

Review - Providing for National Security: A Comparative Analysis

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, AUG 13 2015

Providing for National Security: A Comparative Analysis

Edited by: Andrew H. Dorman and Joyce P. Kaufman

Stanford CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2014

It takes a while to put together and publish a collection of essays, but events wait for no one. Although this collection on the security dilemmas and strategies of leading nations bears a 2014 publication date and contains a few references to 2013 works and 2012 events, it seems too preoccupied with the economic recession of 2008 and the 2011 multi-national intervention in Libya. A burden also for collection editors is who can be recruited as contributors, opening up unhappy gaps in coverage. Thus, though the world has spent its post-Cold War years coping with turmoil in the borderlands of the collapsed Soviet Empire and in what might be called the arc of fire, the countries ranging from North Africa and the Middle East through to Pakistan that are being torn apart by the conflict between traditional Islam and modernization, the collection is mostly made up of the usual suspects, the big to medium powers—the United States, Russia, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, India, Australia, France, South Korea, Canada, and Germany—which have their many domestic and foreign security watchers, but which have to commute to the trouble. The exceptions are two nations that live on the edge of the arc, Nigeria and Turkey, both of which try hard to keep out of the fight.

These snipes aside, there is much of value in *Providing for National Security*. As the editors point out, most nations are fixated by their relative power standing. The United Kingdom may want to trim its defense costs, but does not want any “strategic shrinkage” as its foreign minister is quoted as saying. Andrew Dorman, who prepared the excellent essay on the United Kingdom, notes the confusion over the nation’s identity. Is it Big England, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, part of Europe, the leader of the Commonwealth, or America’s best buddy? Sometimes one and then another. But there is no confusion over its intent to remain a player in the top league. So too with France, which is sees itself as the voice of Europe, and Russia, which does not want to be pushed aside from the power spot once held by the Soviet Union. Both China and India know they have moved up in the ratings, but can’t find the words, perhaps because of obligations that the words would imply, to assert in every forum their new standing. And surely a bit delusional, Canada flirted with being an independent international star in the early post-Cold War years only to be reminded of its vassal status by its huge neighbor and European friends.

Writing from the vantage point of that huge neighbor, I am struck by extent to which nations are dependent upon the United States for their security and their unwillingness to acknowledge that dependency. Despite more than 60 years of American military presence and protection, during which time South Korea has grown prosperous and democratic, it never is quite ready to assume full command of its own forces and is its youth can never quite get over the joys of joining anti-American demonstrations. Japan and Germany, again the direct beneficiaries of American military protection and because of that protection now among the wealthiest nations on earth, cling to interpretations of their own military role that prohibit them from either doing much to aid their ally or taking a responsible role in managing global security. To be sure, several of the essays mention a governmental fear that America will shift its attention (and presumably its troops) to another region. But the strategic planning that takes place rarely includes the search for compensating protection via increases in domestic military capabilities and/or the development of new allies.

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Instead, there much muddled thinking about international norms, economic interdependencies, asymmetric threats, the limits of military means, and the expectation that distant trouble will be contained from spreading their way by minimum contributions to efforts that America will lead and finance.

The question then must be why is the United States so willing to bear the burden of managing the rise of China, the return of Russia to expansionary totalitarianism, the civil wars raging within Islam, and everything else? The answer is partially in the chapter on the United States that Joyce Kaufman wrote. America, she notes, had economic and political reasons to rebuild the economies of Europe and Asia after the Second World War and to protect them on its own during the Cold War. But America misinterpreted both the peaceful end of the Cold War and its quick victory in the Gulf War as giving it a largely unchallengeable, and thus relatively cheap, opportunity to maintain its management of global security while promoting free trade and democratic values into the future. The George W. Bush Doctrine of preemptive action which was developed in response to the 9/11 attacks, Kaufman argues, gave political rationale to push ahead with the project, ignoring both the stumbles of the Clinton years and the escalating political and economic costs of doing so. Momentum has carried the policy deep into the Obama years despite his professed opposition to Bush's actions. Surges, red lines, and bombing campaigns hardly count as the marks of policy change. No boots on the ground slides easily into just a few and then a few more.

Kaufman sees change coming when economics become more central to American security policy, perhaps with the United States becoming more mercantilist like its major allies and competitors already are. Rarely do they forego the opportunity to sell rope to hangmen as long as they aren't in line at the gallows. More likely change will come, she thinks, when the mounting debts of the Welfare State bump into the cost of protecting others. America is indeed far from most of the world's trouble. Half of its defense budget could be devoted to domestic needs without making life more dangerous for Americans. The danger would be for the many globally who free ride on the hubris of America. The obstacle though is more with the expectations of the American public who want their politicians to act as if there are American generated, or even American brokered, answers to the Arab/Israeli conflict, Russia's lost pride, China's rise, modernization stresses in Islam, the colonial legacies in Africa, Pakistani/Indian relations and whatever else burdens the security of the nations covered in this volume.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.