Review – Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances

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Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Perils of America's Alliances
By Mira Rapp-Hooper
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020

By all indications, Mira Rapp-Hooper, of the Council on Foreign Relations and Yale Law School, must be happy with the incoming Biden administration. In her perceptive look at America's alliance system since World War II, she argues that these defensive security guarantees were remarkably successful in deterring aggression. Alliances obtained U.S. interests of projecting power, asserting leadership, and preventing all-out general war, and did so efficiently, democratically, and at affordable political and economic costs. Four unfortunate years of Donald Trump trashing alliances, especially the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), undermined this brilliant record. The newly-elected Joe Biden has signaled that he will reverse course, returning us to sanity, maturity, and professionalism.

To be sure, Rapp-Hooper aims to counter the ignorant America First narrative by proving the value of alliances to the United States itself. In seven tightly-argued and accessible chapters – with, fortunately, only a few nods to political science theory – she shows that defensive pacts served their intended objectives. The alliances, most importantly, also put American security first. Not only did they provide an adequate bang for a well-invested buck, but without them, America's safety would have been at grave risk. She advocates an update to the system, namely by new tactics of responding to adversaries' non-military threats. Thus, innovative thinking is necessary because the dangers faced at the dawn of the Cold War are so different from those of today. Capricious grandstanding offered no remedies. Worse, Trump turned off allies from U.S. leadership. What is needed is a hard look at the new strategic situation (prompted by a revanchist and bothersome Russia and a truly powerful China) by learning some lessons from history, and even from alternative history.

Rapp-Hooper effectively covers the Cold War and the post-superpower conflict eras, splicing in a few counterfactual narratives that justifiably credit policymakers with putting their faith in alliances. The novelty of predominance, an ideological enemy, destruction from the world war, and technological innovations like nuclear weapons and airpower rendered obsolete the century-and-a-half geographic argument that the oceans made America safe. Washington shifted to the entirely new idea that allies, rather than seaboards, were the first line of defense. Policymakers furthered this conceptual transformation by agreeing that deterrence, too, relied on allies, even if they were weak. In sum, America could not survive without a free Europe. The same basic logic held for a free Japan and South Korea as the linchpins of anti-communism in Asia. As long as they took guidance from Washington, and funding from America to assure their acquiescence, the Free World would be safe and prosperous. Most notably, the interests of the guarantor (America) were intertwined with the guarantees. Rapp-Hooper does not term it such, but the military and moral knotting of nations laid the political basis for notions of interdependence and an Atlantic Community. The "shields of the Republic" – defense, deterrence, and controlling the allies – worked well to contain Soviet aggression, limit crises, and, above all, keep allies and America committed to mutual defense.

At what cost did this interventionist shift occur? This is the beauty of the author's counterfactual forays. The Berlin

crisis of 1961 is a case study of what might have happened without the NATO alliance. Quite simply, the United States would have either retreated from central Europe in the face of communist determination or it could have declared World War III, to the detriment of the planet. The alliance gave the option of a credible deterrent, defense of U.S. interests (including remaining in West Berlin), and even restraint of more aggressive allies who might have entrapped the United States into general war. Containment, in other words, meant controlling allies as well as Moscow. NATO remained intact, though France would abandon the military command a half decade later. Rapp-Hopper's counterfactual concludes that the cost of leading and supporting the alliance far outweighed the strategic, political, and economic losses that Washington would have incurred by going it alone.

The record is not impeccable, as the post-Cold War era attests, because, of course, the strategic circumstances changed when America's chief enemy disappeared. At first, the reframing of alliance policies went well because of Washington's unipolar moment. NATO reconceptualized itself as a force for democracy and Europe-wide unity. In Asia, Japan and South Korea remained the targets of U.S. policies but the old Southeast Asian pact withered. But change is always constant, and the very seeds of liberal democracy and security grew into new rivalries, led by a weak but audacious Russia and a modernized and striving China. The problem today is that American thinking remains mired in the Cold War, unable to answer to the new strategic challenges. Russia and China turned to non-military conflict through "competitive coercion" by cleverly using political, technological, legal, and subversive means to subvert alliances by bypassing military triggers in NATO. With no updated tools, Allied answers have come up short.

A change is imperative; this is the biggest challenge for the alliance system since the early Cold War. To be sure, alliances greatly benefited the patron, the United States. They could not save the United States from doomed initiatives in Vietnam and Iraq (joined by some allies) or overthrow despots in Cuba and North Korea. They are not failproof; risky ventures are still determined by policymakers in Washington. But alliances were, and are, as Rapp-Hooper concisely sums up, "essential to the United States' grand strategic objective of defending Eurasia to secure its own economic and military survival" (p.77).

That is true, but there must be domestic buy-in, which the author might have explored in more detail. While so-called elites will endorse her program, pushback will come from all quarters. Moving beyond polling and going into more depth on Americans themselves – the elites as well as the masses – is necessary to understand why the logic of alliances fails to reach many voters. There is less of a sense of why – or even if – Trump appealed to voters with his parochial, bombastic view of NATO. Did his view play well in Peoria, and to what extent? How did the media, civic groups, and state houses address alliances? To what extent did his diatribes abet congressional electoral losses in 2018 or, conversely, boost Trump? And what about Congress, including his enablers in the quiescent but muscular internationalist GOP?

Periodically, Congress reigned in Trump, especially on Russia, but it also stood by as he hectored close allies. Legislators could have dampened down his nonsense, performed for his uninformed but titillated fans. Rapp-Hopper raises the stakes for progressives and conservatives alike. The former hope for retreat, to focus on domestic issues or end imperialistic policies abroad. Many denounce the very notion of leadership; America must simply be a partner, sharing in security efforts rather than dominating it. For conservatives, their very ideology of freedom cannot co-exist next to America First parochialism. But populism sought to take America out of the game, as Trump stuck it to supposedly cheapskate allies. History will not be kind to Trump, but it might also be hard on Republicans who allowed him to jeopardize the security arrangements that history had proven such a success. It would have been instructive to hear more of this debate and how the author's recommendations will work domestically.

That returns us to the basic illogic of the Trump stance of shaming allies into sharing more of the economic burden of the alliance, and even junking NATO. Rapp-Hooper might have pointed out that during the Cold War, it was oftentimes liberals who lamented the unequal cost of burden-sharing by the United States. But they glossed over the fact that lopsided burden-sharing arose "because Washington wanted it this way" (p.79). Returning to isolationism – the Trump logic – would also reduce secondary benefits from the alliance, such as profitable trade relations with allies. Regardless of the era, military and economic policies are attached at the hip by the long-standing capitalist peace doctrine, in which trade and finance serves the nation's security, and vice versa. What appears to be free-

riding by allies is nothing of the sort. Washington foots the bill because the alliance attained a long peace in the past and, today, its interests. Not to mention that defense spending boosts the American economy. To be sure, allies can entrap America in conflicts, but we do a pretty good job on our own in that regard!

Alliance policies have not been faultless, but even the mistake of giving fodder to Vladimir Putin by NATO expansion is preferable to Trump's abandonment of power and rants at reliable friends. Withdrawing from the Iraq nuclear deal or courting the North Korean dictator are hardly good alternatives to alliance cooperation. Biden enters office with democracies facing politically disruptive nationalist flame-throwers, fearful of China and alarmed by Russian corruption, and demoralized by the COVID-19 pandemic. By adopting new, low-intensity methods (cybersecurity, democracy promotion, climate and trade pacts), NATO can best counter the new approaches to China and Russia. We should welcome renewed entanglements with like-minded friends, as this fine book argues, for our own good. An abbreviated version of the old maxim about NATO holds: that alliance kept enemies out and America in.

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