The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force.

By Eliot A Cohen.

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War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft.

By Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris.

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On May 25, 1936, William E. Rappard delivered the eighth Richard Cobden Lecture at the Royal Society of Arts in Adelphi, London," In his lecture, titled "The Common Menace of Economic and Military Armaments," Rappard argued that military and economic armaments were related and posed a grave threat to international peace and prosperity. Military armaments are tools of brute force which can be used for both defensive and offensive purposes. The accumulation of military armaments reduce global safety by making other, lesser armed, countries feel less secure. Economic armaments, in contrast, refer to "all those legislative and administrative devices intended to restrict imports" and manipulate economic activity between those living in different states (Rappard 1936: 10). These armaments increase the chance of conflict by preventing positive-sum exchanges between parties and fostering isolation, nationalism, and a sense of "us" against "them." Together, military and economic armaments, according to Rappard, threaten global well-being by undermining the growth and stability produced by the free movement of goods, services, and people.

Eight decades after Rappard's lecture, military and economic armaments remain at the forefront of foreign policy discussions as illustrated by two recent books. Eliot Cohen's, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*, argues for a renewed commitment by the U.S. government to not only invest in its military armaments, but to proactively use this substantial force around the globe to promote American security and ideals. In *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris argue that the U.S. government should be more willing to engage in "geoeconomics," their term for using economic power to accomplish geopolitical goals. From their perspective a rebalancing of the U.S.

government's foreign policy tools is needed, elevating geoeconomics to the same level as hard power and diplomacy.

The relevance of Rappard's lecture should be evident. While Rappard saw military and economic armaments as a "common menace" threatening global peace and prosperity, the authors of these two books see these as tools for enhancing peace and prosperity. Are Rappard's concerns antiquated? I do not believe so. But before explaining why I will summarize the case for military armaments put forth by Cohen and the case for economic armaments put forth by Blackwill and Harris.

The Case for Military Armaments

The Big Stick is broken into eight chapters, not including a brief Introduction and Epilogue. In the opening lines of the Introduction, Cohen tells his readers that American must take on the responsibility for maintaining world order because "[t]o do otherwise would mean not only to acquiesce in civilization-threatening horrors, but to jeopardize their own prosperity and freedoms" (p. 1). The rest of the book attempts to explain why.

Cohen first explores the past fifteen years of war by the U.S. government in Afghanistan and Iraq (Chapter 2). He lays out what he considers to be the successes and failures of each intervention, finally admitting at the end of the chapter that "the Iraq War was a mistake" (p. 59) and that "as of 2015 the success achieved [in Afghanistan] seemed fragile" (p. 60). In doing so he warns that while reflection on these wars is necessary, it is important "not to be overwhelmed by these experiences, or to read too much into them" (p. 61). Doing so runs the risk of neglecting present-day threats which he believes are significant.

Next, Cohen considers the overall health of the American military through a review of military expenditures by the U.S. government and the personnel and equipment it has purchased (Chapter 3). He expresses concern about the overly bureaucratic and cumbersome procurement process and the general inertia of the U.S. military apparatus. Nonetheless, there is reason for future optimism due to America's economic strength, its alliances, and demographics, which are among the most favorable of any of the current powerful states.

The book then turns to a discussion of what Cohen considers to be the four vital threats to American security and ideals. China (Chapter 4) threatens to establish "hegemony over its neighbors" while "attempting to reshape the international order in its image" (p. 99). In response,

he argues, the U.S. government must strategically use military force to balance this tendency and prevent China from obtaining too much global power. What, specifically, does this require? Cohen contends that success "rests on coalition management and force structure" (p. 117). The U.S. government must signal that it is "capable of generating large quantities of military power" which includes producing large military forces in a short period of time and deploying a "powerful navy and air force that can reassure, strengthen, and protect its allies, and cripple China by blockading its ports and disrupting its commerce" (p. 120). Cohen recognizes the possibility of a Sino-American war, but suggests his strategy would deter such a possibility by making aggression by the Chinese government "self-evidently unwise" (p. 124).

Another supposed threat is Islamist terrorism (Chapter 5) or what Cohen calls "jihadis," including: al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram, among others. Cohen contends that the war against jihadis will go on for decades and requires continued targeted killings and potentially the need for larger-scale military interventions to combat terrorist groups. He also argues for the continued capture of terrorist leaders who should be imprisoned at the Guantánamo Bay facility which, in his view, should be kept open. Finally, Cohen advocates for targeted interventions in fragile states where jihadi movements operate. The goal of these interventions is to stabilize the country by providing security, training armed forces and police, and providing reconstruction assistance.

The third threat, "Dangerous States" (Chapter 6), actually includes three distinct threats—Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The threats posed by each of the states, according to Cohen, is regional and, therefore, requires regional responses. Specifically, the use of hard power in these cases should aim to deter military adventures by the governments of these states and to reassure allies in the respective regions. This requires the ability to use conventional force, clandestine operations, and engage in effective proxy wars. Moreover, it may very well require the U.S. government to engage in the use of preemptive force to prevent Iran and North Korea from securing nuclear weapons. Accomplishing these goals, Cohen argues, requires a permanent deployment of U.S. military forces to these regions so they can be prepared to act as needed.

The final threat is ungoverned spaces and the commons (Chapter 7) which refer to virtual and physical spaces not effectively governed by a state. Responding to these threats requires the U.S. government to follow up on military interventions in order to develop institutions conducive to security and the rule of law. These efforts may take decades and require a significant

commitment by the intervening governments. When possible, Cohen argues that these efforts should take place with a coalition of allies to foster legitimacy and increase the chances of effectiveness. In addition, the U.S. government should seek to govern the commons of the sea with a strong naval presence that ensures peace and open trading lanes. Hard power, according to Cohen, may be necessary in response to a cyberattack and will eventually play an important role in outer space which is currently ungoverned. He concludes that in each case, "[U.S.] military power remains the ultimate guarantor that the diverse great commons of mankind remain accessible to all" (p. 193).

Cohen concludes by arguing that the U.S. government should move away from regularly-scheduled planning and strategy documents which are bureaucratic in nature and don't reflect the rapidly changing conditions of geopolitics. He also makes the argument for a percentage-based target for U.S. defense spending contending that 4 percent of GDP, wisely spent, is suitable to meet the hard power requirements discussed throughout the book (the U.S. government currently spends about 3.3 percent of GDP on defense). He offers a list of six general rules for guiding future U.S. foreign policy which are extremely broad in nature—e.g., "Planning is important; being able to adapt is more important," "You will prefer to go short, but prepare to go long," "While engaging in today's fight, prepare for tomorrow's challenge." These are intended to serve as a general guide because, as Cohen states in the Epilogue, while "[m]ilitary power is, at best, a rough and imprecise instrument…" it is nonetheless "indispensable, and at this juncture in our history, perhaps, more so than ever" (p. 226).

The Case for Economic Armaments

The central argument of *War by Other Means* is that the U.S. government has fallen behind other powerful countries, namely China and Russia, in using economic armaments to achieve foreign policy goals. The result of ignoring the power of these geoeconomic tools is that "the United States squanders opportunities and dilutes its own foreign policy outcomes" (p. 1). Blackwill and Harris' goal is to correct this imbalance by making a case to elevate geoeconomics to the same level as hard power and diplomacy. The book, which consists of an Introduction and ten chapters, makes the case by exploring the various aspects of geoeconomics and emphasizing its benefits as a foreign policy tool.

Blackwill and Harris begin by defining geoeconomics as “the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations’ economic actions on a country’s geopolitical goals” (p. 20). They then consider the reemergence of geoeconomics and how it has become a primary tool for other governments (Chapter 2). Blackwill and Harris attribute the rise of geoeconomics to the lack of alternatives for other countries resulting from U.S. military dominance, the access to valuable resources by an increasing number of governments, and the integration of global markets.

The authors provide a survey of seven geoeconomic instruments (Chapter 3)—policies associated with: trade, investment, the monetary system, sanctions, cyber, aid, and energy and commodities—explaining how each of the instruments operates and how they are often related to one another. In doing so Blackwill and Harris consider the features and conditions required for the various instruments to operate effectively. There are four endowments influencing the effectiveness of geoeconomic tools: the ability to control outbound investment, the specific makeup of the domestic market, control of energy and commodity flows, and the relevance to the global financial system.

Blackwill and Harris then turn to China, providing six case studies of the government’s use of geoeconomic tools (Chapter 4). Extending the discussion of the government’s use of geoeconomic policy beyond Asia, they consider (Chapter 5) whether China’s use of these tools is, overall, successful, concluding that “the body of evidence points to yes” (p. 130). They do qualify this conclusion noting that “[a]t the same time, geoeconomic success is sometimes exaggerated, including with respect to China” (p. 131).

Returning to the United States, Blackwill and Harris trace the historical use of geoeconomic policies by the U.S. government (Chapter 6). They provide several reasons for the decline in the use of these tools including a lack of post-Cold War presidential leadership, a narrow preoccupation with the use of sanctions, and bureaucratic inertia within the U.S. government. Turning to the government’s current use of geoeconomic policies (Chapter 7), they emphasize that these tools are often judged by the wrong standard. The effectiveness of geoeconomic policies, in their view, should not be measured by their economic impact, but rather by their geopolitical impact. Policies may have a negative economic impact, but positive geopolitical effects. America’s energy revolution will have a significant influence on future geoeconomic policymaking (Chapter 8), with the United States expected to become the leading producer of crude oil, natural gas, and

natural gas liquids. Blackwill and Harris argue that this shift will provide the U.S. government with new strategic geoeconomic options to influence geopolitical outcomes.

The final chapters are forward looking. Blackwill and Harris provide a list of twenty recommendations for the development of a geoeconomic strategy for the United States. Most of these prescriptions are extremely broad—e.g., "The president must speak to geoeconomic policy," "Meet the test of climate change," and "Adopt new rules of engagement with Congress"—and the specific details and implementation are left for others to work out. The book concludes by situating geoeconomic policy within the authors' vision of America's grand strategy. They identify eight "extremely important" elements of U.S. national interests and argue that geoeconomic policy is crucial to protecting and advancing these interests. They make clear that "U.S. military primacy continues to be essential in promoting and defending these national interests" (p. 255) but reiterate that geoeconomic tools are crucial complements which deserve renewed attention and support. As this makes clear, the cases for military armaments and economic armaments are interrelated.

Are Military and Economic Armaments a Menace?

In 1936 William Rappard argued that military and economic armaments pose a "common menace" to global stability and prosperity. Both *The Big Stick* and *War by Other Means*, in contrast, argue that the U.S. government's proactive use of military and economic armaments is crucial for both domestic and global well-being. Which position is correct? There is good reason to side with Rappard.

Cohen and Blackwill and Harris focus on the potential benefits of increased military and economic armaments. Both books, however, neglect the potential costs associated with their respective prescriptions for expansions in U.S. government power. Operating in the background of both books is hegemonic stability theory which posits that the global system is likely to remain stable when a single, powerful government serves as a global hegemon. In this role the hegemon can shape, influence, and enforce the rules and arrangements governing international relations between nation states. For the authors of both books, U.S. military and geoeconomic primacy, combined with extensive involvement in world affairs, will produce desirable outcomes for American citizens, and the rest of the world.

This raises a host of contentious issues. First, the presumed benefits of hegemony are questionable. For example, Daniel Drezner (2013) concludes his analysis of military primacy by

noting that “[t]he economic benefits from military predominance alone seem, at a minimum, to have been exaggerated in policy and scholarly circles” (p. 54). This is because “[w]hile there are economic benefits to possessing a great power military, diminishing marginal returns are evident well before achieving military primacy” (p. 54). This suggests that it cannot be simply assumed that increased military prominence is correlated with beneficial outcomes. It is not that military force has no effect but, instead, that simply increasing hard power does not necessarily yield increasing benefits.

The fact that the increased use of hard power does necessarily yield associated benefits extends beyond purely economic gains to other scenarios as well. For example, an existing literature provides both theoretical and empirical support for the position that military intervention does not contribute to spreading sustainable liberal institutions (see Pickering and Peceny 2006, Coyne 2008, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2006). Among other things, this literature highlights the various epistemic and incentive issues facing interveners which often lead to undesirable outcomes.

At first blush it might appear that these insights apply to Cohen’s argument for increased military armaments, but not Blackwill and Harris’ call for increased reliance on geoeconomic tools. But this neglects the reality that military armaments and economic armaments both fall under the broader category of weaponry to be wielded by one government over other people. As the very title of their book suggests, geoeconomic policy is simply “war by other means.” Despite its innocuous sounding name, geoeconomic policy is a form of armaments to be deployed against enemies. As such, these weapons should be viewed as part of the war-making toolkit of those who control discretionary war-making power. Blackwill and Harris are clear that geoeconomic tools should be viewed as complements to military power. Because military and economic armaments are both tools of war, differences are best understood as a matter of degree and not of kind. The same knowledge constraints and incentives that plague the use of military force also apply to the use of economic armaments, although the specific manifestation of these factors may vary across contexts.

Beyond the questionable net benefits of hegemony, assumptions regarding the source of order must also be considered. Adherents to hegemonic stability theory hold that the world will be disorderly, chaotic, and violent absent control and planning by a dominant nation state, such as the U.S. government. This view neglects the importance of spontaneous orders—the emergent orders

that are the result of people pursuing their diverse ends rather than through conscious, centralized planning. A long tradition of spontaneous order thinkers emphasize that significant and crucial parts of the world in which we all live—i.e., economic, legal, social arrangements—are not the result of human design, but rather emerge from the actions of dispersed individuals. These organic orders cannot be designed because they do not fit a single, general form across contexts and cannot be fully understood though limited human reason.

The logic of spontaneous order is crucial for understanding the nuances of international relations. For example, much of international commercial law is emergent in nature (Benson 1989) as are the international laws of war which help to reduce the potentially significant costs of conflict (Anderson and Gifford 1995). In these cases private individuals, each pursuing their own diverse ends, contribute to a broader order that frames and facilitates peaceful cooperation rather than conflict. An appreciation for spontaneous order reasoning has important implications for two reasons.

First, it calls into question the assumption that a dominant, nation-state hegemon is necessary for order. For example, one of the common claims of those advocating for the U.S. government to serve as a global hegemon is the need to protect international trade routes. But why is the default position to assume that trade is so fragile that it will break down absent a liberal hegemon? It is equally, if not more, plausible to assume that people will figure out arrangements for cooperation given the significant benefits associated with peaceful exchange. Moreover, if one assumes that private parties are unable to secure such arrangements, one must also wonder how these same incompetents are going to elect and monitor government officials who supposedly act on behalf of their interests. If private actors cannot resolve opportunism in their interactions with others, why should we think these same people won't fall prey to political opportunism by the political elite who possess the discretion to exercise the concentrated power associated with control of military and economic armaments? And if they are subject to such opportunism, this is a strong argument for minimizing, if not altogether eliminating, the awesome powers associated with these armaments.

The second reason that spontaneous order reasoning matters is because it sheds light on inappropriate assumptions made about other actors. As Robert Jervis (1976, p. 319) notes, "[a] common misconception is to see the behavior of others as more centralized, planned, and coordinated than it is. This is a manifestation of the drive to squeeze complex and unrelated events

into a coherent pattern." Both books suffer from this misconception because both associate order with state-produced control. If the U.S. government doesn't exert control, then Americans will lose out because other governments will exert their power and influence. But this assumes that these "others" exert a significant amount of control both over their own polities and over international affairs. However, as Jervis warns, "decision-makers generally overestimate the degree to which their opposite numbers have the information and power to impose their desires on all parts of their own government" (1976, p. 324). The same logic applies to international affairs as well as where actors possess little control over the numerous, overlapping complex systems that characterize the world. The implications are extremely humbling, although not conducive to political success or employment as an "expert" by the political establishment which demands simple answers that comport with state manipulation and control.

Finally, while both books argue for granting expanded power to the U.S. government, neither does an adequate job of discussing what happens when political actors deviate from first-best conditions. A benevolent and omniscient politician may very well be able to exercise the proposed expansions in military and economic armaments in the manner desired by the authors. But what happens when those with discretionary power deviate from these ideal conditions?

To understand the issue, consider the recent election of Donald Trump. In the days after Trump's election, Cohen (2016a), a staunch critic of candidate Trump, wrote an open letter indicating that while the election outcomes were "dreadful," it still made sense to give Trump a chance and work with his administration. Cohen's change of heart was short lived—five days to be exact—after an exchange with the Trump transition team. In the wake of that interaction, he warned that "[b]y all accounts, [Trump's] ignorance, and that of his entourage, about the executive branch is fathomless" (2016b). Since then Cohen has continued to be a harsh critic, questioning the president's temperament and character while noting that "[i]t will get worse, as power intoxicates Trump and those around him" (2017).

The problem of course is that President Trump now has significant discretionary control over the military and economic policies of the United States. If the prescriptions made by Cohen and Blackwill and Harris are implemented, that would grant the president even more discretion to engage in global military and economic warfare. If Cohen's assessment of Trump is even partially accurate, this seems highly undesirable. The fundamental point extends well beyond the Trump administration. In general, when considering political rules and policies that grant discretionary

power, it is best to follow David Hume's maxim that, "in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a *knave*, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest" (Hume 1963, p. 40, emphasis original). Both books conclude with numerous prescriptions which are grandiose in terms of proposed expansions in government power, but overly general with the specifics unspecified. In light of Hume's maxim, crucial questions remain unaddressed.

Who is going to design and implement these policies? What incentives and knowledge are required for success, and do the realities of politics comport with these requirements? How will special interests manipulate and influence outcomes to feather their own nests at the expense of the safety and prosperity of ordinary people around the world? What happens when someone with questionable character and temperament, if not worse, secures the reins and can wield discretionary power both domestically and abroad? Absent serious engagement with the nuanced issues at the foundation of these questions, one must, ultimately, conclude that military and economic armaments—whether in the hands of the U.S. government or others—continue to be a common menace to domestic and global peace, stability, and well-being.

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