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Interview with Jim Thomas:

Challenging the Conventional Wisdom on US Traditional Alliances from Protectorates to Partnerships

by Octavian Manea

Back when I covered the Pentagon, I used to go and interview big shots and secretaries and so on. And I keep on asking questions and eventually they throw up their hands and say, well, look, you'd better go talk to Jim Thomas then.

- Tom Ricks

We may in fact be entering what could be called the post-power projection era in which traditional modes of power projection may no longer be as viable as they've been in the recent past. What this means is it's going to be harder for us to deploy into distant theaters against a range of potential adversaries to gain access in those theaters. It's going to be harder for us to operate once we're there, especially in traditional modes of operation and it's going to be far harder to sustain logistically, with very long logistics tail stretching all the way back to the continental United States, those forward forces. And one of the things that's really hallmark to U.S., for the U.S. military is the control of various domains, whether it's sea control, space control, control of the air space over our force and over our allies and friends around the world, you name it.

As we look ahead into this new era, I think it's going to look a lot more like the past. The pendulum is swinging back and it looks like it's going to be a lot easier and that this new military competition is going to favor the forces of denial over the forces of control. It's going to be far easier for any power, including the United States to deny adversaries limited objectives in any of those domains than it's going to be to control the domain as a whole."

– Jim Thomas, CNAS 4th Annual Conference: Shaping the Agenda-Future of the Force

How did the US end up with a network of informal protectorates and free riders and not real allies per se?

Well, America's alliances were/are quite real, but they differ from a number of historical alliances in that the preponderance of military power was invested in the US military. The fragility of post-war economies in Europe and Northeast Asia limited what those states could do for their own defense, and led to their dependence on the US military to provide for their security. Consequently, they became to all intents and purposes protectorates of the US; that is, they became dependent on the US for their protection from the Soviet Union. What is troubling is that even in the aftermath of their economic recoveries and the dissolution of the Soviet

empire, these states have not increased defense spending, but have in fact further reduced such spending and become even more dependent on the US to protect their interests, especially out of area.

It seems that we are entering in what could be called the post-power projection era in which traditional modes of power projection become vulnerable and wasting assets. To what extent do all these rising capabilities (area-denial/anti-access capabilities) that could disrupt the status-quo challenge the traditional ability of the US to access its rimland allies? To what extent do the area-denial/anti-access capabilities challenge the Spykman consensus and assumptions in the post 1945 US foreign policy?

The proliferation of so-called anti-access capabilities will make it more difficult to project military power beyond any country's borders and conduct wars of conquest. The further a military has to move, the more difficult it will be. The growth of such keep out zones makes it much more difficult for the US to sustain its traditional forms of forward presence (e.g., close-in airbases, aircraft carriers patrolling close offshore, large ground forces within missile range). Familiar forms of demonstrating military power – “flexible deterrent options” – may become suicidal for the US. That said, the US sustains an advantage as an insular, maritime power that can deny hegemonic aspirants from the heartland the ability to dominate and subjugate rimland states, provided those that have fielded some of their own anti-access systems to assist in preventing their conquest by powers.

Having in mind the rising of the area-denial/anti-access capabilities should we expect a more Finlandized world (where entire regions become trapped in the exclusive and privileged keep-out zones of the great powers)?

It's possible that rather than all states being “Finlandized,” some smaller states could field mini-A2/AD “bubbles” inside the larger A2/AD “bubbles” of larger regional hegemonic aspirants. This might be the best way for them to defend their sovereign airspace, frontiers, and territorial waters.

What are the consequences of the area-denial/anti-access capabilities for the credibility of the US regionally provided governmental services (regional deterrence posture/forward defense, article 5)? How could be avoided the loss of confidence in the ability or willingness of the United States to meet its security commitments?

The maturation and proliferation of the extended-range, precision-guided strike regime suggests that traditional forms of US regional deterrence postures and forward presence may be devalued. One way the US might avoid a loss of confidence by its allies would be to begin defining now new value propositions for its alliances less dependent on traditional forms of US forward presence. There will still be a requirement for “tripwires,” e.g., the US will still need to maintain some forces forward. But a new value proposition might put more emphasis on enabling allies with the capabilities they need to defend their sovereignty more effectively with less reliance on US forces as the “first responders.” It could also mean that the US do more with respect to securing the global commons, which no other states can do as effectively for, or by, itself.

To what extent is adapting America’s traditional alliances (like NATO) to the “new normal” of the post-protectorate era, a paradigm shifting? In fact what does collective defense mean in a post-protectorate era?

A new division of labor may emerge whereby frontline allies field needed capabilities to deny adversaries the ability to succeed in an initial invasion or coercive missile campaign, while the US provides escalation dominance and maintains a strong retaliatory capability.

Could the GUAM doctrine become the role model for the future?

President Nixon’s Guam doctrine stressed the importance of America’s allies doing more to provide for their own self-defense, especially in terms of providing manpower for their defense. It serves as a model for fashioning new divisions of labor between the US and its allies that take account of America’s fiscal predicament as well as the proliferation of precision weapons and the growth of no-go zones. Allies will need to field their own anti-access capabilities to defend their sovereignty and may need US technical assistance to do so. Just as the US once serve as an Arsenal of Democracies; it may play such a role again in the future.

Jim Thomas is Vice President and Director of Studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA). Prior to joining CSBA, Jim served for thirteen years in a variety of policy, planning and resource analysis posts in the Department of Defense, culminating in his dual appointment as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Resources and Plans and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy. In these capacities, he was responsible for the development of the Defense Strategy, conventional force planning, resource assessment, and the oversight of war plans. He spearheaded the 2005-2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), and was the principal author of the QDR Report to Congress. An expanded view of his thoughts is presented in From Protectorates to Partnerships.

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