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Against US World Retrenchment: An Interview with A. Wess Mitchell

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The debate about US retrenchment from the world has returned. And today, in a time of a dim fiscal predicament, it is timelier than ever. In this context, the retirement of Defense Secretary Robert Gates could be a game-changer and could signal a generational and mindset shift with major consequences for US traditional alliances (some of them highlighted by Jim Thomas)

Robert Gates' generation was one of true believers in the value and purpose of the transatlantic alliance:

"*The security of this continent – with NATO as the main instrument for protecting that security – has been the consuming interest of much of my professional life.*" But in a new political and economic climate, where "*you have a lot of new members of Congress who are roughly old enough to be my children or grandchildren, that do not have the formative experiences that I have had (I'm in the awkward position for the first time in my career being 20 years older than my president. I am in the active US government today, essentially the last senior leader who is a product of the Cold War) I think the kind of emotional and historical attachment that American leaders have had to this alliance for nearly 65 years is aging out. "*

At the same time, Gates warned in many of his public speeches, against the dangers of a retrenchment: *"We shrink from our global security responsibilities at our peril. Retrenchment brought about by short-sighted cuts could well lead to costlier and more tragic consequences later – indeed, as they always have in the past. Surely we should learn from our national experience since World War I, that drastic reductions in the size and strength of the US military make armed conflict all the more likely – with an unacceptably high cost in American blood and treasure".*

At the end of the day, we should try to answer one fundamental question: What role do you desire the US to play as a global power? A. Wess Mitchell provides his answer.

Has Russia really changed? There are some voices that argue the Georgian war was not a game-changer for European security, but highlighted instead the end of the imperial mindset.

Today, I think it is *plausible* that current Russian elites are less inclined to embark on Georgia-like adventures than they were before, in part because of constrained resources, in part because of the potential that a move like that could mess up the really good deals they've gotten from the reset.

While that argument *may be plausible*, I think ultimately this would require faith on our part, a faith in the current Russian political elites that they are fundamentally uninterested in continuing the agenda they set out to complete. I am not inclined to put that kind of faith in a regime that has shown its desire to fundamentally revise the European security order - in open violation of almost every major treaty obligation it is party to. It is plausible, but I am very skeptical, because the Russians have seen the game board shifting very much in their favor. I don't think they see the Georgian war as a coda or as a period to that process, but as one of the many instruments at their disposal for accomplishing their aims. The key to understanding Russian behavior is that as a classic revisionist power what Russia wants is low cost revisionism. Russia is not looking for war, especially in the current state – it would be disastrous. It wants revisionism at the margin. I don't worry about Russia as a resuscitated military power. I do worry about Russia as having a *last burst of negative energy*. Russia is the dying supernova of the previous order.

Russia doesn't have enough constructive potential to deal with real world power, but it has that last burst of negative energy to create disorder. In this context, the fundamental objective of US strategy, in this part of the world, should be to permanently tie off Central and Eastern Europe as an active security and strategic concern or open the possibility for Russian adventurism in any shape or form. It shows the need not to have a two-tiered alliance and to permanently and fundamentally reassure Central Europe.

<u>You argued in a recent article</u> published in *The American Interest* that the credibility of US security guarantees in the hinge-point regions is networked. Having in mind this linkage, to what extent could we see a domino effect? Could a loss of US credibility in at one hinge-point region send a ripple effect in another hinge-point region?

First the argument: Although a maritime power, the United States inherited and built up after 1945 alliances with very small, exposed states. These are the US global peripheries. What all three regions share is a cluster of small allies whose security is bound up by the US, and they require strong security US patronage. This includes nations in Central and Eastern Europe, Israel and the moderate Gulf states, as well as the democracies of East Asia. Each sits at a global hinge-point (one of the few places in the global real estate exposed between two tectonic plates, in close proximity to a rising or revisionist great power). Our (with co-author Jakub Grygiel) thesis is that the transition in the new global order would be tested at the periphery first. If you back away from the most exposed members of the American global footprint, the message signaled to the rising opportunistic powers is that low cost revisionism is available - and available immediately. And low cost revisionism is what the opportunistic powers want to *grab, as much as political and military influence*, with the *least trouble*.

But I don't think that it is a direct causation between what goes on in one hinge-point region and what goes on in another. There are obvious similarities between the strategic circumstances of these small states – the great powers or the rising powers in these neighborhoods share similarities of purpose (they watch the actions of one another to gauge the health status of the US system). The allies eye each other and note how the US handles crisis in those areas. But I don't see any evidence whatsoever that there is a causation; that an event in Central Europe inspires leaders in East Asia or

the Middle East to immediately embark on a certain policy course. But it does inform their strategic planning.

In all three of these hinge-point regions, you have the shared characteristics of exposed midsized US allies who are sitting next to a vacuum zone of one type or another, where historically the US and the West attempted to promote democracy. I see evidence that their understanding of their security is a derivative of the status of that vacuum zone. I think from the standpoint of US interests that ultimately we want to see all three hinge-point regions stable and prosperous.

How relevant, especially in a time of fiscal austerity, is Nicholas John Spykman for US grand strategy in Eurasia? Has Spykman highlighted some enduring US global interests?

His work pointed to the enduring importance of the Eurasian littorals to the United States. In an age of diminished defense resources, Spykman's work shows that no matter how the US defines its level of power in the world, it has more or less permanent interests in the Eurasian rim-lands. This pattern of "defense in depth" in the Eurasian littorals has become the central organizing principle from which the majority of other facets of US foreign policy are derived. It is simply not an option for the US to become some distant offshore presence. Spykman is an important corrective to those in the strategic debate who claim that the US is in decline and that our best option for coping with that is to draw back from the world order. What Spykman's work shows is that it has essentially a world island to itself – that the US strategic position for the stability of the world is for our interests primarily, but also for the values' sake. It is simply not an option to recede back to this continental core and wait as the rest of the world takes care of itself through some sort of regional concerts. In some ways, what his work shows today - when you see a transition point between geopolitical moments - one of the most dangerous things you can do is to flirt with a really quick, really precipitous retrenchment. The US simply does not have the option of taking her toys and going home. For our interests and for global stability, there are some parts of the world where we should play that role.

How would Spykman, with today's constrained defense budgets, explain to the Obama Administration the importance of Central Europe for the US grand strategy? Why is this region still relevant for the US?

Someone who is building on Spykman's analysis would say that globally there are certain pieces of strategic real estate whose status disproportionately impacts the US strategic position. He would categorize the space between Germany and Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, as being near the top of the list. From his perspective (of course, he was looking at a very different international environment from a different US power base) at a bare minimum the starting point would be to say that given the extreme importance that the region plays for us, our calculations of the amount of resources we should invest should be different from the calculations we make in investing strategic resources in other regions. I assume he would put the threshold pretty high. As we move to an era of austerity, the critical question is - what is the sober cost-benefit analysis of the involvement of these resources? The problem with a lot of people who argue this point from the realist perspective is that they are exaggerating the likely payoff of US retrenchment by completely ignoring the costs that might occur. In the case of Europe, Spykman's point related to what US policy in the long term should be is ensuring the geostrategic pluralism of the European rim-lands. At the end of the day, an

unstable or destabilized Central and Eastern Europe makes it harder to ensure the geopolitical pluralism of Europe.

This region may not be seen at the forefront of US global interests. We have bigger fish to fry. But you have to bear in mind that this piece of real estate situated between Germany and Russia gave us three global wars in the 20th century: two hot and one cold. It has been the birthplace of geopolitical machinations that have pulled the US into European politics on terms not of its own choosing.

Historically, there have been two configurations possible for this piece of real estate. One is of great rival blocks without anything in between. The other possibility is to have a fragmented buffer space. The critical thing to understand is that, historically, any time you've had the second power configuration with little indefensible states that lack a powerful offshore patron, invariably and without question, it has been an invitation to aggression. In 1989, we corrected for the mistakes American statecraft made in 1918 and to some extent made in 1945. The key for today is to recognize that is not a self sustaining paradigm. It requires investments and installments by each generation of American and European political elites. That space between Germany and Russia will always either make a contribution to global stability or instability. I don't think there is much of a range in between.

Is Iran on the verge of testing the narrative of American decline?

Iran is playing the role of an *opportunistic power*. It sees an opportunity that didn't exist before for increased influence in the region, sensing attenuation or a weakening of the US and Western position in the region and testing to see how far it can go. I saw the recent Iranian effort to send naval assets to the Suez Canal as a classic example, attempting to demonstrate to the wider Middle East its increased strategic reach in a fundamentally transformed post-Iraqi war geopolitical environment. I sense that Iranian leaders do see increased latitude for their influence to increase, and they are looking in a very opportunistic way to see if there is a low-cost option to achieve that.

In a way this is a broader pattern: if you look at the global geopolitical setting, the rising or revisionist powers want low-cost gains at the expense of the *status quo*. But the problem they face is that they don't know when the system has reached the point where their gains would be low-cost and not high-cost, meaning there is not an accurate way to judge at which points the US is most likely - or least likely - to push back. Obviously, they have incentives to seek gains more aggressively when we push back the least. In order to assess when that moment has arrived, the most logical option for a revisionist power is to test the hypothesis of perceived American decline using very limited probes of the American power position at its weakest, thinnest points, testing the logic that the US is least likely to fight to preserve the current system.

What are the consequences of the rise of area-denial/anti-access capabilities for US credibility and governmental services (regional deterrence posture/forward defense) in the hinge-point regions?

It has a very profound impact on US position in these regions. These are very shrewd investments in asymmetric capabilities. It is a modest and achievable goal for their strategic checklists - starting the process of gaining influence globally by regionally acquiring the ability to prevent the main offshore power (the US) from being able to operate with impunity in the region. It has a very heavy impact on

US global strategy and points to the need for the United States to find options to intelligently bundle its forces in the appropriate areas. It also points to the importance of alliance structures in these regions as critical force multipliers, that in some ways raise the threshold for revisionism, because from the standpoint of a revisionist power if you are surrounded by, or in close proximity to, a large number of well-armed US allies, your ability to effectively embark even in an access/denial strategy is complicated. In some ways that should also be the ultimate goal in a period of geopolitical flux: drive up the ante - the costs of revisionism of the aspiring powers.

How should we assess/decode the rise of China? As a Bismarckian (prudent, restrained, cautious) or Wilhelmian great power?

Neither a Bismarckian, nor a Wilhelmian Germany exactly fits China's strategic predilections. There is no sense of *status quo* investment to be a true Bismarckian power, which would assume not only that China is a stakeholder in the *status quo*, but perhaps the single greatest stakeholder. The true essence of the Bismarckian system was actually created after Bismarck carried out his big revisionist aims and then he had a *status quo* worth preserving. And he created brilliant mechanisms for holding the system up. We are not there yet. But it is not a Wilhelmian Germany in the sense that it has not yet developed a military footprint that aims to do anything other than regional power projection. But I think we are at a very delicate moment, that the economic crisis opened up to Chinese strategic minds a range of opportunities that were previously unimaginable. The economic crisis really bolstered the small minority of strategic thinkers who have been arguing for relinquishing Deng Xiaoping's peaceful rise.

Ultimately, my sense of China as a strategic actor, if it matches the pattern of all classic rising powers in history, is that it wants low-cost revisionism. That is the key for understanding China. Even a China that is relinquishing Deng Xiaoping's peaceful rise is doing so because it calculates that the range of opportunities for achieving more has widened. But it is still a rational cost-benefit actor, It looking for opportunities to modify its *status quo* to its advantage without directly challenging a perceived declining US power. This is why I think the declinist talk in the US is so dangerous because we are unwittingly sending signals to China that could artificially accelerate their opportunistic instincts. They are looking at the greatest possible gains for the least possible exertions. In this context, US policy should aim to make the most cost-effective investments in creating a pattern of credibility (through reassurances) that would lead policymakers in China, as rational actors, to conclude that it is not in their interest to modify the *status quo.*

The transition point between two geopolitical moments is always the most crisis-prone and tectonic. Historically, all of the great power wars have come about at the transitions between structural moments, when strategic signaling becomes vital, symbolic and disproportionately important. The current transition can be more or less crisis-prone depending in part on what power investments the US makes today. It starts with this kind of strategic awareness. I see the game for the US globally as tying off the Eastern perimeter so we can direct our attention credibly toward engaging China with a combination of détente and deterrence. If we act like a declining power, the Chinese will treat us accordingly.

The US has a global responsibility, at this hinge-point, not to draw down or redirect its military spending in a way that would reinforce and fuel the signals that give some opportunistic powers the perception that they can reorder their regions.

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The bulk of this interview was conducted in March, during the 2011 GLOBSEC Conference in Bratislava.