

# Review forum

## *US national security: new threats, old realities*

**US national security: new threats, old realities.** By Paul R. Viotti. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press. 2016. 326pp. £26.50. ISBN 978 1 60497 930 5.

### Introduction

This is the first of a series of ‘review forums’ in which we ask several reviewers to reflect on a single book. Given the recent inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, we thought it pertinent to launch this new series with a review forum on Paul R. Viotti’s new volume seeking to bring fresh insights into US national security. Now in office, the new Trump administration is struggling to bring order to its own self-induced chaos, as the world looks on, trying to understand where the United States is headed and what this will mean for other countries.

The state and its provision of national security remain central elements of international relations. At its heart is the essentially contested issue of what constitutes national security and how it may change over time, whom it is for and what role the state should play in its provision.

This volume has been divided into two parts. The first part, covering chapters one to six, examines the threats and opportunities facing the United States, before considering the future utility of military force. Part two, covering chapters seven to nine, then examines some of the very real practical issues confronting policy-makers as they frame and then implement US national security policies. In a sense, the two parts reflect the book’s subtitle: ‘New threats, old realities’.

In the following pages, four reviewers, hailing from a variety of backgrounds, critically examine different dimensions of the book. John Allen Williams uses the lens of strategy to reflect on Viotti’s examination of US national security, focusing particularly on the early chapters of the book. In contrast, Sten Rynning considers one important thread of US national security—the role of allies—to evaluate the degree to which Viotti sees allies as a component of US national security and what this might tell us. Following on from this, David Goldfisher analyses how the book addresses particular types of challenges: insurgency (chapter four) and

counter-insurgency and terrorism (chapter five). Last, Suzanne Nielsen considers the author's arguments on civil–military relations in chapters seven and eight.

*Andrew Dorman, Commissioning Editor, International Affairs*

## **Strategy and national security**

The strategic landscape of US national security has been evolving rapidly. New threats are emerging (or at least are being recognized) and old threats continue to vex policy-makers. Even without the frenetic energy of the incoming Trump administration compounding their task, it is difficult for policy-makers and analysts to distinguish between what is important and what is not, and what is transient as opposed to constant. Paul Viotti's latest book provides a valuable framework by which to understand the changes that are taking place in the national security domain.

This book is a useful corrective for those who feel that choice in national security matters is predetermined, whether by economics, geopolitical realities or some other factor. It is certainly true that these are important issues, and occasionally determinative in the decision-making process. But at the same time, such 'realities' are filtered through the perceptions, values and interests of decision-makers. It is too much to say that reality is socially constructed, but the way facts are interpreted (and even the choice of facts deemed to be relevant) is powerfully affected by individual and cultural considerations. For this reason, one should not expect unanimity of opinion on these important issues, even among individuals in the same culture.

One point of contention is the degree to which 'security' should be considered only in its political and military dimensions. On the one hand, it is true that the security of individual people is affected by a range of challenges, including the new ones discussed in this book. On the other, if security is extended too far, it will become less solid as an object of inquiry and analysis. It does not diminish the importance of issues such as crime, climate change and health to discuss them from a national security perspective and the impact of the threat or use of force in dealing with them, as this book does.

Viotti covers traditional military topics well, providing readers with sensible discussions of arms control, space, private armies and weapons of mass destruction. He gives special attention to the emerging issue of cyber attacks and cyber-crime. The days are long past when a cyber attack was viewed as a weapon of mass annoyance, rather than as a significant threat to the security of one's country. The book's account of nuclear weapons and deterrence is especially useful, sorting out as it does the various considerations and giving some interesting historical context.

Viotti's discussion of war confronts directly the high cost in blood and treasure it entails. Whether this is worth paying in a particular case will never be completely agreed upon, but all decision-makers should realize that the notion of a 'surgical strike' is terribly misleading. No sensible military person would use a phrase like

that, because he or she would understand the degree to which military force is an extremely blunt instrument and should be applied only when the issue at hand is sufficiently important to justify inflicting significant collateral costs in the course of pursuing a military objective.

A crucial issue in the study of war is morality. This is not to be confused with moralism, or the use and misuse of one's own moral judgements to initiate war, but rather the degree to which one can apply moral precepts to the conduct of war and make judgements on that basis. Viotti's discussion of thinkers such as Clausewitz and Jomini helps clarify this point, and along the way provides some guidelines about the conduct of war. His account of just war theory is especially relevant in determining the justice of the war itself (*jus ad bellum*) and the justice of the way in which it is conducted (*jus in bello*). Thus, it is possible that a war would be justified but fought in a way that was itself immoral. The firebombing of Dresden comes to mind, conducted towards the end of a war generally agreed to be just. One could also imagine an unjust war fought justly, etc. The critical issue is—and upon this reasonable people will differ—the criteria to be used in determining whether a particular war or particular action is just or not.

This section of the book closes with an extensive account of armed interventions conducted by the United States over the years. There will not be agreement on the appropriateness in every case, but the book outlines a number of key considerations policy-makers should entertain before undertaking an intervention. Viotti's discussion of various internationalist and nationalist orientations is useful in helping policy-makers think about such issues and analysts to evaluate them.

That US national security concerns must be addressed in a world that is at once increasingly globalized and fragmented greatly complicates the problem for decision-makers. There can be no exact guide for action, but the issues raised in this thoughtful and highly readable book provide a useful framework for how readers should think about US national security issues.

*John Allen Williams, Loyola University Chicago, USA*

## **The role of allies in US national security**

The subtitle of Paul Viotti's recent book captures the signal contribution of this work on US national security. On the one hand, the US faces an evolving international arena of diverse and new threats; on the other, it needs to accommodate longstanding US values such as civilian control of the military, as well as a vast national security apparatus that must be retuned to a 'brave new world'. This is an easily accessible introduction to national security challenges that should be of particular interest to undergraduate students and perhaps the lay reader.

Surprisingly, the book does not single out cooperative relations, including alliances and allies, for separate consideration. Individual allies such as Britain and Australia are mentioned in odd places, as is the collective alliance represented by

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but this work is organized to focus on threats, not friends: chapter one offers a summary of emerging security challenges (such as cyber and global crime) and chapters two to six examine distinct types of threat-based relations. Revealingly, the index contains no references to ‘alliance’, ‘ally’, ‘coalition’, ‘cooperation’ or ‘cooperative security’.

To use Mario Puzo’s memorable phrase from *The godfather*, ‘a man who doesn’t spend time with his family can never be a real man’. Viotti is not unaware of the virtue, in matters of security, of building a network of friends and of spending time with them. He does make reference to the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review that defines the projection of US power to build global security as one of three strategic objectives for the country. Furthermore, in his afterword, the author identifies stability as a ‘broad US interest’ and links it to ‘cooperative security’ and coalition-building, as well as underscoring values shared by the United States and ‘similarly constituted republics’ (and, one might add, constitutional monarchies). However, these observations come late in the game and mostly in an afterword that is five pages long and insufficient to introduce new perspectives on the matter.

There are inherent opportunities in the book to address the US ‘family’ in international affairs. One presents itself in the author’s constructivist approach to intersubjective matters of fact. Why this did not lead him to examine thoroughly, and not just in passing, the international liberal community or the alliance relations the US has built through almost seven decades of global engagement is a bit of a mystery. Viotti employs constructivism to challenge facile domestic assumptions about threats to the United States, which is a fair point, but also a limited one. Constructivism, even in the moderate guise he invokes, would generally question rather than take for granted the nature of anarchy and investigate the intersubjective politics that generate international order.

Another opportunity comes in chapters seven to nine, with the discussion of the constitution of the US republic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Key founding fathers counselled republican unity to manage international affairs, among them George Washington, who, in his farewell speech, argued that the United States might choose ‘temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies’ but generally should take care not to interweave its destiny with those of other regions. The brave new world depicted in chapters one to six fundamentally challenges this tradition, or outlook, of limiting entanglements. It seems insufficient to reserve these considerations to the afterword. In particular, one of the most convincing ways to manage the changing security environment would be for the US to mobilize friends, allies and partners into a structure of security governance. This is an effort that belongs to the realm of grand strategy and is worthy of considerable reflection given the problems it has posed for post-Cold War US presidents. For instance, President Obama sought to build institutions but also to limit foreign entanglements in favour of nation-building at home, in the end getting caught up in coalition-based small wars that unnerved key policy constituencies at home and abroad. This helps explain the potency of

President Trump's electoral platform to 'make America great again'. As a vision for disentangling the United States from major foreign conflicts, President Trump's ideas are unlikely to bring much relief, but will quite likely erode the US's ability to manage threats through cooperative security.

The history of how the United States, with varying success, has built alliances and global networks of support belongs in a comprehensive review of US national security policy. Viotti's book downplays it in an effort to zoom in on adversarial relations and threats and their relationship to US government capacities and values. Viotti has written an inspiring book, though it does leave the reader with a glass half full when it comes to the assessment of alliance politics.

*Sten Rynning, The University of Southern Denmark, Denmark*

### **Insurgencies and counter-insurgencies**

Readers are unlikely to find a more thoughtful conceptual framework for the multitude of factors relevant to understanding (and waging) insurgencies and counter-insurgencies than Paul Viotti's chapters (four and five) on that subject. Viotti deftly addresses the key questions while managing a formidable array of analytical categories.

A partial list can convey some sense of the spectrum of issues that the author engages with: What causes the grievances that lead to insurgencies? To what extent can today's insurgencies be understood as the reaction of traditional societies to the imposition of modernization? Beyond the causes of insurgencies, how can one assess the characteristics of an insurgent group's leadership, ideology and organization? Does the organization include a 'political wing', implying that it may be open to negotiations? What tactics does it adopt—across the spectrum from open warfare by military units, to guerrilla warfare, to the use of terror—and what drives those choices?

The author imposes the same analytical order on counter-insurgencies: Do they address the sources of grievance, or do they emphasize force? If the latter, are they feeding the uprising through unconstrained violence? Or has the relative weight of persuasion and force been informed by serious analysis of local culture, including the role of tribes, clans and religious groups? In that case, is the resulting strategy based on a careful selection of targets (leadership, communications, financing, external allies)? By methodically locating the spectrum of factors within an orderly, accessible conceptual framework, Viotti's approach will help inform future comparative case-studies in a field central to security studies.

Another strength of Viotti's approach is that he is highly attentive to avoiding the intrusion of his own values. In his own words, he 'sets normative biases aside, focusing only on the analytical utility' of his concepts and categories. He thus avoids belittling the grievances of traditional societies against the encroachments of modernity—an error, he observes, that has led to vast underestimations of the power of various insurgencies. If he forms judgements, they are mainly empirically

grounded assessments of the efficacy of various strategies and tactics in particular historical contexts. Most notably, he forcefully depicts the poor choices made by the United States in Vietnam and Iraq, where decision-makers ignored popular grievances, failed adequately to study the structure of societies, misunderstood the ideological motivations of insurgent groups and misused force. In short, they failed to heed virtually the entire checklist of categories that Viotti persuasively depicts as crucial to effective strategies of counter-insurgency.

Viotti's insistence on value-neutral analysis enables him to stress the danger—which so threatened US policy-making in the aftermath of 9/11—that high emotion will overwhelm clear-headed analysis. Yet despite those important advantages, I would offer two criticisms of his 'constructivist' approach. First, it is one thing to avoid pronouncing on whether modernization (or liberal ideology associated with modernization) is good or bad when compared to the array of traditional societies which it threatens. But refraining from passing moral judgement need not extend to avoiding comparative assessments of the relative power of competing ideologies. Are the forces associated with the Enlightenment more powerful than movements (nationalist or religious) that hurl themselves against the transformative imposition (and appeal) of universal human rights? Similarly, didn't the way the Cold War end amount to a verdict on the relative mobilizing power of the two principal contenders—liberal market democracy and Soviet-style socialism—an ideological battle associated with so many Cold War insurgencies and counter-insurgencies?

Today's insurgencies in the Middle East can be viewed as combinations of two of Viotti's analytical categories (intercommunal strife and modernity vs traditionalism). The uprising in Bahrain in 2014–15, for example, could be seen both as a liberal challenge to authoritarianism and as a Shia Islamist challenge to Sunni rule. In all of these examples, can't one assign different weights to the appeal of the various ideologies that contribute to violent, prolonged confrontation?

A second criticism of Viotti's dispassionate analysis is that normative detachment may have analytical costs. Isn't the beleaguered liberal world order, which faces violent and non-violent insurgencies in so many places these days, specifically hampered in the tactics (means) which it chooses because of the ends (universal human rights) that it seeks? Viotti hints at this when he notes that for the American insurgents against the British, 'using such violent tactics as terrorism, torture and assassination was decidedly not part of their game plan'. Liberal insurgencies (and counter-insurgencies) face other obstacles; anti-liberal groups, for example, can happily rely on big lies as instruments of propaganda, while liberals are bound by conviction to offer reasoned arguments based on confirmable evidence.

Students of US national security will significantly benefit from Viotti's comprehensive (yet concise) depiction of the interconnected analytical categories required to master the opportunities and obstacles confronting insurgent groups and those who wish to stop them. Yet as someone who has taken sides with the secular liberal modernizers, it would be nice to see Viotti apply his formidable analytical skill to help that threatened group—which fares so poorly these days in its upris-

ings against an array of authoritarian regimes—choose how best to capture the prize he identifies: legitimacy, or the right to rule.

*David Goldfisher, University of Denver, USA*

## **The continuing search for equilibrium in American civil–military relations**

It is difficult to deny the importance of American civil–military relations. In 2016, defence spending made up more than half of the discretionary spending in the US federal budget and more than one-third of the global total. In his first budget proposal, President Donald Trump seeks to raise this figure by approximately 10 per cent. In addition to the significance of its claim on national resources, given the Department of Defense’s worldwide system of combatant commands and high level of global engagement, the military instrument of power remains an important tool in the hands of US foreign and security policy-makers.

In the domestic realm, the military currently stands out as the American institution that has best sustained public trust. A June 2016 Gallup poll revealed that 73 per cent of Americans had either a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the military. The presidency was at 36 per cent, and Congress was at 6 per cent. While irrational fear of the military would not be conducive to sound policy, some are concerned that this high level of trust could ultimately threaten civilian control.

For these reasons, Paul Viotti made a sound choice when he devoted two of nine chapters in his *US national security* to civil–military relations. A particular strength of this book is that it examines both the challenge of civilian control and the broader relationship of the American military to the society from which it stems. These dimensions of civil–military relations are often treated separately, by different authors working in different disciplines.

In the first of his two chapters on the subject, Viotti reviews the traditional American distrust of standing armies and the relevant provisions of the US constitution, while making the argument that ‘national purposes’ and civilian control are best served by ‘military members fully integrated with—not apart from—American society’ (p. 208). In the second chapter, Viotti offers an ideal type of democratic civil–military relations and then compares reality to this model, finding that the US military falls short in its representativeness and in its integration with society. He concludes the chapter by examining the military’s experience with diversity along the lines of race, gender and sexual orientation.

In arguing that the United States would be best served by a military that is fully integrated with society, Viotti is entering a longstanding debate. The two leading protagonists remain Samuel Huntington, who first argued the benefits of a degree of military cultural isolation in *The soldier and the state* (Harvard University Press) in 1957, and Morris Janowitz, who argued for the value of integration in *The professional soldier* (Free Press) in 1960. Though many may be sympathetic to Viotti’s position, they will not find much in the way of new evidence in this book that a military that is fully integrated with the broader society is superior in advancing national interests or ensuring civilian control. In fact, on the latter point, Viotti

relies in part on ‘strongly held military norms’ against military intervention in domestic politics (p. 208). Given that these apolitical norms are different from the norms held by society, his reliance on them suggests the need for a culture within the military that differs from that of the broader society in at least some respects.

On the issue of diversity, Viotti rightly argues that the integration of minorities based on race, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity is a work in progress (p. 218). As to why this integration is important, he argues that it helps sustain democracy within the broader society (p. 224). While this claim may have validity, there is a missed opportunity here to acknowledge ways that integration can make the military stronger. First, openness to minorities enables the military to draw on the talents of a broader swath of the population in an all-volunteer environment. A second relates to the functional advantages of diversity across all dimensions, including traditionally disadvantaged minority groups, in fostering creative problem-solving and innovation.

While these critiques bear consideration, Viotti has clearly done students and faculty a service with the primer on civil–military relations he provides. In the long run, an informed electorate constitutes the best guarantee that US civil–military relations will continue to contribute to the preservation of a secure and democratic republic.

*Suzanne C. Nielsen, United States Military Academy West Point, USA*

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.