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“Sailing the Water’s Edge – sailing to nowhere?”

Book review on Helen V. Milner’s & Dustin Tingley’s “Sailing the Water’s Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy”

Gordon Friedrichs

For decades, politicians and academics in the US have discussed whether the president enjoys exclusive authority in the establishment and maintenance of foreign affairs. One recalls the famous expression by Republican Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg in 1948 that “politics stops at the water's edge”, which opened the way to an internationalist role for the US and facilitated bipartisan support for the negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty. Throughout the Cold War with its bipartisan consensus, there were few inclinations to question this *leitmotiv* of US foreign policy. Researchers, such as David Singer, James Rosenau or Robert Jervis contributed studies on the foreign policy decision making process, yet domestic politics remained “black boxed” with the executive branch as the state’s single foreign policy authority in an international system marked by anarchy. With the end of the Cold War, domestic political issues became transcended to an international scale, diversifying and increasing the policy instruments at the president’s disposal. *Sailing the Water’s Edge* by Helen V. Milner (Princeton) and Dusting Tingley (Harvard) investigates the determinants of foreign policy choices made by the US president. More specifically, the book focuses on how domestic politics - in particular the interactions between the president, Congress, interest groups, bureaucracies, and the public – influence which foreign policy instruments presidents choose. The authors argue that domestic actors have both material interests *and* ideological divisions towards a variety of foreign policy instruments, such as economic aid, trade, and military deployments, and that both factors constrain presidents from applying certain instruments. The authors find that presidents have most control over military deployments *relative* to other instruments, i.e. geopolitical aid, sanctions, immigration, economic aid, trade, or domestic military spending. As a result, presidents predominately select military foreign policies. The authors thus see a militarization of US foreign policy since the end of World War II – an observation that raises concerns about the nature and condition of a liberal internationalism grand strategy and the future of US foreign affairs. If US grand strategy becomes increasingly securitized, other states will adapt and the international system might become less stable and peaceful. By drawing on theories of political economy, the authors theorize convincingly how and why domestic actors weigh some foreign policy instruments more costly than others and how ideological stances shape domestic contestation. This combination of material and ideological factors is an enlightening contribution to existing literature. The book covers a remarkable breadth of empirical ground. It encompasses a wide array of domestic actors and a meticulous study of quantitative and qualitative data, including lobbying reports, budgetary politics, roll call voting, and public opinion data. In addition, a thorough researched case study of US foreign policy in Sub-Saharan Africa across two presidential administrations exemplifies the authors' arguments convincingly. The authors laudably acknowledge the analytical value of differences *between* foreign policy instruments instead of simply weighing the importance of domestic against international issues.

Yet as Milner and Tingley aspire to sail the disciplinary water's edge, some of their arguments unfortunately sail to nowhere: The authors argue that domestic politics can account for a shift in strategy vis-à-vis Iraq between the Clinton and Bush Jr. administrations. However, a consideration of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as a factor influencing domestic actors' material considerations and ideological divisions is missing. A brief discussion of the "second image reverse" theorem might have been fruitful to account for exceptional circumstances that can disproportionally skew the acceptance of distributional costs. It is also questionable whether domestic constraints on certain instruments only result in foreign policy substitution. Alternative outcomes could be indecision or strategic delay. US presidents' pocket veto is just one example of how presidents can deliberately delay the political process to coerce Congress for policy support, thus skewing the authors' domestic constraint argumentation. Another point of contend is the strict separation between material and ideational factors. A constructivist reading might suggest that ideas shape material interests. One example discussed is the government shutdown of 2013: While its distributive costs were unquestioned, legislators from both sides of the aisle pursued ideological driven policies, which trumped their rational conception of material costs. This shows that ideology can indeed lead to irrational behavior and, in the end, drives distributional cost considerations. Regarding the militarization of US foreign policy, the authors fail to consider its temporal dimension. Distributional costs considerations might change after military operations and engagements prove to be lengthy or allies decide against burden sharing. In addition, once troops have been deployed, Congress has a high incentive to continue funding. This decouples rational material considerations (e.g. the cost of war) from domestic

contestation processes and countervails the authors’ argument that the initial reason for low ideological constraint and distributive costs are based on mere domestic considerations.
While the authors’ strong suit is their astute and painstakingly theorization of the US domestic-foreign policy nexus, supplemented with a rich data set and a thorough methodology, the book’s biggest weakness comes to the fore by reality check. Over the course of US foreign relations history, trade agreements and the scale of US foreign aid have actually prospered, backed by regular trade promotion authority from Congress. The US, since the end of World War II, has continuously lowered its tariffs (merely 1,3% in 2010), became the second largest exporter and largest importer in the world, and has, by now, agreed to a total of 20 free trade agreements– all against the background of a stagnating defense budget (military spending has been in sharp decline since 2010) and tight Congressional control (e.g. the Budget Control Act of 2011). Plain and simple, the US is not securitizing its foreign policy regardless of the theoretical effort the authors make.

– Gordon Friedrichs is a PhD candidate at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. In his PhD project, Gordon Friedrichs examines domestic role contestations and their implications for the U.S. leadership role in the 21st century. Currently, he is also part of a research team working on patterns of economic policy advice in Germany and the U.S. from a comparative perspective.

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