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The Sovereignty Solution: A Common Sense Approach to Global Security

Andrew Higgins

Liberty University Helms School of Government

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Introduction

Anna Simons, a Professor of Defense Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School, and her co-authors Army LTC Joe McGraw and retired Army officer Duane Launchengco, published their book, *The Sovereignty Solution: A Common Sense Approach to Global Security* in 2011. The book makes an ambitious call for a new geopolitical grand strategy for the United States. According to Simons et al., the current national security paradigm has yet to be modified from a 20th-century cast of mind. The ad hoc national security system inherited after the end of the Cold War now fails because it too often applies national power equally to each emerging threat. But security challenges in the 21st century arise so quickly and unexpectedly that continuing in this manner incurs overextension. Moreover, moving forward without realization of this may risk strategic defeat. This should matter to Americans, because if the United States continues to behave as if it can be in all places in equal measure at once, the country will suffer demoralization at home while burning through resources and reputation abroad.

An improved American security would be based on the rediscovery of a few common-sense principles. Firstly, the United States should recommit to the restoration of a *modus vivendi* Westphalian order.¹ This renewed emphasis would assume national sovereignty as the sole criterion for legitimate exchange; deviation from this re-established order would result in swift and massive punishment from any or all aggrieved states.

Secondly, the United States must consolidate its power through recognition of a distinct and shared American character. America should rely on its natural strengths, but also be aware of how its inborn vulnerabilities can be exploited. Doing so will help discriminate between true national interests and foreign policy adventures which have over-relied on untested theory and squander American power. This can be accomplished by returning to a government by and for the people, in which the entire nation is invested when conflict arises through a constitutionally-validated Congressional declaration of war.² Therefore, the United States can form a viable grand strategy pursuant of national security, not the vague and often expansive concept of national interests. If the world's nation-states were to follow suit and restructure their security postures around a self-oriented sovereignty with limited entanglements and a predisposition against overseas warfare, the collective movement toward choice and responsibility would foster greater global peace and prosperity.³

Analysis

The authors' case for a new American security is primarily built on reimagined global security—a restored Westphalia, the state-based system which punishes and rewards according to nation-state sovereignty.⁴ The authors explain that this standard would be tacitly agreed upon by all state actors as the best mechanism to guarantee both rights and responsibilities within international relations.⁵

¹ Anna Simons et al. *The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 44-46.

² *Ibid.*, 61-67.

³ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

Simons and her co-authors describe sovereignty as a two-edged sword. Firstly, states have the right to self-determination. The latitude this affords allows all states to pursue their own security, so long as that pursuit does not infringe upon others.⁶ Open societies like the United States, the authors maintain, will cease intervening in the internal affairs of authoritarian regimes, either on humanitarian or other grounds which do not directly serve that state's security. They may even find themselves cooperating with such governments to limited, but mutually self-serving ends. This would free the United States up from costly entanglements, like state-building enterprises or face-losing criticisms of major strategic trading partners. It would also put an end to the criticism of self-appointment as the world's superpower policeman.

On the other edge of the sword, states must keep their own citizens from meddling in other states' affairs.⁷ States who wittingly or unwittingly harbor sub-state actors, then, are accountable for the actions of those who violate other states' security. The authors call this "self-policing."⁸

"Accountability," moreover, means military retaliation. This, the authors hold, should be massive and overwhelming, and designed to produce adversary concessions.⁹ Failed states—in whatever tribal, elder, or dysfunctional conventional form—are those which fail to adequately self-police. This new status quo would free the United States (and all other sovereign powers) from "attributive deterrence."¹⁰ Two prominent attributive deterrence advocates, Francis Fukuyama and G. John Ikenberry, use rogue state WMD acquisition from an unidentified source state as an instance requiring sovereign states to hold all rogue states with WMD programs responsible.¹¹ Calls to hold bad actors "responsible" without defining what precisely this may mean risks costly reactions with muddled or nonexistent strategic ends. Responsibility, for Simons et al., means overwhelming military action, and deterrence occurs because this is understood.¹²

However, are Simons and her co-authors not simply describing the current Westphalian order? Moreover, are they not simply prescribing a kind of macho multilateralism as the solution to that order's decay? The United Nations, after all, was established explicitly to foster "international security and peace," and in theory can work as a forum for the resolution of interstate conflict.¹² The actual practice of the United Nations is not the sovereignty-based international security which the authors would seem to suggest. Multilateralism, the authors say, demands cession of national sovereignty while not delivering security-serving outcomes. Simons and her co-authors also point to the slow-moving ineffectualness of the UN and other international security arrangements, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.¹³ Simons and her co-authors though do not call for their demise. The authors affirm the UN's capacity to

⁶ Ibid., 46; 72.

⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, G. John Ikenberry. "Report of the Working Group on Grand Strategic Choices." Princeton Project on National Security, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2 September 2004, <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/ppns/groups/GrandStrategy/index.html>, (Accessed 7 Apr 2020).

¹² Ibid., Simons et al., 75-76.

¹¹ Ibid., Fukuyama and Ikenberry.

¹² United Nations. "Article 1." United Nations Charter. 24 October. 1945. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/preamble/index.html>, (Accessed 30 Mar 2020).

¹³ Ibid., Simons et al., 89-90.

maintain international commerce, such as civil aviation, a postal service, a stock exchange, and NATO as a single part of a regime complex which seems to deter Russian belligerence. Nevertheless, they seem to describe the historical Westphalian arrangement as the only solution to a frayed foreign policy under an impending threat from emerging powers and multipolarity.

The main weakness in their case here is that “sovereignty” seems understood not as fidelity from the body politic, but as a citizen’s compliance with a state government constantly implying or threatening retaliation. Some states may have open societies, but whether you are born within one is a product of providence. In either extreme, a citizen finds himself subject to state authority. Sovereignty, then, is a substitute definition for a state’s ability to self-police. The authors’ entire premise relies on the United States taking a sober self-assessment, a reckoning of the disparate opinions and interests normal to a diversely populated democratic republic. Then, the authors expect the American public to come to an easy consensus as to what constitutes national security versus interests—finally, pursuing them in harmony. This series of preconditions may betray the fact that the book was written during the first Obama Administration after the killing of Osama bin Laden; before the renewed attention on racial tensions following Baltimore and Ferguson; and five years prior to the unimaginable election of Donald Trump. Assuming that the U.S. people can, in short order, rally around its first principles and common good to pursue its security seems blithe to the serious divisions now plaguing public discourse. Historically, Americans only do so in times of clear and present crisis.¹⁴

The Prerequisites for Reconstituted Sovereignty

Strong national sovereignty is often confounded by nationalistic language, and several cases for a return to benevolent nationalism have been made in recent years, mostly from the political right. While Simons and her co-authors strive to avoid partisan bias, a call from strong national sovereignty seems far less possible to come from the American political left. Since the early-20th century, American leftist thought and policy has absorbed transnational inclinations, looking to class, ethnicity, or even gender as more binding institutions for the basis of political choices. While left-leaning American presidents have certainly deployed military assets in pursuit of “national security and American interests,” these often come at the expense of American sovereignty or lack strategic gain.¹⁵ And yet Simons and her co-authors’ argument remains compelling. It suggests that the Westphalian system had sufficiently eroded through two world wars such that a new “liberal world order” in 1945 was justified. But, the problem is that this very order, in turn has itself sufficiently eroded such that Simons’ et al. argument appears little more than a call for the status quo ante. Irrespective of ideological origin, delegating authority and accountability to the lowest level—in an anarchical international system, this can only be the nation-state. For the Christian statesman this would be desirable, since it fully conforms to Biblical teaching on the rights and responsibilities of governments, as well as the Church’s teachings on solidarity and subsidiarity (1 Timothy 2:2; Acts 5:29).¹⁶ As one example

¹⁴ W. D. Baker, and O’Neal, J. R. “Patriotism or opinion leadership? The nature and origins of the ‘rally ‘round the flag’ effect.” (*Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 45, No 5, 2001), 661–87.

¹⁵ Molly O’Toole. “President Obama’s National Security Strategy Isn’t Actually New”. *Defense One*. 6 Feb 2015. <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/02/president-obamas-new-national-security-strategy-isnt-actuallynew/104793/>, (Accessed 8 Apr 2020).

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II. “Paragraph 2241”. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2ND. Rev. ed. (Baltimore, MD: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Press, 2018), 541.

from the Gospels, Matthew 22:21 shows how state authority is right and just insofar as it promotes the common good in accordance with natural law. The function of state authority is limited, and so Christians are called to give the state what is owed to it, proportionally, while giving everything else to God. 1 Timothy 2:2 places a burden upon governmental authorities, legitimating them only insofar as they allow for the peaceful self-governing pursuits of their citizens.

Policy Implications and Conclusions

The authors' argument for retaliation against sub-state actors calls to mind recent contingencies against ISIS in Syria. According to their argument, were Syria truly held accountable, there would be no state-sponsored fighters from Syria in Afghanistan or Iraq, let alone other foreign nationals fighting as part of a sub-state transnational organization, like ISIS or Al Qaeda.¹⁷ *Commentary* writer Noah Rothman offers similar reasoning, arguing that rogue states like North Korea and Iran—both of which have strong ties to international terrorism—would never be permitted to develop nuclear weapons.²³ The United States, and any other sovereign state, would have the right to massive and overwhelming action against them in either case.¹⁸ President George W. Bush's policy toward Iran, while it sponsored fighters in Iraq, was to sanction Iran but stop short of deploying resources there as the administration had in both Afghanistan and Iraq. President Obama's policy was to make half-hearted deals with Iran in the hopes of altering its behavior, only to have them flagrantly violated. However, President Trump's policy toward Iran, in particular, seems to most closely conform to the authors' call: the sanctioned killing of General Soleimani was a direct holding to accounts of a high-ranking Iranian official with a solid record of killing Americans in Iraq, one which was taken to eliminate a defined threat to US national interests and signal deterrence to would-be successors.¹⁹ The extent to which the lawful state-directed killing of a condemnable military adversary conform to *The Sovereignty Solution's* call for "massive reaction" may be a matter of debate. But, Soleimani's killing did meet a number of other requirements mentioned by the authors, namely, that it was not preemptive and was limited to strict deterrence with further action only implied. Doing so eliminated a guilty threat with a long record of killing Americans and with reported plans to kill more in the future.²⁰ This satisfies Simons et al.'s understanding of the sovereign state's purpose as an institution to facilitate the peaceful self-governing pursuits of its people.

¹⁷ Anna Simons, Duane Lauchengco, Joe McGraw, Don Redd. "The Sovereignty Solution." 1 Mar 2007, Vol. 02, No. 4, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2007/03/01/the-sovereignty-solution/>, (Accessed 7 Apr 2020).

²³ Bruce Klingner. "It's True: North Korea Is a Sponsor of Terrorism." The Heritage Foundation. 27 Nov 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/terrorism/commentary/its-true-north-korea-sponsor-terrorism>, (Accessed 8 Apr 2020).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Simons et al., 34-35.

¹⁹ Noah Rothman. "Soleimani Deserved His Fate." *Commentary Magazine*. 2 Jan 2020. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/noah-rothman/soleimani-deserved-his-fate/> (Accessed 8 Apr 2020).

²⁰ Tom Shattuck. "Iran's Soleimani killed thousands, planned to kill more". *The Boston Herald*. 4 January 2020, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2020/01/04/irans-soleimani-killed-thousands-planned-to-kill-more/>, (Accessed 15 July 2020).

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