

REVIEWS

Tom Stevenson, *Someone Else's Empire: British Illusions and American Hegemony*

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GREY ANDERSON

IMPERIUM UNCLOAKED

'The world economy, in terms of both productive capacity and trade, is tripolar—the US, EU and China. But world power remains nearly unipolar. This inherently unstable configuration is the central fact of world politics.' Such lapidary determinations have become a hallmark of Tom Stevenson's essays over the past decade in the *London Review of Books*, where he is a contributing editor. In *Someone Else's Empire*, which collects and frames a number of these pieces, Stevenson's picture of the world comes into clearer shape. As his Introduction and Postscript make clear, he is interested in the structures and practices of power, rather than the piling up of wealth, but he understands the first as premised on a defence of the second against all competitors. Following Sumner, Hull, Berle and other strategists of FDR's Brains Trust, Stevenson sees the US garrisoning of the Persian Gulf—home to some of its largest overseas military bases, one of its three external fleets, tens of thousands of American troops—as a means not to procure oil and gas for itself but to control access to them by the other two poles of world trade and production, Europe and East Asia, whose economies Washington can thereby choke.

Stevenson's book is framed as a challenge to three conventional narratives about international relations. The first consists of 'comforting stories of coalitions of democracies uniting against autocratic menaces'. The US empire should not be understood as an ideological construct, or a commitment to rules or to liberalism, let alone to democratic government,

he writes. American power is founded on 'brute military facts and centrality in the international energy and financial systems'. The US permits a range of political forms in its client states, from medieval monarchies, military juntas, parliamentary apartheid and presidential autocracies to liberal democracies with fairer representation and greater social equality than America itself; what matters to Washington is their general accord with its goals. But what is not in doubt, for Stevenson, is the preponderance of American power: unrivalled military superiority, control of the world's critical sea lanes, command posts on every continent, a network of alliances that covers most of the advanced economies, 30 per cent of global wealth and the levers of the international financial system. No other state, he writes, can affect political outcomes in other countries the way that Washington does, on a quotidian basis, from Honduras to Japan. 'To call this an empire is if anything to understate its range.'

Second, *Someone Else's Empire* is sceptical of talk about an emerging multipolar world. Russia's costly invasion of its neighbour is hardly evidence of global power-projection capability, while EU fantasies of strategic autonomy are 'insubstantial'. India has little throw-weight beyond the Subcontinent. Turkey is a staging ground for US nukes. For Stevenson, Sino-American competition is distinctly lopsided, the strategic balance overwhelmingly weighted towards the US. China does not militarily threaten America, he points out; it is not clear that it is even capable of invading Taiwan. Washington menaces Beijing with isolation and punishment, not vice versa. 'So long as the US is maintaining a "defence perimeter" in the East and South China Seas that, unlike its 1950s original, extends to a few kilometres from mainland China, it is not dealing with a peer, it is threatening a recalcitrant.'

The third narrative in dispute is that of American decline. Stevenson dismisses the US pull-out from Afghanistan as evidence of wider retreat. That twenty years of NATO statecraft could crumble within weeks confirmed only that the Afghan government had been 'a corrupt and artificial dependent'. The humiliating conditions of the exit were partially compensated by Biden's 'signature act of punitive sadism' in freezing Kabul's central bank assets, 'a flourish of parting malice'. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was widely proclaimed a mortal threat to the international order, as imperial propagandists like to call it, but Stevenson pours cold water on this notion. The US strategy of building up Ukrainian armed forces proved 'quite effective'; that the CIA appeared to have a mole in the Kremlin with access to the invasion plans also 'ran counter to the narrative of the empire's demise'.

Why Russia switched from small-scale operations, aimed at reasserting influence in the states around its borders, to adopt 'a completely different and far more hubristic strategy' for Ukraine remains, he stresses, poorly

understood. ‘Part of the story must lie in the agreements signed between the US and Ukraine between September and November 2021’, even if the Western powers remained ‘studiously ambiguous’ about NATO accession; the failure of US–Russia talks in January 2022 evidently ‘set’ the decision to invade. More significant for *Someone Else’s Empire*, Moscow’s ‘grave gamble’ in launching the attack was mirrored by the escalatory strategy of Washington and its allies, which shifted in April 2022 from the ostensible goal of shoring up Ukrainian defences to the ‘grander ambition’ of using the war for the strategic attrition of Russia—a terrible risk for the people of Europe, but no proof of US declension. ‘We live not in the mossy ruins of empire but in its still-smouldering battlefields.’

If American power is not on the wane—despite the heartland catastrophe of the financial crisis, a clear failure to lead on environmental questions and a series of unsuccessful wars—how is its perdurance to be explained? Stevenson suggests that the sheer scale of US superiority may be so great as to discourage would-be challengers. In that case, the forward stance of US policy, ever ready to escalate toward military conflict, can be grasped as a concerted effort to keep proving the extent of that superiority, maintaining its deterrent effect—the strategy proposed by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth’s *World Out of Balance* (2008). The confrontations with both China and Russia were clearly elected by the US, Stevenson argues, as one can read ‘in the black and white of strategic documents written prior to any subsequent rupture’.

Several features distinguish *Someone Else’s Empire* from the standard realist IR approach—that of Patrick Porter in the UK, for instance. First, Stevenson initially engaged with these questions as a young reporter, amid the tumult of the Arab Spring. Educated at Queen Mary, University of London, where he was a student journalist, he found himself on the pensions desk at the *Financial Times* when the uprisings began. He lit out for the region, filing despatches from Cairo and the Maghreb. This exposure to the realities of geopolitics—witnessing at first hand the roles played by US and UK officials on the ground, which rarely made it into the pages of the Western press—had an electrifying effect. In particular, Britain’s function as American adjutant in the Middle East stuck in his craw. *Someone Else’s Empire* displays the results. Stevenson provides devastating accounts of UK actions in Iraq and Afghanistan; the ‘peculiarity’ of British foreign policy, structured as it is around the interests of another state, is given unflinching analysis.

‘Many of the chapters’, Stevenson records in the book’s introduction, ‘were originally reportage from places where the tensions of the world situation cannot be hidden in euphemism’:

To write about or even just from Libya, Iraq or Egypt is to be confronted with all the contradictions of Anglo-American power. Two themes were inescapable: the abiding presence of American empire, despite talk of its

demise, and the consistency of British servility to US designs whatever the consequences.

The tone is set for what follows. *Someone Else's Empire* is divided into three sections. The first, 'Equerry Dreams', anatomizes the 'British illusions' of the subtitle. Although the Anglo-American 'special relationship' has been the major determinant of the UK's place in the world for the past eighty years, sober assessment of its content is rare. The national repertoire is crowded with shibboleths of *translatio imperii* and ethno-cultural fate, from Churchill's 'fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples' to Macmillan's identification with the Hellenistic Greeks, destined to 'civilize' the new Rome. 'It is special', Margaret Thatcher insisted. 'It just is, and that's that.' US officials have used more trenchant terms. Dean Acheson's throwaway remark to West Point cadets about Britain having 'lost an empire but not yet found a role' obsessed English commentators throughout the sixties and beyond. Much less quoted is his suggestion that the solution lay in 'getting Britain to act as our lieutenant'.

In Stevenson's reading, it was the prospect of American dominance at sea, already forecast at the end of the Great War, that obliged London to seek some accommodation with its hegemonic successor. Three years after the armistice, the Washington Naval Conference that froze the world balance of naval power in Britain and America's favour also dictated parity between their two fleets; the heads of the Admiralty sat dumbfounded as the US Secretary of State listed by name the capital ships they were to junk. Roughly equal in 1941, by 1944 the Royal Navy displaced a quarter the tonnage of its American counterpart. During the Pacific War, carrier battles at Coral Sea and Midway exhibited the scale of US might, its blue-water pre-eminence further reinforced in the years ahead. In March 1944, a Foreign Office report registered Britain's decline in status, from 'Protagonist to attendant Lord'; it emerged from the conflict a Lend-Lease bondsman.

Peonage, Stevenson argues, was not the only legacy of the wartime compact with the US. Anglo-American intelligence sharing, originally in the form of cryptanalysis work, was formalized in the 1946 UKUSA Agreement. Atomic weapons posed a less tractable problem. British scientists had participated in the Manhattan Project, on the understanding that the UK would benefit from privileged access to American nuclear technology. Not quite a year after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Congress abruptly put paid to that idea, in what the official historian of the Atomic Energy Authority described as 'a depressing picture of a superpower playing with a satellite'. With Sputnik, nuclear cooperation resumed, and in late 1957 the UK successfully tested a thermonuclear device. But no 'all-British' Bomb was ever deployed. Hobbled by the mounting costs, Macmillan's government

abandoned the programme and agreed to purchase the American Skybolt standoff missile; when this was unilaterally cancelled by Washington, in 1962, the Prime Minister went hat in hand to plead for its replacement, the submarine-launched Polaris. As part of the deal, the US established a base for its own Polaris fleet at Holy Loch, on the Firth of Clyde. Thereafter, UK capability would be dependent on American-manufactured missiles, maintenance and servicing. 'There is no chance they would ever be used without approval from Washington', Stevenson notes. 'British politicians like to talk of Britain's "independent deterrent" but in practice its nuclear weapons are an appurtenance of US power.'

Espionage, thermonuclear warheads and expeditionary warfare have been the real substance of the alliance, in Stevenson's account. They also help explain its remarkable continuity, notwithstanding periodic shifts in mood and inflexion. Rifts between the allies occasionally appeared in years to come, but Acheson had captured the underlying dynamic. Conventional periodization of the UK-US relationship posits a residual post-war hankering after great-power status on Britain's part that ended when Eisenhower slapped down the Suez adventure in 1956. *Someone Else's Empire* makes clear that there were two further stages after that. During the interregnum of the 1960s to the 1990s, Britain's rulers adjusted to their new status but still retained some of the mindset of an independent state. In 1967, Wilson explained to LBJ that his government could not despatch two token brigades to Indochina without being perceived as Washington's 'British stooges'. Heath steered a determinedly pro-European course and refused use of UK airspace for the US airlift to Israel during the 1973 war. Thatcher and Reagan were ideological soulmates, but she embarked on the Falklands campaign against initial disapproval from Washington, which then bailed her out with intelligence help, as did Pinochet.

In the new era opened by Blair, British leaders would become evangelists for American foreign policy, however reckless or half-baked it may be. Not quite a year into his premiership, a Johnson-era NSC veteran publicly wondered whether 'British parroting of US foreign policy' had not 'so diminished Britain's standing as to make it more of a diplomatic encumbrance than an asset'. But this reflected a new security-establishment consensus: the highest priority for Britain was involvement in the execution of US strategy, since this would supposedly offer a chance to shape it. Formulated at the time of NATO's war on Yugoslavia, this deluded conviction was hardened—to the extent of justifying dodgy dossiers, lies to Parliament and the like—to make sure the UK played a leading part in the invasion of Iraq. A full division was thought to be 'the entrance fee into American decision-making', per Lawrence Freedman, impresario of the War Studies department at King's College London, in order to 'moderate the tough line'.

Freedman and John Bew, also at KCL, are among the 'leading minds' of a native defence intelligentsia stipended by RUSI, the IISS, Chatham House and other think tanks. Stevenson's portrait of this cabal is incisive. Ranks studded with former US national security officials and coffers topped up with American funds, their influence in the imperial core is nil. Atlanticist to the bone, always on the lookout for 'atavistic anti-Americanism', reliably more *va-t-en-guerre* than the General Staff, their central function, Stevenson writes, 'is to challenge signs of declinism and suggestions that the UK might be demoted from the "top table"'. Under Blair, who outdid the Clinton White House in hawkishness over Kosovo, Cool Britannia strove to rise to the task. The Prime Minister candidly expressed his conception of the relationship in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. Friendly gestures were insufficient to impress upon the Americans the depth of British fealty. 'They need to know, are you prepared to commit, are you prepared to be there when the shooting starts?'

Stevenson delivers a cool appraisal of the result. Notwithstanding the self-serving accounts of well-intentioned Britons joining Operation Iraqi Freedom to soften its course, London took the lead in the dash to war, marshalling other coalition members to alleviate the impression of go-it-alone Texan truculence. The British Army's performance in the field was less satisfactory. Charged with taking the southeastern governorate of Basra, armoured units struggled to overcome an underequipped and half-starved enemy. Once they had captured the capital, only after two weeks of fighting and the expenditure of some 20,000 rounds of cluster munitions, at an untold cost in civilian lives, the occupiers proved still less competent in securing it. 'By early 2007', Stevenson writes, 'the forces in Basra were holed up in a garrison under constant shelling.'

When Blair left office in June that year, the British army was releasing prisoners to the city militias in exchange for temporary cessations of attacks on its positions . . . It took about eight weeks to remove British military equipment from central Basra, but the soldiers withdrew from the city in a single night like criminals leaving a burgled house. Their departure had been negotiated in advance with the Shia militias. British forces exercised so little control over the city by September 2007 that to leave without such an arrangement would have been very difficult. The midnight convoy was subjected to just one IED attack, which given the circumstances was counted a success. Basra was left to the militias. Having invaded Iraq's second city and occupied it for four years, British soldiers ended up sitting in an out-of-town airport while militiamen took potshots at them with rockets.

The humiliation was all the more stinging for an institution neurotically preoccupied with its reputation in the eyes of the Americans. US generals spoke frankly of their disillusionment with British commanders who

arrived boasting of colonial tradition and tactical nous hard won in Northern Ireland. In Afghanistan, the picture was hardly rosier. After an initial contribution of commandos, from 2006 Britain assumed the task of pacifying the Helmand province under NATO auspices, Whitehall and High Command keen for redemption in view of the unfolding rout in Iraq. The mission swiftly devolved into fiasco, rhetoric of ‘population-centric’ counterinsurgency belied by a litany of indiscriminate massacres and atrocities. There was no proper reckoning with the fallout in either case. But as Stevenson writes of Iraq: ‘To speak of individual war crimes is to ignore the fact that the war itself was a terrible crime, a reckless assault of the sort that nations were once disarmed for committing.’

London’s desperate clinging to Washington only makes sense, he suggests in the introduction, if it believes the US really has entered a phase of repeatedly and aggressively proving its colossal preponderance in order to disincentivize any challengers. From this perspective, he allows, as a designated ally, ‘the menial adherence of Britain to the US global project is at least intelligible.’ Yet there is something in British subservience—which has only deepened over the past decade, irrespective of the costs incurred—that defies comprehension. As its economic position continues to decline, the UK maintains the largest military budget of any NATO member save the US, expenditure that both Labour and the Conservatives promise to increase. Statements of national-defence strategy mimic those promulgated by Washington, with phrases often lifted verbatim. London jettisoned hopeful designs for rapprochement with Beijing to fall in with the American hard line, aping the US ‘pivot’ with its own ‘tilt to Asia’, advertised in the 2021 ‘integrated security review’, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, authored by Bew. That May, HMS Queen Elizabeth set course for the South China Sea. The same defence review disclosed that Britain would expand its stock of nuclear weapons, a momentous decision taken with very little public discussion. As Stevenson notes, the strategic rationale for this build-up is unclear. Meanwhile, the Johnson government’s approach to the war in Ukraine—‘more Virginian than the Pentagon or the CIA’—has been zealously upheld by his successors, and the UK consistently takes the lead in supplying ‘escalatory’ weapons systems to Kiev ahead of other European states.

‘It is one thing to station military forces around the world to maintain your own empire’, Stevenson observes, ‘but quite another to do so for someone else’s.’ Is there any possible alternative? No element in the British establishment favours any break with the Atlanticist project, he notes; even at the height of Corbyn’s influence, he could not include a radical critique of UK foreign policy in the Labour manifesto. ‘On the other hand’, Stevenson continues,

the strategic community in the UK is nominally technocratic. Its preference for a strategy tethered to American power does not come from a class coalition, or any more general political tendency except in a very superficial way. Its effects are not of obvious benefit. And while most of the world has no decision to make about American hegemony, Britain is in the fortunate position that it could opt for much less cooperation, should it wish.

Such an option would make avoiding overseas military escapades a strategic priority, refocusing on the more manageable task of ‘island defence’. Disabused of the misguided quest to exercise a global role, the UK might at last reconcile itself to the rank of a middling-tier economic power, a position often associated with foreign-policy neutrality and non-alignment. Come what may, ‘the British armed forces have been a consistent source of evil in the world; any diminishment in expeditionary capacity would be a good in itself’.

The second part of *Someone Else's Empire* examines America's international ‘instruments of order’. What Stevenson labels ‘the reactive management of empire’ is not limited to the Middle East. National Security Strategy documents, nuclear-force posture and flexing of geo-economic muscle all attest to the cohesiveness of foreign-policy thinking across presidential administrations. Taken collectively, Stevenson argues, the potency of these tools again contravenes hasty pronouncements of American decline. If US economic primacy has diminished in relative terms, its centrality to global finance and the importance of the dollar remain invaluable resources. The growing use of sanctions reflects one dimension of the unique leverage this provides. In American hands, the economic weapon can not only prohibit national trade with a foreign state but impair the ability of anyone in the world to trade with that state, on pain of so-called secondary sanctions. Iran was the proving ground for this endeavour. Washington levelled embargos against the Islamic Republic from the 1980s, but it wasn't until the new millennium—and new jurisdiction over the inter-bank payments system, asserted by presidential decree and Patriot Act provisions—that efforts to isolate the Iranian economy really began, an ‘onslaught’ announced by Obama in 2011.

Partially lifted after the nuclear ‘deal’ in 2015 (a ‘success’, in Stevenson's opinion), these went back into effect when Trump withdrew from the JCPOA a few years later. The reversal peeved American allies, press-ganged into following suit, but a European effort to develop an alternative mechanism for payments came to naught, and objections at the UN were brushed aside. Washington has since targeted Russia with the same apparatus on an even grander scale, to inconclusive effect. Whether sanctions ‘work’ as a means of coercing states to change their behaviour, rather than simply deepening the misery of their populations, is open to doubt. But they have other uses, as Stevenson indicates, in preparing the ground for military action, if necessary, and disciplining allied helpmeets.

Surveillance is another prize asset. Stevenson gives a fine sense of the physical infrastructure of the Five Eyes alliance, the existence of which was only officially revealed to the public in 2010, and the vast array of monitoring stations that collect information from undersea cables, phone calls, radio navigation beacons and electronic communications. Britain to the east, Canada to the north, and Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific are integral to this enterprise. But while the US automatically receives the signals intelligence they collect, it does not always share it; the NSA sometimes reclassifies reports it receives from allies, making them inaccessible to the nation that generated them. Much of this network relies on spatial reconnaissance. The US currently commands more satellites than the rest of the world put together, enabling spying as well as 'kinetic strikes' by unmanned aerial vehicles. This is the basis for US strategists' seemingly fanciful engagement for 'astrostrategy', institutionalized with the creation of the US Space Force in 2019. Hallucinatory anticipations of orbital warfare contain a semi-rational kernel, in the form of anxiety that Russia and China might develop sufficient counterspace capabilities to jeopardize the American satellite network and potentially neutralize its armed forces, which are now incapable of functioning without GPS. This is a distant prospect. Yet, as Stevenson remarks, 'The American strategion sees itself as waging a constant battle against complacency. To ward this off, the political class periodically conjures up imminent threats to US superiority.'

So too for claims that American nuclear superiority is imperilled. After the disappearance of the Soviet Union, US strategy in this department was two-pronged, aimed at maintaining and 'modernizing' its arsenal while cajoling other nuclear-armed powers into winnowing theirs—and, above all, blocking any other states from obtaining parity with the nuclear club. The chief device for this is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which preserves US preponderance in the name of peace. Obama, eulogized by the Norwegian Nobel Committee for his vision of a 'world without nuclear weapons', committed \$1 trillion to upgrading the American stockpile. There has recently been talk from the Biden Administration of expanding as well as improving it. This is justified by Pentagon projections that China will boast upwards of a thousand warheads by 2030. If so, that would amount to less than a third of the US inventory, and there are doubts as to the survivability of the Chinese deterrent. Whatever the case, Stevenson writes, uncertainty concerning the balance of forces and the abrogation of Cold War arms-control agreements mean that the coming years 'may well represent a dangerous moment of transition similar to the one experienced between the US and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s'.

Prior to the second decade of this century, there was little discussion of any credible challenge to American dominion over the seas. In 2021, however, the Department of Defense reported to Congress that China

possesses ‘numerically the largest navy in the world’. This is true if one counts small support vessels and the like. In every other sense, Stevenson emphasizes, the US Navy dwarfs the Chinese fleet, with a qualitative and quantitative advantage in battleships, submarines and amphibious assault ships. Washington commands eleven nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, arguably still the gold standard for seaborne power-projection. China claims three, two of which are retrofitted Soviet craft barely half the size of the Nimitz-class supercarriers, and all rely on conventional diesel and turbine propulsion. Argosy aside, the remit of US maritime strategy is beyond compare. Assured of its hold over the key chokepoints of Malacca, Yokosuka, Hormuz, Suez and Panama—‘the contemporary equivalents’, Stevenson notes, of the ‘five keys’ that Admiral John Fisher held permitted the Royal Navy to ‘lock up the world’—Washington has bases in Guam, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines, as well as Diego Garcia, the nominally British island in the centre of the Indian Ocean, home to a naval support facility as well as a CIA black site and one of four GPS hubs worldwide. By comparison, the PLA Navy is for the moment but a regional flotilla.

Military prepotency, the exorbitant privilege of the dollar and commanding say over global finance, a globe-girding alliance system: these, not ‘soft power’ or normative sway, are the foundations of American rule, in Stevenson’s telling. Its outcomes are explored in the third section of *Someone Else’s Empire*, ‘A Prize from Fairyland’—Churchill’s delighted cry on hearing about the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf, a region that Britain had girt with protectorates (Oman, the Trucial States/UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar) since the eighteenth century. Stevenson is categorical concerning the interests at stake. If the US maintains such a sizable military presence in the Middle East, in spite of domestic criticism and vows to redirect attention to other theatres, it is because Persian Gulf hydrocarbons constitute ‘a stupendous strategic resource’, in the words of a US official. Three-quarters of the oil and gas are exported eastward, to Asia. America’s armed protection of the oil-producing states ensures that Japan, South Korea, India and China ‘must deal with the US in the knowledge that it could, if it wished, cut them off from their main source of energy.’

Within that dispensation, however, American strategy has always employed a variable calculus from state to state, according to their access to petroleum riches and geopolitical weight. These, in Stevenson’s view, are the considerations that informed Washington’s response to the upheaval that traversed the Arab world in 2011. In the Gulf sheikhdoms, legatees of a long history of Anglo-American ingerence, there was no question of allowing unrest to spread. US Central Command is headquartered at the gigantic Al Udeid airbase in Qatar, and it maintains bases in Bahrain, the

UAE, Kuwait and Oman. When protest erupted in Manama, where the Fifth Fleet is berthed, Saudi and Emirati forces, armed and equipped by the US and UK, arrived to assist the House of Khalifa in putting down the rising. Two days earlier, Stevenson observes, the Bahraini dynast had received a visit from Obama's Defence Secretary.

On the southern tip of the peninsula, Yemen's Saleh was compelled to yield to a coterie of old-regime elites with a view to forestalling more radical demands from the street. In Egypt, second only to Israel in its receipt of American military aid, the White House failed to keep Mubarak in power, but entrusted the army leadership with ensuring that his replacement not deviate from the terms of the 'strategic partnership'. Different treatment was reserved for Libya, of less consequence to the West and headed by the unreliable Gaddafi. At the instigation of France and Britain, a NATO air assault launched in March 2011, sanctified by a UN resolution on the pretext of protecting civilian protestors from an imminent bloodbath, accomplished regime change, the despot himself pinpointed and murdered that October. Chinese and Russian opposition on the Security Council ruled out an equivalent mandate for action against Ba'athist Syria, far more of a thorn in Washington's side; instead, the US and UK joined their Gulf satraps in the sponsorship of jihadi proxies, armed and staffed from southern Turkey, fighting to overthrow Assad's regime.

Over a sequence of chapters, *Someone Else's Empire* reviews the aftermaths of the convulsions. In Upper Mesopotamia, ISIS emerged as an uncanny heir to American 'nation-building' hubris. At its 2014 apogee, the Islamic State governed a territory that spanned more than 100,000 square kilometres, with capitals in Mosul and Raqqa. Russian intervention on behalf of its Syrian ally and a US-led 'war of annihilation' effectively broke the caliphate, although fighting continues in northern Syria, where Ankara conducts intermittent offensives against Washington's Kurdish allies in the anti-ISIS coalition. Libya lies in ruins, stalked by hunger and disease, its crude reserves disputed by armed factions. British, French and Italian special forces back rival claimants in an ongoing civil war that has seen the reemergence of ancient cleavages between Cyrenaica, in the east, and western Tripolitania. Stevenson's report is full of the life and squalor of the place as he records the regrets of revolutionaries, the pretensions of militia leaders and the cynicism of would-be ministers in the devastated capital.

In Cairo, the reign of Sisi—installed in office by coup d'état in 2013—has in many respects been even more repressive than Mubarak's. Enforcement of domestic order is highly militarized, in the image of the state itself. Citizens face arbitrary arrest and detention in an archipelago of jails, including secret prisons operated by the army and security services, detailed by Stevenson in a superb piece of investigative reporting. Evidence of systematic torture

and other abuses may be intermittently deplored by Western chancelleries, but there is no question of serious reprimand given Egypt's pivotal strategic emplacement. Tunisia, site of the spark that ignited the Arab revolts, looked for a time to be a lone exception to their dismal ledger. Ten years on from the ouster of Ben Ali, a presidential autogolpe announced the return of dictatorship. European interest in the country is largely limited to its services as littoral gendarme, barring migrants from crossing the Mediterranean, and transit hub for Algerian gas.

'American foreign policy', Stevenson writes, 'was once routinely attacked on grounds of incoherence, but more relevant has been its stability, even through the reckless dysfunction of the Trump years.' The war in Yemen, another after-effect of the Arab Spring, is a case in point. There, the ousted despot confederated with a Shi'ite rebel group, the Houthis, in a bid to topple the transitional government headed by his former deputy. In spring 2015, Saudi Arabia intervened to check feared Iranian influence over its tributary neighbour. The campaign was heavily dependent on support from Britain and the US for weapons, target selection and air-to-air refuelling. Six years later, it had claimed upwards of 150,000 lives but signally failed to dislodge the Houthis. On taking office in 2021, the Biden Administration declared that Washington was ceasing support for 'offensive military operations' in Yemen. No longer would the US 'give our partners in the Middle East a blank cheque to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values'. Yet as Stevenson corroborates, American intelligence continued to flow to Riyadh and its co-belligerent in Abu Dhabi. Since his book was published, the US and UK commenced their own strikes against the Yemeni rebels in retaliation for the Houthis' interdiction of Red Sea shipping, following Israel's offensive in Gaza. Asked in January whether the airstrikes were 'working', Biden replied, 'Are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes.'

Stevenson's honourable prospectus for a neutral British foreign policy gives the flavour of his work. An allergy to mystification, a keen eye for euphemism and attention to the brute facts of international affairs are not the least of his virtues, handsomely showcased in *Someone Else's Empire*. Lucid analysis of great power politics is counterbalanced by registry of their effects on the ground, witnessed first-hand and documented unsentimentally. Not many writers of his generation have equivalent gifts; fewer still combine them. It is a pity in a sense that the book is structured—and titled—to foreground British questions; logically, the second section should precede the first: US predominance, British subservience. For as an anatomy of American empire, Stevenson's book stands in the tradition of Chalmers Johnson and Gabriel Kolko—or, in a subsequent generation of the left, Peter Gowan and Perry Anderson. Of his own age cohort, born since 1980, it calls to mind the work of Richard Beck, Thomas Meaney or early Stephen

Wertheim. But it is hard to think of any coeval Stateside who could match Stevenson's range and journalistic chops.

His conclusion bears some resemblance to Christopher Layne's call for the US to retreat from the unsustainable pursuit of 'primacy' and return to its natural vocation of 'offshore balancer', blessed by geography with continental security and a vast internal market. The comparison invites a question. What theoretical framework underpins Stevenson's analysis? The genesis of many of his chapters as essays for the LRB, where conceptual elaboration has historically been abhorred (no theory, please, we're British!), means that the relation of US imperial might to capitalist interests and other domestic needs goes unexamined. For Layne, the paradox of America's hegemonic grand strategy is that it compels the US to risk war over strategically unimportant places to prove—to allies and adversaries alike—that Washington is willing to fight to defend states that are unimportant. This is not to say that the mechanisms are unchanging. Since the 1990s, at least, the relative significance of air power and auxiliary forces has grown, reflecting both the range of theatres in which the US is engaged and its diminishing willingness to sustain casualties, in inverse proportion to the death-dealing capacity of American arms. Such attenuation of the 'warrior ethos', together with the audit of operations in the Middle East and the uncertain returns of proxy warfare in Eastern Europe, has invited renewed scepticism as to the utility of US military force, further compounded by shortfalls in defence-industrial capacity. But hard power confers advantages beyond the battlefield. Among other things, by stoking international tensions, it serves to reassert Washington's indispensable role as purveyor of 'security' to its clients. Threats to curtail that provision are a potent lever in realizing other objectives, from increased allied expenditure on US-manufactured kit to concessions on trade and foreign investment. Conversely, similar considerations help to explain the otherwise perplexing chronicle of British subordination.

But do they explain it all? One can salute Stevenson's dispatch of idealist versions of liberal internationalism, along with their euphemisms for a national imperium backed by ordnance and atomic hellfire—'the international order' and so on—yet still want to retain a place for the role of ideas in world politics. One wonders how Stevenson would account for Edwardian England's choice to fight one imperial challenger, Germany, yet acquiesce to subordination at the hands of another: the United States? Contemporaries certainly thought commonalities of language, culture and religion played a role, as well as City investment flowing west across the Atlantic—and, of course, military calculation. It would be interesting, too, to know how Stevenson would explain Washington's growing hold over EU foreign policy.

Stevenson's insistence on the material sources of power, a realist instinct to expose the ideological distortions that parade force as consent, remains

a great strength. He has no truck with apologetics for empire in the name of 'values'. Yet if violence and suasion are perceived as a continuum, different admixtures come into view; for Gramsci, between the two poles stood '*corruzione-frode*', purchased influence and other slippery techniques. To turn again to US-UK relations: beyond the roster of State Department 'Foreign Leaders' programme alumni (Heath, Thatcher, Blair, Brown, May) or the arcana of the Trilateral Commission (Starmer, Rory Stewart), Le Cercle (Zahawi, Stewart again), senior British politicians are routinely engaged by US universities, think tanks and firms on leaving office, if not beforehand. Combined with this, of course, is the statal substructure of security cooperation and intelligence-sharing, which involves beavies of soldiers, diplomats and spies. Some 12,000 US service members are stationed in the UK at a dozen bases nominally under Royal Air Force command. The British Defence Staff in Washington oversees hundreds of personnel seconded to the Pentagon's 'combatant commands'; the largest detail, at CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, is headed by a two-star general. Wargames, 'embedded' deployments and training exercises all help sustain these highly institutionalized relays, which offer a degree of continuity and stability that insulates the special relationship from the oscillations of national politics. 'The relationship is so intertwined at so many levels', in the words of a former State Department adviser, asked to envision a hypothetical British defection, 'that you have what I'd call automatic stabilizers.' 'If things started to move in those directions, forces would emerge and assert themselves, and push both governments the right way.'

Labour, historically a subaltern force in domestic life, has always found it easier to assume the lieutenant's commission than the Conservatives, far more prone to the twitching of sovereign-imperial limbs. Eden's defiance over Suez inspired the Eisenhower Administration to organize his departure, conducted without undue delicacy. ('It was like a business deal', Macmillan cabled Butler after a conversation with the US Treasury Secretary, 'They were putting a lot of money into the reorganization of Britain and they would hope very much that the business would be successful. But, of course, when you were reconstructing a business that was in difficulties, the personal problems could not be ruled out.') Heath's failure to seek American approval for his European policy prompted Kissinger to suspend intelligence sharing, while UK neutrality in the Yom Kippur War met with talk of terminating nuclear assistance. Wilson's posturing over Vietnam was by comparison a bagatelle, and he returned to office pledging to repair relations. 'Harold is going to want to have some foreign policy', Nixon jeered at the time, 'some little things for his bonnet and he may just start swinging a little weight around.' An Atlanticist *ultra* like Thatcher could denounce US duplicity in Grenada and high-handed management of German reunification. Major and

Hurd dissented from the Clinton administration's belligerence in Bosnia. Even Cameron and Osborne tried to maintain good economic relations with China and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank after they had been instructed to desist, and Johnson persevered in contracting Huawei to build out the UK 5G network until pressure from Washington finally imposed a volte-face. 'One thing you learn about the relationship with the United States', the first Ambassador to Washington under Blair would insist, 'is that if you're very tough with them and stand very firmly on your position . . . they rather respect that'. 'The Israelis—who really do enjoy a special relationship with the US—are incredibly tough with them, even though they're utterly dependent on zillions of dollars of aid.'

From another vantage, the record of Ukanian vassaldom might be figured as a predictable corollary to what Tom Nairn identified as the secular 'eversion' of the British elite, imperial and post-imperial alike, predisposed to try to resolve domestic contradictions through internationalization. Faced with the choice between preserving the world position of the City and the prerogatives of national sovereignty—a trade-off posed starkly over Suez—Britain's governing clique has long opted for the former. 'Having at last put its Industrial Revolution behind it', Nairn forecast at the turn of the 80s, 'the globe-encircling empire will end as a colony.' 'Churchillism', a bombastic pastiche intermingling chauvinist militarism and Atlanticist *bona fides*, contrived to lend a patina of grandeur to this state of affairs, but was its effect rather than cause. The neoliberal turn, auguring further hypertrophy and the deterritorialization of the financial centre itself—and with it, ever closer intertwinement with the US—merely compounded a longstanding tropism. For those who reap its rewards, the benefits are not inconsiderable. Like Washington, London seeks to break down trade barriers and shape the rules and regulations that govern capital flows, the international provision of financial and actuarial services, regulatory 'best practices', 'digital governance' and arbitration procedures. The favours dispensed by the 'system-maker' are not wholly illusory. In American eyes, the UK is, of course, only one of many dependencies. Its military adventurism, adjunct nuclear capability and willingness to 'be there when the shooting starts' serve no end in themselves, as Stevenson rightly stresses. Their function is to prove the country's importance to its patron. It is difficult to imagine a reversal of this settlement that would not entail a far more sweeping transformation of the British state and ruling class.