

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Kagan, R. (2018). *The jungle grows back: America and our imperiled world*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

*Douglas Eduard Steinert, University of Ottawa*

A reoccurring theme in international politics is the alleged threat to the established liberal world order, which can be illustrated by protectionist measures on trade and the rise of populism in several countries, including those that are traditionally described as “liberal democracies”. This international order, which finds its origin in the aftermath of World War II, has been institutionalized through the creation of organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), among others. The United States was pivotal in conceiving the current arrangement of international institutions and has supported it over decades. In his latest book, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, Robert Kagan writes about the role that America’s global military engagement has played in forging and protecting this order. In short, he portrays such engagement as necessary to promote prosperity and calls for its continuation to ensure that liberal values are preserved. The book provides a significant contribution to the analysis of international politics by outlining the historical perspective of America’s role in global politics. Nevertheless, when defending America’s military undertaking, Kagan’s analysis fails to recognize the shortcomings it has had in recent years.

Through a chronological structure, the author provides the reader with an insight into America’s sentiments towards the state of international affairs over time. From debates surrounding America’s role in World War I up to the Syrian conflict, Kagan outlines key historic moments that shaped the United States as a hegemonic superpower. The book’s message will resonate with those interested in geopolitics, particularly if they are interested in the democratic peace hypothesis.

The author asserts that the progress the international community has witnessed over the past few decades, namely the peace achieved in Europe, consolidation of democracy in many countries, as well as immense technological, economic and social advances, was not inevitable or the culmination of anything. Neither was global progress the result of a change in the basic nature of human beings. It has been the product of a unique set of circumstances, contingent on a particular set of historical outcomes, including on the battlefield, that allowed for the rise of American power. And, as it happened, America had a national ideology based on the liberal principles of the Enlightenment (Kagan, 2018). Kagan argues that the world is a jungle and in order to keep our liberal gardens free from unwanted weeds, the international order requires permanent engagement. It requires America’s engagement.

According to the author, it is America’s military presence around the globe, which can be exemplified by NATO in Europe or by the commitment to Japan and South Korea, that allows countries to overcome the power struggles and competitive animosities of world politics. In turn, an environment for progress has been created. Detached from these concerns, nations can

focus on economic development and trade, which, in a world with a rules-based liberal order, benefits the U.S. as much as the other countries within the order. America, therefore, should change the course adopted under Donald Trump and reclaim its position as the indispensable superpower, thereby benefiting the global community.

The jungle that is growing back in the world, according to Kagan, is the result of an uninterested atmosphere currently present in American politics and society, unable to engage and promote liberal values across the globe. He mentions the rise of populism in Europe, particularly in Hungary, Poland, and Italy, but also in America under President Donald Trump. The jungle grows back at home, too. Kagan draws attention to familiar geopolitical concerns—such as Russian attitudes towards neighbours as well as China’s awakening—but also introduces topics that are rarely mentioned in present-day debates about America and its closest allies. After so many decades, according to the author, a historic underlying desire for military autonomy could become more prominent in Japan and in Germany.

One New York Times reviewer called it “lucid and elegant,” and I also believe the book to be well-written. It does justice to the role the United States played in securing peace and prosperity in the West and does so with historical accuracy. In present times, it is hard to postulate if a similar outcome would have been feasible without America. The author builds his argument on the successes achieved in this regard. The spirit of the book is perhaps best illustrated by Hilary Clinton’s speech at the Council of Foreign relations in 2013, where she asserts, “our ability to convene and connect is unparalleled, and so is our ability to act alone whenever necessary. So, when I say we are truly the indispensable nation, it’s not meant as a boast or an empty slogan. It’s a recognition of our role and our responsibilities. That’s why all the declinists are dead wrong. It’s why the U.S. must and will continue to lead in this century” (Clinton, 2013). Such reasoning is welcomed by audiences, particularly in the U.S., who envision a continuation of the interventionist foreign policy practiced under George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Nevertheless, when encountered by a non-American public, the argument risks presumptuousness. Furthermore, other American authors on foreign affairs, such as John Mearsheimer, have heavily criticized positions similar to these in matters of international relations. Although recognizing the nature of chaos in the international system and defending the need for an offensive defense strategy, Mearsheimer calls for containment when it comes to projects that contemplate socially engineering other jurisdictions in America’s image (Mearsheimer, 2018). The legacy of regime changes pursued in the Middle East by the U.S. is a good example of where such a critique is due.

Notwithstanding political views on the issue of America’s military engagement, the historical perspective provides readers with a more thorough comprehension of both the fundamental nature and differing reactions towards America’s contemporary foreign policy. History is enlightening. The book is certainly a relevant contribution to the analysis of international affairs and makes for a worthwhile read.

## **References**

- Council on Foreign Relations. (2013, January 31). *Hillary Clinton - Remarks on American Leadership* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B3wBkYK3Es>
- Kagan, R. (2018). *The jungle grows back: America and our imperiled world*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2018). *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.