

SVEN BISCOP, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words. A Guide to Great Power Politics in the 21st Century*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2021, 252 pages.

I have read Sven Biscop's *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* as a philosopher and sociologist with a certain expertise in the field of international relations. Arguably, I do not read books or scientific articles to find their negative aspects. But for someone who reads Professor Biscop's *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* with the intention to engage it critically and write an academic review afterwards, the "annoying" aspect is that this academic work is replete with positive aspects, some of which are scrutinized by this review.

The first positive aspect that I would like to stress is the apparent "classic approach" to grand strategy that Sven Biscop employs in this book, at the heart of which lies the examination of great power politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This may come as a surprise, as Professor Biscop writes "from a European perspective, as a citizen of Belgium and the EU, based in Brussels" (p. 3). Moreover, Professor Biscop seems to be influenced by European Union's strategic culture, one that at face value fails to read international relations in terms of great power politics. My bias towards EU's strategic culture comes mostly from Robert Cooper's *The Breaking of Nations*, a (still) very influential book in the field of international relations in Romania. Specifically, I tend to look at the EU's strategic culture through Cooper's ideal-typical lens, one that depicts the EU as the embodiment of postmodern security, which places emphasis especially on human security and not so much on state security, although it is difficult to completely separate the former from the latter in democratic regimes. To an significant extent, Cooper's ideal type of a postmodern European Union was already abandoned by the 2016 EU's Global Strategy, which displays certain Westfalian aspects, such as principled pragmatism and the EU's potential strategic autonomy. My point is that, due to my theoretical biases, it has been rather surprising to run into a European scholar who reads international relations in terms of great power politics, seeks to explain it and offers policy advice that could solve the problem of persistent rivalry among great powers. This, to me, is tantamount to a classic approach on grand strategy which is not useful *per se*. It could be useful because of the following traits. First, it works from the assumption that the value of a certain academic field depends on the questions it poses. And the general "research question" that Professor Biscop poses in *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* is how the US, China, Russia and the EU could

Rom. Jour. of Sociological Studies, New Series, No. 2, pp. 119–122, Bucharest, 2022



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avoid the emergence of persistent rivalry, with disruptive consequences for world politics. By addressing this topic, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* seek to find an answer for two aspects specific to the classic approach in international relations. That is, adequately explaining states' behavior and identifying the factors – systemic and subsystemic – that account for the emergence of war and peace in world politics (Ayoob 2002). Biscop argues that, while competition among states is an already “banalized” aspect in world politics, rivalry “is the product of a conscious choice by some of the powers” (pp. X–XI). In order to avoid a state of permanent rivalry, continues Biscop, great powers should “accept the existence of peer competitors and recognise each other’s right to pursue their legitimate interests in legitimate ways” (p. 221). Another reason why a classic approach on grand strategy could be useful for reading contemporary international relations is that it rests on a good knowledge of history, with an emphasis on military history. In the absence of this proficient historical knowledge, the strategic thinker may have a hard time scrutinizing the complexity of present-day international context. Therefore, in its (successful) attempt to make sense of great power politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* elegantly delves into different historical episodes about the interaction between/among great powers. Drawing on Stanley Hoffmann, I argue that a grand strategic thinker is rather a “literate”, instead of a “numerate” (Hoffmann 1977). This is another aspect of a classic approach in strategic studies and, from this perspective, Sven Biscop writes like a “literate”. It is not my intention to dismiss the merits of quantitative methods in the field of international relations. My point is that a certain propensity of the academic field to turn conceptual and methodological innovations into an end in itself could hinder the understanding of world politics. Professor Biscop’s *Grand Strategy in 10 Words*, although it rests on solid historical and theoretical grounding, has no intention to come up with fancy heuristic innovations. Instead, it is replete with the insights of an insider, who pays heed to potential policy solutions for macropolitical issues. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that Sven Biscop brings into discussion the influence that the “strategic culture” may have on the security policies of the US, China, the EU and Russia. This is an important conceptual innovation, despite the fact that, in my view, a concept like the “dominant substrategic culture” could be more appropriate for exploring the influence that cultural factors may have on strategic decision. This, however, does not take away the merits of *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* which offers comparative insights into the “strategic culture” of the four great powers (p. 22, p. 31, p. 33, p. 86) that it brings under scrutiny.

As already argued, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* appears to be full of positive aspects for a sociologist with a shallow expertise in the field of international relations. One of these refers to its comparative approach. In *Grand Strategy in 10 Words*, Biscop pays little heed to methodological innovations. And yet this book compares systematically the security policies of the US, China, Russia and the EU

on different dimensions of the grand strategic thought. For instance, in the section dedicated to the *creative* aspect of grand strategy, that sometimes requires to come up with new instruments and new ends, instead of pouring more tangible resources into field action, Biscop offers an insightful comparison among the “civilizational projects” of contemporary great powers. The reader finds out that, in essence, Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union, the EU’s EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, and the US’ Blue Dot Network have been just reactions to China’s Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013. Which means that, when it comes to civilizational projects, China has already turned into a pacesetter in contemporary world politics. Biscop elegantly points out that, thanks to its “17+1” regional framework, China has managed to divide the EU, in contrast to Russia’s aggressive approach which has united the EU against Moscow (p. 133). Interestingly, Biscop argues that, despite the cooperation between Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union and China’s Belt and Road Initiative, Moscow is reluctant to acknowledge that it competes for regional influence with both China and the EU. An important difference between the EU’s civilization projects – the Union for the Mediterranean, the Eastern Partnership, and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy – and the ones that China and Russia have already institutionalized is that the former try to establish “connectivity with consent”, as the EU look for partners, instead of clients. In this case, Sven Biscop might be a little bit biased, although he notes that “a regional affinity cannot be created by an external power” (p. 135). The trouble with the abovementioned civilizational projects is their lack of security guarantees. Thus, when it comes to the “vital” (p. 138) military dimension, states will turn to the US for protection.

Another positive aspect of *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* consists in an insightful knowledge of the European Union’s grand strategy. Especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, social scientists ask themselves what has become of the EU’s strategic autonomy, a concept that inserted into the 2016 EU’s global strategy. *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* was published in 2021, and, therefore, Professor Biscop does not cover the war in Ukraine. This notwithstanding, Biscop maintains that a necessary condition for the EU’s sovereignty resides in a European conventional force. While the European Union will continue to rely on the US nuclear umbrella, such a conventional force will make clear to Russia that it will not be able to win a short war against the EU (p. 88). Arguably, this will be mostly a “negative sovereignty” (p. 25), which may offer the EU the choice not to do something under certain international circumstances. According to the EU’s High Representative, Joseph Borrell, the Europeans cannot accept the emergence of a Sino-American bipolarity (p. 42). Despite the pressure that both the US and China have put on the Europeans to align with their strategies, the EU is economically intertwined with both the US and China and, as a consequence, prefers to maintain its economic sovereignty. Is this possible in the context of the War in Ukraine? As already argued, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words* does not cover the War in Ukraine as

it was published in 2021. And yet Professor Biscop addresses at least two reasons that could impede the development of a more sovereign European Union. The first reason is the EU's dominant strategic culture, one that relies on the principle of "normative power". This is a "weak strategic culture" (p. 109) that cannot form the basis of a comprehensive grand strategy, one that combines military, political and economic power. The second reason is related to a clear lack of "strategic enablers", that is, institutional and military capabilities, that could allow the EU to project effectively its influence at a regional and international level. What Professor Biscop addresses only indirectly is the fact that, especially in the field of defense and security, the member states of the EU are still prevalent. As a consequence, the EU's strategic culture, which is still a work in progress, has to deal with countless national strategic subcultures, with the consequence that the latter may impede the development of the former.

Intentionally, my review has not delved into the ten traits of grand strategy that Sven Biscop brings into analysis. The reader needs to discover these by himself/herself. Also, my review leaves untouched the last chapter, which offers four solutions that may alleviate the rivalry among the contemporary great powers. This chapter draws attention to the potential backsliding of grand strategic thought – and practice – in a context of permanent rivalry among the great powers. We make grand strategy in order to defend our own way of life, while respecting the way of life of our competitors as long as they follow their legitimate interests in a legitimate way, that is, in line with international rules. Otherwise, if the process of grand strategy stops working from the democratic assumptions that are specific to our way of life, it could turn into a technology that only allows those in power to stay in power.

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