

# Eliot Cohen's blueprint for World War Three

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The belligerent outlook of former State Department official and Johns Hopkins Professor Eliot Cohen's 2016 book is succinctly summarized in its title, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*.

The book's contents expose the threat posed to the human race by a nuclear-armed American capitalist class in protracted economic and geopolitical decline. The book is peppered with Clausewitzian aphorisms that give the flavor of the reckless military offensive Cohen proposes:

\* "Strategy is the art of matching military means to political ends" [206].

\* "The actual use of nuclear weapons by the United States is not a last resort" [171].

\* "There is something uniquely reassuring about permanently stationed US troops" [169].

\* "It will do no good to pretend, in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, that America will never undertake such operations again" [146].

\* "The right strategic time horizon for the anti-jihadi war is decades, even longer" [197].

\* "American military power is the handmaiden of American statecraft" [172].

\* "Law is one thing; naval power is another" [183].

One is tempted to read these aphorisms in the high-pitched, heavily accented voice of Peter Sellers as the deranged ex-Nazi scientist, Dr. Strangelove.

But Cohen speaks as a representative of the American ruling class. His strategy is based on three fundamental principles: preemptive war, deterrence through offensive military action (including nuclear attacks), and decades-long military occupations involving thousands of US troops. Although these principles already underlie American foreign policy, Cohen proposes a significant escalation on all fronts. As if to visually support this last point, the cover of Cohen's book jacket includes a single image: a US soldier's boots on the ground.

"In some cases, America must accept the necessity of using force preemptively..." he writes. "While it is generally believed that the United States has some such capabilities, they will probably become of greater importance in the future" [171].

This includes the preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

"Although one hesitates to say it," he continues, "it is conceivable in the future that the United States will have to be ready with precise, low-yield nuclear weapons. This is a horrifying possibility. A North Korean bomb landing on Tokyo (let alone Los Angeles), however, would be infinitely more horrifying. The actual use of nuclear weapons by the United States is not a last resort—accepting the detonation of a nuclear weapon in a great American or allied city is" [171].

Cohen's position is that decisive military action—including preemptive attack—is necessary to win back the credibility lost through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as through the Obama administration's decision not to invade Syria.

"A recovery of credibility about the use of force, and thereby the power to deter, will probably occur only when the United States actually does something to someone—wiping out a flotilla of Iranian gunboats

attempting to seize an American-flagged merchant ship, for example" [168]. In other words, the US should be prepared to risk a Third World War in order to improve its bargaining position.

According to Cohen, the US will need a "flexible" military strategy to account for the various types of wars the US will be engaged in for many decades:

"The wars of the twenty-first century may take many forms. Conventional conflict, including with China, most assuredly cannot be ruled out. At the other end of the spectrum, terrorism will surely continue. In between, what has been called hybrid war—blending different forms of force with subversion, sabotage, and terror—will also exist. Wars may be sudden or build up slowly; they may be protracted...[they] might drag on for a decade or more" [208-209].

Cohen sets a series of military priorities for the US in the coming decades. He speaks for a growing section of the foreign policy establishment which sees China as Washington's primary world rival. He expresses frustration with those who view Russia as the main enemy. China, due to its superior economic, demographic and military power, poses "the first security challenge to the United States that requires a hard power response" [99].

He writes that it is an "undeniable fact that America's relative economic position in the world has declined, and may very well continue to do so." However, Cohen says, "America has three great assets in its strategic confrontation with China: its alliance relationships, the quality of its armed forces, and—if used and explained correctly—its way of war" [113].

In Cohen's view, war between the two countries is becoming increasingly likely. He cites game theorist Thomas Schelling who wrote, "Often we must maneuver into a position where we no longer have much choice left" [166]. Cohen claims: "War may come without either side willing it from the beginning," [121] and, "In the event of a clash between forces comparable in number, skill, and resolve, mass casualties are always possible" [73].

These are not the ravings of an isolated sociopath, they are mainstream positions within the Democratic and Republican parties. The book has earned the praise of a number of top US military-intelligence figures, including US military commander, CIA Director and KKR Executive David Petraeus, who said the book was "brilliant, timely, hugely important, and very well-reasoned." Michael Chertoff, the former secretary of Homeland Security, said, "Professor Cohen lays out a clear, balanced vision for the critical role American military power must take in securing our world."

Cohen's book has been greeted with glowing reviews from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. *Times* writer Jennifer Senior called the book "an implicit critique of the president-elect's worldview (to the extent that he has one) and a toothsome snack for those who despise Mr. Trump. Even if you disagree with Mr. Cohen—and I did, often, scribbling violent objections in the margins as I read—it's easy to spend time in his company. He writes thoughtfully, methodically and with unfussy erudition. His chapters are organized with the pleasing precision of a bento box."

It is a testament to the deep degeneration of American liberalism that

Cohen's book could be portrayed by the *Times* as a "toothsome snack" for opponents of Trump, and not as an argument for preemptive nuclear war and permanent neocolonial military occupations. The *Times* does not mention that a preemptive war of aggression is a "crime against peace" according to the principles elaborated during the trial of leading Nazi Party officials at Nuremberg.

Aside from US military adversaries, Cohen is preoccupied with two great obstacles to the imperialist war drive: spending on social programs and domestic and international opposition to war.

He explains that increased military spending will require a relentless attack on the living conditions of the working class. A major strategic weakness of American imperialism is that the US "has proven unable to adjust its entitlement spending to make it possible to invest large sums in military power and domestic infrastructure" [90].

He claims American workers are living too long and are sucking up money that could be used for military build-up:

An aging population, in which every year fewer workers support more retired individuals, will face inexorable pressures to cut discretionary spending—of which defense is always the largest element—to provide for entitlements in the form of pensions and medical care. Herein lies the fundamental crisis of the modern welfare state, constructed in Europe and to a lesser extent the United States during and after World War II, and expanded throughout the world thereafter. Entitlements that seem affordable during the postwar demographic boom, at a time of shorter life expectancies today and less technologically advanced medical care, become far harder to sustain when there is no longer a bulge of youthful workers, when nonagenarians are far more common...and when medical care is capable of more and more exotic, successful, and expensive efforts to keep people alive [86-87].

Second, he worries that domestic anti-war sentiment will undercut the ruling class's ability to wage war: "War is a contest of will... This is particularly true for the United States, whose vast resources are unlikely to be exhausted in a conflict, but whose will may" [221].

In his introduction, Cohen notes his concern that "today, more than ever, many Americans question the utility of 'the big stick' as a tool of US foreign policy" [xi]. "Social cohesion and political ability reflect intangibles: the ability to endure loss, the willingness to mobilize national resources, the ability to persevere, having a system able to make decisions—these are elements of militarily relevant national power, too" [92]. Moreover, America's young population poses a distinct threat: "Young people are turbulent," he says, recalling "the student revolts of the late 1960s" [87].

Cohen fears that Washington's imperialist allies will be unable to provide necessary military support on account of social opposition:

Most troubling of all, large percentages, and in some cases majorities, of the populations of several founding members of NATO no longer accept the fundamental premise of the alliance, embodied in Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, that an attack against one is an attack on all. By a margin of 53 to 47 in France, 51 to 40 in Italy, and 58 to 38 in Germany, populations told pollsters in 2015 that their country should not use military force to defend a NATO ally in a military conflict with Russia [155].

His conclusion: a "'Reasonable assurance' of popular support again assumes too much...Achieve military success and public support will follow, not the other way around" [215-216]. In other words, the US must carry out its drive to war with or without the support of the population. It is better, from a military standpoint, if the government is able to drown the population in pro-war propaganda. But if this proves ineffective, Cohen predicts that raining devastating blows against "the enemy" will shock the working class into submission.

On this question, it is Cohen who assumes too much.

Opposition to imperialist war has developed in the United States and

internationally over the last 15 years in response to the immense cost in life and resources of the US-led wars of plunder. Significant majorities of the US and Europe opposed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because they were waged based on lies for the purpose of securing world domination on behalf of American banks and corporations. Millions of citizens and thousands of coalition soldiers have been killed in the wars, while trillions of dollars have been drained from social programs in order to expand the military-intelligence agencies.

In the autumn of 2014, polls showed less than 10 percent of Americans supported direct US military intervention in Syria, while similar levels of anti-war sentiment also triggered a parliamentary vote in Britain that postponed UK intervention. These facts horrified the architects of future imperialist war, but they also deepened the ruling class's turn toward political reaction and anti-democratic domestic policies.

This process finds expression in the election of Donald Trump, who made a phony appeal to hostility to the war in Iraq by hinting at an "isolationist" foreign policy. His pretenses toward isolation have been belied by his bellicose threats against both Iran and China, his talk of "taking the oil" from occupied Iraq and his support for a massive buildup of the US military. His program can be called "isolationist" to the extent that his plan for unrelenting war and military build-up may be carried out with less reliance on NATO and the traditional US allies. This unnerves certain sections of the foreign policy establishment, including Cohen.

No opposition to the US plans for war will come from the Democratic Party. The *Times*'s Jennifer Senior revealed more than she intended when she noted in her review, "Had Hillary Clinton won, it's doubtful that Mr. Cohen's new book, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*, which he clearly finished well before the election, would receive the attention it now surely (and quite deservedly) will. For all of Mr. Trump's chest-pounding about the Islamic State, it was Mrs. Clinton, ultimately, who was viewed as the more interventionist, even hawkish, of the two candidates."

The world Cohen presents is one of endless war, nuclear devastation and occupations on an even greater scale than today. He speaks as a representative of the American establishment, and his proposals reveal the future confronting humanity under capitalism.

The wars Cohen proposes will lead to the deaths of millions, tens of millions, or possibly billions. If humanity survives such wars, many millions—and not just those in Central America and the Middle East—will become refugees. The environmental impact of a major war would be disastrous and likely irreparable, with untold numbers killed by malnutrition and disease.

The fate of humanity relies on the ability of the working class to organize itself independently of the parties of war and capitalism and to seize power from the imperialist war architects before they transform the planet into rubble.



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