Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power*  

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In the view of leading US politicians and analysts, violence can be projected ever more easily and rapidly across ever larger stretches of space today. Advances in information, communications, transport and weapons technology, so they claim, have radically shrunk space and distance. They stripped geography of the protective function it once played, collapsing the traditional distinction between ‘over there’ and ‘over here’. In the post-geographical age, homeland defence has thus acquired a planetary dimension. The US and its allies are exposed to insecurities from all places, which is why global military operations are required to uphold American national security.

Patrick Porter’s book *The Global Village Myth* systematically confronts this so-called ‘globalist’ reading of world politics, its empirical validity and practical consequences. When and why did the globalist conception of international insecurity emerge? Do its purported mechanisms recognise the logistical and strategic challenges posed to military operations? And in what kind of actor and polity does ‘globalism’ transform the United States itself?

To answer these questions, Porter offers conceptual reflections and empirical tests. The introductory chapter approaches globalism as a ‘mental cartography’, indeed as a limitless notion of strategic interest. It charts the pervasiveness of this worldview among policymakers in Washington and lists the muscular foreign policies that are justified in its name. Following this groundwork, the chapter starts to reflect critically on the narrative. Is globalism fact or myth? Porter argues that it is indeed little more than an asserted reality, not least since it relies on faulty syllogisms. Globalism, he maintains, is produced by a cosmopolitan elite that confuses the experiences of tourists with the challenges of conquerors. Its narrative rests on technological determinism and a one-sided emphasis on the offensive: Instead of pondering how military organisations make varying uses of technologies and territories, globalists simply claim new inventions to do away with distance and its protective function, to boost necessarily the offensive capabilities of any actor, and thus gravely to challenge US national security worldwide.

The second chapter traces the historical origins of globalist thinking and acting in the US. Globalism, Porter shows, became a winning paradigm in Washington around the 1950s roughly. Its emergence was driven by a combination of factors.
In the 1940s, the US began out-growing and out-powering European nations, thus becoming capable of globalist actions in the first place. Beliefs in the universalism of American values, too, aided Washington’s assertion of a mandate to organise world politics, and so did demands for leadership by allies. Most importantly, however, the understanding that new technologies turned distance redundant deepened with a series of shock experiences. Pearl Harbor, the Korean War and 9/11, the chapter shows, were all instances in which US strategists developed ever more expansive notions of US national interest. To be sure – strategic debates such as on possible ‘domino effects’, forward bases in Greenland or perimeter defence against the USSR suggest that this development was not uncontested. Criticism notwithstanding, however, a global conception of US national (in-)security became ever more prominent over time, and it turned into an accepted ‘truth’ by the late 1950s.

Yet, does this ‘truth’ represent more than mere opinion? Chapters three, four and five subject globalism to tests of different sorts. Chapter three looks at the threat of terrorism. It first describes how terrorism is characterised in Washington today, namely as a post-territorial phenomenon home to ‘failed states’, as an unpredictable and omnipresent danger that lacks a centre of gravity and can thus not be deterred, and as a threat capable of generating rapid and mass destruction across vast distances. Addressing one element after the other, it then shows how this reading of terrorism – popularised not the least also by the 9/11 Commission – rests on a number of faulty components (such as the incorrect association of terrorism with ‘failed states’), and how it ignores the logistical and practical challenges of terrorist tactics. The 9/11 infliction of mass violence, Porter shows, indeed relied on a series of operational components such as international financing, access to flight schools, purchase of flight tickets, availability of travel permits, clandestine communication and acculturation to American and Western behaviour. With this, terrorist violence was not teleported across geographical space in 2001. Its trajectory from Afghanistan to the US operated through a complex set of security dispositives of all kinds – dispositives that failed on that occasion, but also instruments whose effectiveness can and are being strengthened. An operational analysis of 9/11 hence shows that terrorism navigates through ‘strategic space’, that is, various security layers. Such space does not cease to exist with new technologies but can be controlled ever more closely by governments (and it indeed is since 9/11), which is why the globalist thesis does not work.

Chapter four proposes another test of the globalist narrative. Looking at the tensions between China and Taiwan, Porter again asks whether new technologies are indeed turning distance – in this case, the specific challenge of amphibious operations – obsolete, thus rendering Taiwan exceedingly vulnerable to a military intervention by China. Unlike the preceding case, the second ‘test’ here relies on an elaborate yet hypothetical modelling of a military confrontation between the two countries in focus, and hence not actual empirics (references to real-existing military equipment aside). Its scenario runs through all sides to a military confrontation. It suggests that Taiwan’s defences cannot actually be overcome that easily – or as Porter describes it, at affordable costs – by novel military technologies, for they do not only aid the offensive. Even if China could deny the US access to nearby waters, thus keeping Taiwan’s ally out of the conflict, Taiwan can adapt its defensive posture to the new Chinese capabilities (and it indeed does). The globalist presentation of technology as
a synonym for offensive dominance, the chapter hence shows, fails to hold also in a case of (or scenario) of conventional war.

Focussing on cyber-conflict and drones, chapter five then sets out the book’s last two tests of globalism. Porter shows here how globalists deem cyber-operations de-territorialised and private actor-driven means of war, and challenges that are exceedingly difficult to deter. Questioning this presentation, the chapter then dissects the ways in which cyber-operations work in practice. It argues that instead of inflicting strategic violence across vast stretches of space, cyber-attacks cause nuisance and local disturbances at best. What is more, advances in information technologies tend to produce different effects on national security than what globalist argue. If weapons such as the Stuxnet virus had any effect on national security, Porter argues, they rather accelerated the move to offline systems instead of deepening vulnerabilities. Somewhat similarly, the increasing reliance on drones also does not simply confirm the globalist thesis. Although adding a new instrument to military operations, Porter shows how these new technologies consume considerable resources. They rely on detailed knowledge of local theatres and are incapable of inflicting strategic damage.

The concluding chapter brings the insights of the case studies together to debunk again the globalist narrative. New technologies do not make the offence trump over defence, and they do not turn space obsolete, for strategic space remains. Transposing this insight to US policy-making, the conclusion shows how current foreign policies – the engagement of the US in a cascade of offensive wars and the militarisation of its domestic life in particular – are premised on a dangerous myth of the world having turned into a global village. As importantly, the conclusion also suggests that un-reflected reliance on globalist thinking masks the responsibilities of US policymakers for making international politics what it currently is. America’s wars abroad and securitisation of public space at home are no unavoidable necessities. They are political choices grounded in a (globalist) narrative of choice.

With *The Global Village Myth*, Patrick Porter makes a timely intervention into current security debates. This intervention is capable of speaking to scholars and practitioners alike. To the academic readership, the book contributes a sophisticated and competent understanding of strategic space, that is, a comprehensive presentation of the various security dispositives through which any projection of violence must operate. To policymakers, the book’s dissection of the globalism narrative – its misuses of geographical metaphors, conflation of attack with conquest, and offence-oriented interpretation of technology – contributes an instructive and most warranted critical reflection. The book’s concluding argument according to which some of the most muscular, intrusive and expensive US security policies are relying on faulty syllogisms is provocative, yet offers a constructive and reflected perspective on the challenges of contemporary US strategising.

In many respects, these reasons suffice to make *The Global Village Myth* recommended reading to international security scholars and practitioners. Then again it would be unfair to downplay the book’s scholarly shortcomings just because it makes a timely intervention into US politics. And indeed, readers will find the monograph not to be a perfect product. Firstly, at the level of scholarly handicraft, the book’s contents strike the reader as surprisingly unevenly developed: The genealogy of globalist thinking, for instance, focuses on the 1940s and 1950s but then jumps to the early 2000s, as if globalist ideas did not have to be actively sustained during the decades in between. The references made to historical debates among IR realists in
chapter two sometimes work as a literature review, but sometimes also as proofs of epistemological positions adopted by US security policy-making circles, and there is no indication as to when (or why) this function changes. Most challenging perhaps, the tests of globalism diverge rather strongly. Whereas the analysis of terrorist operations is highly substantial and empirical, the discussion of war between China and Taiwan is hypothetical, that is, scenario-based. The discussion of cyber-war essentially circulates around the distinct case of Stuxnet, and the treatment of drone operations is cursory at best. The development of narratives and combination of cases, then, strike as surprisingly haphazard and uneven overall – although these elements all do contribute to a critical reflection on globalism.

Secondly, readers will miss a critical engagement with the book’s dedicated focus on the idiosyncratic US case. Certainly – as a major Power in world politics US strategic debates do merit deeper analysis. Without further discussion, however, it remains unclear to what extent issues such as the de-bordering of national interests, the interplay between new technologies and security strategy, or the ever more widespread mobilisation of society and state resources for security purposes echo, are endorsed or rejected by political systems that do not share the distinct geographical, technological, political and historical features of the US. This is particularly important insofar as the book’s non-engagement with cases beyond the US leaves unknown why allies do support the US policies set out in the book. If the global wars conducted by the United States are premised on globalist thinking and a limitless notion of US strategic interest in and by Washington, then on what bases do other countries support these wars? By not engaging this question the book reduces itself to a rather narrow treatment of US domestic politics and foreign affairs strategising. This is unfortunate for its critical take on the projection of global security interests and metaphors such as ‘the global village’ clearly also speak to international politics in a considerably larger sense.

Thirdly and lastly, The Global Village Myth both represents and suffers from the continuing yet unproductive dissociation of ‘American’ strategic studies from contemporary ‘European’ security studies. There is no question that Porter’s handling of the conventional strategic studies literature is sophisticated. His book’s comprehensive omission of reflexive security studies, however, is as impressive, and it is inappropriate insofar as it makes important parts of the book appear much more innovative than they are. The insight that geographic and political-strategic space are not the same thing, for example, has been brought up by critical geopolitics more than two decades ago. The understanding that globalist thinking and acting are linked to US identity and the type of actor this nation seeks to be is a point prominently raised by the book, yet without any reference to the well-established literature on (US) identity construction and its interplays with foreign affairs strategising. Even the book’s critique of deterministic security logics, which globalism is well shown to

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represent, makes no allusion to the widely available criticisms of structuralist and techno-determinist IR theorising.\(^4\)

More problematic perhaps, the omission of contemporary security studies literatures also weakens the book’s central argument. By ignoring works on the performativity of security theories, constitutive theorising and dialectical conceptions of causation\(^5\), The Global Village Myth fails to offer a tangible understanding of how the purported praxeological effects of globalism operate in practice, that is, how ‘ideas’ translate into (and are sustained by) ‘actions’. In a similar vein, the choice against a variegated conception of power – especially the difference between military capabilities and the power to shape conceptions of world politics\(^6\) – renders unclear precisely how and why the globalist narrative became dominant in the US, thus providing a foundation for the foreign policies Porter seeks to question, and how and by whom such ideas can be challenged. The book’s strong reliance on Realist work and language, then, cannot mask the fact that both the linkages between ideas and foreign policy practices and the analysis’ central notion of power are heavily underspecified – and this situation is detrimental to the much warranted, more policy-oriented, intervention that The Global Village Myth makes.

Taking things together, it hence seems important to recognise The Global Village Myth for both the contributions it makes and those it does not: Its critical examination of globalist narratives and techno-deterministic logics in US security politics is sophisticated and much warranted, especially so with a view to practitioner audiences. Whether many Western security analysts would learn that much from the book, however, – as John Mearsheimer argues on the back of the publication – is a statement that cannot be confirmed as easily. Some readers will find the empirical tests (too) unevenly developed, and the broader analysis as such difficult to adapt to non-US cases and thus international politics writ large. Others will have met many of the described mechanisms of threat politics in other literatures already.

