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Review: The 'Safe Passage' From British to American Hegemony

The world's dominant nation, as it weakens, often goes to war with its growing rival. In the 19th century, power transferred peaceably. Why? Brendan Simms reviews 'Safe Passage' by Kori Schake.

By Brendan Simms
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Over the past decade or so, the geopolitical rise of China and the relative decline of the United States have agitated leaders and policy makers across the world. For many, the key question is not whether the torch of world leadership will pass from one to the other, something they consider inevitable, but whether the shift can take place without a war. At Harvard, the scholar Graham Allison, with a research team, has studied the historical precedents for power transitions, and his findings are not encouraging. In almost every case, he discovered, conflict was the result. The perennial danger, he explained in "Destined for War," published earlier this year, is that the weakening greater power will force a confrontation with its growing rival in order to stem its own decline, as Athens did with Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. The results can be disastrous, as they were for Athens.

The shining exception to the pattern is the peaceful shift in global dominance between 1870 and 1945. Kori Schake, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, tackles this subject in "Safe Passage: The Transition From British to American Hegemony," a remarkable and timely chronicle—living history of the best sort. Ms. Schake takes "hegemony" to mean not complete dominance but the ability to set and enforce global rules.

As every American schoolchild used to know, the omens for future collaboration between Britain and the United States were anything but good after the American Revolution. The United States was born in a violent secession, and its origin myths were anti-British: the Boston Massacre, Bunker Hill, Saratoga, Yorktown. America's first major war as an independent republic, in 1812, was fought against Britain. Throughout the 19th century, millions of Irish immigrants brought their grievances against England with them to America's shores. Even so, as Ms. Schake shows, conflict was averted at crucial "inflection points," and rivalry gave way to collaboration. The credit for this achievement, she argues convincingly, goes largely to the British.

'Columbia's Easter Bonnet' by S.D. Ehrhart after sketch by Louis Dalrymple, 1901. Courtesy Library of Congress. PHOTO: SCIENCE HISTORY IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The rapprochement had its roots in the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which sought to prevent the establishment of new European colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Ms. Schake notes that this policy was actually a British idea, the intention being to exclude European newcomers and preserve Britain's existing colonies and extensive commercial presence. The doctrine itself, once articulated by the U.S. president, was policed by the Royal Navy rather than the much weaker American fleet.

In the 1840s, the two powers clashed over the Oregon Territory. Britain, though stronger militarily, accepted a compromise that endures to this day in the U.S.-Canadian border along the 49th parallel. Then, during the Civil War, London resisted the temptation to halt the rise of a competitor-power by supporting the Confederacy—say, by breaking the Union blockade. Britain's reasoning, in this case, rested on the self-interested desire to maintain the integrity of the blockade weapon for its own use and, in part, on a growing abhorrence of slavery.

As a result of such decisions, a peaceful transition—a "safe passage"—

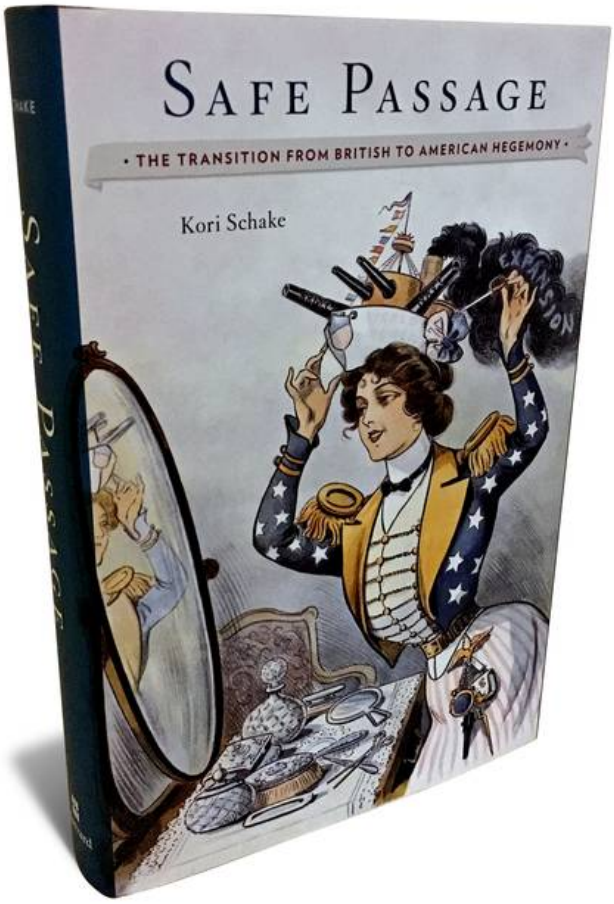

PHOTO: WSJ

SAFE PASSAGE

By Kori Schake
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became possible. Its core logic, in Ms. Schake's view, was a mutuality of ideological and geopolitical interests, a realistic grasp of shifting military and economic power, and a kind of political cross-pollination: The United States, to paraphrase Ms. Schake's formulation, became more imperial as Britain became more democratic. When the two nations faced off briefly in Venezuela toward the end of the century —a dispute over a border between Venezuela and British Guiana had led the U.S. to intervene as arbiter and referee—Britain and America were already closer to each other than to the other actors on the scene. This closeness was confirmed by the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the Royal Navy supported the United States in a tense confrontation with the Kaiser's ships in Manila Bay, where Germany appeared set to step into the role being vacated by Spain.

From the start of World War I, America provided financial and industrial defense to the Entente powers and in 1917 decisively entered the war. During the early stages of World War II, it acted as the "Arsenal of Democracy" before joining the war itself. Thereafter, America would continue to work with Britain in setting and enforcing global rules, but there was now no doubt as to who was the senior and who the junior partner.

There was nothing inevitable about the smoothness of this transition, even

in the 20th century, and it shouldn't be understood as a linear curve. Tensions arose in the 1920s over naval armaments, for instance. While Ms. Schake ends her story in 1945, she alludes to the tensions ahead, too, especially over the Suez Crisis of 1956, when Washington precipitated a run on the pound sterling to force Britain to withdraw from Egypt.

Toward the end of "Safe Passage," Ms. Schake spells out the implications of her history for the present day. The comparison is tricky, because while Britain and the United States are in many ways "cognate"—culturally, linguistically and politically—there is no such underlying affinity between the United States and China. For this reason, Ms. Schake tends toward pessimism: Just as the U.S. tried to remake the world in its image and not that of Britain, so will China try to clone its own values rather than adopt American ones.

There is, of course, a more optimistic scenario. Emmanuel Macron, the French president, has recently put forward, and the German Social Democrats have just endorsed, a plan for the creation of what will effectively be a European superstate. If he succeeds, and a robust new Eurozone threatens to surpass the U.S. economically—a big "if," admittedly—then Washington might do worse than to turn to Ms. Schake's book on how to manage the transition.

Mr. Simms is the author of "Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, From 1453 to the Present."

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