Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991)

Quick Summary

Overexpansion is the common phenomenon among great powers in the industrial age. However, the over-expansive strategy proved to be counterproductive. Then, why was this myth of security through expansion held persistently, sometimes to the extreme, by them? In his book, Jack Snyder offers an explanation that coalition politics and strategic ideology are intertwined to provide a reason on why overexpansion continued even beyond the point of productiveness.

Snyder draws on existing paradigms of international politics—Realism, Cognitive school, and domestic politics theory—for their explanations on why overexpansion occurs even though it may lead to the formation of alliances against the country that launches the over-expansive attempt. He also tests these paradigms with the empirical data of the case studies of five countries—Germany, Japan, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States—in order to draw the conclusion on which one of these paradigm is the most promising. As a result, Snyder argues that these existing explanations are still inadequate to cope with the puzzle of overexpansion.

Realist theory argues that a promotion of security through expansion would then be rational despite its predictably high costs and low chance of success. However, as Snyder points out, this explanation violates the balance of power, the main principle of international politics that Realists strongly upholds itself. The balance of power indicates that aggressive strategies such as overexpansion are self-destructive and then should not be employed.

Cognitive school also offers a quite different explanation. It regards the policy of overexpansion as a result of human errors. With psychological and human behavioral analysis, cognitive scholars argue that formative experiences of statesmen led to a blind belief in the myths of expansion. Based on Snyder's analysis, the empirical results contradict the argument made by the cognitive theory. Snyder declares that to understand the beliefs of imperial leaders, we must look primarily at social, political and ideological surrounding, not cognitive processes of human beings.

As for the domestic political paradigm, domestic interest groups are the main factors that perpetuated expansion until it surpassed a rational point. They exploit the belief of national security based on expansion for their own benefits. However, the deficiency of this theory lies on the practicality of its argument. In a real situation, how successfully the groups who held narrow interests against the rest of people in the country can hijack state policy is problematic. Besides, how much these interest groups can outstrip the interests of national leaders who possess more power is also doubtful.

As a consequence, Snyder redefines this problematic paradigm by inserting the role of cartelization and strategic ideology to it. Cartelization is a situation when imperialist interest groups join in logrolled coalition in order to strengthen their negotiating power. To satisfy interests of all groups in the coalition, expansion after expansion becomes unavoidable. The myth of security through expansion then plays a major role in helping these coalition groups to pursue their interests. Snyder claims that selling this myth of security is easier and more effective in the cartelized system. Based on Snyder's argument, both cartelization and strategic ideology functioning in domestic politics resolve the myth of great power's overexpansion.

Specifically, Snyder's hypothesis claims that variations in the pattern of domestic politics explain the level of government-generating 'myths of empires' that results in the country's overexpansion. Building on Alexander Gerschenkron's work on the timing of industrialization, Snyder identifies three basic regime types—democratic, cartelized, and unitary systems—as independent variables for his argument. These three regimes and also hybrids among them affect the degree of policy makers' advocacy of strategic-ideological concepts, the components that serves as intervening variables for Snyder's hypothesis. Dichotomous views of policy makers on these concepts either support or oppose the aggressive policies of expansion, thus determining the existence and extent of overexpansion that Snyder regards as the independent variable of his hypothesis. As the table on page 58 reveals, the conclusion seems to be that in a country of which type of politics is cartelization, the myth of security through expansion is highly prominent and results in the extreme level of overexpansion.

Snyder selects five case studies to back up his argument. These five countries reflect the timing of industrialization process which, in his opinion, has a huge impact on the variations of regime types. They include Germany and Japan from the late nineteenth century to World War II, Britain in the Victorian era, the Soviet Union since the 1930s, and the United States during the Cold War. The democratic system of

Victorian Britain is regarded as the consequence of early industralization. The system of the United States is also applied but to the lesser degree. The cartelized regime is related to later industrialization; this relationship is illustrated by the cases of Germany and Japan. Soviet Union is a case sample for the link between late-late industrialization and a 'hypercentralized' government. Snyder's attempt to show the relationship between industrialization and types of domestic regime is to weaken the idea that international conditions make a significant impact on the formation of domestic regime types. Without this mention on the relation between the domestic system and the industrialization, Snyder's argument will be accused as an unnecessary analysis on micro-level politics since readers can easily obtain an adequate explanation from macro-level theories.

Various tests of covariation between casual variables indicated by three competing theories and the outcome of overexpansion are used with these five case studies. The book uses three kinds of tests on the rival theories to search for the covariation between independent variables and intervening and dependent variables. The first test examines covariation across countries, the second covariation over time within a country, and the third covariation across individuals and groups within cases. Based on the result of his empirical testing, cognitive school takes the bottom rank based on performances. The realist theory, however, passes the tests successfully, especially on the covariation between a state's position in the international system and its propensity to overexpand. Undoubtedly, Snyder boasted the successes of domestic coalition politics in passing these empirical tests. His conclusion is that although the international factors stressed by Realism play an important role, their effects are skewed by domestic coalition making and ideological mythmaking which are the main components of his redefined domestic political theory.

Obviously, these five case studies support Snyder's argument. However, he and his analysis on these five countries do not adequately cope with the case of dictatorship like Nazi's Germany and of Soviet Union under Stalin, which consisted of weak cartelized power, yet pursued overexpansive strategies. All it says is that overexpansion occurs in that type of regime because leaders who face no countervailing force from interest groups believe in the virtues of aggressive policies. His hypothesis cannot explain why they believe and choose overexpansionist strategies instead of other alternatives. At the end, Snyder simply leaves out this entire type of regime. However, he argues that the inclusion of the type of authoritarian regime such as Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union and Napoleon France is not necessary and the exclusion of it does not fail his hypothesis.