The background of the book cover is a classical painting. It depicts a muscular, nude man standing and looking towards the viewer. He is holding a large, circular celestial globe or map of the sky with his right arm. The globe is filled with various figures, including a central figure that appears to be a deity or a personification of the sun or moon, surrounded by other celestial beings and constellations. The man's physique is highly detailed, showing his muscles. The overall style is reminiscent of Renaissance or Baroque art.

# **International Relations Theory**

AND THE

# **Consequences of Unipolarity**

EDITED BY

**G. John Ikenberry**


**Michael Mastanduno**

**William C. Wohlforth**

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## *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*

The end of the Cold War and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in a new unipolar international system that presented fresh challenges to international relations theory. Since the Enlightenment, scholars have speculated that patterns of cooperation and conflict might be systematically related to the manner in which power is distributed among states. Most of what we know about this relationship, however, is based on European experiences between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, when five or more powerful states dominated international relations, and in the latter twentieth century, when two superpowers did so. Building on a highly successful special issue of the leading journal *World Politics*, this book seeks to determine whether what we think we know about power and patterns of state behavior applies to the current “unipolar” setting and, if not, how core theoretical propositions about interstate interactions need to be revised.

G. JOHN IKENBERRY is the Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs in the Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. He is also a Global Eminence Scholar at Kyung Hee University.

MICHAEL MASTANDUNO is Nelson A. Rockefeller Professor of Government and Dean of the Faculty at Dartmouth College.

WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH is the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth College, where he teaches in the Department of Government. He is the Editor-in-chief of *Security Studies*.



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G. JOHN IKENBERRY  
MICHAEL MASTANDUNO  
WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH



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## *Notes on the contributors*

**Yaeli Bloch-Elkon** is Lecturer/Assistant Professor of Political Science and Communications at Bar Ilan University, Israel, and an associate research scholar at the university's Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) and at Columbia University's Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP). She has published articles in numerous journals on the topics of media, public opinion and foreign policy, terrorism and counter-terrorism, and partisan polarization.

**Daniel Deudney** is Associate Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University. His recent book is *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from Polis to Global Village* (2007).

**Martha Finnemore** is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University. She is the author of *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (2003), a co-author of *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (2004), and co-editor of *Who Governs the Globe?* (2010).

**Robert Jervis** is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (2010).

**Jeffrey W. Legro** is Compton Professor in the Politics Department and Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (2005) and co-editor of *To Lead the World: US Foreign Policy after the Bush Doctrine* (2008).

**Barry R. Posen** is Ford International Professor of Political Science at MIT and Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He is the author of two books, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks*, and *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, and numerous

scholarly articles, including “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* (Summer 2003). His current research focuses on US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War.

**Robert Y. Shapiro** is Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. He is co-author (with Benjamin I. Page) of *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (1992) and (with Lawrence R. Jacobs) of *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (2000). His current research focuses on partisan polarization and its consequences in American politics.

**Jack Snyder** is the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science and the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University. He is the co-author (with Edward D. Mansfield) of *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (2005).

**Stephen M. Walt** is Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University. He is the author of *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (2005), *Revolution and War* (1996), and *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), as well as of numerous articles on international politics and foreign policy. His most recent book (with John J. Mearsheimer) is *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007).

## *Notes on the editors*

**G. John Ikenberry** is Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and the author of *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War* (2001), and *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Rise, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (2011). He is also a Global Eminence Scholar at Kyung Hee University.

**Michael Mastanduno** is Professor of Government and Dean of the Faculty at Dartmouth College. He is the co-editor of the recent publications *U.S. Hegemony and International Organizations* (2003) and *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (2003). His current research interests include US–China relations and the role of the United States in the global economy.

**William C. Wohlforth** is the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth College, where he teaches in the Department of Government. He is the co-author (with Stephen G. Brooks) of *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (2008).

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# 1

## *Introduction: unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences*

G. JOHN IKENBERRY, MICHAEL MASTANDUNO,  
AND WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH

American primacy in the global distribution of capabilities is one of the most salient features of the contemporary international system. The end of the Cold War did not return the world to multipolarity. Instead the United States – already materially preeminent – became more so. We currently live in a one superpower world, a circumstance unprecedented in the modern era. No other great power has enjoyed such advantages in material capabilities – military, economic, technological, and geographical. Other states rival the United States in one area or another, but the multifaceted character of American power places it in a category of its own. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, slower economic growth in Japan and Western Europe during the 1990s, and America’s outsized military spending have all enhanced these disparities. While in most historical eras the distribution of capabilities among major states has tended to be multipolar or bipolar – with several major states of roughly equal size and capability – the United States emerged from the 1990s as an unrivaled global power. It became a “unipolar” state.

Not surprisingly, this extraordinary imbalance has triggered global debate. Governments, including that of the United States, are struggling to respond to this peculiar international environment. What is the character of domination in a unipolar distribution? If world politics is always a mixture of force and consent, does unipolarity remove restraints and alter the mix in favor of force? Is a unipolar world likely to be built around rules and institutions or based more on the unilateral exercise of unipolar power? These questions have been asked in the context of a global debate over the projection of power by the former George W. Bush administration. To what extent was America’s foreign policy after 2001 a reflection simply of the idiosyncratic and provocative strategies of the Bush administration itself, rather than a

manifestation of the deeper structural features of the global system of power? These concerns over how a unipolar world operates – and how the unipolar state itself behaves – are the not-so-hidden subtext of world politics at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Classic questions of international relations (IR) theory are at stake in the debate over unipolarity. The most obvious question concerns balance of power theory, which predicts that states will respond to concentrated power by counterbalancing.<sup>1</sup> The absence of a balancing response to American unipolar power is a puzzle to some, while others argue that incipient or specific types of balancing behavior are in fact occurring.<sup>2</sup> A related debate is over power transition theory, which focuses on the specific forms of conflict that are generated between rising and declining hegemonic states.<sup>3</sup> The abrupt shift in the distribution of capabilities that followed the end of the Cold War and the rise of China after the Cold War raise questions about the character of conflict between dominant and challenger states as they move along trajectories of rise and decline. A unipolar distribution also raises issues that scholars grappled with during the Cold War, namely the structure and dynamics of different types of polar systems. Here the questions concern the ways in which the features of polarity affect the durability and war-proneness of the state system.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, scholarly debates

<sup>1</sup> See Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions and Research Design," in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 128–153.

<sup>2</sup> G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); and T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortman, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). On incipient balancing, see Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 24, 1 (Summer 2000): 5–41; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise," *International Security* 17, 4 (Spring 1993): 5–51; Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," *International Security* 30, 1 (Summer 2005): 7–45; and Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, 1 (Summer 2005): 109–139.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958); and A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> See Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, 3 (April 1964): 390–406; Richard N. Rosecrance, "Bipolarity, Multipolarity and the Future," *Journal of Conflict*

about threat perception, the impact of regime characteristics on foreign policy, the propensity of dominant states to provide collective goods, and the ability of a state to translate preponderant capabilities into effective influence are also at stake in the debate over unipolarity.<sup>5</sup>

This book is a systematic inquiry into the logic and dynamics of unipolarity. Its starting point is the distinctive distribution of capabilities among states in the contemporary global system. The central question driving our inquiry is straightforward: To what extent – and, if so, how – does this distribution of capabilities matter for patterns of international politics?

In their initial efforts to make sense of an American-dominated international system, scholars and observers have invoked a wide array of grand terms such as empire, hegemony, unipolarity, imperium, and “uni-multipolarity.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars are searching for a conceptual language to depict and place in historical and comparative perspective the distinctive political formation that has emerged after the Cold War. But this multiplicity of terms obscures more than it reveals. In this project, unipolarity refers narrowly to the underlying material distribution of capabilities, and not to the political patterns or relationships depicted by terms such as empire, imperium, and hegemony. What makes the global system unipolar is the distinctive distribution of material resources. An important research question is whether and in what ways this particular distribution of capabilities affects patterns of

*Resolution 10* (September 1966): 314–327; Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* 93 (Summer 1964): 881–909; Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Responses to American Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2006); Robert Jervis, “The Remaking of a Unipolar World,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29, 3 (2006): 7–19.

<sup>6</sup> A huge literature has emerged – or returned – depicting America as an empire. See, for example, Charles Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). On hegemony, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). On imperium, see Peter Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). On uni-multipolarity, see Samuel Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, 2 (March/April 1999): 35–49.



international politics, creating outcomes that are different than what one might expect under conditions of bipolarity or multipolarity.

Setting up the inquiry in this manner requires a basic distinction between power as material resources and power as influence. Power resources refer to the distribution of material capabilities among states. The global system today – seen in comparative historical perspective – has concentrated power capabilities unprecedented in the modern era. But this observation should not prejudice questions about the extent and character of influence or about the logic of political relationships within the global system. Powerful states, even unipolar ones, may not always get the outcomes they prefer. Nor should this observation about the concentration of power prejudice the question of whether the global system is coercive, consensual, legitimate, or illegitimate. Describing the system as unipolar leaves unanswered the Weberian questions about the logic and character of the global political system that is organized around unipolarity.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, we develop a framework for analyzing unipolarity and highlight the arguments of the chapters that follow. The individual contributions develop hypotheses and explore the impact of unipolarity on the behavior of the dominant state, on the reactions of other states, and on the properties of the international system. While the book takes as a starting point the causal impact of unipolarity as a concentrated distribution of capabilities, individual chapters explore more complex causal chains. Polarity may have effects, in other words, that are not captured by the typical neorealist explanatory scheme with which the concept is associated. Finnemore, for example, stresses potent social and ideational constraints the need for legitimacy places on the unipole, while Ikenberry develops the reciprocal interaction between unipolarity and the US-sponsored liberal international order. In all chapters, however, unipolarity looms as a potentially important factor affecting patterns of behavior over the long term.

Collectively, we find that unipolarity does have a profound impact on international politics. International relations under conditions of unipolarity force us to rethink conventional and received

<sup>7</sup> In this way, we are following a basic distinction that is made in the power theory literature. See, in particular, David A. Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

understandings about the operation of the balance of power, the meaning of alliance partnerships, the logic of international economic cooperation, the relationship between power and legitimacy, and the behavior of satisfied and revisionist states. A unipolar distribution of capabilities will eventually give way to other distributions. The argument advanced here is not that unipolarity will last indefinitely, but that as long as it does last, it will constitute a critical factor in understanding patterns of foreign policy and world politics.

### Definition and measurement

Scholars use the term “unipolarity” to distinguish a system with one extremely capable state from systems with two or more great powers (bi-, tri-, and multipolarity). Unipolarity should also be distinguished from hegemony and empire, which refer to political relationships and degrees of influence rather than to distributions of material capability. The adjective “unipolar” describes something that has a single pole. International relations scholars have long defined a pole as a state that (a) commands an especially large share of the resources or capabilities states can use to achieve their ends, and (b) excels in all the component elements of state capability, conventionally defined as size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military might, and organizational-institutional “competence.”<sup>8</sup>

A unipolar system is one whose structure is defined by the fact that only one state meets these criteria. The underpinnings of the concept are familiar to international relations scholars. They flow from the massive literature on polarity, and especially from Waltz’s seminal treatment. The core contention is that polarity structures the horizon of states’ probable actions and reactions, narrowing the range of choice and providing subtle incentives and disincentives for certain types of behavior. An appreciation of polarity yields a few important insights about patterns of behavior in international politics over the long term. Even for those scholars most persuaded of its analytical utility, polarity is at best a necessary part of explanation rather than a sufficient

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 131.

explanation.<sup>9</sup> The distribution of capabilities may be a place to begin an explanation, but is rarely enough to complete one.

Polarity is a theoretical construct; real international systems only approximate various polar ideal types. The polarity concept implies a threshold value of the distribution of capabilities. The more unambiguously the poles in a real international system pass the threshold, the more confidence analysts can have that the properties attributed to a given system structure in theory will obtain in practice. The more unambiguously the capabilities of the great powers in a multipolar system clearly stand apart from all other states and are comparable to each other, the more relevant are the insights from the theoretical literature on multipolarity. Waltz often discussed the logic of a bipolar system as if it were a two-actor system. The more dominant the superpowers were in reality, the more confidence analysts could have that those logical deductions actually applied. In reality, the Cold War international system was never “perfectly” bipolar. Analysts used to speak of loose vs. tight bipolarity, and debated whether the Soviet Union had the full complement of capabilities to measure up as a pole.

How do we know whether or to what degree an international system has passed the unipolar threshold? Using the conventional definition of a pole, an international system can be said to be unipolar if it contains one state whose overall share of capabilities places it unambiguously in a class by itself compared to all other states. This reflects the fact that poles are defined not on an absolute scale but relative to each other and to other states. In addition, preponderance must characterize all the relevant categories of state capabilities.<sup>10</sup> To determine polarity, one has to examine the distribution of capabilities and identify the states whose shares of overall resources obviously place them into their own class.

There will doubtless be times in which polarity cannot be determined, but now does not appear to be one of them. Scholars largely agree that there were four or more states that qualified as poles before 1945; that by 1950 or so only two measured up; and that by the 1990s

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive critical review of the polarity literature, see Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> William Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 21, 1: 1–36; William Wohlforth, “U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World,” in Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled*, 98–118; Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

one of these two poles was gone. They largely agree, further, that no other power – not Japan, China, India or Russia, nor any European country, nor the EU – has increased its overall portfolio of capabilities sufficiently to transform their standing.<sup>11</sup> This leaves a single pole.

There is widespread agreement, moreover, that any plausible index aggregating the relevant dimensions of state capabilities would place the United States in a separate class by a large margin.<sup>12</sup> The most widely used measures of capability are GDP and military spending. As of 2009, the United States accounted for roughly a fifth of global GDP and over 40 percent of GDP among the established great powers (see [Table 1.1](#)). The post-Cold War US economic position surpasses that of any leading state in modern history, with the sole exception of the United States' own standing in the early Cold War years (when World War Two had temporarily depressed every other major economy). The size and wealth of the United States' economy mean that the generation of its massive military capabilities represented only roughly 4 percent of its GDP in 2009 ([Table 1.2](#)), compared to the nearly 10 percent it averaged over the Cold War's peak years of 1950–1970, as well as the similarly large burdens borne by most of the major powers of the past.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Some scholars argue that bipolarity or multipolarity might characterize international politics in certain regional settings. See, for example, Robert Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty First Century," *International Security* 23, 4 (Spring 1999): 81–117; and Andrew Moravcsik, "The Quiet Superpower," *Newsweek* (June 17, 2002, Atlantic Edition).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Ethan B. Kapstein, "Does Unipolarity Have A Future?" in Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 464–490; Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Wohlforth, "Stability of a Unipolar World"; Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World"; Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*; William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Arvind Virmani, "Global Power from the 18th to the 21st Century: Power Potential (VIP2), Strategic Assets & Actual Power (VIP)," Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, Working Paper 175, New Delhi (2005). The most comprehensive contrarian view is Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), whose main arguments are that the United States is weaker economically than it seems (a claim mainly about the future); and that US military capability is comparatively ineffective at achieving favorable outcomes (a claim about utility).

<sup>13</sup> Calculated from *Budget of the United States Government Fiscal Year 2005: Historical Tables* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2005).

Table 1.1 *Economic indicators for the major powers, 2009*

	GDP, current prices (\$ billion)	% Great power GDP, current prices	% World GDP, current prices	% World GDP, PPP	GDP per capita, current prices	Public debt (% GDP)	Productivity (\$ GDP per hour worked)
United States	14,256	42.2	23.3	20.3	46,381	52.9	55.3
China	4,519	13.4	7.4	12.5	3,404	18.2	n.a.
Japan	5,068	15	8.3	5.9	39,731	192.1	38.3
Germany	3,353	9.9	5.5	4	40,875	77.2	50.5
Russia	1,660	4.9	2.7	3	11,690	6.9	n.a.
France	2,676	7.9	4.4	3	42,747	79.7	53.2
Britain	2,184	6.5	3.6	3.1	43,736	68.5	44.9

Notes: % World GDP, PPP is World Bank estimate for 2005. Differences between PPP (purchasing power parity) and market exchange rate measures are discussed in Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, ch. 2. Data for United States public debt are from 2005. Productivity estimates are from 2005.

Sources: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, April 2010; World Bank, 2011 *International Comparison Program, Preliminary Results*. Public debt: CIA *World Factbook 2010*. Hours worked: OECD *Employment Outlook 2010, Statistical Annex*. Productivity: OECD *Compendium of Productivity Indicators 2008*.

Table 1.2 *Defense expenditures for the major powers, 2009*

	Defense expendi- tures (\$ billion)	% Great power defense expenditures	% World defense expenditures	Defense expenditures % of GDP	Defense R&D expenditures (\$ billion)
United States	663.3	62.9	43	4.3	74.2
China	98.8	9.4	7	2	n.a.
Japan	46.9	4.4	3	0.9	1.6
Germany	48	4.6	3	1.3	1.4
Russia	61	5.8	4	3.5	n.a.
France	67.3	6.4	4	2.3	4.4
Britain	69.3	6.6	4	2.5	3

The United States now likely spends more on defense than the rest of the world combined (Table 1.2). Military research and development (R&D) may best capture the scale of the long-term investments which now give the United States a dramatic qualitative edge over other states. As Table 1.2 shows, in 2008 US military R&D expenditures were more than six times greater than those of Germany, Japan, France, and Britain combined. By some estimates over half the military R&D expenditures in the world are American. And this disparity has been sustained for decades: over the past thirty years, for example, the United States invested over three times more than the EU combined on military R&D. Hence, on any composite index featuring these two indicators the United States obviously looks like a unipole. That perception is reinforced (see Table 1.3) by a snapshot of science and technology indicators for the major powers.

These vast commitments do not make the United States omnipotent, but they do facilitate a preeminence in military capabilities vis-à-vis all the other major powers that is unique in the post-seventeenth-century experience. While other powers can contest US forces operating in or very near their homelands, especially over issues on which nuclear deterrence is credible, the United States is and will long remain the only state capable of projecting major military power globally.<sup>14</sup> This dominant position is enabled by what Barry Posen calls “command of the commons” – that is, unassailable military dominance over the sea, air, and space. The result is an international system that contains only one state with the capability to organize major politico-military action anywhere in the system.<sup>15</sup> No other state or even combination of states is capable of mounting and deploying a major expeditionary force outside its own region, except with the assistance of the United States.

<sup>14</sup> Sustained US investment in nuclear capabilities, against the backdrop of Russian decline and Chinese stasis, has even led some to question the existence of stable deterrence between these countries. See Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 30, 4 (2006): 7–44.

<sup>15</sup> David Wilkinson, “Unipolarity without Hegemony,” *International Studies Review* 1, 2 (1999): 141–172; Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East*; Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Barry Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28, 1 (2003): 5–46.

**Table 1.3 *Science and technology indicators for the major powers, 2006–2009***

	Value added of high-technology industries (\$ million) (2007) <sup>1</sup>	Share of value added of high-technology industries (\$ million) (2007)	Gross domestic expenditure on R&D (\$ million PPP) (2008)	No. of triadic patent families (2008) <sup>2</sup>	Science and engineering doctoral degrees (2006)	PCs per 1000 people (2006)	Internet access per 1000 people (2008)	Secure Internet servers <sup>3</sup> per million people (2009)
United States	374,233.0	30.70%	398,194.0	14,828	30,452	810	760	1,234
China	166,003.0	13.60%	141,400.0	433	22,953	60	220	1
Japan	128,897.0	10.60%	149,212.9	14,126	8,122	800	750	519
Germany	85,806	7.00%	76,796.9	6,027	10,243	660	750	641
Russia	9,640	0.80%	22,121.0	49	19,725	130	320	11
France	42,174.0	3.50%	42,893	2,430	56,770	650	680	210
Britain	51,786.0	4.30%	38,707.50	1,658	9,761	800	760	905

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> In 2007 dollars. High technology defined by the National Science Board as “aerospace, communications and semiconductors, computers and office machinery, pharmaceuticals, and scientific instruments and measuring equipment.”

<sup>2</sup> Triadic patent families represent attempts to receive patents for an invention in the United States, Europe, and Japan. See [www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind06/c6/c6g.htm](http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind06/c6/c6g.htm); data for China/Russia from 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Secure Internet servers use encryption technology in Internet transactions. See [www.netcraft.com](http://www.netcraft.com)

*Sources:* World Bank, *World Development Indicators* 2010; OECD, *Main Science and Technology Indicators*, May 2010; National Science Board, *Science and Engineering Indicators*, 2010 Volume 2; *R&D Magazine*, Battelle, OECD, IMF, CIA.

Conventional measures thus suggest that the concentration of military and overall economic potential in the United States distinguishes the current international system from its predecessors over the past four centuries (see [Figure 1.1](#)). As historian Paul Kennedy observed, “Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing . . . I have returned to all of the comparative defense spending and military personnel statistics over the past 500 years that I compiled in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, and no other nation comes close.”<sup>16</sup>

The bottom line is that if we adopt conventional definitions of polarity and standard measures of capabilities, then the current international system is as unambiguously unipolar as past systems were multi- and bipolar.

## Unipolarity and its consequences

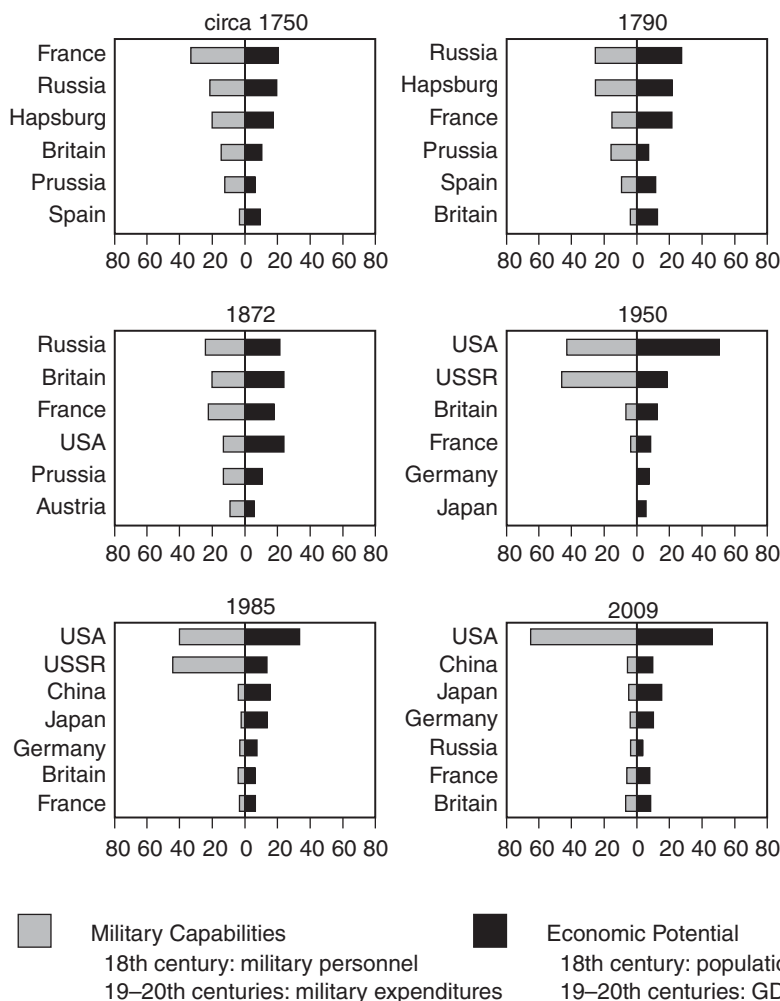
As the chapters that follow indicate, the effects of unipolarity are potentially widespread. For purposes of analytical clarity it is possible to divide these effects in three ways: on the behavior of the unipole, on the actions of other states, and on the properties of the international system itself. Seven chapters address effects along these dimensions. They are followed by three chapters that reflect critically on the analytical utility of polarity under contemporary conditions.

## Behavior of the unipole

The specific characteristics and dynamics of any unipolar system will obviously depend on how the unipolar state behaves. But the unipole’s behavior might be affected by incentives and constraints associated with its structural position in the international system. Indeed, even the unipole’s domestic politics and institutions – the immediate well-springs of its behavior on the international scene – might themselves change profoundly under the influence of its position of primacy in the international system. The chapters in this volume yield hypotheses concerning four general behavioral patterns.

<sup>16</sup> “The Eagle Has Landed: The New U.S. Global Military Position,” *Financial Times Weekend*, February 2004.





**Figure 1.1** Distribution (percentage) of economic and military capabilities among the major powers<sup>a</sup> (seventeenth–twenty-first centuries)

*Sources:* Eighteenth-century data: Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987). GDP, 1870–1985: Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1829–1992* (Paris: OECD, 1995); GDP, 2009 sources from Table 1.2; military expenditures, 1872–1985: National Material Capabilities data set v. 3.02 at <http://www.correlatesofwar.org>. The construction of these data is discussed in J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, “Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965,” in Bruce Russett, ed., *Peace, War, and Numbers* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1972), pp. 19–48. Military expenditures 2009, sources from Table 1.1

<sup>a</sup> Germany = FRG, and Russia = USSR in 1950 and 1985; Maddison’s estimates are based on states’ modern territories. For 1872, Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia are combined, as are Russia and Finland.

*Unipolarity and revisionism: is the unipole a satisfied state?*

The stability of any international system depends significantly on the degree to which the major powers are satisfied with the status quo.<sup>17</sup> In *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin argued that leading states “will attempt to change the international system if the expected benefits exceed the expected costs.”<sup>18</sup> In the quarter century since that book’s publication, IR scholars have never seriously debated whether the “expected net gain” of systemic revisionism might be positive for the United States. It is hardly surprising that scholars set aside the question of revising the territorial status quo – plausible arguments for the utility of large-scale conquest in an age of nuclear weapons and low economic benefits of holding territory are hard to imagine. But the territorial status quo is only a part of what Gilpin meant by “international system.” The other part comprises the rules, institutions, and standards of legitimacy that frame daily interactions. Why has there been no scholarly debate on whether the United States might seek to revise that aspect of the system? In the 1980s, to be sure, the question did not seem relevant. Scholars believed that the United States was in relative decline, so the costs of changing the system were simply assumed to be high, and a US preference for the status quo appeared obvious.

The transition from bipolarity to unipolarity arguably represented a dramatic power shift in the United States’ favor, altering Gilpin’s equation toward revisionism. Yet the question of whether, as a new unipole, the United States might adopt a more revisionist stance has not figured centrally in international relations research. The reason was a key assumption built into almost all research on hegemonic stability and power transition theory: that the leading state in any international system is bound to be satisfied. Hence, research on the origins of satisfaction and revisionism is overwhelmingly about subordinate states, not the dominant state.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1951); Organski, *World Politics*; Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, 1 (Summer 1994): 72–107; and Robert Powell, “Stability and the Distribution of Power,” *World Politics* 48, 2 (1996): 239–267.

<sup>18</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change*, ch. 2.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Ronald L. Tammen *et al.*, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000); Jonathan M. DiCicco

Robert Jervis' chapter questions this assumption. While the case can be made that a unipole – particularly one which achieved this status in an international system already strongly shaped by its power and preferences – might rationally opt for conservatism,<sup>20</sup> international relations scholarship is rich with hypotheses that the opposite is equally if not more likely. Jervis argues that unipolarity offers powerful structural incentives for the leading state to be revisionist. These include the absence of countervailing power, the tendency for both the interests and the fears of the leading state to increase as its relative capabilities increase, and the psychological tendency to worry more about the future to the extent the present situation is desirable. Jervis also suggests that these structural incentives are reinforced by particular features of the American approach to unipolarity – the sense after the attacks of September 11, 2001 that the world could and must be transformed, and the enduring and widespread belief that international peace and cooperation will be sustained only when all other important states are democratic. The structural and contingent features of contemporary unipolarity point plausibly in the direction of a revisionist unipole, one simultaneously powerful, fearful, and opportunistic.

### *Unipolarity and the provision of public goods*

Public or collective goods may be consumed by multiple actors without those actors necessarily having to pay the full costs of producing them. The classic theoretical insight is that if enough actors follow their rational self-interest and choose to free ride on the efforts of others, public goods will be underproduced or not produced at all.<sup>21</sup> To overcome the free rider problem requires cooperation among

and Jack S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43, 6 (1999): 675–704; and Jason Davidson, *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-quo States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Josef Joffe, "Bismarck or Britain? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Unipolarity," *International Security* 19, 4 (Spring 1995): 94–117; and Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security* 21, 4 (Spring 1997): 49–88.

<sup>21</sup> See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), and the literature discussed therein.

self-interested actors.<sup>22</sup> A good part of the IR literature, in particular that associated with hegemonic stability theory, hypothesizes that cooperation in international relations requires the leadership of a dominant state.<sup>23</sup> Its preponderance of economic and military resources means the dominant state has the ability to bear disproportionately the costs of providing international collective goods such as an open world economy or a stable security order. The dominant state has an interest in bearing those costs because it benefits disproportionately from promoting system-wide outcomes that reflect its values and interests.

During the Cold War, the United States took on the responsibilities that Kindleberger argued were needed to promote international economic stability, such as serving as an open market of last resort and allowing the use of its currency for exchange and reserve purposes. International economic stability among the Western powers reinforced their security alliance against the Soviet Union. The United States also bore disproportionately the direct costs of Western alliance security. The Soviet Union, on its side of the international divide, ultimately shouldered disproportionate alliance costs as well.<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Waltz took the argument a step further, arguing that in the bipolar system the United States and Soviet Union may have been adversaries but, as

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> This literature is vast, and its claims have been subject to considerable critical scrutiny. Key statements include Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Robert O. Keohane, “The Theory of Hegemonic Stability and Changes in International Economic Regimes,” in Ole Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George, eds., *Change in the International System* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), 131–162; Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade,” *World Politics* 28 (1976): 317–347; Bruce Russett, “The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony,” *International Organization* 39 (1985): 207–231; Duncan Snidal, “The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory,” *International Organization* 39 (1985): 579–614; David A. Lake, “Leadership, Hegemony and the International Economy: Naked Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?” *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (1993): 459–489; and Joanne Gowa, “Rational Hegemons, Excludable Goods, and Small Groups: An Epitaph for Hegemonic Stability Theory?” *World Politics* 41 (1989): 307–324.

<sup>24</sup> See Valerie Bunce, “The Empire Strikes Back: The Evolution of the Eastern Bloc from Soviet Asset to Liability,” *International Organization* 39, 1 (1985): 1–46; Randall Stone, *Satellites and Commissars: Strategy and Conflict in the Politics of Soviet-Bloc Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

the two dominant powers, shared a mutual interest in system stability, an interest that prompted them to cooperate in providing public goods such as nuclear non-proliferation.<sup>25</sup> Hedley Bull makes a similar point in his classic study of the international system as a society of states.<sup>26</sup>

How might the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar system affect the inclination of the now singularly dominant state to provide international public goods? Two hypotheses arise, with contradictory behavioral expectations. First, we might expect a unipole to take on an even greater responsibility for the provision of international public goods. The capabilities of a unipole relative to other major states are greater than those of either dominant power in a bipolar structure. The unipole's incentive should be stronger as well, since it now has the opportunity to influence international outcomes globally, not just in its particular subsystem. We should expect the unipole to try to "lock in" a durable international order that reflects its interests and values.<sup>27</sup>

A second hypothesis, however, suggests the opposite. We should expect a unipolar power to underproduce public goods despite its preponderant capabilities. The fact that it is unthreatened by peer competitors and relatively unconstrained by other states creates incentives for the unipole to pursue more parochial interests even at the expense of a stable international order. The fact that it is extraordinarily powerful means that the unipole will be more inclined to force adjustment costs on others rather than bear disproportionate burdens itself.

Three of the contributions below address these issues. Michael Mastanduno's analysis of the global political economy shows that the dominant state will be both system maker and privilege taker – it will seek simultaneously to provide public goods and to exploit its advantageous structural position for parochial gain. It enlists the cooperation of other states and seeks, with varying success, to force adjustment burdens upon them. Robert Jervis suggests that because the unipole has wide discretion in the nature and extent of the goods provided, its efforts are likely to be perceived by less powerful states as hypocritical attempts to mask the actual pursuit of private goods. Considering the specific features of the liberal order built around US power, Ikenberry,

<sup>25</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, ch. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

by contrast, argues that the unipole faces strong general incentives to maintain this order. Even if it periodically acts as a privilege taker on specific issues, its overall support for the institutional-normative order has many attributes of public goods provision.

### *Unipolarity and control over outcomes*

It has long been an axiom of social science that resources (or capabilities as defined herein) do not translate automatically into power (control over outcomes or over the behavior of other actors).<sup>28</sup> Yet most observers regard it as similarly axiomatic that there is some positive relationship between a state's relative capability to help or harm others and its ability to get them to do what it wants. Even if the relationship is complex, more capabilities relative to others ought generally to translate into more power and influence. By this commonsense logic, a unipole should be expected to have more influence than either of the two great powers in a bipolar system.

Chapters in this volume argue that the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity may not be an unambiguous benefit for the unipole's ability to wield influence. On the contrary, a unipolar state may face the paradoxical situation of being simultaneously more capable and more constrained. Two distinct theoretical logics suggest that a unipole might enjoy less power to shape the international system than a superpower in bipolarity. First is the logic of balancing, alliance, and opposition, discussed in the contributions by Stephen Walt and Mastanduno. The increased concentration of capabilities in the unipole may only elicit increased opposition – in the form of either traditional counterbalancing or subtler soft balancing – from other states. Even if such resistance falls short of providing a real counterweight, it may materially hamstring the unipole's ability to exercise influence. As Walt argues, the structural shift to unipolarity removed one of the major motivations for the middle-ranked great powers to defer to the United States. Mastanduno offers a similar argument: the collapse of a unifying central threat signifies that after the Cold War the United States has less control over adjustment struggles with its principal economic partners,

<sup>28</sup> Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2 (1957): 201–215; Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power*.

because it can no longer leverage their security dependence to dictate international economic outcomes. Globalization reinforces this US predicament by expanding the number of relevant players in the world economy and by offering them alternatives to economic reliance on the United States. While under bipolarity the propensity of other middle powers to defer to the United States was structurally favored, under unipolarity the opposite may obtain. Even if observable balancing behavior reminiscent of bipolarity or multipolarity never occurs, a structurally induced tendency of the middle-ranked great powers to withhold cooperation may sap the unipole's effective power.

Second is a social logic of legitimacy, analyzed by Martha Finnemore. To use capabilities effectively, she argues, a unipole must seek to legitimate its role. But any system of legitimation imposes limits on the unipole's ability to translate capabilities into power. Finnemore stresses that the legitimation strategy followed by the United States after World War Two – institutionalization – imposes especially severe constraints on the use of its material capabilities in pursuit of power. The rules, norms, and institutions that make up the current international order are thus especially resistant to the unilateral use of superior capabilities to drive outcomes. Hence, for reasons Finnemore spells out in detail, the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity may well have diminished the effective utility of the United States' preponderant capabilities.

Yet Ikenberry's chapter suggests that these constraints are only one side of a complex equation of influence. While active attempts to translate capabilities into influence on specific issues may frequently be frustrated by the institutional constraints Finnemore highlights, in diffuse and admittedly hard-to-measure ways, the rules and institutions molded and maintained by US capabilities arguably shape patterns of outcomes in ways favorable to Washington.

### *Unipolarity and domestic politics*

The impact of domestic politics on foreign policy is of longstanding interest in the study of politics. In his classic appraisal of the United States, Tocqueville concluded that the US political system was "decidedly inferior" to other types in the conduct of foreign policy, with a tendency to "obey impulse rather than prudence," and to "abandon a

mature design for the gratification of a momentary passion.”<sup>29</sup> During the Cold War, Theodore Lowi, Stephen Krasner, and others reinforced the idea that American political institutions create disadvantages in external policy.<sup>30</sup> More recent literature has reversed the presumption and argues that democracy offers distinctive advantages in foreign policy including legitimacy, transparency, the ability to mobilize the public for war-fighting efforts, and the potential to use competition among branches of government to gain advantage in diplomacy and negotiations.<sup>31</sup>

Political scientists have placed greater emphasis on the impact of regime type on foreign policy than on how changes in the relative international position of a country affect the role domestic politics play in its foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, conventional wisdom during the Cold War suggested that the bipolar structure had a double disciplining effect on the conduct of US foreign policy. The external threat disciplined American society, leading interest groups and the public generally to defer to central decision makers on the definition of national interest and how best to achieve it. Domestic politics stopped at the “water’s edge” because the international stakes were so high. The Cold War constrained American decision makers as well, forcing them to exercise caution in the international arena and to assure that public opinion or interest groups did not capture or derail foreign policy for parochial reasons.

<sup>29</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I (New York: Appleton and Co., 1890), 299–300.

<sup>30</sup> Theodore Lowi, “Making Democracy Safe for the World,” in John Ikenberry, ed., *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays* (New York: HarperCollins 1989), pp. 258–292; and Stephen Krasner, “United States Commercial and Monetary Policy: Unraveling the Paradox of Internal Weakness and External Strength,” in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Between Power and Plenty* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 51–88.

<sup>31</sup> For example, David Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review* 86, 1 (March 1992): 24–37; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Robert Pastor, “The President vs. Congress,” in Robert Art and Seyom Brown, eds., *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Search for a New Role* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 11–31.

<sup>32</sup> See Otto Hintze, “Military Organization and the Organization of States,” in Felix Gilbert, ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 178–215; and Peter Alexis Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed,” *International Organization* 32, 4 (Autumn 1978): 881–912.



Under unipolarity, the double disciplining effect is no longer operative, with neither publics nor central decision makers as constrained as in a bipolar context. The consequent impact of domestic politics on foreign policy will depend in part on whether initiative is taken more by less constrained central decision makers or less constrained societal actors. One hypothesis is that under unipolarity the line between domestic and foreign policy will blur and domestic politics will no longer stop at the water's edge. With less at stake in foreign policy, it is harder for leaders to discipline societal actors and easier for societal actors to capture aspects of the foreign policy agenda to suit their parochial needs. The likely results are a less coherent foreign policy and a tendency for the state to underperform in the international arena, missing opportunities to exercise influence commensurate with its preponderant capabilities. A second hypothesis is that central decision makers will exploit the lack of constraint to manipulate a public – one that no longer has clear guiding principles in foreign policy – to respond to a wide array of possible threats and opportunities. As Jervis suggests, for the unipole threats may be nowhere – or everywhere.

The contribution by Jack Snyder, Robert Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon takes up the impact of domestic politics under unipolarity. They find that the George W. Bush administration took advantage of the structural discretion offered by unipolarity to conduct a far more active and risky foreign policy than would be possible under the constraints of bipolarity. Developments in American politics such as political polarization have not only encouraged this effort by leaders, they have enabled interest groups to tie their particular domestic concerns to the more activist foreign policy agenda, and they have encouraged opportunistic leaders to use foreign policy as a salient issue in domestic political debate.

### **Unipolarity and the behavior of secondary states**

Unipolarity may present secondary states with dramatically different incentives and constraints than bipolar or multipolar settings. Authors in this volume highlight three general behavioral patterns that may be shaped by the unipolar structure: strategies of resistance to or insulation from the unipole's overweening capabilities; alliances and alignments; and the use of international institutions.

*Balancing and other forms of resistance*

The proposition that great concentrations of capabilities generate countervailing tendencies toward balance is among the oldest and best known in international relations.<sup>33</sup> Applying this balancing proposition to a unipolar system is complex, however, for even as unipolarity increases the incentives for counterbalancing it also raises the costs. Walt and Finnemore each analyze the interplay between these incentives. They agree on the basic proposition that the current unipolar order pushes secondary states away from traditional “hard” counterbalancing – formal military alliances and/or military buildups meant to create a global counterweight to the unipole – and toward other, often subtler strategies, such as “soft” balancing, hiding, binding, delegitimation, or norm entrapment. These analyses lead to the general expectation that a shift from a multipolar or bipolar to a unipolar structure would increase the relative salience of such subtler balancing/resistance strategies.

Walt argues that standard neorealist balance of power theory predicts the absence of counterbalancing under unipolarity. Yet he contends that the core causal mechanisms of balance of threat theory remain operative in a unipolar setting. Walt develops a modification of the theory that highlights the role of soft balancing and other subtler strategies of resistance as vehicles to overcome the particular challenges unipolarity presents to counterbalancing. He contends balancing dynamics remain latent within a unipolar structure, and can be brought forth if the unipole acts in a particularly threatening manner.

Finnemore develops a contrasting theoretical architecture for explaining secondary state behavior. For her, both the absence of balancing and the presence of other patterns of resistance can only be explained by reference to the social, as opposed to the material, structure of international politics. In particular, secondary state strategies that have the effect of reining in the unipole cannot be understood as the result of standard security-maximizing incentives. Rather, they are partially the outgrowth of the secondary states’ internalization of the norms and rules of the institutional order. If the unipole acts in

<sup>33</sup> See the reviews and discussion in Levy, “Balances and Balancing” and Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495–1999,” *Security Studies* 14, 1 (2005): 1–31.

accordance with those rules, the tendency of other states to resist or to withhold cooperation will be muted. Finnemore establishes three social mechanisms that constrain the unipole: legitimation, institutionalization, and incentives for hypocrisy. Each of these entails a logic of resistance to actions by the unipole that violate certain socially defined boundaries. Ikenberry highlights the flipside of this dynamic. Resistance exists and is important, but it is comparatively muted, he argues, because both the benefits of buying into the institutionalized hegemonic order and the costs of opting out of it are high.

### *Alliances and alignment*

Scholars have long recognized that the dynamics of alliance and alignment transcend the imperative of counter-hegemonic balancing.<sup>34</sup> Aggregating capabilities against a potentially dominant state is thus only one of the many purposes alliances serve. States may also choose to ally with a dominant power either to shield themselves from its capabilities or to seek to influence its policies. In addition, secondary states may ally with each other for purposes not directly connected to resistance to the dominant state, such as influencing each other's domestic or foreign policies or coordinating policies on regional or functional issues.

Larger patterns of such alliance behavior may be systematically related to the international system's structure. Scholars contend that in classic multipolar systems, especially those with no clear hegemon in sight, a large proportion of alliance behavior was unconnected to systemic balancing imperatives.<sup>35</sup> Under bipolarity, the proportion of alliance dynamics that was an outgrowth of systemic balancing increased, yet the rivalry between the two superpowers also created opportunities for secondary states to use alliance choices as leverage, playing each superpower off against the other. Walt argues that in a

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Glen H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in Theory and Practice: What Lies Ahead?" *Journal of International Affairs* 43, 1 (1989): 1-17; Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39, 1 (1997): 156-179; and Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality versus Neorealist Theory," *International Security* 19, 1 (1994): 108-148.

<sup>35</sup> See Schroeder, "Historical Reality," and R. Harrison Wagner, "What was Bipolarity?" *International Organization* 47 (1993): 77-106.

unipolar system nearly all significant alliance behavior will be in one way or another a reaction to the unipole – to contain, influence, or exploit it. As a result, independent alliances focused on other threats will be relatively rare, compared to bipolar or multipolar systems. Walt also contends that under unipolarity leverage opportunities dramatically decline compared to bipolarity and he specifies the conditions under which secondary states will tend to opt for alignments with the unipole, neutrality, or resistance. This is consistent with Ikenberry's analysis, which shows that most alliance behavior has been with the unipole, while alliance formation around other potential poles, such as Russia and China, remains negligible.

### *Use of international institutions*

Although their relative power affords opportunities to go it alone, dominant states find a variety of reasons to use international institutions. Institutions may be helpful in coalition building. They facilitate the exercise of power by creating patterns of behavior that reflect the interests and values of the dominant state. Institutions can conceal or soften the exercise of power, and they can lock in a hegemonic order and enable it to persist "after hegemony."<sup>36</sup>

Weaker states in a unipolar structure similarly have incentives to utilize institutions. Two types of motivation are relevant. First, weaker states may engage a unipole by enlisting its participation in new or modified institutional arrangements in order to constrain or tie it down. Since a unipolar state may be powerful enough to follow its own rules, possibly to the detriment of weaker states, those states may appeal within an institutional context to the unipole's concern for its reputation as a member of the international community, or to its need for cooperating partners, in order to persuade it to engage in rule-based order even if it cannot simply determine the rules unilaterally. The dispute between the United States and some of its allies over US participation in the International Criminal Court reflects the attempt by weaker states to tie the unipole down and the unipole's effort in turn to remain a free agent in the event it cannot define the institutional rules. Second, weaker states may create or strengthen international institutions that exclude the unipolar state. These institutions might be

<sup>36</sup> Keohane, *After Hegemony*; Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

designed or intended to foster a common identity (e.g., the European Union, the East Asian Economic Caucus), build capacity to withstand influence attempts by the unipole (e.g., the European common currency), or create the potential to act independently of the unipole or at cross purposes with it (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, European Rapid Reaction Force).

In bipolarity, weaker states tend to participate in institutional arrangements defined and dominated by one or the other of the major players. The Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War was distinctive precisely because it sought – not necessarily with success – to institutionalize a path independent of either superpower. Under conditions of unipolarity, we can hypothesize that weaker states, lacking the capacity to balance the unipole, will turn to a variety of institutional initiatives intended to constrain the unipolar state or enhance their own autonomy in the face of its power. The use of international institutions by weaker states is highlighted below in the chapters by Walt and Finnemore, while “lock-in effects” are analyzed in Ikenberry’s contribution.

### **Systemic properties: how peaceful is unipolarity, and will it endure?**

The classical systems theorists were preoccupied with two dependent variables: peacefulness and stability.<sup>37</sup> Scholars today have reason to be less optimistic that deterministic laws of stability or peacefulness can be derived from the structural characteristics of any international system.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, the questions of whether some types of international systems are more prone to conflict than others, and whether some types are more likely to endure than others, remain critical and take on added significance in the context of the more novel international system of unipolarity.

<sup>37</sup> See the discussion in Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), ch. 3, and “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective” in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> See Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

*Unipolarity and great power conflict*

Two major theoretical traditions deal with causes of war in ways that may relate to system structure: neorealism and power transition theory. Applying these in the context of unipolarity yields the general proposition that military conflicts involving the unipole and other major powers (i.e., “great power wars”) are less likely in unipolar than in either bipolar or multipolar systems. According to neorealist theory, bipolarity is less war-prone than multipolarity because each superpower knows that only the other can threaten it, realizes that it can’t pass the buck to third parties, and recognizes it can balance accretions to the other’s capabilities by internal rather than external means. Bipolarity blocks or at least complicates three common paths to war in neorealism: uncertainty, free riding, and fear of allied defection. The first and second operated during the 1930s, and the third prior to World War One. By the same logic, unipolarity is even less war-prone: none of these causal mechanisms is relevant to a unipole’s interactions with other great powers. Power transition and hegemonic theories predict that major war involving the leading state and a challenger becomes more likely as their relative capabilities approach parity.<sup>39</sup> Under unipolarity, parity is beyond the reach of a would-be challenger, so this mechanism does not operate. In any event, many scholars question whether these traditional theories of war remain relevant in a world in which the declining benefits of conquest, nuclear deterrence among most major powers, the spread of democracy, and changing collective norms and ideas reduce the probability of major war among great powers to an historically low level.<sup>40</sup> The absence of major conflicts among the great powers may thus be overdetermined or have little to do with unipolarity.

Wohlforth develops an alternative theoretical framework for assessing the consequences of unipolarity for great power conflict, one that focuses on status or prestige seeking as opposed to security as the core preference for major states. He derives from a diverse theoretical literature a single hypothesis on the relationship between unipolar capability distributions and great power conflict. He tests it in the current

<sup>39</sup> See Gilpin, *War and Change*; Tammen *et al.*, *Power Transition*; and DiCicco and Levy, “Power Shifts and Problem Shifts.”

<sup>40</sup> Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2005), 31.

international system and historically, and he derives further implications for relationships between the unipole and secondary states. He supplies theoretical reasons and initial empirical support for the proposition that unipolarity itself helps to explain low levels of militarized interactions among great powers since 1991. The same logic and evidence, however, suggest that the route back to bi- or multipolarity may be more prone to great power conflict than many scholars now suppose.

### *The durability of a unipolar system*

The current unipolar system already has lasted longer than some scholars anticipated at the end of the Cold War.<sup>41</sup> How much longer it will persist before transforming into the more “normal” systemic pattern of multipolarity or perhaps to a new bipolarity remains to be seen. Durability will depend primarily on developments in the capabilities and behavior of the unipole and other major powers. Because the unipole is such a disproportionately powerful actor in this system, the evolution of its own capabilities and behavior is likely to carry the greatest weight. Other actors are more likely to react to the unipole than to trigger system-transforming processes on their own.

The evolution of relative *capabilities* is obviously a crucial variable, and there is no clear theoretical presumption. One hypothesis is that unipolarity is self-reinforcing. The unipole is so far ahead militarily that it finds it relatively easy to maintain and even widen its capability lead over would-be peers – especially if, as some scholars argue, the contemporary US defense industry benefits from increasing returns to scale.<sup>42</sup> Given massive investments in the military requirements of unipolar status over many years, other states face formidable barriers to entry – technological, economic, and domestic political – in any effort to become peer competitors.

<sup>41</sup> See Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise,” *International Security* 14, 4 (1993): 86–124; Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, 2 (1993): 44–79; and Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War.” See also the retrospective in Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited,” *International Security* 31, 2 (2006): 7–41.

<sup>42</sup> See Jonathan Caverley, “Killer Apps: American Hegemony and the New Economics of Defense,” *Security Studies* 16 (October 2007): 597–613.

The contrary hypothesis can be drawn from Gilpin's work, which highlights the tendency of dominant powers to plant the seeds of their own demise. Dominant states may not maintain or widen their capability lead because they fall prey to overextension abroad and/or the corrupting influences of affluence at home.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the very success of their order may inadvertently encourage or develop challengers to their dominant role within it.<sup>44</sup> The US-centered system promotes openness and globalization; the diffusion of the benefits of these processes strengthens states on the periphery who can outpace the United States economically and eventually translate their economic strength into political influence and military capacity.

The *behavior* of the unipole matters as well, and again with potentially divergent effects. A unipole may discourage peer competition by reassuring states already inclined toward the status quo and by providing the benefits of system integration to those with ambivalent intentions.<sup>45</sup> Through its behavior, the unipole may encourage would-be challengers to accept subordinate but beneficial roles. Alternatively, and because it has the capability and discretion to act as a revisionist state itself, the unipole through its behavior might heighten the insecurity of other states and prompt them to contemplate individual or collective challenges to its dominance.

The impact of developments across capabilities and behavior may be reinforcing or contradictory. A unipole might successfully reassure other states while simultaneously maintaining its capability lead over them. It might alarm other states while dissipating its relative advantages. Or its behavior might point in one direction while its capabilities point in another.

Ikenberry's chapter bears most directly on these issues. He contends that conflict in the current unipolar system is muted not only by the sheer power dynamic but also by benefits of the order fostered by the unipole. By creating and maintaining an open and inclusive order, the United States, in effect, engineered satisfaction with the status quo on the part of other states. While outsized material capabilities were necessary to establish the order in the first place, the spread of

<sup>43</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change*.      <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," in Kapstein and Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics*, 138–181.



satisfaction and “buy in” on the part of other rising states might lock in key aspects of the current order even as the underlying power distribution shifts toward bipolarity or multipolarity.

### Unipolarity’s limits

Three final chapters draw on the preceding seven to explore the conceptual and explanatory limits of unipolarity as well as the dynamics that might spell its end. Dan Deudney tackles a problem that has plagued polarity analysis since the heyday of Waltz’s writings on the subject: the interaction between polarity and nuclear weapons. He argues that robust mutual nuclear deterrence among major powers substantially attenuates – though hardly eliminates – the effects that might be attributed to polarity. With state survival assured by deterrence, a system’s polarity no longer looms over great powers’ strategies for assuring their core security interests, but it does have implications for a large range of second-order state interests and affects the politics of nuclear proliferation.

Barry Posen derives from the seven chapters on unipolarity’s consequences a bottom-line implication that unipolarity is “self-abrading.” That is, the structure generates incentives for behaviors that will tend to move the system back to multipolarity. He then adduces the patterns of great power behavior we may expect to observe as the system moves from unipolarity to multipolarity or (less likely) bipolarity. Some of the competitive patterns he analyzes resemble great power politics of the past, but, he stresses, they are likely to be attenuated by changes in the international system not captured by the polarity concept.

Critically surveying all the chapters, Jeff Legro notes that they all ultimately agree that unipolarity’s effects are always mediated through other causes – international institutions, economic interdependence, threat perceptions, nuclear deterrence, domestic institutions, ideas – that each require independent analysis. Like Posen, he stresses that polarity is partly the product of state choice, and that this system structure has to be seen as in some part endogenous to interstate interactions rather than as an exogenous structural condition. He concludes that unipolarity – and, more generally, polarity – is a “normal variable,” rather than the master explanatory variable it was once thought to be. It is *an* important independent variable, but not *the* explanatory variable. Legro makes a plea for what he terms conjunctural analysis,

or the study of how multiple factors, including polarity, interact to produce a given result.

## Conclusion

One of the oldest insights in the study of international relations is that power, in the form of material capabilities, has a decisive impact on relations among states. Thucydides famously recorded the frank and brutal observation that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” In a world of states, power disparities generate both security and insecurity and have an impact on what states want and what they can get. Few scholars embrace theories of world politics that rely exclusively on the structural circumstances created by material capabilities of states and their distribution within the international system. But it is also widely agreed that one ignores such factors at one’s explanatory peril.

For most of modern world history, the distribution of material capabilities among sovereign states has been best characterized as multipolar or bipolar. The contemporary structure is extraordinary and has the potential to endure beyond an historical “moment.” One of the great theoretical challenges in the study of international relations is to identify the extent to which and the various ways in which a unipolar distribution of power influences how states act and generates patterns of conflict and cooperation. In broad terms, the chapters below are interested in how a unipolar international order differs in its character and functioning from bipolar and multipolar orders. In more operational terms, we are interested in how the shift from the Cold War bipolar system to the current American-centered unipolar system matters for the behavior of states and the character of international rule and order.

There are obvious limitations to our ability to validate hypotheses or subject theoretical claims to rigorous empirical tests. Precisely because a unipolar distribution of power has not appeared routinely in earlier eras, we do not possess multiple historical cases for systematic comparisons. It is equally difficult to draw inferences about the impact of unipolarity because we are still living through it. In effect, we are in the midst of an historical cycle. Patterns of foreign policy and international outcomes will be better discerned after unipolarity has given way to bipolarity or multipolarity. What this volume can and does accomplish, however, is to lay out the questions, categories, and hypotheses

that should continue to guide inquiry, and to offer initial empirical determinations of our claims. The set of hypotheses we develop collectively in three categories – the behavior of the unipole, the reactions of secondary states, and the overall functioning of the international system – constitutes a rich agenda for future theoretical and empirical research. Three aspects of that agenda strike us as sufficiently salient to merit emphasis in closing.

First, scholarship needs to untangle and clarify three related but distinct manifestations of unipolarity that easily become confused in the making of causal arguments. One is the unipolar distribution of power as an ideal type across time, the second is unipolarity in the particular international circumstances of the early twenty-first century (e.g., including the existence of nuclear weapons and a security community among some of the leading powers), and the third is American unipolarity, or unipolarity with the United States as the dominant state with its particular institutional and ideological features. In making causal claims, it is exceedingly difficult to determine how deeply rooted “cause” and “effect” are in the distribution of power. Do the foreign policy patterns of the Bush or Obama administrations follow in a relatively straightforward way from conditions of unipolarity or are they much more circumstantial? Would other states – were they to emerge as a unipolar power – act in a similar way, or is behavior more contingent on the character of the state or the peculiarities of its leaders? The authors in this volume offer various answers to these questions of causation, but they tend to agree that there remains considerable contingency in a unipolar system. Constraints and opportunities – as well as threats and interests – do shift when the global system moves from bipolarity to unipolarity, but the linkages between the structure of power and the actions of states are not straightforward. Future research will want to specify these linkages and the way in which circumstance modifies and mediates the structural impact of unipolarity.

A second research agenda concerns the nature and character of constraints on the unipolar state. One of the defining features of unipolarity is that the power of the leading state is not balanced by other major states. Yet it remains unclear – in the absence of this classic power constraint mechanism – what, if anything, in fact disciplines and restrains unipolar power. Finnemore looks closely at the role of legitimacy as a constraint on state power, and provides some evidence

that this so-called “soft” mechanism of constraint does matter. It is plausible to expect that a unipolar state, any unipolar state, would prefer to lead and operate in an international order that is seen as normatively acceptable – i.e., legitimate – to other states than not. Legitimate domination is more desirable than coercive domination. But questions remain about how powerful this incentive is for the leaders of a dominant state, and how costly it actually becomes to the unipole, in the short and longer term, when its behavior and the system associated with its power are perceived by others as less legitimate.

A third research area concerns how unipolarity affects the logic of hegemonic behavior. As noted earlier, there are two lines of argument regarding how a unipolar state might act in regard to the provisioning of public goods, rules and institutions. One suggests that the leading state has a clear incentive to commit itself to leadership in the establishment and management of a cooperative, rule-based system. It receives a flow of material rewards and enjoys reduced costs of enforcement according to this logic. But the theoretical and policy-relevant question is whether the shift from Cold War bipolarity to unipolarity has altered hegemonic leadership incentives. One possibility is that the decline in a shared security threat makes it harder to strike bargains – the leading state’s offerings of security are less needed by other states and it is less dependent on the front line support of weaker and secondary states. Another possibility is that unipolarity increases the incentives for free riding by subordinate states while at the same time reducing the willingness of the lead state to bear the disproportionate costs of public goods provision. Hegemonic leadership may also hinge on judgments about the overall life cycle of unipolarity. If a unipolar state assumes that its dominance is semi-permanent, it may be willing to suffer lost legitimacy or the costs of enforcement – costs that are seen as less consequential than the freedom of action that is achieved by reducing its hegemonic responsibilities. But if the leading state judges that its unipolar position will decline in the years ahead, the value of rules and institutions may increase to the extent those rules and institutions are “sticky” and can help protect the leading state’s interests and lock in its preferred international order during the days when it inevitably becomes relatively less capable.

The hypotheses and findings in this volume ultimately take us back to basic questions in the study of international relations. The surprising onset of unipolarity encourages us to revisit questions about how

the international structure of capabilities shapes, encourages, and constrains state behavior. In attempting to make sense of this new type of global structure, we are forced to grapple with the enduring issue of how the powerful and the weak make their way in a changing international environment.

## 2 | *Unipolarity, status competition, and great power war*

WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH

Does unipolarity promote peace among major powers? Would the return of multipolarity increase the prospects for war? Although unipolarity has been marked by very low levels of militarized competition among major powers, many scholars doubt whether the association is causal. Mainstream theories of war long ago abandoned the notion of any simple relationship between polarity and war, positing that conflict emerges from a complex interaction between power and dissatisfaction with the status quo. “While parity defines the structural conditions where war is most likely,” one team of prominent power transition theorists notes, “the motivation driving decisions for war is relative satisfaction with the global or regional hierarchy.”<sup>1</sup> High levels of dissatisfaction may prompt states to take on vastly superior rivals. To explain the low levels of conflict since 1991, therefore, scholars must look beyond the distribution of capabilities to account for the absence of such dissatisfaction.

To most observers, moreover, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the status quo among today’s great powers appear to be driven by factors having little or nothing to do with the system’s polarity. “For most scholars,” writes Robert Jervis, “the fundamental cause of war is international anarchy, compounded by the security dilemma. These

I would like to acknowledge with thanks contributions made by colleagues who discussed presentations of this paper at the University of Washington’s Political Science Department and the IR/Foreign Policy Workshop at the Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth. I am particularly indebted to Stephen Brooks, Bridget Coggins, David Kang, Elizabeth Keir, R. Ned Lebow, Jonathan Mercer, Brent Strathman, and Benjamin Valentino.

<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Carole Alsharabati, Brian Efrid, and A. F. K. Organski, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000), 9. The increased importance of explaining dissatisfaction in a variety of theoretical literatures is noted and documented in Jason W. Davidson, “The Roots of Revisionism: Fascist Italy, 1922–29,” *Security Studies* 11 (Summer 2002).

forces press hardest on the leading powers because while they may be able to guarantee the security of others, no one can provide this escape from the state of nature for them.”<sup>2</sup> But for today’s leading powers anarchy-induced security problems appear to be ameliorated by nuclear deterrence, the spread of democracy, the declining benefits of conquest, and changing collective ideas, among other factors. In combination, these factors appear to moderate insecurity and resulting clashes over the status quo, which most scholars believe drive states to war. Mainstream theories of war thus seem irrelevant to what Jervis terms an “era of leading power peace.”

The upshot is a near scholarly consensus that unipolarity’s consequences for great power conflict are indeterminate and that a power shift resulting in a return to bipolarity or multipolarity will not raise the specter of great power war. This chapter questions the consensus on two counts. First, I show that it depends crucially on a dubious assumption about human motivation. Prominent theories of war are based on the assumption that people are mainly motivated by the instrumental pursuit of tangible ends such as physical security and material prosperity. This is why such theories seem irrelevant to interactions among great powers in an international environment that diminishes the utility of war for the pursuit of such ends. Yet we know that people are motivated by a great many non-instrumental motives, not least by concerns regarding their social status.<sup>3</sup> As John Harsanyi noted, “Apart from economic payoffs, social status (social rank) seems to be the most important incentive and motivating force of social behavior.”<sup>4</sup> This proposition rests on much firmer scientific ground now than when Harsanyi expressed it a generation ago, as cumulating research shows that humans appear to be hardwired for sensitivity to status and that relative standing is a powerful and independent motivator of behavior.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, “Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace: Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 2001,” *American Political Science Review* 91 (March 2002), 11.

<sup>3</sup> For theory and evidence from two contrasting perspectives, see R. Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Barry O’Neill, *Honor, Symbols and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> John Harsanyi, *Essays on Ethics, Social Behavior, and Scientific Explanation* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976), 204.

<sup>5</sup> For reviews, see Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond:*

Second, I question the dominant view that status quo evaluations are relatively independent of the distribution of capabilities. If the status of states depends in some measure on their relative capabilities, and if states derive utility from status, then different distributions of capabilities may affect levels of satisfaction, just as different income distributions may affect levels of status competition in domestic settings.<sup>6</sup> Building on research in psychology and sociology, I argue that even capabilities distributions among major powers foster ambiguous status hierarchies, which generate more dissatisfaction and clashes over the status quo. And the more stratified the distribution of capabilities, the less likely such status competition is.

Unipolarity thus generates far fewer incentives than either bipolarity or multipolarity for direct great power positional competition over status. Elites in the other major powers continue to prefer higher status, but in a unipolar system they face comparatively weak incentives to translate that preference into costly action. And the absence of such incentives matters because social status is a positional good – something whose value depends on how much one has in relation to others.<sup>7</sup> “If everyone has high status,” Randall Schweller notes, “no one does.”<sup>8</sup> While one actor might increase its status, all cannot simultaneously do so. High status is thus inherently scarce, and competitions for status tend to be zero sum.<sup>9</sup>

*Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Robert H. Frank, “Positional Externalities Cause Large and Preventable Welfare Losses,” *American Economic Review* 95 (May 2005); Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1994); and C. Loch, M. Yaziji, and C. Langen, “The Fight for the Alpha Position: Channeling Status Competition in Organizations,” *European Management Journal* 19 (February 2001).

<sup>6</sup> For example, E. Hopkins and T. Kornienko, “Running to Keep in the Same Place: Consumer Choice as a Game of Status,” *American Economic Review* 94 (September 2004).

<sup>7</sup> F. Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Randall Schweller, “Realism and the Present Great-Power System: Growth and Positional Conflict over Scarce Resources,” in Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Shubik, “Games of Status,” *Behavioral Science* 16 (1971). As Frank (“Positional Externalities”) stresses, positionality does not mean that zero-sum competitions are inevitable – it merely means that there is a large element of social comparison in the utility derived from a good.



I begin by describing the puzzles facing predominant theories that status competition might solve. Building on recent research on social identity and status seeking, I then show that under certain conditions the ways decision makers identify with the states they represent may prompt them to frame issues as positional disputes over status in a social hierarchy. I develop hypotheses that tailor this scholarship to the domain of great power politics, showing how the probability of status competition is likely to be linked to polarity. The rest of the chapter investigates whether there is sufficient evidence for these hypotheses to warrant further refinement and testing. I pursue this in three ways: by showing that the theory advanced here is consistent with what we know about large-scale patterns of great power conflict through history; by demonstrating that the causal mechanisms it identifies did drive relatively secure major powers to military conflict in the past (and therefore that they might do so again if the world were bipolar or multipolar); and by showing that observable evidence concerning the major powers' identity politics and grand strategies under unipolarity are consistent with the theory's expectations.

## Puzzles of power and war

Recent research on the connection between the distribution of capabilities and war has concentrated on a hypothesis long central to systemic theories of power transition or hegemonic stability: that major war arises out of a power shift in favor of a rising state dissatisfied with a status quo defended by a declining satisfied state.<sup>10</sup> Though they have garnered substantial empirical support, these theories have yet to solve two intertwined empirical and theoretical puzzles – each of which might be explained by positional concerns for status.

First, if the material costs and benefits of a given status quo are what matters, why would a state be dissatisfied with the very status quo that

<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in power transition and most other hegemonic war theories, as well as in the bargaining literature on war. See, for example, Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, "The Power Transition Research Program: Assessing Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," and Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Global War and the Political Economy of Structural Change," both in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Robert Powell, "Bargaining Theory and International Conflict," *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (2002).

had abetted its rise? The rise of China today naturally prompts this question, but it is hardly a novel situation. Most of the best known and most consequential power transitions in history featured rising challengers that were prospering mightily under the status quo. In case after case, historians argue that these revisionist powers sought recognition and standing rather than specific alterations to the existing rules and practices that constituted the order of the day.

In each paradigmatic case of hegemonic war, the claims of the rising power are hard to reduce to instrumental adjustment of the status quo. In R. Ned Lebow's reading, for example, Thucydides' account tells us that the rise of Athens posed unacceptable threats not to the security or welfare of Sparta but rather to its identity as leader of the Greek world, which was an important cause of the Spartan assembly's vote for war.<sup>11</sup> The issues that inspired Louis XIV's and Napoleon's dissatisfaction with the status quo were many and varied, but most accounts accord independent importance to the drive for a position of unparalleled primacy. In these and other hegemonic struggles among leading states in post-Westphalian Europe, the rising challenger's dissatisfaction is often difficult to connect to the material costs and benefits of the status quo, and much contemporary evidence revolves around issues of recognition and status.<sup>12</sup>

Wilhelmine Germany is a fateful case in point. As Paul Kennedy has argued, underlying material trends as of 1914 were set to propel Germany's continued rise indefinitely, so long as Europe remained at peace.<sup>13</sup> Yet Germany chafed under the very status quo that abetted this rise and its elite focused resentment on its chief trading partner – the great power that presented the least plausible threat to its security:

<sup>11</sup> R. Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 3, esp. 99–104.

<sup>12</sup> Lebow, *Cultural Theory*, chs. 7–9; Daniel S. Markey, "The Prestige Motive in International Relations" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2000); and David Sylvan, Corinne Graff, and Elisabetta Pugliese, "Status and Prestige in International Relations" (Manuscript, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 1998). For general reviews, see Jeremy Black, ed., *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987); Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Kennedy, "The First World War and the International Power System," in Stephen Miller, ed., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Great Britain. At fantastic cost, it built a battleship fleet with no plausible strategic purpose other than to stake a claim on global power status.<sup>14</sup> Recent historical studies present strong evidence that, far from fearing attacks from Russia and France, German leaders sought to provoke them, knowing that this would lead to a long, expensive, and sanguinary war that Britain was certain to join.<sup>15</sup> And of all the motivations swirling round these momentous decisions, no serious historical account fails to register German leaders' oft-expressed yearning for "a place in the sun."

The second puzzle is bargaining failure. Hegemonic theories tend to model war as a conflict over the status quo without specifying precisely what the status quo is and what flows of benefits it provides to states.<sup>16</sup> Scholars generally follow Robert Gilpin in positing that the underlying issue concerns a "desire to redraft the rules by which relations among nations work," "the nature and governance of the system," and "the distribution of territory among the states in the system."<sup>17</sup> If these are the issues at stake, then systemic theories of hegemonic war and power transition confront the puzzle brought to the fore in a seminal article by James Fearon: What prevents states from striking a bargain that avoids the costs of war?<sup>18</sup> Why can't states renegotiate the international order as underlying capabilities distributions shift their relative bargaining power?

Fearon proposed that one answer consistent with strict rational choice assumptions is that such bargains are infeasible when the issue at stake is indivisible and cannot readily be portioned out to each side. Most aspects of a given international order are readily divisible,

<sup>14</sup> Ivo N. Lambi, *The Navy and German Weltpolitik, 1862–1914* (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Keir A. Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory," *International Security* 32 (Fall 2007); Lebow, *Cultural Theory*, ch. 7.

<sup>16</sup> J. M. DiCicco and J. S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43 (December 1999), 690.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 198, 186. There is a similar discussion in Tammen *et al.*, *Power Transitions*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>18</sup> James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (Summer 1995). Needless to say, many scholars do not accept the bargaining literature's construal of the puzzle of war. See, for example, Jonathan Kirshner, "Rationalist Explanations for War?" *Security Studies* 10 (Autumn 2000).

however, and, as Fearon stressed, “both the intrinsic complexity and richness of most matters over which states negotiate and the availability of linkages and side-payments suggest that intermediate bargains typically will exist.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, most scholars have assumed that the indivisibility problem is trivial, focusing on two other rational choice explanations for bargaining failure: uncertainty and the commitment problem.<sup>20</sup> In the view of many scholars, it is these problems, rather than indivisibility, that likely explain leaders’ inability to avail themselves of such intermediate bargains.

Yet recent research inspired by constructivism shows how issues that are physically divisible can become socially indivisible, depending on how they relate to the identities of decision makers.<sup>21</sup> Once issues surrounding the status quo are framed in positional terms as bearing on the disputants’ relative standing, then, to the extent that they value their standing itself, they may be unwilling to pursue intermediate bargaining solutions. Once linked to status, easily divisible issues that theoretically provide opportunities for linkages and side payments of various sorts may themselves be seen as indivisible and thus unavailable as avenues for possible intermediate bargains.

The historical record surrounding major wars is rich with evidence suggesting that positional concerns over status frustrate bargaining: expensive, protracted conflict over what appear to be minor issues; a propensity on the part of decision makers to frame issues in terms of relative rank even when doing so makes bargaining harder; decision makers’ inability to accept feasible divisions of the matter in dispute even when failing to do so imposes high costs; demands on the part of states for observable evidence to confirm their estimate of an improved position in the hierarchy; the inability of private bargains to resolve issues; a frequently observed compulsion for the public attainment of concessions from a higher ranked state; and stubborn resistance on the part of states to which such demands are addressed even when acquiescence entails limited material cost.

The literature on bargaining failure in the context of power shifts remains inconclusive, and it is premature to take any empirical pattern

<sup>19</sup> Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations,” 390.

<sup>20</sup> Dan Reiter, “Exploring the Bargaining Model of War,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (March 2003).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Stacie Goddard, “Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy,” *International Organization* 60 (Winter 2006).

as necessarily probative. Indeed, Robert Powell has recently proposed that indivisibility is not a rationalistic explanation for war after all: fully rational leaders with perfect information should prefer to settle a dispute over an indivisible issue by resorting to a lottery rather than a war certain to destroy some of the goods in dispute. What might prevent such bargaining solutions is not indivisibility itself, he argues, but rather the parties' inability to commit to abide by any agreement in the future if they expect their relative capabilities to continue to shift.<sup>22</sup> This is the credible commitment problem to which many theorists are now turning their attention. But how it relates to the information problem that until recently dominated the formal literature remains to be seen.<sup>23</sup>

The larger point is that positional concerns for status may help account for the puzzle of bargaining failure. In the rational choice bargaining literature, war is puzzling because it destroys some of the benefits or flows of benefits in dispute between the bargainers, who would be better off dividing the spoils without war. Yet what happens to these models if what matters for states is less the flows of material benefits themselves than their implications for relative status? The salience of this question depends on the relative importance of positional concern for status among states.

### Do great powers care about status?

Mainstream theories generally posit that states come to blows over an international status quo only when it has implications for their security or material well-being. The guiding assumption is that a state's satisfaction with its place in the existing order is a function of the material costs and benefits implied by that status.<sup>24</sup> By that assumption, once a state's status in an international order ceases to affect its material well-being, its relative standing will have no bearing on decisions for war

<sup>22</sup> Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60 (Winter 2006).

<sup>23</sup> As Powell notes regarding these two basic explanations, "Ultimately one may have to judge which mechanisms seem to provide a more compelling account of a set of cases. These judgments will have to await a better understanding of commitment problems" ("War as a Commitment Problem," 194).

<sup>24</sup> This is implicit in both power transition and most other hegemonic war theories, as well as in the bargaining literature.

or peace. But the assumption is undermined by cumulative research in disciplines ranging from neuroscience and evolutionary biology to economics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology that human beings are powerfully motivated by the desire for favorable social status comparisons. This research suggests that the preference for status is a basic disposition rather than merely a strategy for attaining other goals.<sup>25</sup> People often seek tangibles not so much because of the welfare or security they bring but because of the social status they confer. Under certain conditions, the search for status will cause people to behave in ways that directly contradict their material interest in security and/or prosperity.

Much of this research concerns individuals, but international politics takes place between groups. Is there reason to expect individuals who act in the name of states to be motivated by status concerns? Compelling findings in social psychology suggest a positive answer. Social identity theory (SIT) has entered international relations research as a psychological explanation for competitive interstate behavior.<sup>26</sup> According to the theory's originator, Henri Tajfel, social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."<sup>27</sup> Tajfel and his followers argue that deep-seated human motivations of self-definition and self-esteem induce people to define their identity

<sup>25</sup> For extensive reviews, see sources in fn. 5, especially Frank, "Positional Externalities." On status as an end in itself, see, for example, K. Fließbach, B. Weber, P. Trautner, T. Dohmen, U. Sunde, C. E. Elger, and A. Falk, "Social Comparison Affects Reward-Related Brain Activity in the Human Ventral Striatum," *Science* 318 (November 23, 2007). Relevant here are findings from the empirical literature inspired by relative deprivation theory. See M. Olson, C. P. Herman, and M. P. Zannan, eds., *Relative Deprivation and Social Comparison* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986); and the discussion in Rupert Brown, "Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30 (November 2000), 748–50.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49 (Spring 1995); Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable," *Perspectives on Politics* 4 (December 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Henri Tajfel, *Human Group and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 251. For a review, see Brown, "Social Identity Theory."

in relation to their in-group, to compare and contrast that in-group with out-groups, and to want that comparison to reflect favorably on themselves. In a remarkable set of experiments that has since been replicated dozens of times, Tajfel and his collaborators found that simply assigning subjects to trivially defined “minimal” in-groups led them to discriminate in favor of their in-group at the expense of an out-group, even when nothing else about the setting implied a competitive relationship.

Although SIT appears to provide a plausible candidate explanation for interstate conflict, moving beyond its robust but general implication about the ubiquitous potential for status seeking to specific hypotheses about state behavior has proved challenging. In particular, experimental findings concerning which groups individuals will select as relevant comparisons and which of many possible identity-maintenance strategies they will choose have proved highly sensitive to the assumptions made about the social context. The results of experimental research seeking to predict responses to status anxiety – whether people will choose social mobility (identifying with a higher status group), social creativity (seeking to redefine the relevant status-conferring dimensions to favor those in which one’s group excels), social conflict (contesting the status-superior group’s claim to higher rank), or some other strategy – are similarly highly context dependent.<sup>28</sup>

For international relations the key unanswered question remains: Under what circumstances might the constant underlying motivation for a positive self-image and high status translate into violent conflict? While SIT research is suggestive, standard concerns about the validity of experimental findings are exacerbated by the fact that the extensive empirical SIT literature is generally not framed in a way that captures salient features of international relations. The social system in which states operate is dramatically simpler than the domestic

<sup>28</sup> The original tripartite division of strategies is discussed in Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979); on recent research concerning this choice, see Brown, “Social Identity Theory”; Leonie Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory,” *Political Psychology* 22 (March 2001); and Jacques E. C. Hymans, “Applying Social Identity Theory to the Study of International Politics: A Caution and an Agenda” (paper presented at the convention of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, March 24–27, 2002).

social settings much of the research seeks to capture. Decision makers' identification with the state is generally a given, group boundaries are practically impermeable, and there are very few great powers and very limited mobility. For states, comparison choice and the selection of status maintenance strategies are constrained by exogenous endowments and geographical location. Natural and historical endowments – size and power potential – vary much more among states than among individuals and so play a much larger role in determining hierarchies and influencing the selection of identity maintenance strategies.

Assumptions built into most SIT research to date generally do not capture these realities of interstate life. In particular, standard SIT research designs beg the question of the *expected costs* of competing for status. Experiments do not generally posit situations in which some groups are endowed with demonstrably superior means with which to discriminate in favor of their own group at the expense of out-groups. Indeed, built into most experimental setups is an implied assumption of material equality among groups. Yet international politics is notable as a social realm with especially large disparities in material capabilities, and decision makers are unlikely to follow identity maintenance strategies that are demonstrably beyond their means.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the relevance for states of SIT's core finding that individual preferences for higher status will affect intergroup interactions. Individuals who identify with a group transfer the individual's status preference to the group's relations with other groups. If those who act on behalf of a state (or those who select them) identify with that state, then they can be expected to derive utility from its status in international society. In addition, there are no evident reasons to reject the theory's applicability to interstate settings that mimic the standard SIT experimental setup – namely, in an ambiguous hierarchy of states that are comparable in material terms. As Jacques Hymans notes: "In the design of most SIT experiments there is an implicit assumption of rough status and power parity. Moreover, the logic of SIT theory suggests that its findings of ingroup bias may in fact be dependent on this assumption."<sup>29</sup>

Status conflict is thus more likely in flat, ambiguous hierarchies than in clearly stratified ones. And there are no obvious grounds for rejecting the basic finding that comparison choice will tend to be "similar

<sup>29</sup> Hymans, "Applying Social Identity Theory," 11.



but upward” (that is, people will compare and contrast their group with similar but higher-status groups).<sup>30</sup> In most settings outside the laboratory this leaves a lot of room for consequential choices, but in the context of great power relations, the set of feasible comparison choices is constrained in highly consequential ways.

### How polarity affects status competition

SIT is often seen in a scholarly context that contrasts power-based and identity-based explanations.<sup>31</sup> It is thus put forward as a psychological explanation for competitive behavior that is completely divorced from distributions of material resources. But there is no theoretical justification for this separation. On the contrary, a longstanding research tradition in sociology, economics, and political science finds that actors seek to translate material resources into status. Sociologists from Weber and Veblen onward have postulated a link between material conditions and the stability of status hierarchies. When social actors acquire resources, they try to convert them into something that can have more value to them than the mere possession of material things: social status. As Weber put it: “Property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity.”<sup>32</sup> This link continues to find support in the contemporary economics literature on income distribution and status competition.<sup>33</sup>

Status is a social, psychological, and cultural phenomenon. Its expression appears endlessly varied; it is thus little wonder that the few international relations scholars who have focused on it are more struck by its variability and diversity than by its susceptibility to

<sup>30</sup> For SIT-based findings related to the “similar but upward” comparison bias, see Rupert Brown and Gabi Haeger, “Compared to What? Comparison Choice in an Inter-nation Context,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 29 (February 1999): 31–42, esp. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Hymans, “Applying Social Identity Theory.”

<sup>32</sup> Max Weber, “Class, Status, Party,” in R. Bendix and S. M. Lipset, eds., *Class, Status and Power*, 2nd edn. (New York: Free Press, 1966); Thorsten Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Theory of Institutions*, rev. edn. (1899; New York: New American Library, 1953).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Hopkins and Kornienko, “Running”; B. Cooper, C. García-Peñalosa, and P. Funk, “Status Effects and Negative Utility Growth,” *Economic Journal* 111 (July 2001); K. A. Brekke, R. B. Howarth, and K. Nyborg, “Status-seeking and Material Affluence: Evaluating the Hirsch Hypothesis,” *Ecological Economics* 45 (June 2003).

generalization.<sup>34</sup> Yet if SIT captures important dynamics of human behavior, and if people seek to translate resources into status, then the distribution of capabilities will affect the likelihood of status competition in predictable ways. Recall that theory, research, and experimental results suggest that relative status concerns will come to the fore when status hierarchy is ambiguous and that people will tend to compare the states with which they identify to similar but higher-ranked states.<sup>35</sup> Dissatisfaction arises not from dominance itself but from a dominance that appears to rest on ambiguous foundations. Thus, status competition is unlikely in cases of clear hierarchies in which the relevant comparison out-groups for each actor are unambiguously dominant materially. Applied to international politics, this begins to suggest the conditions conducive to status competition. For conflict to occur, one state must select another state as a relevant comparison that leaves it dissatisfied with its status; it must then choose an identity-maintenance strategy in response that brings it into conflict with another state that is also willing to fight for its position.

This set of beliefs and strategies is most likely to be found when states are relatively evenly matched in capabilities. The more closely matched actors are materially, the more likely they are to experience uncertainty about relative rank. When actors start receiving mixed signals – some indicating that they belong in a higher rank while others reaffirm their present rank – they experience status inconsistency, and face incentives to resolve the uncertainty. When lower-ranked actors experience such inconsistency, they will use higher-ranked actors as referents. Since both high- and low-status actors are biased toward higher status, uncertainty fosters conflict as the same evidence feeds contradictory expectations and claims. When the relevant out-group is unambiguously dominant materially, however, status inconsistency is less likely. More certain of their relative rank, subordinate actors

<sup>34</sup> Evan Luard, *Types of International Society* (New York: Free Press, 1976).

<sup>35</sup> See M. B. Brewer and R. J. Brown, "Intergroup Relations," in D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th edn. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), vol. II, 554–594. These core propositions are supported throughout the theoretical and empirical literatures in sociology and psychology. See, for example, R. V. Gould, *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and, for general discussions, Joseph Berger and Morris Zelditch, Jr., eds., *Status, Power, and Legitimacy: Strategies and Theories* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1998).

are less likely to face the ambiguity that drives status competition. And even if they do, their relative weakness makes strategies of social competition an unlikely response. Given limited material wherewithal, either acquiescence or strategies of social creativity are more plausible responses, neither of which leads to military conflict.

The theory suggests that it is not just the aggregate distribution of capabilities that matters for status competition but also the evenness with which key dimensions – such as naval, military, economic, and technological – are distributed. Uneven capability portfolios – when states excel in different relevant material dimensions – make status inconsistency more likely. When an actor possesses some attributes of high status but not others, uncertainty and status inconsistency are likely.<sup>36</sup> The more a lower-ranked actor matches the higher-ranked group in some but not all key material dimensions of status, the more likely it is to conceive an interest in contesting its rank and the more likely the higher-ranked state is to resist. Thus, status competition is more likely to plague relations between leading states whose portfolios of capabilities are not only close but also mismatched.

## Hypotheses

When applied to the setting of great power politics, these propositions suggest that the nature and intensity of status competition will be influenced by the nature of the polarity that characterizes the system.

*Multipolarity* implies a flat hierarchy in which no state is unambiguously number one. Under such a setting, the theory predicts status inconsistency and intense pressure on each state to resolve it in a way that reflects favorably on itself. In this sense, all states are presumptively revisionist in that the absence of a settled hierarchy provides incentives to establish one. But the theory expects the process of establishing a hierarchy to be prone to conflict: any state would be expected to prefer a status quo under which there are no unambiguous superiors to any other state's successful bid for primacy. Thus, an order in which one's own state is number one is preferred to the status quo,

<sup>36</sup> The basic idea comes from G. E. Lenski, "Status Crystallization: A Non-Vertical Dimension of Social Status," *American Sociological Review* 19 (August 1954). Johan Galtung applied it to interpersonal and intergroup conflict: Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Aggression," *Journal of Peace Research* 1, 2 (1964).

which is preferred to any order in which another state is number one. The expected result will be periodic bids for primacy, resisted by other great powers.<sup>37</sup>

For its part, bipolarity, with only two states in a material position to claim primacy, implies a somewhat more stratified hierarchy that is less prone to ambiguity. Each superpower would be expected to see the other as the main relevant out-group, while second-tier major powers would compare themselves to either or both of them. Given the two poles' clear material preponderance, second-tier major powers would not be expected to experience status dissonance and dissatisfaction, and, to the extent they did, the odds would favor their adoption of strategies of social creativity instead of conflict. For their part, the poles would be expected to seek to establish a hierarchy: each would obviously prefer to be number one, but absent that each would also prefer an ambiguous status quo in which neither is dominant to an order in which it is unambiguously outranked by the other.

*Unipolarity* implies the most stratified hierarchy, presenting the starkest contrast to the other two polar types. The intensity of the competition over status in either a bipolar or a multipolar system might vary depending on how evenly the key dimensions of state capability are distributed – a multipolar system populated by states with very even capabilities portfolios might be less prone to status competition than a bipolar system in which the two poles possess very dissimilar portfolios. But unipolarity, by definition, is characterized by one state possessing unambiguous preponderance in all relevant dimensions. The unipole provides the relevant out-group comparison for all other great powers, yet its material preponderance renders improbable identity-maintenance strategies of social competition. While second-tier states would be expected to seek favorable comparisons with the unipole, they would also be expected to reconcile themselves to a relatively clear status ordering or to attempt strategies of social creativity.

<sup>37</sup> This core prediction mirrors the standard rendition of balance of power theory, except the causal mechanism driving it centers on threats to self-identity rather than on physical security. Original theoretical works on the balance of power were clear that the theory was about status as well as security. See the discussion in Michael Sheehan, *Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996), ch. 2.

## General patterns of evidence

Despite increasingly compelling findings concerning the importance of status seeking in human behavior, research on its connection to war waned some three decades ago.<sup>38</sup> Yet empirical studies of the relationship between both systemic and dyadic capabilities distributions and war have continued to cumulate. If the relationships implied by the status theory run afoul of well-established patterns or general historical findings, then there is little reason to continue investigating them. The clearest empirical implication of the theory is that status competition is unlikely to cause great power military conflict in unipolar systems. If status competition is an important contributory cause of great power war, then, *ceteris paribus*, unipolar systems should be markedly less war-prone than bipolar or multipolar systems. And this appears to be the case. As Daniel Geller notes in a review of the empirical literature: “The only polar structure that appears to influence conflict probability is unipolarity.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, a larger number of studies at the dyadic level support the related expectation that narrow capabilities gaps and ambiguous or unstable capabilities hierarchies increase the probability of war.<sup>40</sup>

These studies are based entirely on post-sixteenth-century European history, and most are limited to the post-1815 period covered by the standard data sets. Though the systems coded as unipolar, near-unipolar, and hegemonic are all marked by a high concentration of capabilities in a single state, these studies operationalize unipolarity in a variety of ways, often very differently from the definition adopted here. An ongoing collaborative project looking at ancient interstate

<sup>38</sup> Exemplars of the last wave of status-war research include Maurice A. East, “Status Discrepancy and Violence in the International System: An Empirical Analysis,” in J. N. Rosenau, V. Davis, and M. A. East, eds., *The Analysis of International Politics: Essays in Honor of Harold and Margaret Sprout* (New York: Free Press, 1972); Michael D. Wallace, *War and Rank among Nations* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973); and Manus I. Midlarsky, *On War: Political Violence in the International System* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

<sup>39</sup> D. S. Geller, “Explaining War: Empirical Patterns and Theoretical Mechanisms,” in M. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 437.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. See the reviews presented in Kugler and Lemke, “Power Transition”; DiCicco and Levy, “Power Shifts”; and Reiter, “Bargaining Model.”

systems over the course of 2,000 years suggests that historical systems that come closest to the definition of unipolarity used here exhibit precisely the behavioral properties implied by the theory.<sup>41</sup> As David C. Kang's research shows, the East Asian system between 1300 and 1900 was an unusually stratified unipolar structure, with an economically and militarily dominant China interacting with a small number of geographically proximate, clearly weaker East Asian states.<sup>42</sup> Status politics existed, but actors were channeled by elaborate cultural understandings and interstate practices into clearly recognized ranks. Warfare was exceedingly rare, and the major outbreaks occurred precisely when the theory would predict: when China's capabilities waned, reducing the clarity of the underlying material hierarchy and increasing status dissonance for lesser powers. Much more research is needed, but initial exploration of other arguably unipolar systems – for example, Rome, Assyria, the Amarna system – appears consistent with the hypothesis.<sup>43</sup>

### Status competition and causal mechanisms

Both theory and evidence demonstrate convincingly that competition for status is a driver of human behavior, and social identity theory and related literatures suggest the conditions under which it might come to the fore in great power relations. Both the systemic and dyadic findings presented in large-N studies are broadly consistent with the

<sup>41</sup> William C. Wohlforth, Richard Little, Stuart Kaufman, David Kang, Charles Jones, Victoria Tin-Bor Hui, Arthur Eckstein, Daniel Deudney, and William Brenner, "Testing Balance of Power in World History," *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (June 2007); Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

<sup>42</sup> David C. Kang, "Stability and Hierarchy in East Asian International Relations, 1300–1900 CE," in Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth, eds., *Balance of Power*.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart J. Kaufman and William C. Wohlforth, "Balancing and Balancing Failure in Biblical Times: Assyria and the Ancient Middle Eastern System, 900–600 BCE," in Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth, eds., *Balance of Power*; Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Mario Liverani, *Prestige and Interest: International Relations in the Near East, ca. 1600–1100 B.C.* (Padova: Sargon, 1990).

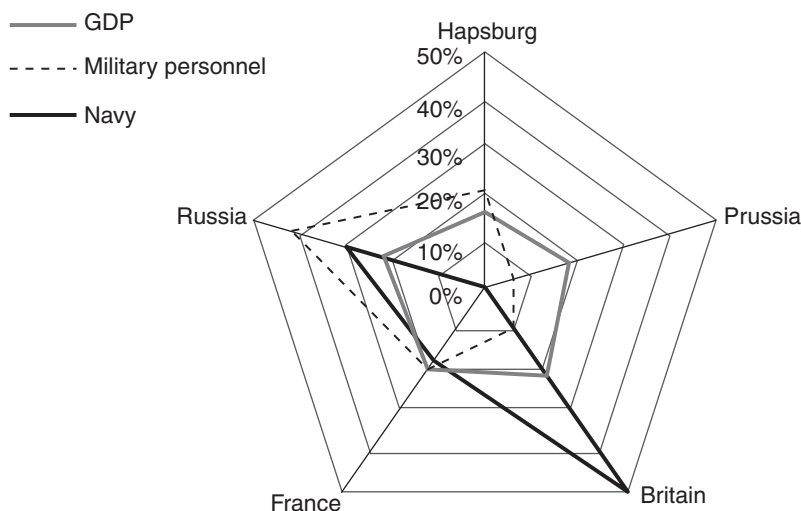
theory, but they are also consistent with power transition and other rationalist theories of hegemonic war.

How much status competition matters in light of the many competing explanations remains to be seen. The theory is distinguished chiefly by its causal mechanisms rather than by its brute predictions – mechanisms that continue to operate in a world in which the mechanisms central to other theories do not. In experimental settings, competition for status can be neatly distinguished from behavior motivated by instrumental pursuit of material rewards. In actual world politics, by contrast, the quest for status is likely to be intertwined with other aims in extremely complex ways. Substantial further refinement, ideally informed by new experimental work, would be necessary to conduct convincing tests against aggregate data.

The question is whether the substantial investments such refinement entails are warranted. I address this question by checking to see whether status competition can actually bring states to blows in two exploratory case studies of status competition in multipolar and bipolar settings.<sup>44</sup> We want to see whether the postulated causal links actually occur between close gaps in material resources and uneven capabilities portfolios, status dissonance, competition, bargaining failure, and military conflict. If we find evidence of these causal mechanisms in play in historical cases with some resemblance to the current unipolarity but with different capabilities gaps separating states, then both the veracity and the relevance of the theory are strengthened.

In particular, the ideal cases would involve relatively secure leading states in multipolar and bipolar systems. If the evidence in such cases shows the causal mechanisms specified here leading to costly conflict, then confidence in the theory is strengthened, as is the counterfactual claim that if today's distribution of capabilities were bipolar or multipolar, status competition might have similar consequences. Accordingly, I examine leading states that represented relatively low-probability threats to the core security of other great powers. Two states most closely meet this criterion: Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the later Cold War. Britain's offshore

<sup>44</sup> As John Gerring notes, "Case studies enjoy a natural advantage in research of an exploratory nature"; Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39. Precisely these qualities may also limit their general inferential utility.



**Figure 2.1** Distribution of GDP, military personnel, and major naval ships, 1850

*Sources:* GDP: P. Bairoch, “International Industrialization Levels from 1759 to 1980,” *Journal of European Economic History* 11 (Spring 1982). Military personnel: National Material Capabilities data set v. 3.02, at [www.correlatesofwar.org](http://www.correlatesofwar.org). Navy (major ships index): George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

location and comparatively small army made it an exceedingly unlikely candidate for the military conquest and occupation of such formidable continental great powers as France and Russia. And the threat posed by the United States to the basic survival of the Soviet Union was clearly muted by Moscow’s acquisition of a secure second-strike nuclear force in the 1960s and 1970s.

### Status competition in multipolarity

The great power subsystem of the mid-nineteenth century featured a typical multipolar structure with five great powers of roughly comparable capabilities. As [Figure 2.1](#) illustrates, the unevenness of Britain’s and Russia’s portfolio of capabilities – Russia preeminent on land and Britain ruling the seas – increased the ambiguity of the hierarchy.



Britain accounted for about one-half of total sea-power capabilities in the great power subsystem, while Russia mustered more than one-third of total land-based military power. Less visible to contemporary observers was a dynamic cause of increased ambiguity: Britain's rising economic and industrial power. In the decades after 1815, Britain's GDP steadily gained on Russia's, with a "power transition" occurring just before 1850. Measured by iron/steel production, the ratio of Britain's industrial advantage increased from 4:1 to an astonishing 13.5:1 over the course of the 1815–1850 interval.<sup>45</sup> Though Britain was, as historian Winfried Baumgart puts it, "the real and only world power," at the time many saw Russia as being "on the road to becoming her rival."<sup>46</sup>

The origins of the Crimean War demonstrate how such a material setting can create ambiguity about rank, setting the stage for states to fight over a minor and readily divisible issue that comes to symbolize relative status. In 1852 the sultan of the Ottoman Empire yielded to French pressure to increase the privileges of Roman Catholic clerics at the holy sites in Palestine, which had fallen under the control of Orthodox monks supported by Russia. None of the protagonists truly cared which monastic order controlled the dusty shrines in Jerusalem, and if they had, numerous compromise bargains were feasible.<sup>47</sup> But the issue came to symbolize the relative rankings of the powers. Correctly perceiving Napoleon III's aim of enhancing France's status at Russia's expense, the tsar immediately concluded that securing Russia's identity as second to none (and equal to Britain) required a counterdemand: that the sultan not only reverse the decision but acquiesce to exclusive

<sup>45</sup> GDP estimates are from both Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1991* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1995); and Paul Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels from 1759 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History* 11 (Spring 1982); iron/steel from *National Material Capabilities dataset v. 3.02*, at [www.correlatesofwar.org](http://www.correlatesofwar.org). The construction of these data is discussed in J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965," in Bruce Russett, ed., *Peace, War, and Numbers* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972).

<sup>46</sup> Winfried Baumgart, *The Crimean War, 1853–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ample documentary evidence for this is presented in David M. Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War* (London: Longmans, 1994); and William E. Echard, *Napoleon III and the Concert of Europe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), ch. 2.

Russian rights over Orthodox religious sites and citizens within the Ottoman Empire, an objective he sought to meet by exerting military pressure.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Russia, which saw itself throughout as defending its identity as an upholder of the status quo, now became the revisionist.<sup>49</sup> Britain and all other great powers resisted, but it took four years of intricate diplomacy and bloody war to convince the Russians to back down.

Archives regarding this war have long been open and the historiography is vast.<sup>50</sup> What the documents say could not be clearer: the war was *about status*.<sup>51</sup> The issue at stake became whether Russia could obtain rights in the Ottoman Empire that the other powers lacked. The diplomats understood well that framing the issue as one of status made war likely, and they did everything they could in the slow run-up to military hostilities to engineer solutions that separated the issues on the ground from matters of rank. But no proposed solution (eleven were attempted) promised a resolution of the Russians' status dissonance. The draft compromises accepted by Russia yielded on all points – except they included language that, however vaguely, codified Russia's rights vis-à-vis its co-religionists that the tsar and his ministers had demanded at the outset. For Russia, these clauses symbolized the restoration of the status quo ante. For Turkey, France, and Britain, they implied a dramatic increase in Russia's status unwarranted by any increase in its capabilities.

Nicholas escalated the situation to what he called “a crisis of coercion” in order to eliminate a perceived threat to his empire's identity as second to none, including Britain.<sup>52</sup> Confident of Russia's material

<sup>48</sup> Echard, *Napoleon III*, chs. 1–2. For notes by the tsar explicating his reasoning, see A. M. Zaionchkovskiy, *Vostochnaia Voina* [The Eastern War], 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1908–13), vol. I, *Prilozheniia*, 357–358.

<sup>49</sup> V. N. Vinogradov, “Nikolai I v ‘krimskoi lovushke,’” *Novaia i Noveishaia Isotiriia* 34 (1992).

<sup>50</sup> On the earlier literature, see Brison D. Gooch, “A Century of Historiography on the Origins of the Crimean War,” *American Historical Review* 62 (October 1956); and Gooch, ed., *The Origins of the Crimean War* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1969); for the later literature, invaluable guides are Goldfrank, *Origins*; David Wetzel, *The Crimean War: A Diplomatic History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Norman Rich, *Why the Crimean War? A Cautionary Tale* (Hanover and London: University Press of America, 1985).

<sup>51</sup> Sylvan, Graff, and Pugliese, “Status and Prestige,” make a powerful case for this point, citing relevant documents.

<sup>52</sup> Tsar Nicholas, quoted in Rich, *Why the Crimean War?*, 47.

power, dismissive of the salience of British sea power, and ignorant of the military implications of the industrial revolution, he expected London to acquiesce.<sup>53</sup> But Britain's cabinet saw the tsar's demand as an unwarranted presumption considering their assessment of Russia's real capabilities. Accepting that demand meant accepting a degradation in Britain's own position. The more the Russians sensed a refusal to acknowledge their status, the more strident they became; and the more they insisted on tangible signs of recognition, the more the British supported France and the Turks, the less willing the latter were to compromise, and the greater the status dissonance in St. Petersburg.

What the documents do *not* say is equally important. There is scant evidence of the main causal mechanisms of major contemporary theories of war. Theories based on security scarcity find little support. Russia escalated the crisis in full confidence that the Western powers had no credible military option in the theater.<sup>54</sup> Before the combat operations began, neither the British nor the French appeared concerned about the threat Russia posed to their security. Indeed, even after the war began, Palmerston insisted that Britain had little to fear militarily from Russia.<sup>55</sup> There is scant evidence that British worries over access to India figured in prewar decision making, while concerns about Russian naval deployments in the Black Sea postdated the war and, in any case, had nothing to do with the security of the empire's sea lines. Nor is there evidence that Russia's dissatisfaction had anything to do with the material costs and benefits of the status quo. On the contrary, Russian decision makers saw their revisionism as a defense of their identity as a bulwark of the existing order. And there is no evidence concerning key implications of the bargaining model of war: that the parties saw themselves as disputing the allocation of a flow of goods that would be diminished by the costs of war; that negotiated bargains were frustrated by the inability to get commitments not to renege on agreements in the future; and that a resolution of the commitment problem is what allowed an agreement to end the war.

<sup>53</sup> Though he expected Britain to acquiesce, he asserted that its refusal to do so "would not stop me. I shall march along my own path, as Russia's dignity demands." Quoted in Goldfrank, *Origins*, 170.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2, 8–10, and ch. 2.

<sup>55</sup> And a lot to gain. See the documents collected in Hermann Wentler, *Zerstörung der Großmacht Rußland? Die britischen Kriegsziele im Krimkrieg* [The Destruction of Russia as a Great Power? British War Aims in the Crimean War] (Göttigen and Zürich: Vandenhoeck and Rupprecht, 1993).

Again and again, what frustrated intermediate bargaining involving issue linkage was the connection to status.<sup>56</sup>

In sum, to explain the Crimean War one needs to explain why Russia advanced a revisionist demand despite having no material reason for dissatisfaction with the status quo, why Britain and France resisted forcefully even when their security and wealth were not implicated, why Russia persisted in the face of determined, multiyear diplomatic efforts, and why it took years of costly conflict and the deaths of over 600,000 men (some 450,000 of them Russian) to force St. Petersburg to back down. While standard theories explain none of these things, the status theory offers plausible explanations. The war ended only when its escalating costs forced the Russians to accept peace terms that reduced their status as thoroughly and unambiguously as victory would have secured it.<sup>57</sup> The leaders of each of the main powers willingly took near-term security risks for status gains, and strong evidence links these decisions to the causal mechanisms of the theory developed here.

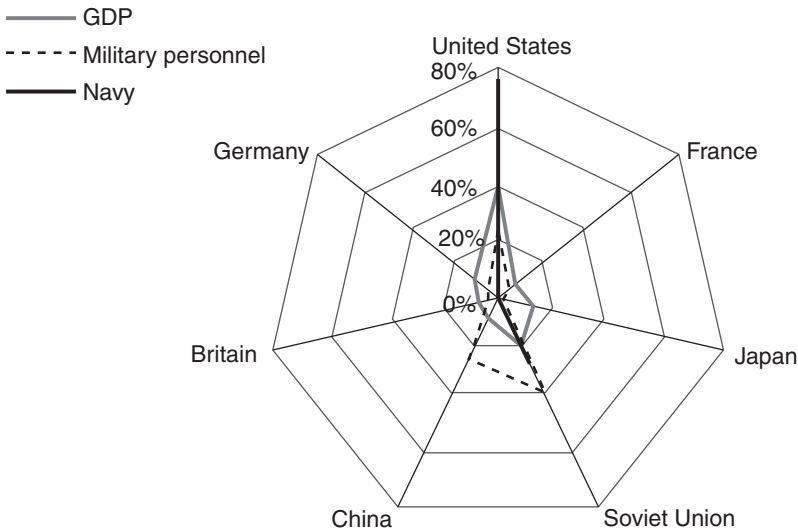
### Status competition under bipolarity

New research documents the role of status competition in generating indirect military conflict among major powers operating in a world much more like our own: the Cold War. By the early 1960s the nuclear argument for insecurity could be turned on its head into a powerful argument for ultimate security.<sup>58</sup> As Figure 2.2 illustrates,

<sup>56</sup> There is, however, strong evidence for the salience of imperfect information.

<sup>57</sup> Russia was forced to accept clauses on the deployment of its navy on the Black Sea that had the effect of reducing its status to a level comparable to Turkey's. See Winfried Baumgart, *The Peace of Paris, 1856: Studies in War, Diplomacy, and Peacemaking* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1981).

<sup>58</sup> A majority of scholars writing during the later Cold War era assumed that security imperatives worked for cooperation; and hence that competitive behavior had to be explained by other factors. See, for example, Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 12 (Summer 1989); and Barry Posen and Stephen Van Evera, "Defense Policy of the Reagan Administration: Departure from Containment," in Steven Miller, ed., *Conventional Forces and American Defense Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). In addition, many analysts view the later Cold War as a weak two-power concert, threatened intermittently by ideology and domestic impulses. See, for example, Roger E. Kanet and Edward A. Kolodziej, eds., *The Cold War as Cooperation* (London: Macmillan, 1991); and Allen Lynch, *The Cold War is Over – Again* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992).



**Figure 2.2** Distribution of GDP, military personnel, and major naval ships, 1970

Sources: GDP: Angus Maddison, *Statistics on World Population, GDP, and per Capita GDP, 1–2006 AD*, at [www.correlatesofwar.org](http://www.correlatesofwar.org). Navy (major ships index): Modelski and Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics*.

bipolarity contained material sources of status uncertainty. While the Soviet Union was equal to or stronger than the United States in conventional military and raw industrial capabilities, the United States dominated all other categories of power.

As the status theory predicts, each saw the other as the main referent out-group, and their mutual struggle to establish or alter a hierarchy was a backdrop to their interaction during the Cold War. The perception in Moscow was that the United States had emerged from World War Two with rights and privileges that the Soviet Union did not possess.<sup>59</sup> Resentment of this perceived status inequality and an intense desire to achieve real superpower “parity” showed up in numerous diplomatic exchanges under Stalin and Khrushchev, but its relative significance is easier to distinguish under Brezhnev. American decision

<sup>59</sup> See Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), chs. 2–5; and William C. Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions in the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1993), chs. 3–5.

makers perceived this clearly, even as they negotiated the détente-era agreements that formalized superpower parity. Subsequent evidence from memoirs backs up this impression.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it was clear that détente and status were linked. What was not clear was how the formal parity enshrined in détente was to be reconciled with continued real status inequality between the two principals. Part of the problem was that Soviet responses to perceived status inequality could be perceived as claims to primacy. Exactly as happened with Russia and Britain a century earlier, arguably “defensive” identity-maintenance strategies adopted by decision makers in Moscow and Washington could spark conflict.

This is exactly what transpired in the sequence of events that destroyed détente and set in motion the last round of the Cold War. Neither the available documents nor the recollections of Brezhnev’s aides paint a picture of a leadership taking on the United States for world primacy.<sup>61</sup> Instead, they reveal all the classic signs of status dissonance: that is, dissatisfaction with an inferior position brought about by the attainment of parity along some important dimensions but not along others. The issue was a modest enhancement in Moscow’s position, made possible by a fortuitous combination of opportunity

<sup>60</sup> Zubok, *Failed Empire*, chs. 7–8; Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance*, ch. 7. Memoirs that attest to the importance of “equality and equal security” include Alexander Alexandrov-Agentov, *Ot Kollontai do Gorbacheva – Vosponimaniia* [From Kollontai to Gorbachev: Memoirs] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994); G. M. Kornienko, *Kholodnaia voina – svidetel'stvo ee uchastnika* [The Cold War – A Participant’s Testimony] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994); Georgy Arbatov, *The System: An Insider’s Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1993); and Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Random House, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Most responsible for this finding are the Carter–Brezhnev Project, sponsored by the Center for Foreign Policy Development, at the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University; the National Security Archive; and the Cold War International History Project, which declassified scores of important documents and organized a series of critical oral history conferences. A key publication of the project is Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet–American Relations in the Carter Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997). Westad’s summary of the new evidence on the Horn conflict is typical: “The main foreign policy aim for Soviet involvement in Africa was to score a series of inexpensive victories in what was perceived as a global contest with Washington for influence and positions in the Third World.” “Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974–76: A New Pattern of Intervention,” Cold War International History Project [CWIHP] *Bulletin* 8–9 (Winter 1996–1997), 21.

and means. Brezhnev and his aides sought to translate the détente-era declarations of parity and equality into reality by emulating the status-superior power. They sought to compete with the United States for influence outside traditional Soviet spheres of influence.

The available archival record of the late Cold War cannot be compared to the extensive cache of archival material available for the Crimean case, and it is harder to reject alternative explanations for this behavior, explanations that center on domestic politics and ideas. Nevertheless, the available evidence does support Vladislav Zubok's contention that proxy wars in the Third World were "a manifestation of a major reason for Soviet behavior in the 1970s: to act as a global power equal to others."<sup>62</sup> In part this is a reflection of what is not to be found in the available documents and memoirs: evidence connecting the escalation of Soviet support for armed proxies to any concrete security or economic motivation. Instead, we have strong evidence that Brezhnev and his politburo comrades craved recognition and undertook their new activity in the Third World for the purpose of reducing status dissonance. Their identity as representatives of a superpower second to none would be more secure if they could successfully exercise the same rights – in this case armed intervention on behalf of proxy clients – that their main comparison out-group, the United States, had long enjoyed. Moreover, there is strong circumstantial evidence that the Soviet leaders knowingly took security risks in pursuit of status. Zubok uncovers a paper trail of warnings to Brezhnev that expanding Soviet involvement in the Third World would jeopardize détente, which Brezhnev saw as central to Soviet security interests.<sup>63</sup>

The problem was that Moscow's competitive identity-maintenance strategy had the effect of slowly shifting the Carter cabinet to National Security Adviser Brzezinski's hawkish view of a "Soviet thrust toward global preeminence."<sup>64</sup> As Carter described his "view of the Soviet threat" in 1980: "My concern is that the combination of increasing Soviet military power and political shortsightedness fed by big-power ambition, might tempt the Soviet Union both to exploit local turbulence (especially in the Third World) and to intimidate our friends

<sup>62</sup> Zubok, *Failed Empire*, p. 249.      <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 7, esp. 252.

<sup>64</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 148.

in order to seek political advantage and eventually even political preponderance.”<sup>65</sup>

The Americans' response was linkage. Washington would link the central strategic relationship – nuclear and conventional arms control, trade, cultural exchanges, and the relationship with China – to Moscow's behavior in the Third World. And linkage is the key, for the main decision makers on both sides believed that arms control and other forms of military cooperation were in their long-term security interests. By holding the central relationship hostage to the struggle for status, Carter was accepting a trade-off between security and status. By moving closer to Beijing, he was risking military tension in the one security relationship that could genuinely threaten US survival – that with the Soviet Union. The Soviets, for their part, in refusing to acknowledge linkage and rein in the status-seeking policy, were accepting reciprocal risks. The result was a dramatic intensification of the Cold War rivalry, as each side proved willing to allow the contest over status to infect the central strategic relationship.

As the US response gathered momentum, status dissonance mounted in Moscow. US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance observed that Soviet leaders “were displaying a deepening mood of harshness and frustration at what they saw as our inconsistency and unwillingness to deal with them as equals.”<sup>66</sup> They preferred renewed competition to acceptance of détente on terms that suggested reduced status. Brezhnev's problem was analogous to Nicholas' more than a century earlier: how to maintain détente without signaling acceptance of reduced status. Moscow's solution was similar to St. Petersburg's: offer to negotiate but subordinate the search for agreement to insistence on symbolic recognition of the status quo. At several junctures during the unfolding struggle in the Third World, Brezhnev and Gromyko made offers of cooperative conflict resolution in the spirit of a concert or “condominium.” Following the precedent set by the Nixon and Ford administrations, Carter rejected these offers as provocative ploys. The problem for Washington was that the offers reflected Soviet insistence on super-power parity, a status the US was willing to grant only on strategic arms negotiations.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., annex 1, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 101.

<sup>67</sup> The best example is Brezhnev's “condominium ploy” in the Yom Kippur War of 1972. Compare the Soviet and American views as reflected in Viktor



In short, two superpowers relatively certain of their core security engaged in a series of expensive militarized disputes involving proxies in the developing world. On both sides, policy makers' proposals for delinking positional concerns from the regional and global security agenda failed to persuade leaders. While much of the documentary record remains sealed in archives, available sources provide evidence of the link between small and asymmetrical capabilities gaps, status dissonance, and a willingness to sacrifice interests in security and prosperity in the competition for status.

### Unipolarity and status competition

As [Figure 1.1](#) in the introduction to this volume illustrates, the great power subsystem is currently stratified at the top to a degree not seen since the modern international system took shape in the seventeenth century. The foregoing analysis suggests a plausible answer to the question of unipolarity's implications for great power conflict: that a symmetrically top-heavy distribution of capabilities will dampen status competition, reducing or removing important preconditions for militarized rivalry and war. A unipole will provide a salient out-group comparison for elites in other major powers, but its symmetrical material preponderance will induce them to select strategies for identity maintenance that do not foster overt status conflict. And because its material dominance makes its status as number one relatively secure, the unipole itself has the option to adopt policies that seek to ameliorate status dissonance on the part of second-tier powers.

### *The unipole*

Studies of post-Cold War US foreign policy are rich with evidence that US decision makers value their country's status of primacy.<sup>68</sup> Official

Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), chs. 5–7; and Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 299. For the similar logic behind US rejection of “condominium offers” concerning Angola, see Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 180–181.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003).

US strategies from the dawn of unipolarity in 1991 through the Clinton administration to the pre-9/11 Bush administration call explicitly for “maintaining U.S. predominance.”<sup>69</sup> US administrations continue to make massive investments in areas where no plausible competition exists – perhaps most notably in maintaining nuclear primacy.<sup>70</sup> They have sought a large role in nearly every region of the globe despite facing no peer rival. Notwithstanding setbacks in Iraq, the United States continued to expand its global reach, with an annual defense budget of over \$500 billion (likely \$600 billion if supplemental spending is included) and a continued expansion of overseas bases (adding or expanding bases in eight countries since 2001). While there are many competing explanations for this pattern of behavior, one candidate that has thus far not figured in scholarly research is that US decision makers derive independent utility from their state’s status as a unipole.

Given its material dominance and activist foreign policy, the United States is a salient factor in the identity politics of all major powers, and it plays a role in most regional hierarchies. Yet there is scant evidence in US foreign policy discourse of concerns analogous to late Cold War perceptions of a Soviet “thrust to global preeminence” or mid-nineteenth-century British apprehensions about Tsar Nicholas’ “pretensions to be the arbiter of Europe.” Even when rhetoric emanating from the other powers suggests dissatisfaction with the US role, diplomatic episodes rich with potential for such perceptions were resolved by bargaining relatively free from positional concerns: tension in the Taiwan Strait and the 2001 spy plane incident with China, for example, or numerous tense incidents with Russia from Bosnia to Kosovo to more recent regional disputes in post-Soviet Eurasia.

On the contrary, under unipolarity US diplomats have frequently adopted policies to enhance the security of the identities of Russia, China, Japan, and India as great (though second-tier) powers, with

<sup>69</sup> Quote from Office of the Secretary of Defense/Net Assessment Summer Study, August 1, 2001, “Strategies for Maintaining U.S. Predominance,” discussed in Niall Ferguson, “This Vietnam Generation of Americans Has Not Learnt the Lessons of History,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 10, 2004, 19; on the 1991 Defense Guidance Planning document, see Barton Gellman, “Keeping the U.S. First: Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1991, A1.

<sup>70</sup> Keir A. Lieber and Daryl Press, “The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 30 (Spring 2006).

an emphasis on their regional roles. US officials have urged China to manage the six-party talks on North Korea while welcoming it as a “responsible stakeholder” in the system; they have urged a much larger regional role for Japan; and they have deliberately fostered India’s status as a “responsible” nuclear power. Russia, the country whose elite has arguably confronted the most threats to its identity, has been the object of what appear to be elaborate US status-management policies that included invitations to form a partnership with NATO, play a prominent role in Middle East diplomacy (from which Washington had striven to exclude Moscow for four decades), and to join the rich countries’ club, the G7 (when Russia clearly lacked the economic requisites). Status-management policies on this scale appear to be enabled by a unipolar structure that fosters confidence in the security of the United States’ identity as number one. The United States is free to buttress the status of these states as second-tier great powers and key regional players precisely because it faces no serious competition for overall system leadership.

### *Second-tier great powers: Russia and China*

Research on the elite perceptions and discourse in Russia, China, India, Europe, and Japan reveals that there is a strong interest in a favorable status comparison vis-à-vis out-groups and that the United States looms large as a comparison group, but in no capital is there evidence of the kind of status dissonance that characterized, for example, Moscow in the mid-twentieth century or St. Petersburg in the mid-nineteenth.<sup>71</sup> Resentment of the US role is evident, especially in Russia and China,

<sup>71</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34 (Spring 2010): 63–96, is the most comprehensive application of SIT to post-Cold War Russian and Chinese strategy. Other key sources include: Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield); Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, United States and the Global Order* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006); William C. Wohlforth, “The Transatlantic Dimension,” in Roland Danreuther, ed., *European Union Foreign and Security Policy: Towards a Neighbourhood Strategy* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo’s Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

but the operative assessment is that the capabilities gap precludes a competitive identity-maintenance strategy vis-à-vis the United States. Indeed, both countries attempted competitive strategies in the 1990s but reversed course as the evidence accumulated that their efforts had been counterproductive.

China's quest for great power status after "the century of shame and humiliation" is a staple of foreign policy analysis. Its preference for multipolarity and periodic resentment at what it sees as the United States' assertion of special rights and privileges is also well established. Chinese analyses of multipolarity explicitly reflect the predicted preference for a flat hierarchy over one in which a single state has primacy; that is, they express a preference for a world in which no power has a special claim to leadership.<sup>72</sup> In the early 1990s Jiang Zemin attempted to act on this preference by translating China's growing economic and military power into enhanced status in world affairs through competitive policies. As Avery Goldstein shows, this more forward policy soon provoked a nascent US backlash against the perceived "China threat."<sup>73</sup> The signature event was Beijing's decision to heighten tensions around the Taiwan Strait in 1995–1996 in order to curb Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui's independence policies and punish Washington for encouraging them. This resulted in the dispatch of two US aircraft carrier groups to the area and a dramatic upgrading of the US–Japan security relationship, including potential collaboration on a theater missile defense system covering the East China Sea (and possibly Taiwan).

According to many China watchers, the result was a clearer appreciation in Beijing of the costs and benefits of a competitive search for status under unipolarity. As Peter Gries puts it: "While many Chinese have convinced themselves that U.S. power predominance cannot last, they do grudgingly acknowledge the world's current unipolar nature."<sup>74</sup> As a result, Beijing adopted a "peaceful rise" strategy that downplays the prospect of direct competition for global parity with or

<sup>72</sup> See Leif-Eric Easley, "Multilateralism, not Multipolarity: China's Changing Foreign Policy and Trilateral Cooperation in Asia," *International Herald Tribune*, March 29, 2008; the article reports on research conducted on official Foreign Ministry sources.

<sup>73</sup> Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>74</sup> "China Eyes the Hegemon," *Orbis* 49 (Summer 2005), 406.

primacy over the United States.<sup>75</sup> Thus, notwithstanding an underlying preference for a flatter global status hierarchy, in terms of concrete policies China remains a status quo power under unipolarity, seeking to enhance its standing via strategies that accommodate the existing global status quo.<sup>76</sup>

With its dramatic fall from superpower status, Russia presents the richest evidence concerning materially constrained identity-maintenance strategies. As noted, one response to status dissonance is to engage in “social creativity,” that is, to seek to redefine the attributes that convey status. Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko argue that this is precisely what Gorbachev sought to do with his “new thinking” diplomacy.<sup>77</sup> Given Brezhnev’s failure to translate military might into status parity and dim prospects for attaining peer status on other material dimensions, Gorbachev tried to “find a new domain in which to be preeminent” by positioning the Soviet Union as a “moral and visionary leader.”<sup>78</sup>

The challenge – not explored by Larson and Shevchenko – is that such strategies require persuasion and that the ability to persuade is linked to material capability.<sup>79</sup> The higher-ranked state must somehow be persuaded to accept the downward revision in its rank implied by the acceptance of a new definition of what attributes convey status. And given that the higher-ranked state prefers to retain that rank, it will resist if it thinks it has the material wherewithal to do so. Gorbachev’s problem was that his country was suffering from demonstrably declining material capability to persuade the United States to accept a redefinition of status that would redound to Moscow’s benefit. The US response was sensitive to Moscow’s status concerns rhetorically, but the real terms offered on each specific issue reflected the reality of Gorbachev’s shrinking leverage. The real lesson of the Gorbachev

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*.

<sup>76</sup> Alastair Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security* 27 (Spring 2003); David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy,” *International Organization* 57 (Winter 2003).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 95, 96.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Bennett, “Trust Bursting Out All Over: The Soviet Side of German Unification,” in William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

experience was that competing for status against an emerging unipole requires the commitment of real, measurable resources.

Russian discourse on identity and grand strategy has grappled with this outcome for fifteen years, veering from a failed attempt to retain superpower status as a US ally under Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev to an equally ill-fated effort to regain it as leader of “multipolar” anti-US policy coalitions under Kozyrev’s successor Evgenyi Primakov. But while tumultuous debates continue, accompanied by endless assertions of great power status on the part of leadership figures, the deeper reality is acceptance of second-tier status for the foreseeable future.<sup>80</sup> The outcome resembles that in Beijing: strategies of social competition and social creativity appear to be foreclosed by material conditions, leaving a strategy of rhetorical resentment and substantive acquiescence to Russia’s status as a regional great power.

## Conclusion

The evidence suggests that narrow and asymmetrical capabilities gaps foster status competition even among states relatively confident of their basic territorial security for the reasons identified in social identity theory and theories of status competition. Broad patterns of evidence are consistent with this expectation, suggesting that unipolarity shapes strategies of identity maintenance in ways that dampen status conflict. The implication is that unipolarity helps explain low levels of military competition and conflict among major powers after 1991 and that a return to bipolarity or multipolarity would increase the likelihood of such conflict.

This has been a preliminary exercise. The evidence for the hypotheses explored here is hardly conclusive, but it is sufficiently suggestive to warrant further refinement and testing, all the more so given the importance of the question at stake. If status matters in the way the theory discussed here suggests, then the widespread view that the rise of a peer competitor and the shift back to a bipolar or multipolar structure present readily surmountable policy challenges is suspect. Most scholars agree with Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke’s argument: “[S]hould a satisfied state undergo a power transition and catch

<sup>80</sup> See Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21 (April–June 2005).

up with dominant power, there is little or no expectation of war.”<sup>81</sup> Given that today’s rising powers have every material reason to like the status quo, many observers are optimistic that the rise of peer competitors can be readily managed by fashioning an order that accommodates their material interests.

Yet it is far harder to manage competition for status than for most material things. While diplomatic efforts to manage status competition seem easy under unipolarity, theory and evidence suggest that it could present much greater challenges as the system moves back to bipolarity or multipolarity. When status is seen as a positional good, efforts to craft negotiated bargains about status contests face long odds. And this positionality problem is particularly acute concerning the very issue unipolarity solves: primacy. The route back to bipolarity or multipolarity is thus fraught with danger. With two or more plausible claimants to primacy, positional competition and the potential for major power war could once again form the backdrop of world politics.

<sup>81</sup> Kugler and Lemke, “Power Transition,” 131.

### 3 *Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity: why being a unipole isn't all it's cracked up to be*

MARTHA FINNEMORE

One would think that unipoles have it made. After all, unipolarity is a condition of minimal constraint. Unipoles should be able to do pretty much what they want in the world since, by definition, no other state has the power to stop them. In fact, however, the United States, arguably the closest thing to a unipole we have seen in centuries, has been frustrated in many of its policies since it achieved that status at the end of the Cold War. Much of this frustration surely stems from non-structural causes – domestic politics, leaders' poor choices, bad luck. But some sources of this frustration may be embedded in the logic of contemporary unipolarity itself.

Scholarship on polarity and system structures created by various distributions of power has focused almost exclusively on material power; the structure of world politics, however, is social as much as it is material.<sup>1</sup> Material distributions of power alone tell us little about the

Comments from all of the project participants helped frame and orient this essay. Additional comments from Ingrid Creppell, Peter Katzenstein, Kristin Lord, and anonymous reviewers for *World Politics* are gratefully acknowledged. Research assistance and thoughtful discussion by Amir Stepak greatly improved the chapter.

<sup>1</sup> The contributions to Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann are representative of the materialist orientation of this literature; T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). Only one contribution to that volume, Michael Bartletta and Harold Trinkunas, "Regime Type and Regional Security in Latin America: Toward a 'Balance of Identity' Theory," grapples in depth with non-material factors. Ikenberry's volume similarly contains only one essay that explores non-material factors explicitly. See Thomas Risse, "U.S. Power in a Liberal Security Community," in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). The materialist orientation of the project of which this essay is a part draws on this tradition. See Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, Chapter 1 in this volume.



kind of politics states will construct for themselves.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true in a unipolar system, where material constraints are small. Much is determined by social factors, notably the identity of the unipole and the social fabric of the system it inhabits. One would expect a US unipolar system to look different from a Nazi unipolar system or a Soviet one; the purposes to which those three states would use preponderant power are very different. Similarly, one would expect a US unipolar system in the twenty-first century to look very different from, say, the Roman world, or the Holy Roman Empire (if either of those counts as a unipolar system). Social structures of norms concerning sovereignty, liberalism, self-determination, and border rigidity (among other things) have changed over time and create vastly different political dynamics among these systems.<sup>3</sup> Generalizing about the social structure of unipolarity seems risky, perhaps impossible, when so much depends on the particulars of unipole identity and social context, but in the spirit of this project, I will try.

Even a very thin notion of social structure suggests some reasons why contemporary unipolar power may be inherently limited (or self-limiting) and why unipoles often cannot get their way.<sup>4</sup> Power is only

<sup>2</sup> The type of system states construct may not reflect the material distribution of power at all. After 1815, the European great powers consciously constructed a multipolar system under material conditions that might be variously categorized as hegemony or bipolarity, depending on how one measures, but are not multipolar by any material measure. See Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), ch. 4, for an extended discussion.

<sup>3</sup> See, *inter alia*, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilisation' in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power and World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Robert H. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); John G. Ruggie, "Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations," *International Organization* 46 (Winter 1993): 139–174; and Mlada Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> For a related conclusion derived from a somewhat different theoretical perspective and reasons, see Joseph P. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American*

a means to other, usually social, ends. States, including unipoles, want power as a means of deterring attacks, amassing wealth, imposing preferred political arrangements, or creating some other array of effects on the behavior of others. Even states with extraordinary material power must figure out how to use it. They must figure out what they want and what kinds of policies will produce those results. Creating desired social outcomes, even with great material power, is not simple, as the US is discovering. By better understanding the social nature of power and the social structures through which it works its effects, we might identify some contingently generalizable propositions about unipolar politics and, specifically, about social-structural reasons why great material powers may not get their way.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I explore three social mechanisms that limit unipolar power and shape its possible uses. The first involves legitimation. To exercise power effectively, unipoles must legitimate it and in the act of legitimating their power, unipoles must diffuse it. They must recognize the power of others over them since legitimation lies in the hands of others. Of course, unipoles can always exercise their power without regard to legitimacy. If one simply wants to destroy or kill, the legitimacy of bombs or bullets is not going to change their physical effects on buildings or bodies. However, simple killing and destruction are rarely the chief goal of political leaders using power. Power is usually the means to some other end in social life, some more nuanced form of social control or influence. Using power as more than a sledgehammer requires legitimation, and legitimation makes the unipole dependent, at least to some extent, on others.

The second mechanism involves the institutionalization of unipolar power. In the contemporary world, powerful Western states including the US have relied on rational-legal authorities – law, rules, institutions – to do at least some of the legitimation work. Unipoles can create these institutions and tailor them to suit their own preferences. Indeed, the US expended a great deal of energy doing exactly

*Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller exploration of the nature of power in world politics see Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59 (January 2005): 39–75; and Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds., *Power in Global Governance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

this kind of rational-legal institution building in the era after World War Two.<sup>6</sup> Constructing institutions involves more than simple credible commitments and self-binding by the unipole, however. Laws, rules, and institutions have a legitimacy of their own in contemporary politics that derives from their particular rational-legal, impersonal character.<sup>7</sup> Once in place these laws, rules, and institutions have powers and internal logics that unipoles find difficult to control.<sup>8</sup> This, too, contributes to the diffusion of power away from unipole control.

These social structures of legitimation and institutionalization do more than simply diffuse power away from the unipole. They can trap and punish as well. Unipoles often feel the constraints of the legitimation structures and institutions that they themselves have created, and one common behavioral manifestation of these constraints is hypocrisy. Actors inconvenienced by social rules often resort to hypocrisy, proclaiming adherence to rules while busily violating them. Such hypocrisy obviously undermines trust and credible commitments, but the damage runs deeper: hypocrisy undermines respect and deference both for the unipole and for the values on which it has legitimized its power. Hypocrisy is not an entirely negative phenomenon for unipoles, or any state, however. While unrestrained hypocrisy by unipoles undermines the legitimacy of their power, judicious use of hypocrisy can, like good manners, provide crucial strategies for melding ideals and interests. Indeed, honoring social ideals or principles in the breach can have long-lasting political effects as decades of US hypocrisy about democratization and human rights suggests.

These three mechanisms almost certainly do not exhaust the social constraints on unipolar power, but they do seem logically entailed in any modern unipolar order. Short of such sweeping social changes as the delegitimation of all rational-legal forms of authority or the establishment of some new globally accepted religion, it is hard to see

<sup>6</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), ch. 3, esp. 212–215.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Darren G. Hawkins, David A. Lake, Daniel L. Nielson, and Michael J. Tierney, eds., *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

how a unipole could exercise power effectively without dealing with these social dynamics. Each mechanism and its effects are, in turn, discussed below.

### The legitimacy of power and the power of legitimacy

Legitimacy is, by its nature, a social and relational phenomenon. One's position or power cannot be legitimate in a vacuum. The concept only has meaning in a particular social context. Actors, even unipoles, cannot create legitimacy unilaterally. Legitimacy can only be given by others. It is conferred either by peers, as when great powers accept or reject the actions of another power, or by those upon whom power is exercised. Reasons to confer legitimacy have varied over history. Tradition, blood, and claims of divine right have all provided reasons to confer legitimacy, although in contemporary politics conformity with international norms and law is more influential in determining which actors and actions will be accepted as legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing the legitimacy of power does not mean these others necessarily like the powerful or their policies, but it implies at least tacit acceptance of the social structure in which power is exercised. One may not like the inequalities of global capitalism but still believe that markets are the only realistic or likely way to organize successful economic growth. One may not like the P5 vetoes of the Security Council but still understand that the United Nations cannot exist without this concession to power asymmetries. We can see the importance of legitimacy by thinking about its absence. Active rejection of social structures and the withdrawal of recognition of their legitimacy create a crisis. In domestic politics, regimes suffering legitimacy crises face resistance, whether passive or active and armed. Internationally, systems suffering legitimacy crises tend to be violent and non-cooperative. Post-Reformation Europe might be an example of such a system. Without at least tacit acceptance of power's legitimacy, the wheels of international social life get derailed. Material force alone remains to impose order, and

<sup>9</sup> Ian Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power at the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," *International Organization* 53 (April 1999): 379–408.

order creation or maintenance by that means is difficult, even under unipolarity. Successful and stable orders require the grease of some legitimization structure to persist and prosper.<sup>10</sup>

The social and relational character of legitimacy thus strongly colors the nature of any unipolar order and the kinds of orders a unipole can construct. Yes, unipoles can impose their will, but only to an extent. The willingness of others to recognize the legitimacy of a unipole's actions and defer to its wishes or judgment shapes the character of the order that will emerge. Unipolar power without any underlying legitimacy will have a very particular character. The unipole's policies will meet with resistance, either active or passive, at every turn. Cooperation will be induced only through material quid pro quo payoffs. Trust will be thin to non-existent. This is obviously an expensive system to run and few unipoles have tried to do so.

More often unipoles attempt to articulate some set of values and shared interests that induce acquiescence or support from others, thereby legitimating their power and policies. In part this invocation of values may be strategic; acceptance by or overt support from others makes exercise of power by the unipole cheaper and more effective. Smart leaders know how to "sell" their policies. Wrapping policies in shared values or interests smooths the path to policy success by reassuring skeptics.<sup>11</sup> Rhetoric about shared interests in prosperity and economic growth accompanies efforts to push free trade deals on unwilling partners and publics. Rhetoric about shared love of human rights and democracy accompanies pushes for political reforms in other states.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; and Reus-Smit, *Moral Purpose*; Thomas M. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Ian Hurd, "The Strategic Use of Liberal Internationalism: Libya and the UN Sanctions, 1992–2003," *International Organization* 59 (July 2005): 495–526; and Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, "Who 'Won' Libya?: The Force–Diplomacy Debate and its Implications for Theory and Policy," *International Security* 30 (Winter 2005): 47–86. For more on the intertwined relationship of legitimacy and effectiveness in power projection, see Erik Voeten, "The Political Origins of the Legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council," *International Organization* 59 (July 2005): 527–557; and Martha Finnemore, "Fights about Rules: The Role of Efficacy and Power in Changing Multilateralism," *Review of International Studies* 31, supplement S1 (December 2005): 187–206.

In their examination of debates leading up to the 2003 Iraq War in this volume Jack Snyder, Robert Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon provide an example of unipolar attempts to create legitimacy through strategic use of rhetoric. They show how “evocative and evasive rhetoric” allowed proponents of the war to imply links between the 9/11 attacks, weapons of mass destruction, and Saddam Hussein’s regime. Potentially unpopular or controversial policies were rationalized by situating them in a larger strategic vision built on more widely held values, as when the authors of the 2002 National Security Strategy memorandum wove together the global war on terror, the promotion of American democratic values abroad, and the struggle against authoritarian regimes to create a justification for preventive war.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Ronald Krebs and Patrick Jackson argue, rhetorical “sales pitches” of this kind can be highly coercive. Examining the same case (the selling of the Iraq War), Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz show how the administration’s “war-on-terror” discourse, which cast the US as a blameless victim (attacked for “who we are” rather than anything we did), was designed in such a way as to leave opponents with very few arguments they could use to rally effective opposition in Congress.<sup>13</sup>

Usually this articulation of values is not simply a strategic ploy. Decision makers and publics in the unipole actually hold these values and believe their own rhetoric to some significant degree. Unipole states, like all states, are social creatures. They are composed of domestic societies that cohere around some set of national beliefs. Their leaders are products of those societies and often share those beliefs. Even where leaders may be skeptical, they likely became leaders by virtue of their abilities to rally publics around shared goals and to construct foreign and domestic policies that reflect domestic values. Even authoritarian (and certainly totalitarian) regimes articulate shared goals and function only because of the web of social ties that knit people together. Certainly all recent and contemporary strong states that could be

<sup>12</sup> Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, Chapter 6 in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Krebs and Patrick T. Jackson, “Twisting Arms/Twisting Tongues,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (March 2007): 35–66; Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, “Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq,” *Security Studies* 16 (July 2007): 409–51.

candidates for unipoles – the US, China, Russia, Germany, and Britain – do.<sup>14</sup>

Thus unipole states, like all states, find naked self-aggrandizement or even the prescriptions of Machiavellian *virtù* difficult to pursue.<sup>15</sup> Unipoles and the people who lead them pursue a variety of goals derived from many different values. Even “national interest” as most people and states conceive of it involves some broader vision of social good beyond mere self-aggrandizement. Americans like to see democracy spread around the world in part for instrumental reasons – they believe a world of democracies is a safer, more prosperous world for Americans – and also for normative ones – they believe in the virtues of democracy for all. Likewise, Americans like to see markets open in part for instrumental reasons – they believe a world of markets will make Americans richer – and also for normative ones – they believe that markets are the ticket out of poverty.

Much of unipolar politics is thus likely to revolve around the degree to which policies promoting the unipole’s goals are accepted or resisted by others. Other states and foreign publics may need to be persuaded, but often influential domestic constituencies must also be brought on board. Channels for such persuasion are many and varied, as is evident from past US diplomatic efforts to sell its policies under bipolarity. The shift from laissez-faire to what John Ruggie terms the “embedded liberal compromise” as the basis for the US-led economic order after World War Two required extensive diplomatic effort to persuade other states and New York’s financial elite to go along. The tools of influence used to accomplish this were sometimes material but also intellectual and ideological. It was the “shared social purposes” of these economic arrangements that gave them legitimacy among both state and societal actors cross-nationally.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Note that, like rhetoric, social ties can be very coercive. Social (and non-material) forms of coercion include shame, blame, fear, and ridicule as well as notions about duty and honor.

<sup>15</sup> Machiavelli understood very well how difficult his prescriptions were to follow. That is why a book of instruction was required for princes.

<sup>16</sup> John G. Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 195–231; and Harold James, *International Monetary Cooperation since Bretton Woods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

A unipole's policies are thus circumscribed on two fronts. The policies must reflect values held at home, making them legitimate domestically. At the same time, in order to induce acquiescence or support from abroad, they must appeal to the leaders and publics of other states. Constructing policies across these two spheres – domestic and international – may be more or less difficult, depending on circumstances, but the range of choices satisfying both constituencies is unlikely to be large. Widespread disaffection on either front is likely to create significant legitimacy costs to leaders, either as electoral or stability threats domestically or as decreased cooperation and increased resistance internationally.

Creating legitimacy for its policies is thus essential for the unipole but it is also difficult, dangerous, and prone to unforeseen consequences. Domestically, the need to cement winning coalitions in place has polarized US politics, creating incentives to exploit wedge issues and ideological narratives. As Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon describe, neo-conservatives, particularly after 9/11, used these tools to great effect to generate support for the Bush administration's policies. Such ideologically driven persuasion efforts entail risks, however. Constructing coherent ideological narratives often involves sidelining inconvenient facts, what Snyder and his co-authors call "fact bulldozing." This is more than just highlighting some facts at the expense of others. It may (or may not) begin with that aim, but it can also involve changing the facts people believe to be true, as when large numbers of people came to believe that weapons of mass destruction were indeed found in Iraq. Thus, to the degree that these persuasion efforts are successful, if their ideology does not allow them to entertain contrary facts, policy makers and publics may make decisions based on bad information. This kind of self-delusion would seem unlikely to result in smart policy. To the extent that ideological narratives become entrenched, these delusions may extend to future generations of policy makers and make them victims of blowback. Even if successors come to terms with the facts, they may be entrapped by the powerful legitimating rhetoric constructed by their predecessors.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, Chapter 6 in this volume. On blowback see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 39–49. Terms in quotation marks are from Snyder, *Myths of Empire*. Note that in making these



Internationally, this need to construct legitimate policies also creates important opportunities for opponents and potential challengers to a unipole. As Stephen Walt notes in this volume, opportunities for conventional material balancing are limited under our current unipolar situation and, by definition, one would expect this to be so in most, if not all, unipolar systems. What is a challenger to do? With material balancing options limited, one obvious opening for rival states is to undermine the legitimacy of unipolar power. A creative rival who cannot match or balance a unipole's military or economic strength can easily find strategies to undercut the credibility and integrity of the unipole and to concoct alternative values or political visions that other states may find more attractive. Thus, even as a unipole struggles to construct political programs that will attract both domestic and international support with an ideology or values that have wide appeal, others may be trying to paint those same programs as self-aggrandizing or selfish.

Attacks on legitimacy are important "weapons of the weak."<sup>18</sup> Even actors with limited or no material capability can mount damaging attacks on the credibility, reputation, and legitimacy of the powerful. The tools to mount such attacks are not hard to come by in contemporary politics. Information and the ability to disseminate it strategically are the most potent weapons for delegitimizing power in all kinds of situations, domestic and international. Even non-state actors like non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activist networks whose material capabilities are negligible in the terms used in this chapter have been able to challenge the legitimacy of policies of powerful states and the legitimacy of the states themselves. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) is one prominent example. Civil society groups and like-minded states were able to attract signatures from more than 120 governments to ban these devices in 1997 despite opposition from the unipole (US) government. The fact that the ICBL received the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts is suggestive of its success

arguments about the power of ideology and persuasion to create political effects, Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, too, are departing from the materialist orientation of this project.

<sup>18</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See also the discussion of "delegitimation" in Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005).

at delegitimizing unipole policies on this issue. If legitimacy were irrelevant, the US would have ignored this challenge; it did not. The Pentagon has begun phasing out these weapons and replacing them with newer, more expensive devices meant to conform to the treaty requirements. Indeed, that the US began touting the *superiority* of its new mine policy (promulgated in February 2004) over the ICBL's Ottawa treaty requirements highlights the power of this transnational civil society network to set standards for legitimate behavior in this area.<sup>19</sup> Similar cases of NGO pressure on environmental protection (including climate change), human rights, weapons taboos, and democratization amply suggest that this ability to change what is "legitimate" is a common and consequential way to challenge unipoles.<sup>20</sup> The fact that these challenges are mounted on two fronts – international pressure from foreign governments, international organizations, and NGO activists on the one hand, and domestic pressure from the unipole's own citizens who support the activists' views on the other – makes these challenges doubly difficult to manage.

<sup>19</sup> The US Department of Defense has spent hundreds of millions of dollars since 1998 and has requested hundreds of millions more for the development and procurement of landmine alternatives (including Spider and Intelligent Munitions Systems). See Department of the Army, *Descriptive Summaries of Statistics: Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation; Army Appropriations, Budget Activities 4 and 5* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2008). On the 2004 landmines policy, see US Department of State, "U.S. Landmine Policy," at [www.state.gov/t/pm/wra/c11735.htm](http://www.state.gov/t/pm/wra/c11735.htm) (accessed March 1, 2008). On US claims of its superiority to the Ottawa standards, see US Department of State, "U.S. Bans Nondetectable Landmines," January 3, 2005, [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/40193.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/40193.htm) (accessed March 1, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Thomas Risse-Kappen, ed., *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Paul Wapner, "Politics beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics," *World Politics* 47 (April 1995): 311–340; Richard Price, "Reversing the Gunsights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Landmines," *International Organization* 52 (Summer 1998): 613–644; Sanjeev Khagram, *Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

State actors, too, can use these weapons to attack the unipole's policies and do so regularly. Among states, attempts to delegitimize the policies of others are a staple of foreign policy making and may be employed more often in states that have fewer material capabilities with which to achieve their goals against a unipole. France may be unable to balance effectively against US material power in contemporary politics, but it can (and has) raise questions about US leadership and the legitimacy of US policies, especially US inclinations toward unilateralism. Exploiting multilateralism's legitimacy as a form of action, French attempts since the late 1990s to label the US a "hyperpower" and to promote a more multilateral, even multipolar, vision of world politics are clearly designed to constrain the US by undermining the legitimacy of any US action that does not receive widespread international support and meet international standards for "multilateralism."<sup>21</sup>

Countering such attacks on legitimacy is neither easy nor costless. It requires constant management of the transnational conversation surrounding the unipole's behavior and continuing demonstrations of the unipole's commitment to the values or vision that legitimate its power. To simply dismiss or ignore these attacks is dangerous; it smacks of contempt. It says to others, "You are not even worth my time and attention." A unipole need not cater to the wishes of the less powerful to avoid conveying contempt. It can argue, justify, and respectfully disagree – but all of these take time, attention, and diplomacy. Dismissal is very different than disagreement, however. Peers disagree and argue; subordinates and servants are dismissed. By treating the less powerful with contempt the unipole communicates that it does not care about their views and, ultimately, does not care about the legitimacy of its own power. To dismiss or ignore the views of the less capable is a form of self-delegitimation. Contempt is thus a self-defeating strategy for unipoles; by thumbing its metaphorical nose at others, the unipole undercuts the legitimacy needed to create a wide range of policy outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, statements by Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine and President Jacques Chirac in Craig R. Whitney, "France Presses for a Power Independent of the U.S.," *New York Times*, November 7, 1999, A9.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Steve Walt for bringing this issue of contempt to my attention.

Social control is never absolute and material power alone cannot create it. Effective and long-lasting social control requires some amount of recognition, deference, and, preferably, acceptance on the part of those over whom power is exercised. Other parties, not the unipole, thus hold important keys to the establishment of effective and stable order under unipolarity. Paradoxically, then, preponderant power can only be converted into social control if it is diffused. To exercise power to maximum effect, unipoles must give up some of that power to secure legitimacy for their policies.

### **Institutionalizing power: rational-legal authority and its effects on unipolar power**

In contemporary politics, the legitimation strategy of choice for most exercises of power is to institutionalize it – to vest power in rational-legal authorities such as organizations, rules, and law. A unipole can create these and shape them to its liking. Indeed, the US expended a great deal of energy doing exactly this in the era after World War Two. But as with legitimacy, institutionalization of power in rational-legal authorities diffuses it. Once in place, these laws, rules, and institutions have a power and internal logic of their own that unipoles find difficult to control.<sup>23</sup> This is true in several senses.

First, institutionalizing power as rational-legal authority changes it. Power and authority are not the same. Much like legitimacy, authority is both social and relational. Indeed, authority is the concept that joins legitimacy to power. Authority is, according to Max Weber, domination legitimated.<sup>24</sup> A more practical definition might be that authority is the ability of one actor to induce deference from another.<sup>25</sup> Unlike power, authority cannot be seized or taken. One cannot be an authority in a vacuum nor can one plausibly create or claim authority unilaterally. Authority must be conferred or recognized by others.

<sup>23</sup> Ikenberry, *After Victory*; and Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, ch. 2. The causes and consequences of modernity's fascination with rational-legal authority have been central to a number of strands of sociology. See, for example, the work of Max Weber, Michael Mann, Immanuel Wallerstein, and John Meyer.

<sup>24</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, esp. 212–215.

<sup>25</sup> Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, 5.

Consequently, institutionalizing power in authority structures necessarily involves some diffusion of that power. If others cease to recognize or defer to the authorities a unipole constructs, crisis, and perhaps eventual collapse of authority, would ensue, leaving little but material coercion to the unipole.

Transformation of power into authority is not the only consequential change under institutionalization. The fact that authority has a rational-legal character also matters. Unlike traditional and what Weber called “charismatic” types of authority, which are vested in leaders, rational-legal authority is invested in legalities, procedures, rules, and bureaucracies and thus rendered impersonal. Part of what makes such authority attractive, *ergo* legitimate, in the modern world is that the impersonal nature of these rules creates an odd sense of equality. Even substantively unequal rules may take on an egalitarian cast when they are promulgated in impersonal form, since it suggests that the same rules apply to everyone. Laws of war and rules of trade are legitimated in part because everyone plays by the same rules, even the powerful, even the unipole. This is what makes such rules potentially attractive and legitimate to others. However, such rules also diminish the unipole’s discretion, and by implication, its power. Of course, there are a great many ways in which impersonal rules can create unequal outcomes, and often inequality occurs by the design of the unipole. Unipoles, after all, write many of the system’s impersonal rules. It is no accident that current systemic rules demand open markets and free trade; they are rules that benefit strong economies like the US. My point is that unequal outcomes created by impersonal rule are more legitimate in contemporary politics than inequality created by a particularized or ad hoc decree of the powerful. It is more legitimate to say, “Only countries that have stabilized their economies may borrow from the International Monetary Fund (IMF),” than to say, “Only countries the US likes may borrow from the IMF.”

Living according to general, impersonal rules circumscribes unipole behavior in several ways, however. Unipoles have difficulty claiming they are exempt from the rules they expect to bind others. The US has difficulty demanding human rights protections and respect for due process from other states when it does not abide consistently by these same rules. Impersonal rules may require short-term sacrifices of interests. This might be worthwhile for long-term gains but

institutionalization makes it harder for unipoles to have their cake and eat it; institutionalization decreases room for unipole opportunism. For example, by institutionalizing power in the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Dispute Settlement Body, the US implicitly agreed to lose sometimes (often this has occurred at inconvenient times, such as during the steel tariff flap that preceded the 2004 elections).<sup>26</sup> Not accepting decisions against itself would undermine the institution that the US helped create. Locked-in rules and institutions also may not keep up with changes in unipole interests. Unipoles may construct one set of impersonal rules and institutions that serve long-term interests as calculated at time  $t_1$  but find these less useful at time  $t_2$  if interests have changed. Both of these effects of institutions have been extensively studied.<sup>27</sup>

Less well studied is another feature of rational-legal authority: the expansionary dynamic built into all bureaucracies and formal organizations. This, too, can dilute unipole control. Like other large public bureaucracies, international organizations are usually created with broad mandates derived from very general shared goals and principles. The UN is charged with securing world peace; the IMF is supposed to stabilize member economies and promote economic growth; and the World Bank pursues "a world free from poverty." These institutions are legitimated by broad aspirations and principles. At the same time, such breadth sits uneasily with the much narrower actual mandates and capabilities of the organizations, which are given few resources and are hamstrung by restrictions. Over time, broad mandates tend to put pressure on the constrained structures. Efforts by staff, constituents, and interested states to ensure that these organizations actually do their job have, over time, expanded the size and scope of most international institutions far beyond the intention of their creators. The IMF and the World Bank now intrude into minute details of

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, "Bush Ditches Steel Import Duties," *BBC News*, December 4, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3291537.stm>; and "Steel Tariffs Spark International Trade Battle," *NewsHour*, November 17, 2003, [www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/july-dec03/steel\\_11-17.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/july-dec03/steel_11-17.html) (accessed February 27, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Krasner's discussion of "institutional lag" was an early and particularly clear statement of this problem. Stephen Krasner, "Regimes and the Limits of Realism: Regimes as Autonomous Variables," in Krasner, *International Regimes*.

borrowers' societies and economies in ways explicitly rejected by states at the founding of these organizations.<sup>28</sup> The UN's peace-building apparatus now reconstitutes entire states – from their laws and constitution to their economy and security apparatus.<sup>29</sup> These sweeping powers were not envisioned when the UN was created. Unipoles can usually stop such expansion if they strongly object, but to the extent international organizations (IOs) can persuade other states and publics of the value of their activities, objections by the unipole are costly. More fundamentally, IOs are often able to persuade unipoles of the utility and rightness of an expanded scope of action. International organizations can set agendas for unipoles and reshape goals and the sense of what is possible or desirable. They can appeal directly to publics in unipole states for support, creating domestic constituencies for their actions and domestic costs for opposing or damaging them. For example, Americans generally like the UN and would prefer to act with it in Iraq and elsewhere, as recent polling consistently showed.<sup>30</sup> NGOs have also mobilized around IO agendas such as the Millennium Development Goals or Jubilee 2000, and have proven powerful at

<sup>28</sup> Sidney Dell, "On Being Grandmotherly: The Evolution of IMF Conditionality," *Essays in International Finance* 144 (Princeton: International Finance Section, Department of Economics, Princeton University, 1981); Harold James, "From Grandmotherliness to Governance: The Evolution of IMF Conditionality," *Finance and Development* 35 (December 1998), available online at [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/1998/12/james.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/1998/12/james.htm) (accessed February 27, 2008); and James, *International Monetary Cooperation*, esp. 78–84 and 322–335.

<sup>29</sup> Chuck Call and Michael Barnett, "Looking for a Few Good Cops: Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding, and CIVPOL," *International Peacekeeping* 6 (Winter 1999): 43–68.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, polls showing that in January 2003 Americans thought it was "necessary" to get UN approval for an invasion of Iraq, by a margin of more than 2:1 (67 percent to 29 percent), and that in June/July 2003, seven in ten Americans said that the US should be willing to put the entire Iraq operation under the UN, with joint decision making, if other countries were willing to contribute troops. Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), "PIPA-Knowledge Networks Poll: Americans On Iraq and the UN Inspections," January 21–16, 2003, question 12, [www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/IraqUNInsp1\\_Jan03/IraqUNInsp1%20Jan03%20quaire.pdf](http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/IraqUNInsp1_Jan03/IraqUNInsp1%20Jan03%20quaire.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2008) and Program on International Policy Attitudes, "Public Favors Putting Iraq Operations Under UN if Other Countries Will Contribute Troops," July 11–20, 2003, [www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/Iraq-Jul03/Iraq%20Jul03%20pr.pdf](http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/Iraq-Jul03/Iraq%20Jul03%20pr.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2008).

creating costs and benefits that induce even powerful states to pursue them.<sup>31</sup>

Loss of control over the institutions it creates is thus not simply a problem of poor oversight on the part of the US or any other modern unipole. It is not simply a principal-agent problem or a case of IOs run amok. Institutionalizing power in rational-legal authorities changes the social structure of the system in fundamental ways. It creates alternatives to the unipole and, indeed, to states as sources of authoritative rule making and judgment. It creates non-state actors that not only make rules that bind the powerful, but that also become influential actors in their own right with some degree of autonomy from their creators. Sometimes IOs exercise this power in a purely regulative way, making rules to coordinate interstate cooperation, but often they do much more. To carry out their mandates, these international organizations must and do exercise power that is both generative and transformative of world politics. As authorities, IOs can construct new goals for actors, such as poverty alleviation, good governance, and human rights protection, which become accepted by publics and leaders even in strong states – including unipoles. They can constitute new actors, such as election monitors and weapons inspectors, which become consequential in politics even among powerful states. Understanding unipolar politics requires some understanding of the influence and internal logic of the institutions in which power has been vested and their often unforeseen transformative and generative potential in the international system.

### Ideals, interests, and hypocrisy

Social structures of legitimation, including international organizations, law, and rules, do more than simply diffuse power away from the unipole. They can trap and punish as well. Unipoles often feel the constraints of the legitimation structures they themselves have created. One common behavioral manifestation of these constraints is hypocrisy. Actors inconvenienced by social rules often resort to

<sup>31</sup> For an empirical exploration of the mechanisms by which IO expansion may be fueled by broad mandates and normative claims, see Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*.



hypocrisy: they proclaim adherence to rules or values while violating them in pursuit of other goals.

Why is hypocrisy a problem in the international realm? After all, hypocrisy is usually associated with public masking of private immorality while international politics is claimed by many to be a realm in which morality has little role.<sup>32</sup> If true, no one should care much about hypocrisy; but accusations of hypocrisy are not meaningless in international politics and actors do not treat them as inconsequential. Charges of hypocrisy are often leveled at state leaders by both their own publics and by other states, and leaders respond to the accusations. Even a seemingly technical area like trade politics has been rife with such charges as continued protection and subsidy of US farmers sits uneasily with the drumbeat of US calls for other countries to liberalize.<sup>33</sup> So what is the problem, exactly?

Hypocrisy is a double-edged sword in politics. It is both dangerous and essential. On the one hand, unrestrained hypocrisy undermines the legitimacy of power; it undermines the willingness of others to accept or defer to the actions of the powerful. There are several ways to think about this. One might be to define hypocrisy simply as saying one thing while doing another. This minimizes the moral or normative component of hypocrisy in that it eschews judgments about the virtue of the various things we are saying or doing. What matters is not the virtue of what we say or the venality of what we do, but rather the fact that the two are inconsistent. This approach has the advantage of reducing morality to things international relations (IR) scholars know how to study – promise keeping and trust – both of which are valued primarily because they serve self-interest. This would probably be the most common approach to hypocrisy in IR, drawing as it does from microeconomics and economic notions of interest.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Variants on this position permeate realist thinking going back to Thucydides. For overviews see Steven Forde, "Classical Realism," and Jack Donnelly, "Twentieth Century Realism," both in Terry Nardin and David Mapel, eds., *Traditions of International Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 62–84 and 85–111.

<sup>33</sup> Mlada Bukovansky, "Yes, Minister: The Politics of Hypocrisy in the World Trade Organization" (paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, San Diego, CA, March 22–25, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Oliver Williamson, "Credible Commitments: Using Hostages to Support Exchange," *American Economic Review* 73 (September 1983): 519–540; Oliver Williamson, *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism: Firms,*

Seen as such, hypocrisy is a problem for at least two reasons. First, it interferes with credible commitments and entails reputation costs. Saying one thing and doing another shows that the state in question is not trustworthy. If a unipole proclaims X but does Y (or says that it is not bound by X), others will not trust future proclamations or commitments. A second problem might be that hypocrisy is a symptom of difficulties in forgoing short-term gains for long-term interests. Over the long term a state wants outcome X, but in the short term opportunities for benefits from Y are tempting, so a state proclaims X but does Y. Political institutions sometimes structure incentives that encourage such myopia, as when electoral systems encourage leaders to heavily discount the future because those leaders will not have to deal with costs incurred after their terms are over. Both of these problems, credibility and myopia, are well understood in IR but both minimize the problem posed by hypocrisy. Hypocrisy produces bad (or at least suboptimal) outcomes that punish the hypocrite as much as anyone else. Hypocrisy is stupid from this perspective, but it is not immoral or evil.

Promise breaking and short-sightedness are certainly common and consequential, but they by no means exhaust the damage hypocrisy can do. When foreign leaders and publics react to hypocrisy, they usually bring a much richer fund of moral condemnation. Hypocrisy is more

*Markets, and Relational Contracting* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Diego Gambetta, ed., *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Oliver Williamson, "Calculative, Trust, and Economic Organization," *Journal of Law and Economics* 36 (April 1993): 483–486. The IR literature drawing on these economic notions is extensive. See, for example, Brett Ashley Leeds, "Domestic Political Institutions, Credible Commitments, and International Cooperation," *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (October 1999): 979–1002; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (Summer 1995): 379–414; Lisa Martin, *Democratic Commitments: Legislatures and International Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Beth A. Simmons, "International Law and State Behavior: Commitment and Compliance in International Monetary Affairs," *American Political Science Review* 94 (December 2000): 819–835; and Jon Pevehouse, "Democratization, Credible Commitments, and International Organizations," in Daniel Drezner, ed., *Locating the Proper Authorities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 25–48. Note that even this very thin notion of hypocrisy (as promise breaking) cannot be analyzed without attention to social structure. *Pacta sunt servanda* is a social norm that is obtained only in some social contexts and often must be painstakingly constructed among actors.

than mere inconsistency of deeds with words. Hypocrisy involves deeds that are inconsistent with particular kinds of words – proclamations of moral value and virtue. States often make such proclamations as a means of legitimating their policies and power. Unipoles, which aspire to lead, perhaps do this more than other states because they need legitimacy more than most. Certainly the United States, with its notions of “American exceptionalism,” has a long history of moralistic justifications for its power and policies. International institutions, often created by unipoles and extensions of unipolar power, are also prone to such proclamations. The UN, the World Bank, and the IMF all work hard to legitimate themselves with claims for the moral virtue of what they do – pursuing peace, defending human rights, alleviating poverty. When their actions do not match their rhetoric, states and IOs may get off lightly and be seen only as incompetent. But when others doubt the intent and sincerity of these actors, accusations escalate from mere incompetence to deceit and hypocrisy.

Failure to conform to the values and norms that legitimate power and policies is not only counterproductive for particular policies: it is also perceived by others as providing information about character and identity. We despise and condemn hypocrites because they try to deceive us: they pretend to be better than they are. Hypocrisy leads others to question the authenticity of an actor’s (in this case, a unipole’s) moral commitments but also its moral constitution and character. Actors want reputations for more than just promise keeping. They may seek reputations for virtue, generosity, piety, resolve, lawfulness, and a host of other values. A unipole might cultivate such a reputation simply because it is useful. Such a reputation enhances trust, increases deference, and makes the unipole’s position more legitimate, more secure, and more powerful. However, if reputations are perceived to be cultivated only for utility, those reputations are weak and of limited value. Reputations must be perceived as heartfelt to convince others of their weight. Sincerity is the antidote to hypocrisy.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Sincerity is not a perfect antidote. In individuals sincerity does not completely solve problems of rationalization and self-deceit. Hypocrites know their action to be wrong, but often deal with this discomfort, not by changing behavior but shifting their beliefs. Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 58. In collectivities, like states, the practice of

Demonstrating the sincerity necessary to legitimate power often requires the powerful to sacrifice and pay for the promotion or protection of shared values. Power legitimated by its service to and love of democracy must be used to promote and protect democracy, even when democracy is inconvenient or costly. Installation of authoritarian or non-representative governments that happen to be friendly or accommodating by an actor that proclaims its love of democracy, smacks of hypocrisy. Power legitimated by its love of human rights must be brought to bear on violators of those rights, even when those violators may be strategic allies. Failure to do so raises doubts about the sincerity of the powerful and spawns reluctance to defer to policies of that state.

Thus, hypocrisy has three elements. First, the actor's actions are at odds with its proclaimed values. Second, alternative actions are available. Third, the actor is likely trying to deceive others about the mismatch between its actions and values (obviously, to admit up front that one's values are empty rhetoric would be to forfeit any respect or legitimacy associated with invoking those values).<sup>36</sup> Observers will differ in their judgment about whether all of these elements apply in a given case. What looks like deceit or a break with values to one observer may not appear so to others. What constitutes a viable alternative may similarly be a matter of dispute. Like many things in social life, acts of hypocrisy vary in both degree and kind. The price paid by the accused hypocrite will thus vary as well. It could range from public criticism and difficult-to-measure reductions in respect and deference to more concrete withdrawal of support, such as refusal to endorse or contribute resources to an actor's proposed policy. To illustrate, it is worth considering three recent cases in which the contemporary unipole, the US, has been charged with hypocrisy and the ways in which such charges may (or may not) have hampered its leadership abilities.

reformulating goals or values to fit behavior is at least as common. Nils Brunsson, *The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions, and Actions in Organizations*, trans. Nancy Adler (New York: Wiley, 1989); and Catherine Weaver, *Hypocrisy Trap: The Rhetoric, Reality and Reform of the World Bank* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne Dovi offers a more detailed list of criteria for discerning what she calls "political hypocrisy" in "Making the World Safe for Hypocrisy?" *Polity* 34 (Autumn 2001): 3–30, 16.

*Iraq sanctions and the Oil for Food program*

Marc Lynch's analysis of the Iraq sanctions regime illustrates several aspects of the dangers hypocrisy poses for unipoles. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the UN, at US urging, imposed economic sanctions to pressure the Iraqi regime to withdraw and, following the 1991 US-led military action, to disarm and comply with UN resolutions. Widespread publicity about the humanitarian costs of the sanctions quickly came to threaten their legitimacy, however. The UN's own inspection team reported in 1991 that the Iraqi people faced a humanitarian "catastrophe," including epidemic and famine.<sup>37</sup> The Oil for Food program, proposed by the US, was supposed to restore the sanctions' legitimacy. Authorized by UN resolution 986 in April 1995 and subsequently administered by the UN, the program allowed Iraq to sell limited amounts of oil (such sales having been banned under the sanctions) provided that the revenues were used to purchase humanitarian goods such as food and medicines.

The moral character of the critique of the sanctions (that they caused suffering of innocents) invited, perhaps required, a policy response billed as moral and humanitarian. The Oil for Food program was thus trumpeted as a moral action: it was designed to alleviate suffering caused by US and UN policies. Once implemented, though, a policy justified on moral grounds is scrutinized by others for moral effects. The media, NGOs, and activists monitored implementation of the program and were not shy about publicizing its failures. Reports of widespread civilian suffering, rising infant mortality, and increasing civilian death rates sparked opposition to the policy in the publics of the lead sanctioning states. Denunciation of the program by its UN coordinator, Denis Halliday, followed by his resignation, fueled the criticism both outside the UN and within it.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> United Nations, "Report on Humanitarian Needs in Iraq in the Immediate Post-crisis Environment by a Mission to the Area Led by the Under Secretary General for Administration and Management, 10–17 March 1991," also known as the Ahtisaari Report, March 20, 1991, [www.un.org/Depts/oip/background/reports/s22366.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/oip/background/reports/s22366.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> "Middle East UN Official Blasts Iraq Sanctions," *BBC News*, September 30, 1998, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/183499.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/183499.stm) (accessed February 28, 2008).

The failure of Oil for Food to deliver humanitarian outcomes, compounded by the rampant (and much publicized) corruption that riddled the program, destroyed the legitimacy of the policy. Violations of the sanctions regime for private enrichment were not understood as “promise breaking” or credible commitment problems; they were not mere inconsistencies between the words and deeds of sanctioning governments. Rather, humanitarian suffering compounded by widespread profiteering and corruption of the sanctions program by Western businesses, with varying degrees of complicity by their governments and UN officials, became a moral issue in part because the program had been sold in those terms. Returning to the three criteria, while failure of the program to reduce suffering might (or might not) have been excused as incompetence, the profiteering and corruption were clearly at odds with the sanctioners’ proclaimed virtuous values. Alternative actions (sanctions without corruption) were possible, and a variety of actors including governments were trying to cover up their self-serving actions. Exposure of this kind of hypocrisy made the motives of the sanctioners suspect and made it difficult for the US in particular to create legitimacy for any policy on Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

### *Intervention in Kosovo*

Reactions to the US-led intervention in Kosovo also illustrate the ways in which the three elements of hypocrisy (mismatched words and actions, available alternative actions, and attempts to dissemble or deceive) can corrode legitimacy of a unipole’s action. In 1999, at US urging, NATO launched airstrikes against Serb targets in Kosovo. The goal was to stop violent repression of ethnic Albanians and force the Serbian government back to the negotiating table. Again, the intervention was justified as a humanitarian action: military force was needed to protect civilians from violence at the hands of the Milosevic regime (whose record of atrocities no one disputed). Accusations of hypocrisy

<sup>39</sup> Marc Lynch, “Lie to Me: Sanctions on Iraq, Moral Argument and the International Politics of Hypocrisy,” in Richard Price, ed., *Moral Limit and Possibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).

came on two grounds. First, while sympathetic to its moral aims, most observers viewed the action as plainly contrary to international law. The UN Security Council did not authorize NATO's use of force, as the charter requires. The US could have simply stated that the charter and the law in this situation were flawed and moral concerns trumped law. Moral concerns, not legality, could have been called upon to legitimate the intervention policy in this case. Instead, the US tried to have it both ways – to make the intervention both virtuous and legal. For example, Secretary of State Albright claimed that “NATO will, in all cases, act in accordance with the principles of the UN [c]harter.”<sup>40</sup> President Clinton framed the Kosovo action not only as consistent with the UN charter but also as an exemplar of UN effectiveness.<sup>41</sup> The charter's explicit prohibition against unauthorized uses of force was swept under the rug. So one potential hypocrisy problem involved an attempt to misrepresent the legality of the intervention by minimizing the profound legal issues it raised. As a result, US professions to value international law and the UN were questioned.<sup>42</sup>

A second potential hypocrisy problem (and a much-criticized aspect of the intervention) involved the execution of the intervention and whether it was actually designed with the well-being of Kosovar

<sup>40</sup> Madeleine Albright, “NATO: Preparing for the Washington Summit,” *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* (December 1998), statement prepared for the North Atlantic Council, Brussels, Belgium, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1584/is\\_11\\_9/ai\\_53706253](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1584/is_11_9/ai_53706253) (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> “In the last year alone, we have seen abundant evidence of the ways in which the United Nations benefits America and the world. The United Nations is the primary multilateral forum to press for international human rights and lead governments to improve their relations with their neighbors and their own people. As we saw during the Kosovo conflict, and more recently with regard to East Timor, the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and mass murder can find no refuge in the United Nations and no source of comfort in its charter.” See William J. Clinton, “United Nations Day, 1999: A Proclamation by the President of the United States,” October 24, 1999, available at <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1999/10/1999-10-24-proclamation-on-united-nations-day.html>. Similarly, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger stated within a single interview that UNSC Resolution 1199 gave the US “all the international authority that we need here to act” but at the same time argued that “NATO cannot be a hostage to the United Nations” and had the authority to act in Kosovo without it. See his interview with Margaret Warner, *NewsHour*, October 2, 1998, [www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec98/berger\\_10-2.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec98/berger_10-2.html) (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Dovi, “Making the World Safe.”

Albanians as its foremost goal. Most conspicuously, NATO's use of high altitude bombing against Serb positions appeared to many observers as designed to minimize casualties to NATO pilots rather than Kosovar civilians. At such high altitudes, the accuracy of NATO bombs was diminished. Suspicions about ostensibly humanitarian motives deepened when it was discovered that the US and Britain had used cluster bombs in their attacks on the city of Nis. Cluster bombs, by their nature, are indiscriminate in their effects and so may violate laws of war when used in civilian areas.<sup>43</sup> Again, the problem here was that the intervention was justified as a humanitarian action. Consequently, the US action invited judgment on those terms. Civilian casualties, by themselves, need not have compromised the mission's legitimacy. It was the fact that alternative actions were available (more precise bombing from lower altitudes, different weapons) that raised questions about US sincerity as a humanitarian actor.<sup>44</sup>

### *Democracy promotion and Palestinian elections*

Democracy promotion provides another example of the dynamics of hypocrisy at work. Claims to spread democracy have figured prominently in the US's efforts to legitimate its power and win support for what might otherwise be viewed as illegitimate interference in the domestic affairs of other states. Spreading democracy can be risky though. If you let people vote, you might not like the results, and if you take action against the victors when you promoted freedom to choose, you look hypocritical. This has happened more than once in recent decades. US actions to topple elected governments in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Chile (1973), and Nicaragua (1980s) come to mind.

Democracy promotion took on new force after the end of the Cold War, however, and has been a particular hallmark of the George W. Bush administration. Following 9/11, democracy promotion in the Middle East was central to the US's security strategy in that region. It provided one rationale for the Iraq War and was also a

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign*, February 7, 2000, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/nato/index.htm> (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Dovi, "Making the World Safe."



prominent (and not always welcome) demand by the US in its dealings with non-democratic states.<sup>45</sup> When Palestinians held their first presidential elections in January 2005, the United States applauded and held them up as exemplars to neighboring states.<sup>46</sup> But when Palestinians later held internationally monitored legislative elections (in 2006) and Hamas won 74 of the 132 seats (as compared to Fatah's 45), the US faced a dilemma. Hamas is viewed as a terrorist organization by the administration (indeed, it is formally listed as such by the US Department of State), yet it had been freely chosen by Palestinian voters despite US efforts to bolster support for Fatah.<sup>47</sup> To reject the election outcome outright would undercut a centerpiece of the administration's policy in the region (democracy promotion). On the other hand, to accept Hamas jeopardized another of the administration's central values, fighting terrorism. The resulting policy tried to square this circle by cutting off direct aid to the Palestinian Authority while leaving intact funding for humanitarian projects run through NGOs and international organizations.<sup>48</sup>

Reactions to US policy in this case varied among audiences, but focusing on the three elements of hypocrisy helps pinpoint the nature of disagreement. The second criterion, availability of an alternative policy, is perhaps the most interesting here because it reveals a central and common aspect of our judgments about hypocrisy. In this case, the US had made two conflicting proclamations of values. On the one hand, it wanted to spread democracy and support elections. On the other hand, it abhorred terrorism and judged Hamas to be a terrorist organization. In this view, Hamas' electoral victory presented a "tragic

<sup>45</sup> For democracy as a rationale for the Iraq War, see Bush's radio address of March 1, 2003, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030301.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030301.html) (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks at the American University in Cairo," June 20, 2005, [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm) (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Steven Erlanger, "U.S. Spent \$1.9 Million to Aid Fatah in Palestinian Elections," *New York Times*, January 23, 2006, A11.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Morro, "U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians," *Congressional Research Service*, October 9, 2007, <http://italy.usembassy.gov/pdf/other/RS22370.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2008). See also "Overview of EU Relations with the Palestinians," on the European Commission Technical Assistance Office for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip's website at [www.delwbg.cec.eu.int/en/eu\\_and\\_palestine/overview.htm#1](http://www.delwbg.cec.eu.int/en/eu_and_palestine/overview.htm#1) (accessed February 28, 2008).

choice” in which the US was forced to choose between two deeply held values. From the administration’s perspective there was no “non-hypocritical” alternative: whatever the US did would betray a core value.

Variation in judgments about US hypocrisy hinged on the degree to which observers shared the US’s core values and recognized the conflict between them. Palestinians, not surprisingly, saw no value conflict, *ergo*, great hypocrisy.<sup>49</sup> They saw a clear alternative: support the legitimately elected Hamas government. Europeans were more sympathetic. They shared both US values and were caught in a similar dilemma but were quicker to publicly recognize the irony (if not hypocrisy) of their position.<sup>50</sup> Some US domestic actors also recognized the dilemma, but saw alternatives to the full cut-off of aid, and were correspondingly critical of US policy.<sup>51</sup>

Judgments about hypocrisy thus can and should vary, and costs to the potential hypocrite will vary accordingly. Hypocrisy involves proclaiming some virtue then engaging in blameworthy behavior contrary to public proclamations. If the behavior is unmitigated

<sup>49</sup> “It would come as no surprise to us if this letter were to be met with dismissal, in keeping with this administration’s policy of not dealing with ‘terrorists,’ despite the fact that we entered the democratic process and held a unilateral ceasefire of our own for over two years. But how do you think the Arab and Muslim worlds react to this American hypocrisy?” Open letter from Hamas Senior Political Advisor to Rice, December 2007, [www.prospectsforpeace.com/Resources/Ahmad.Yousef.Letter.to.\\_Condoleezza.Rice.pdf](http://www.prospectsforpeace.com/Resources/Ahmad.Yousef.Letter.to._Condoleezza.Rice.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, comments by Italy’s Foreign Minister, Massimo D’Alema, recognizing the contradiction in EU policy, acknowledging that Mahmud Abbas had been correct in his fears about the election outcome, and expressing concern about “a certain ‘democratic fundamentalism’” that equates elections with democracy without regard to context. “Italian Foreign Minister Comments on Israel, U.S., Iraq, Iran,” *BBC Monitoring Europe*, May 22, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the *New York Times* (February 15, 2006) editorial in which it recognizes that the US “cannot possibly give political recognition or financial aid to such a government” but condemns the administration’s policy as “deliberate destabilization.” “Set aside the hypocrisy such a course would represent on the part of the two countries that have shouted the loudest about the need for Arab democracy, and consider the probable impact of such an approach on the Palestinians.” The *Times* called for less provocative policies. See “The Right Way to Pressure Hamas,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2006, [www.nytimes.com/2006/02/15/opinion/15wed1.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/15/opinion/15wed1.html) (accessed February 28, 2008).

vice – gratuitous torture (cruelty) or private enrichment at public expense (greed or venality) – then charges of hypocrisy are easy to make and appropriately damaging. But what about cases in which apparently blameworthy behavior is, in another light, justified by a different virtue? What happens when proclaimed virtues demand conflicting action? What about cases in which, for example, we torture prisoners and violate their human rights in an effort to secure the country against future terrorist attacks? If protecting the country and respecting individual rights come into conflict, we do not really want leaders to say, “We don’t care about rights” or “We don’t care about security.” We want them to continue to value both and proclaim those values publicly, even if they cannot or will not reconcile them.

Hypocrisy provides one means to do this. It allows actors to espouse, often loudly, some dearly held value but to carry out policies that are not entirely consistent with that value and may even undercut it. We often condemn such action as hypocrisy and it may well be so. Such action may be motivated by duplicitous impulses, but when it is prompted at least in part by value conflict, some sympathy may be in order. The alternatives to this type of hypocrisy are often much less attractive. Denying that value conflicts exist and imposing some kind of ideology of certitude that allows no room for doubt or debate is hardly a promising solution. Certainly this has been tried. Ideological purists tend not to produce happy politics, however. Maintaining such purity in practice requires a great deal of repression and violence. Such fervent ideological commitment also tends to breed its own forms of hypocrisy since purity is hard to maintain in lived lives. Another alternative to hypocrisy is constant exposure of hypocrisy to public scrutiny – anti-hypocrisy. This is more attractive and, indeed, can be a very useful device for keeping hypocrites on several sides of a public debate in check and somewhat honest. But exposing all policies as hypocrisies all the time breeds cynicism and antipathy to politics. It undermines public trust and social capital in a host of ways, delegitimizing the political system overall.<sup>52</sup> Hypocrisy, it seems, is something we cannot live with but cannot live without.

Effective leadership often requires hypocrisy of this kind, hypocrisy that balances conflicting values. Forging common goals and policies

<sup>52</sup> Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, has a nice discussion of hypocrites and antihypocrites in ch. 2.

that will receive broad acquiescence or even allegiance is what leaders do, but that requires compromise and a delicate balancing of conflicting values. To the extent that unipoles seek to lead rather than dictate and coerce, this type of hypocrisy must be central to their policies. Indeed, in the case of unipoles, this type of hypocrisy is often expected and even appreciated by foreign leaders and publics as necessary for the maintenance of international order and stability. If the United States truly pursued its democracy-promotion agenda with single-minded commitment, many would perceive it as tyrannical or reckless and unfit to continue to lead the rest of the world.<sup>53</sup> Elections are means to peaceful, humane, self-determining polities; they are not ends in themselves. Elections that trigger wars, civil wars, and mass violence may be self-defeating. Promoting elections without regard to context or consequences would hardly be a moral or virtuous policy.

Double talk is the bread and butter of any politician or political leader. Saying one thing while doing another, at least sometimes, is essential in public life and no polity could survive without a great deal of such inconsistency. There are simply too many values conflicting in too many places to maintain consistency. Balancing inconsistent values need not be a vice at all. Indeed, it is an essential skill. Labels for inconsistency between values and policy are not always pejorative. Hypocrisy has a number of close relatives that most of us like. Compromise, an important virtue in politics (especially liberal politics), sits uneasily close to it. Diplomacy, an essential component of a peaceful system, all but demands hypocrisy – and in large doses. Leadership, too, demands a significant divorce of rhetoric and policy to succeed. Unipoles, and sovereign states more generally, are not unusual in being organized hypocrisies. Virtually all politics, from the local PTA to the international system, organizes hypocrisy in important ways to survive and function. Organizing hypocrisy is a central social task for all social organizations and a crucial one for political organizations.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to Amir Stepak for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>54</sup> Brunsson, *Organization of Hypocrisy*; and Krasner, *Sovereignty*. Note that hypocrisy in organizations is somewhat different from our common notions about hypocrisy in individuals. For a more extended discussion of Brunsson's original concept and Krasner's use of it, see Michael Lipson "Peacekeeping: Organized Hypocrisy?" *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (March 2007): 5–34.

Hypocrisy thus pervades international politics. It is a problem for any actor seeking to legitimate power domestically or internationally. Its effects are compounded, however, in the case of unipoles. Unipoles aspire to lead other states and, perhaps, establish an institutionalized international order. They therefore make more and more sweeping claims about the public-interest character of their policies. The assertiveness and intrusiveness of their policies into the lives of others makes their actions “public” and of public concern in unique ways. Consequently, they need legitimacy more than other states and are more vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy than others. This is probably a good thing. Great power deserves great scrutiny.

It suggests, however, that successful unipoles need strategies for managing inevitable hypocrisy – strategies that involve some combination of social strength (i.e., deep legitimacy) and sympathy among potential accusers with the values conflict that prompts unipole hypocrisy. If the unipole (or any actor) has great legitimacy and others believe deeply in the value claims that legitimate its power, they may simply overlook or excuse a certain amount of hypocrisy, even of a venal kind. Many countries for many years have accepted US and European protectionism in agriculture because they valued deeply the larger free-trade system supported by them.<sup>55</sup> “Good,” or legitimate, unipoles get some slack. Others may tolerate hypocrisy if they can be persuaded that it flows from a trade-off among shared values, not just from convenience or opportunism of the unipole. Agreement to violate one value, sovereignty, to promote others, security and justice, by toppling a sitting government member of the UN was easy to come by in the case of Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. Other states were convinced that this was a necessary value trade-off. Conversely, side agreements protecting US troops from International Criminal Court prosecution look self-serving since other troops receive no such protection.

## **Conclusion**

The strength of a unipolar system depends heavily on the unipole’s material capabilities as well as the social system in which unipolarity is embedded. Unipoles can shape that system at least to some degree.

<sup>55</sup> Bukovansky, “Yes, Minister.”

They can portray themselves as champions of universal values that appeal to other states and other publics. They can invest in the building of norms or institutions in which they believe and from which they will benefit. The US was remarkably effective at this in the years following World War Two. Within its own sphere of influence under bipolarity, the US was a vocal (if not always consistent) proponent of freedom, democracy, and human rights. It built an extended institutional architecture designed to shape global politics in ways that both served its interests and propagated its values. So successful was the US at legitimating and institutionalizing its power that, by the time the Berlin Wall fell, other models of political and economic organization had largely disappeared. The US-favored liberal model of free markets and democracy became the model of choice for states around the world not through overt US coercion, but in significant part because states and publics had accepted it as the best (*ergo* most legitimate) way to run a country.

Constructing a social system that legitimates preferred values can grease the wheels of unipolar power by inducing cooperation or at least acquiescence from others, but legitimacy's assistance comes at a price. The process by which a unipole's power is legitimated fundamentally alters the social fabric of politics. Successful legitimation persuades people that the unipole will serve some set of values. Those persuaded may include publics in the unipolar state, foreign states and publics, and even decision makers in the unipole itself. Legitimacy can thus constrain unipoles, creating resistance to policies deemed illegitimate. Voters may punish leaders at the next election; allies may withhold support for favored policies. But legitimacy can also have a more profound effect – it can change what unipoles want. To the extent that unipole leaders and publics are sincere, they will conform to legitimacy standards because they believe in them. Institutionalizing power similarly changes the political playing field. It creates new authoritative actors (intergovernmental organizations) that make rules, create programs, and make decisions based on the values they embody – values given to them in no small part by the unipole.

Legitimacy is invaluable to unipoles. Creating a robust international order is all but impossible without it and unipoles will bend over backward to secure it since great power demands great legitimacy. At the same time, service to the values that legitimate its power and institutions may be inconvenient for unipoles; examples of

hypocritical behavior are never hard to find among the powerful. Hypocrisy varies in degree and kind, however, and the price a unipole pays for it will vary accordingly. Simple opportunism will be appropriately condemned by those who judge a unipole's actions, but other kinds of hypocrisy may provoke more mixed reactions. Like any social system, the one constructed by a unipole is bound to contain contradictions. Tragic choices created by conflict among widely shared values will be unavoidable and may evoke some sympathy. Balancing these contradictions and maintaining the legitimacy of its power requires at least as much attention from a unipole as building armies or bank accounts.

# 4

## *Alliances in a unipolar world*

STEPHEN M. WALT

An alliance (or alignment) is a formal (or informal) commitment for security cooperation between two or more states, intended to augment each member's power, security, and/or influence. Although the precise arrangements embodied in different alliances vary enormously, the essential element in a meaningful alliance is a commitment for mutual support against some external actor(s). Because these arrangements affect both the capabilities that national leaders can expect to draw upon and the opposition they must prepare to face, alliances are always a key feature of the international landscape and should play an important role in the calculations of any foreign policy decision maker.<sup>1</sup>

The advent of unipolarity has had profound effects on the nature of contemporary alliances. A preponderance of power in the hands of a single state – in this case, the United States – had never before occurred in the modern era. Because the gross distribution of capabilities helps identify both possible sources of threat and the potential allies that might be recruited to deal with them, the condition of unipolarity inevitably shapes the alliance choices that are available to different states. A unipolar distribution of capabilities will also influence bargaining within contemporary alliances, based on the relative strength of different actors and the alliance options available to each.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Modelski regards *alliance* as “one of the dozen or so key terms in international politics,” and Hans Morgenthau refers to alliances as a “necessary function of the balance of power operating in a multi-state system.” See Modelski, “The Study of Alliances: A Review,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 7 (April 1963); and Morgenthau, “Alliances in Theory and Practice,” in Arnold Wolfers, ed., *Alliance Policy and the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive analysis of the effects of system structure on alliance politics is Glenn W. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Snyder analyzes both multipolar and bipolar systems but does not address unipolarity.



These insights – drawn from the realist tradition in international relations theory – imply that the emergence of unipolarity in the aftermath of the Cold War was bound to affect both the membership of different alliance networks and the nature of relations within them. Given that realist theories focus on how political actors compete for security in the absence of an overarching central authority, they remain relevant to understanding how unipolarity emerged and what its characteristic features will be.<sup>3</sup> The current unipolar structure is itself the product of four decades of relentless competition between the United States and the Soviet Union; further, the arrival of unipolarity did not bring an end to interstate security competition. US primacy falls well short of global hegemony, which means that major powers must continue to worry about security issues and take steps to guarantee it, either alone or in concert with others. Certain structural constraints may be looser in unipolarity – especially for the unipole itself – but realism remains relevant both as an element of the explanation for the emergence of unipolarity and as a tool for understanding its dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

Yet there is no consensus on the overall impact that unipolarity will have on contemporary international alliances, in part because it is a novel condition in world politics. The implications of unipolarity have yet to receive sustained theoretical attention; there are after all only eighteen or so years of history on which to base any evaluation of our conjectures.<sup>5</sup> Some writers believe unipolarity heralds the dissolution of NATO and other Cold War-era alliances, whereas others

<sup>3</sup> On the core elements of the realist tradition, see Stephen M. Walt, “The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition,” in Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, eds., *Political Science: State of the Discipline III* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> On realism’s ability to account for the end of the Cold War, see William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 19 (Winter 1994–1995).

<sup>5</sup> The most sophisticated theoretical statement is William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24 (Summer 1999). Other useful analyses include G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); David Malone and Yuen Foong Khong, eds., *Unilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy: International Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003); and T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

predict that the other major powers are likely to draw closer together in an effort to contain the overwhelming power of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Another view suggests that the remaining medium powers lack the capacity to balance the overwhelming power of the United States and that any attempt to construct an anti-US coalition would face insurmountable dilemmas of collective action.<sup>7</sup> This last group of authors suggests that other states, instead of balancing US power, are more likely to bandwagon with it. Yet another line of argument maintains that today's medium and lesser powers will align with the United States not because they fear US power but because they are primarily concerned with regional threats and want to use US power to deal with them.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter seeks to advance the discussion by presenting a theoretical analysis of alliance formation in unipolarity. In a world with a single global superpower, how will other states choose allies and what strategies will they follow in order to maximize international support and minimize opposition? What strategies should we expect the unipole to pursue, and with what effects? Will relations *within* existing unipolar alliances differ from behavior observed in bipolar and multipolar systems, and in what ways? To what extent has behavior since 1991 confirmed or confounded these expectations?

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. The first section summarizes the existing literature on alliances and discusses some of the methodological challenges involved in analyzing the implications of unipolarity. The second section describes the structural features of unipolarity and some of the more obvious implications for

<sup>6</sup> Works anticipating NATO's gradual decline include Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, paperback edition, 1990), preface; and Stephen M. Walt, "The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America Are Drifting Apart," *National Interest* 54 (Winter 1998–1999). Predictions of imminent balancing against the United States include Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18 (Fall 1993); and Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17 (Spring 1993).

<sup>7</sup> See especially Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *National Interest* 70 (Winter 2002–2003), esp. 8–9. This view is also implicit in Wohlforth, "Stability"; and documented in Wohlforth, "Revisiting Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia," in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 187–191.

statecraft. The third section analyzes how states are likely to choose allies in unipolarity, illustrating the principal strategies with contemporary examples. The fourth section offers conjectures about the impact of unipolarity on relations within existing alliances, focusing in particular on the ability of the unipole to use alliances as a tool for managing relations with lesser powers and on the strategies that weaker partners may employ to increase their own influence over a more powerful partner. I conclude with some observations about the durability of the current condition of world politics and the appropriate strategies for testing these conjectures.

### The alliance literature

The primary purpose of most alliances is to combine the members' capabilities in a way that furthers their respective interests, especially their security goals. Accordingly, the prevailing conception in the literature sees alliances primarily as a response to an external threat.<sup>9</sup> Threats, in turn, are a function of power, proximity, specific offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions, and the expected response to an emerging threat is to attempt to balance against it.<sup>10</sup>

The desire to balance perceived threats is not the only motivation for making an alliance, however. Under certain circumstances, states may choose to bandwagon with an existing threat, especially if they believe that resistance is impossible or if they are convinced a threat can be deflected or appeased by accommodating it.<sup>11</sup> States facing an

<sup>9</sup> Useful but dated surveys of the alliance literature include Michael Don Ward, "Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics," *Monograph Series in World Affairs* 19 (1982); Stephen M. Walt, "Multilateral Collective Security Arrangements," in Richard Shultz, Roy Godson, and Ted Greenwood, eds., *Security Studies for the 1990s* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1993); and Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39 (Spring 1997).

<sup>10</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Discussions of bandwagoning include Walt, *Origins*; Deborah Larson, "Bandwagon Images in American Foreign Policy: Myth or Reality?" in Jack L. Snyder and Robert Jervis, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Superpower Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); Robert Kaufman, "To Balance or Bandwagon? Alignment Decisions in 1930s Europe," *Security Studies* 1 (1992); and Randall K. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994).

internal challenge may seek external support in order to deal with this danger, and needy governments may be “bribed” into alignment by promises of economic or military assistance.<sup>12</sup> States with similar ideologies or domestic political systems are sometimes seen as more likely to ally with one another, although certain ideologies (such as Marxism-Leninism and pan-Arabism) proved to be more divisive than unifying. Finally, states may also enter an alliance in order to gain greater influence over their alliance partners. As Schroeder emphasized in an important essay, alliances are both “weapons of power” and “tools of great power management.”<sup>13</sup>

Over time, the literature on intra-alliance relations has focused on four main issues. The first concerns the distribution of burdens within an alliance. As Olson and Zeckhauser demonstrated in a seminal article, because security is a collective good, larger powers within an alliance tend to bear a disproportionate share of the costs while smaller members tend to free ride. This insight has spawned a large literature featuring both theoretical refinements and numerous empirical studies, with Olson and Zeckhauser’s core finding remaining largely intact.<sup>14</sup> A second issue is alliance cohesion and leadership; in general, the more asymmetric the distribution of capabilities within an alliance, the more durable it is likely to be and the greater the ability of the alliance leader to dictate alliance policy. Third, a number of studies have explored the

<sup>12</sup> See Steven David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> See Paul W. Schroeder, “Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management,” in Klaus Knorr, ed., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1976), 230–231. Robert Osgood argues that “next to accretion [of power], the most prominent function of alliances has been to restrain and control allies.” See Osgood, *Alliances in American Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 22; also Patricia Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Chris Gelpi, “Alliances as Instruments of Intra-Allied Control or Restraint,” in Helga Haftendorn, Robert Keohane, and Celeste Wallander, eds., *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, “An Economic Theory of Alliances,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 48 (August 1966). A useful survey of subsequent work in this area is Todd Sandler and Keith Hartley, “Economics of Alliances: The Lessons for Collective Action,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 39 (September 2001).

twin dangers of “abandonment” (being left in the lurch in a crisis or war) and “entrapment” (being dragged into misguided wars by one’s alliance commitments). States that fear abandonment are less able to restrain adventurous allies and more likely to be entrapped, while states that resist entrapment must worry that key allies will lose confidence in them and seek more reliable partners.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, a number of scholars have examined the impact of norms and institutions on alliance dynamics, generally concluding that alliances are more effective and long-lived (1) when they are highly institutionalized, (2) when the member states are liberal regimes, and (3) when there are explicit norms regulating alliance decision making.<sup>16</sup> Critics argue that alliance norms and institutions are largely epiphenomenal and that the distribution of capabilities (or threats) will play a more important role in shaping alliance formation and cohesion.<sup>17</sup>

Theoretical differences notwithstanding, the existing literature on alliances shares one common trait: it is a product of the past bipolar and multipolar eras and inevitably reflects both past policy concerns and the available historical evidence. Testing conjectures about contemporary alliances is complicated further by the need to distinguish between the effects of (1) the structural features of unipolarity, (2) America’s status as the single superpower, and (3) the particular policies adopted by specific US administrations. In other words, how much observable behavior is explained by the unipolar structure alone,

<sup>15</sup> Glenn Snyder and Kenneth Waltz argue that these twin dangers are more worrisome in multipolar systems than in bipolar systems, and Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder suggest that these problems are even more pronounced when conquest is easy and the need for prompt and reliable allies is especially great. See Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36 (Summer 1984); Snyder, *Alliance Politics*; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 170–173; and Christensen and Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44 (Spring 1990).

<sup>16</sup> See Haftendorn, Keohane, and Wallander, *Imperfect Unions*; Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Robert B. McCalla, “NATO’s Persistence after the Cold War,” *International Organization* 50 (Summer 1996); and G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> See John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19 (Winter 1994–1995); and Pressman, *Warring Friends*.

how much by the unique qualities of the current unipole (that is, its ideology, geographic location, history, and so on), and how much by the particular policies of the Clinton administration, the Bush administration, or their successors?

This problem underscores the importance of stating the causal logic of different conjectures clearly. Which predictions reflect purely structural features (that is, the unipolar distribution of power) and would be valid no matter which state was the unipole? Which behaviors result from the fact that the United States happened to emerge as the unipole and would presumably apply no matter who the president was? Finally, which effects derive from the particular policies of specific US leaders and would not have occurred had a different administration been in power or had the current one made different choices among clear alternatives?

It follows that efforts to test these different conjectures should rely heavily on qualitative techniques such as process tracing and pay close attention to the perceptions, preferences, and motivations of key actors. In order to correctly test whether states are balancing, hedging, or bandwagoning, we need to know more than just the distribution of capabilities and a list of who allied with whom. We also need to know what security problem the alliance was intended to address and why particular leaders opted for a specific policy choice. We should also be appropriately modest in drawing conclusions, given that fifteen years is a relatively short time period and we simply cannot control for all the potentially relevant variables (that is, we cannot compare *American-led* unipolarity with data drawn from an epoch where some other state was the unipole).<sup>18</sup> With these caveats in mind, let us now consider how unipolarity will shape alliance behavior.

### Structural effects

A unipolar system is one in which a single state controls a disproportionate share of the politically relevant resources of the system.

<sup>18</sup> On process tracing, see especially Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/BCSIA Studies in International Security, 2005); Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Methods, Shared Standards* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

Unipolarity implies that the single superpower faces no ideological rival of equal status or influence; even if ideological alternatives do exist, they do not pose a threat to the unipolar power's role as a model for others.

Wohlforth argues that the "unipolar threshold" is reached when one state is so strong that there is no possibility of a counter-hegemonic coalition. While useful, this conception still contains a number of ambiguities. It is not clear if this definition means that the leading state has more than 50 percent of the total resources of the system, or if the leading state is merely so strong that, as a practical matter, it would be difficult to impossible to unite all the states that would be needed to balance it.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, if a countervailing coalition did form, how close must it get to the unipole in order to shift the structure from unipolarity back to bipolarity or multipolarity? Is the system unipolar if no rival state (or coalition) could hope to defeat the unipole in an all-out war, or does it become multipolar once another state (or coalition) is merely able to impose sufficient costs so as to thwart the unipole's main aims (without necessarily being able to impose its will on the unipole)? The relationship between latent versus mobilized power is also ambiguous: is the system unipolar if other states lack the raw power potential to challenge the unipole no matter how hard they try, or is it unipolar merely because potential balancers have consciously chosen not to devote the resources at their disposal to this task?<sup>20</sup>

Despite these ambiguities, Wohlforth is almost certainly correct in describing the current structure of world politics as unipolar. The United States has the world's largest economy (roughly 60 percent larger than the number two power), and it possesses by far the most powerful military forces. If one includes supplemental spending, US military expenditures now exceed those of the rest of the world *combined*.<sup>21</sup> Despite its current difficulties in Iraq and the 2007

<sup>19</sup> See William Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World," in Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled*, 103–104.

<sup>20</sup> As Lieber and Alexander emphasize, Europe has sufficient population and economic strength to pose a significant counterweight to American power, were its members willing to invest the necessary resources toward this common goal. See Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005), 116–119.

<sup>21</sup> See "Worldwide Military Expenditures," [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org/military/world/spending.htm), [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/spending.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/spending.htm) (accessed January 3, 2008).

downturn in the US economy, the United States retains a comfortable margin of superiority over the other major powers. This capacity does not allow the United States to rule large foreign populations by force or to recreate the sort of formal empire once ruled by Great Britain, but it does give the United States “command of the commons” (that is, the ability to operate with near impunity in the air, sky, and space) and the ability to defeat any other country (or current coalition) in a direct test of battlefield strength.<sup>22</sup> Put differently, the United States is the only country that can deploy substantial amounts of military power virtually anywhere – even in the face of armed opposition – and keep it there for an indefinite period. Moreover, it is able to do this while spending a substantially smaller fraction of its national income on defense than previous great powers did, as well as a smaller fraction than it spent throughout the Cold War.<sup>23</sup> The United States also enjoys disproportionate influence in key international institutions – largely as a consequence of its economic and military capacities – and casts a large cultural shadow over much of the rest of the world as well.<sup>24</sup>

In short, America’s daunting capabilities are a defining feature of the contemporary international landscape, the debacle in Iraq and its various fiscal deficits notwithstanding. US primacy shapes the perceptions, calculations, and possibilities available to all other states, as well

<sup>22</sup> See Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28 (Summer 2003).

<sup>23</sup> The United States spent 9.3 percent of GDP on defense in 1960, 8.1 percent in 1970, and 5.2 percent in 1990. By contrast, it spent only 3.7 percent of GDP on defense in 2005; the source is “Outlays by Superfunction and Function: 1940–2009,” Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2005 (Washington, DC, 2004), Table 3.1, [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2005/pdf/hist.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2005/pdf/hist.pdf) (accessed June 27, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Summaries of the US position include Chapter 1 in this volume; Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Wohlforth, “Stability”; Walt, *Taming American Power*; and Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Cannot Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). American primacy is also acknowledged by quasi-Marxists such as Perry Anderson, who writes: “With still the world’s largest economy, financial markets, reserve currency, armed forces, global bases, culture industry and international language, the US combines assets that no other state can begin to match.” See Anderson, “Jottings on the Conjecture,” *New Left Review* 48 (November–December 2007).



as to other consequential international actors. Although other states also worry about local conditions and concerns, none can ignore the vast concentration of power in US hands.

It is important to emphasize again the distinction between the general condition of unipolarity and the particular features of the specific unipolar order that exists today. State behavior today is influenced partly by the overall distribution of capabilities, but also by the particular geographic location of the United States, the liberal ideals with which the United States is associated, and the specific historical features and institutional connections inherited from the Cold War. Each of these features shapes contemporary alliance dynamics, and any attempt to identify the impact of unipolarity on alliance behavior must take these competing causal factors into account.

Overall, weaker powers have essentially three choices in a unipolar world. They can (1) ally with each other to try to mitigate the unipole's influence, (2) align with the unipole in order to support its actions or exploit its power for their own purposes, or (3) remain neutral. In a unipolar world, therefore, most alliances will in some sense be a reaction to the dominant state – either to constrain it or to exploit it. Independent alliances may form to address purely local concerns on occasion, but they will be less common and probably less important.

This unprecedented situation contains several obvious implications for contemporary alliance behavior, albeit with somewhat contradictory effects.

### *Greater freedom of action for the unipole*

By definition, unipolarity means that the unipole has greater freedom of action than great powers do under either bipolarity or unipolarity. It enjoys greater freedom of action because it does not have to worry about direct opposition from any country possessing roughly equal capabilities. Thus, the United States can now contemplate actions it would have quickly rejected when the Soviet Union was intact. Fear of a hostile Soviet reaction discouraged US escalation during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and led the United States to behave cautiously in the Middle East and elsewhere. Were the Soviet Union still intact and allied with Iraq, for example, the United States would certainly have thought twice before invading the latter in 2003.

Similarly, although the United States was the clear leader of the Western alliance system throughout the Cold War, the need to keep Europe out of Soviet hands (and the concomitant need for some level of tangible allied support) forced Washington to devote considerable effort to consensus-building and coordination with its weaker partners. Today, by contrast, the United States has no great power rivals, less need for allied support, and thus a greater capacity to go it alone.<sup>25</sup> To the extent that allies are needed (to legitimate a particular course of action or to provide overseas facilities, for example), the unipole has a greater ability to pick and choose among different alliance partners.

As Snyder has shown, alliance ties in bipolarity were to a large extent structurally determined.<sup>26</sup> In unipolarity, by contrast, structural imperatives are either absent or greatly diminished. With less need for a large and cohesive alliance network, the unipole (in this case the United States) has greater leeway to opt for its preferences. Thus, the United States, as the unipolar power, will be more inclined to align with states for which it feels a strong ideological affinity (for example, its fellow democracies) or with states that demonstrate a clear willingness to follow its lead. It is therefore no accident that the Bush administration explicitly endorsed reliance on ad hoc “coalitions of the willing.” Or as former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld put it in 2005: “[T]he mission determines the coalition.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Increased concerns about the power of the unipole*

The second effect follows directly from the first. Unipolarity inevitably creates concerns about the imbalance of power in the unipole’s favor. Again, this is an inevitable structural feature of unipolarity: because the unipole can act on its own and because its actions will have far-reaching effects, all states must worry about what it might do and how its actions might affect them. Even if the unipole is not hostile and

<sup>25</sup> Emphasizing and exploring the value of the go-it-alone option is Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> See Snyder, *Alliance Politics*.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, *Der Spiegel*, October 31, 2005; and also the preface to *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002).

does not pose an existential threat to most other states, it may still take actions that inadvertently harm the interests of others. Thus, even longtime allies will be concerned about the concentration of power in the unipole's hands.<sup>28</sup>

This structural feature of unipolarity explains why concerns about US primacy predated the election of George W. Bush in 2000. French and German leaders began voicing concerns about US "hyperpower" and "unilateralism" when Bill Clinton was president, and NATO's efforts to deal with the Bosnian crisis in the mid-1990s and the 1999 Kosovo War were punctuated by intense intra-alliance quarrels, considerable resentment at US high-handedness, and growing awareness of Europe's excessive dependence on US power. In 2000 the official Russian National Security Strategy warned of "attempts to create an international relations structure based on domination by Western countries . . . under US leadership and designed for unilateral solutions (including the use of military force) to key issues in world politics." Or as a senior Chinese diplomat told an American reporter that same year: "How can we base our national security on your assurances of good will?" Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash captured this concern perfectly in his comment that "the problem with American power is not that it is American. The problem is simply the power. It would be dangerous even for an archangel to wield so much power."<sup>29</sup>

Subsequent events have shown that other states' concerns were not misplaced. The US decision to invade Iraq created a failed state there,

<sup>28</sup> This issue is explored at length in Walt, *Taming American Power*, ch. 2.

<sup>29</sup> In the 1990s French foreign minister Hubert Védrine repeatedly complained about American "hyperpower" and once declared that "the entire foreign policy of France . . . is aimed at making the world of tomorrow composed of several poles, not just one," and German chancellor Gerhard Schröder warned that the danger of American "unilateralism" was "undeniable." See Craig R. Whitney, "NATO at 50: With Nations at Odds, Is It a Misalliance?" *New York Times*, February 15, 1999; "Russia's National Security Concept," *Arms Control Today* 30 (2000), 15; Eric Eckholm, "China Says U.S. Missile Shield Could Force a Nuclear Buildup," *New York Times*, May 11, 2000, A1, A16; and Timothy Garton Ash, "The Peril of Too Much Power," *New York Times*, April 9, 2002. Similar statements acknowledging the resentment and concern generated by US power include *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, March 2005), 5; Max Boot, "Resentment: It Comes with the Territory," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2003; and William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "The Present Danger," *National Interest* 59 (Spring 2000).

which raised Turkish concerns about Kurdish nationalism, increased Sunni Arab concerns about Iran's ascendancy, and also heightened Israeli concerns about Iran and Islamic jihadism. The invasion also led indirectly to terrorist bombings in Madrid and possibly London and contributed to rising oil prices for everyone. The United States did not intend to produce any of these effects, of course, but each of them underscores the reasons why even friendly states worry about the imbalance of power in the unipole's favor.

### *Greater obstacles to counter-hegemonic balancing*

Even if other states now worry about the unipole's dominant power position, the condition of unipolarity also creates greater obstacles to the formation of an effective balancing coalition. When one state is far stronger than the others, it takes a larger coalition to balance it, and assembling such a coalition entails larger transaction costs and more daunting dilemmas of collective action. In particular, each member of the countervailing coalition will face greater incentives to free ride or pass the buck, unless it is clear that the unipolar power threatens all of them more or less equally and they are able to develop both a high degree of trust and some way to share the costs and risks fairly. Moreover, even if a balancing coalition begins to emerge, the unipole can try to thwart it by adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy: punishing states that join the opposition while rewarding those that remain aloof or support the unipole instead.

These structural obstacles would exist regardless of who the single superpower was, but a counter-hegemonic alliance against the United States faces an additional non-structural barrier. The United States is the sole great power in the Western hemisphere, while the other major powers are all located on the Eurasian landmass. As a result, these states tend to worry more about each other; furthermore, many have seen the United States as the perfect ally against some nearby threat. Accordingly, they are even less likely to join a coalition against the United States, even if US power is substantially greater. Assembling a vast counter-American coalition would require considerable diplomatic virtuosity and would probably arise only if the United States began to pose a genuine existential threat. It is unlikely to do so, however, in part because this same geographic isolation dampens American

concerns about potential Eurasian rivals.<sup>30</sup> America's geopolitical isolation has been an advantage throughout its history, and it remains an important asset today.<sup>31</sup>

### *Credibility and leverage*

Alliances depend in part on credibility – on the belief that commitments will be honored – and unipolarity is likely to have somewhat contradictory effects on the role that credibility plays in contemporary alliances. Thus, because the unipole has less need for allies, its partners have more reason to doubt any pledges it does make. During the Cold War, for example, US allies in Asia and Europe could be fairly certain that Washington would come to their aid if they were threatened, because it was manifestly in America's interest to prevent Soviet gains. Today, however, other states cannot be as certain that the United States would back them out of its own self-interest, and must therefore work harder to keep US commitments intact. This tendency may create certain complications for the United States when it seeks to reassure allies, but it also means that the United States should be able to exact a higher price for the support it does provide.

A corollary to the above argument is that medium and small powers will have less influence and leverage than they enjoyed under bipolarity. During the Cold War, medium and small powers gained leverage with Washington (or Moscow) by playing the two superpowers off against each other. Thus, states like India and Egypt sometimes managed to get benefits from both superpowers simultaneously or were able to use

<sup>30</sup> This conclusion would not follow if the United States faced potential peer competitors in the Western hemisphere. Security competition between the United States and any serious hemispheric rivals would be intense, and would undoubtedly include efforts by both sides to recruit allies to their cause from around the world, just as the Confederacy tried to obtain allied support from Britain during the American Civil War.

<sup>31</sup> As Wohlforth points out, geography and power reinforce each other in the present global context. If any Eurasian power tries to balance the United States by mobilizing its internal capabilities, this action will alarm its neighbors and encourage them to seek help from the United States. Even a concerted effort by several Eurasian powers to increase their own strength and ally more closely together might be self-defeating if it encouraged others to shift toward the United States. See Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy," 107–108.

the threat of realignment to extract additional concessions or benefits from their current patron.<sup>32</sup>

Under unipolarity, by contrast, weaker states are less able to influence the dominant power's conduct by threatening to realign or by warning that they may be defeated or overthrown if not given sufficient support by their patron. Not only do weaker states lack an attractive alternative partner, but the unipole needs them less and thus will worry less about possible defection or defeat.

This situation does not mean that weaker partners have no leverage at all. The unipole's position of primacy does not give it complete control; that could be obtained only by conquest and occupation. (And as the US experience in Iraq shows, there are real limits to a unipole's ability to compel obedience even under these conditions.) Even if the structural distribution of capabilities enhances the unipole's leverage, much weaker states may still control unique assets and may therefore gain some capacity to bargain with the dominant state. For example, a weak state that happens to occupy a critical strategic location may be able to extract concessions from the unipole, as Uzbekistan and Pakistan have done since September 11, 2001.<sup>33</sup>

On average, however, the shift to unipolarity will reduce the leverage available to medium and smaller powers and, as discussed below, will encourage them to rely on alternative strategies of alliance maintenance.

Thus, unipolarity fundamentally alters the tension between the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment. Weaker clients have to worry more about abandonment – because the unipole needs them less – and the unipole will be less likely to be dragged into conflict by reckless or adventurist allies. Unipolar powers may be more likely to fight foolish wars, of course (in part because they need not fear great power opposition), but they will not be doing so because they are

<sup>32</sup> On this pattern, see Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet–Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East Policy and the Making of the U.S.–Israeli Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 3; and Walt, *Origins*, ch. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Afghan president Hamid Karzai has also been able to extract various concessions from the United States, largely by threatening to collapse and thereby recreate a safe haven for the Taliban and possibly a resurgent al-Qaeda.

worried that a strategically vital ally may defect or be defeated if they remain aloof. For great powers, in short, the abandonment/entrapment dilemma will be most intense under multipolarity, somewhat diminished under bipolarity, and least worrisome under unipolarity.

By contrast, the recent Iraq War suggests that weaker states are *more* vulnerable to entrapment in unipolarity, because the unipole can put great pressure on them to join any coalitions of the willing it sees fit to promote. But if the unipole's judgment is faulty (as it was in Iraq), its reluctant partners will find themselves paying costs they had not anticipated.

### *Distraction or disengagement?*

A final feature of unipolarity is the tendency for the unipole to be distracted by a wide array of foreign policy problems. If the unipole chooses to try and mold the system to its liking or to play an active role as the residual provider of collective goods, then it will inevitably be involved in many issues and will find it difficult to keep its attention focused on any single one. For instance, the US invasion of Iraq gave North Korea the opportunity to advance its nuclear ambitions, and the current US preoccupation with the war on terror has made it easier for China to expand its influence in Asia.<sup>34</sup> Weaker states, by contrast, will focus their attention on a small number of vital problems, including efforts to manipulate the unipolar power. Thus, although there is much to be said for being No. 1, being the dominant power also entails a number of pitfalls.<sup>35</sup>

This possibility is not structurally ordained, however. As noted above, unipolarity implies fewer structural constraints on the unipole and thus grants it greater freedom of action. In theory, therefore, a unipole could choose to refrain from direct efforts to manage or shape the system, because it was confident that it enjoyed a considerable margin of safety and was convinced that letting other states deal with

<sup>34</sup> See Dana Dillon and John J. Tkacic, Jr., "China's Quest for Asia," *Policy Review* 134 (December–January 2005–2006); and Bruce Vaughn and Wayne Morrison, *China–Southeast Asia Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 2006).

<sup>35</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, "American Primacy: Its Prospects and Pitfalls," *Naval War College Review* 55 (Spring 2002).

emerging security threats would conserve its power and its unipolar status for as long as possible. In other words, one can imagine a unipole choosing to pass the buck (or free ride) on various regional powers, instead of letting them pass the buck to it, and a number of scholars have recently advocated that the United States move in this direction.<sup>36</sup>

The United States has not pursued this course since the advent of unipolarity, however; that is, it did not try to disengage from its earlier Cold War alliances. In fact, Washington has if anything become more energetic in trying to shape the system: expanding NATO, putting pressure on rogue states, and actively trying to export democracy. But the assertive nature of US policy is not solely the result of its structural position as the unipole. In addition to the outward thrust of liberal ideology (with its built-in universalism), the US effort to exert active global leadership is also an artifact of the particular historical circumstances in which unipolarity emerged. Having established a global military position in the context of the Cold War, the United States decided not to liquidate it once the Cold War ended. Had the United States achieved unipolar status directly from multipolarity (for example, had it become the unipole in 1920), then it might well have refrained from the sort of global military role that it built during the Cold War and has maintained ever since.

### Alliance strategies in unipolarity

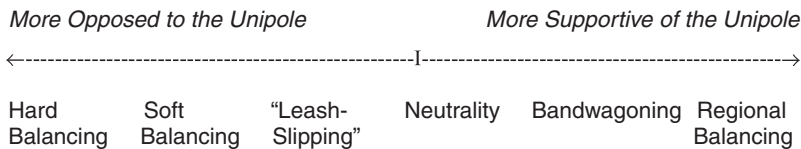
What forms will unipolar alliances take and what strategies are the member states likely to pursue? As discussed above, most alliances in unipolarity will reflect either an effort to align against the unipole or an attempt to accommodate it and exploit its power. The responses, depicted in [Figure 4.1](#), range from extreme opposition to the unipole to formal alignment with it.

#### *Hard balancing*

As discussed above, one obvious reaction to unipolarity would be the formation of a countervailing coalition to contain the strongest state.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Barry R. Posen, "A Strategy of Restraint," *American Interest* 3, 2 (November–December 2007). For similar arguments, see Walt, *Taming American Power*, ch. 5; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, ch. 10; and Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment," *International Security* 31 (Fall 2006).





**Figure 4.1** Alliance choices under unipolarity

This response is what classical balance of power theory would lead us to expect, and a number of scholars have predicted precisely this outcome over the past decade.<sup>37</sup>

In Waltz's classic formulation, states can balance either by internal effort or by cooperating with others. In either case, the aim is to strengthen one's ability to defend one's interests in the uncertain world of anarchy. Both internal and external balancing can be directed against very specific threats (for example, as in a defensive alliance that commits the members to war if either is attacked by a particular enemy), but it can also consist of more general treaties of mutual support regardless of the precise identity of the threat.<sup>38</sup>

Although the focus in this chapter is on alliance strategies, there are a number of examples of states seeking to balance the unipole (the United States) via internal effort. For example, it is likely that efforts by Iran and North Korea to gain nuclear weapons are inspired in part by the desire to deter a US attack or deflect US pressure.<sup>39</sup> In

<sup>37</sup> See Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, 1 (2000); Layne, "Unipolar Illusion"; and Charles A. Kupchan, "Life after Pax Americana," *World Policy Journal* 16 (Fall 1999).

<sup>38</sup> In their critique of the concept of soft balancing, Wohlforth and Brooks suggest that balancing should be confined to "action taken to check a potential hegemon" and that "balance of power theory is not relevant to state behavior unrelated to systemic concentrations of power." See Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005), 78. Yet this formulation would eliminate any alignments that were not counter-hegemonic but still entailed two or more states agreeing to combine their capabilities in ways that would enhance their security, including their security vis-à-vis the unipole. This conception would also eliminate alliances formed when there was no potential hegemon in sight, but where states nonetheless faced security problems that they wished to address by joining forces with others.

<sup>39</sup> As Iranian reformist politician Mostafa Tajazadeh observed just before the war in Iraq: "It is basically a matter of equilibrium. If I don't have a nuclear bomb, I don't have security." Quoted in Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear Calculations," *World Policy Journal* 20, 2 (Summer 2003), 24.

addition, several recent accounts suggest that part of the motivation behind A. Q. Khan's successful effort to spread nuclear technology was a desire to constrain American power and that Khan's objective was shared by prominent Pakistani officials.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, part of the motivation behind China's military buildup is almost certainly the desire to counter US military dominance in the Far East, even if it does not yet involve an explicit attempt to alter the global balance of power.<sup>41</sup>

Turning to external efforts, one can in fact find a few examples of hard balancing against the American unipole, although even these examples fall short of the classic balance of power ideal. Security cooperation between Syria and Iran increased markedly following the US invasion of Iraq, and American officials have accused both countries of aiding the Iraqi insurgents. While obviously contrary to US interests, this response is hardly surprising, given America's stated desire for "regime change" in both countries. Although clearly less than a formal alliance, this sort of collusion still fits the standard definition of balancing. By strengthening the insurgency in Iraq, Syria and Iran sought to keep the United States bogged down and thus unable to put direct military pressure on them.<sup>42</sup> Other oft-cited examples include the continuing security partnership between Russia and China, the multilateral

<sup>40</sup> Thus, Gordon Corera argues that a primary motivation for Pakistan's clandestine nuclear exports was the belief that it was in "Pakistan's national interest for more countries to have bombs, thereby . . . reducing the power of the United States." General Mirza Azlam Beg, former chief of staff of the Pakistani Army, reportedly believed that the global spread of nuclear weapons would hasten the arrival of a multipolar world, and facilitate the formation of an alliance of "strategic defiance" linking Iran, Pakistan, and China. Similarly, Khan himself argued that his efforts had "disturbed all their [US] strategic plans, the balance of power and blackmailing potential in this part of the world." See Corera, *Shopping for Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity, and the Rise and Fall of the A. Q. Khan Network* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74–76; and Matthew Kroenig, "The Enemy of My Enemy is My Customer: Why States Provide Sensitive Nuclear Assistance" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> For competing perspectives on the purposes of China's buildup, see Thomas Christenson, "Posing Problems without Catching Up," *International Security* 25 (Spring 2001); Brooks and Wohlforth, "Hard Times," 87; Lieber and Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing"; Robert J. Art, Stephen Brooks, William Wohlforth, Keir Lieber, and Gerard Alexander, "Correspondence: Striking the Balance," *International Security* 30 (Winter 2005–2006).

<sup>42</sup> See Michael Slackman, "Wary of U.S., Syria and Iran Strengthen Ties," *New York Times*, June 25, 2006.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which brought Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan together in 2001 for the purpose of “strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly friendship among the member states . . . [and] devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability”), or earlier security cooperation between rogue states such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbia.<sup>43</sup> Each of these efforts seems to have been intended either to strengthen the parties vis-à-vis the United States or to limit US influence in particular regions (for example, Central Asia). Such actions should be seen as a form of balancing (that is, states are seeking to enhance their security through combined or coordinated action) even if they lack the capabilities necessary to create a true counterpoise to the current unipole.

Yet as several scholars have noted previously, what is striking about these efforts is how tentative and half-hearted most of them are, especially when one considers the other major powers. There have been no attempts to form a formal alliance whose explicit purpose is to contain the United States (even though leaders like Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez have called for such arrangements), and even the most far-reaching informal efforts have been fairly modest.<sup>44</sup> Equally important, these efforts do not appear to be driven largely by structural concerns (that is, by the distribution of capabilities), and there has been little or no effort to assemble a countervailing coalition of even approximately equal capabilities.

The relative dearth of hard balancing is consistent with the view that alliances form not in response to power alone but in response to the level of threat. States will not want to incur the various costs of

<sup>43</sup> As a Pentagon spokesman put it: “These are two countries, both subject to attack by forces within NATO. They both have primarily Soviet-built or purchased air-defense systems, and they are both subject to international embargoes. So they obviously might look for ways to work together.” See Philip Shenon, “Crisis in the Balkans: the Iraqi Connection,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1999, A16. See also “Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” at [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/sco.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/sco.htm); and “Declaration on Establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (2001), at [www.sectsco.org/html/00088.html](http://www.sectsco.org/html/00088.html).

<sup>44</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off-Balance’: Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy,” in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*; and also Brooks and Wohlforth, “Hard Times”; and Lieber and Alexander, “Waiting for Balancing.”

balancing (increased military spending, loss of autonomy, punishment by the unipole, and so on) unless they believe doing so is truly necessary. In particular, states will not engage in hard balancing against the unipole if its power is not perceived as posing an imminent threat to their security. If the unipole happens to be geographically distant from the potential balancers (and thus poses less of a threat to them) and if it is not believed to have aggressive intentions (that is, does not appear eager to conquer them), then potential balancers will be unlikely to form an overt hard balancing alliance.

This discussion explains why even an administration as unpopular as that of George W. Bush nonetheless has not triggered the formation of a hard balancing coalition. Although other states worry about US power, and states in some regions (for example, the Middle East) have reason to fear US attack, most of the world's major powers do not fear an American invasion. Europeans may dislike US policies, Asians may worry about US judgment, and Chinese leaders may see the United States as a rival over the longer term, but they do not perceive the United States as having expansionist ambitions on a par with those harbored in the past by Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union. If the United States were to acquire such ambitions, and were it to begin to act upon them, a hard balancing coalition would almost certainly form. Absent such aims or behaviors, however, hard balancing will remain rare.

### *Soft balancing*

Instead of hard balancing, efforts to join forces to counter US power or limit US influence have generally taken the form of soft balancing. These actions have been directed against specific US policies rather than against the overall distribution of power itself.<sup>45</sup> Hard balancing

<sup>45</sup> Analyses of soft balancing include Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005); T. V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in an Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005); Walt, *Taming American Power*; Jeremy Pressman, "If Not Balancing, What?" *Discussion Paper 2004-02* (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 2004); and Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "If Not Soft Balancing, Then What? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and U.S. Policy toward China," *Security Studies* 17 (April–June 2008). Dissenting views are found in Brooks and Wohlforth, "Hard Times"; and Lieber and Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing."

usually focuses on the overall balance of power and seeks to assemble a countervailing coalition that will be strong enough to keep the dominant power in check, no matter what policies it decides to pursue. By contrast, soft balancing accepts the current balance of power but seeks to obtain better outcomes within it, by assembling countervailing coalitions designed to thwart or impede specific policies. In the current era of US dominance, therefore, soft balancing is the *conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to US preferences, outcomes that could not be gained if the balancers did not give each other some degree of mutual support*. Instead of combining military forces or conducting joint operations, soft balancers combine their diplomatic assets in order to defend their interests. By definition, soft balancing seeks to limit the ability of the United States to impose its preferences on others.

Critics of soft balancing have argued that it is indistinguishable from the normal bargaining that is a constant feature of world politics. They also point out that what might appear to be a balancing response – an increase in military spending, for example – might be the exact opposite, if it were in fact encouraged and welcomed by the unipole, and thus suggest that studies emphasizing the role of soft balancing are inherently non-falsifiable.<sup>46</sup> These criticisms do not invalidate the concept, but they highlight the importance of gauging motivations when trying to label or explain different alliance responses. If states are in fact choosing to coordinate action, augment their power, and take on new commitments with others, because they are worried about the unipole's dominant position and/or are alarmed by the actions it is undertaking, it is legitimate to regard such behavior as a form of balancing.<sup>47</sup>

If they are coordinating action or taking on new commitments because the unipole has encouraged them to do so, however, then that is obviously not a case of balancing *against* the unipole. Judging whether a particular response is properly seen as balancing requires careful interpretation, but this qualification hardly means the concept is neither useful nor falsifiable.

<sup>46</sup> See Brooks and Wohlforth, "Hard Times"; and Lieber and Alexander "Correspondence: Striking the Balance," 190.

<sup>47</sup> He and Feng, "If Not Soft Balancing," contains a useful counter to the critiques of "soft balancing" offered by Wohlforth, Brooks, Lieber, and Alexander (pp. 365–370).

The Bush administration's failed effort to obtain UN Security Council authorization for its preventive war against Iraq in 2003 illustrates soft balancing nicely. Although there was broad agreement that Saddam Hussein was a brutal tyrant and broad opposition to Iraq's efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction, the United States was able to persuade only three other Security Council members to support a second resolution to authorize the use of force. This failure was due in part to growing concerns about US power and the Bush administration's heavy-handed diplomacy, but it was also the result of the ability of France, Russia, and Germany to formulate and maintain a unified position.<sup>48</sup>

The anti-war coalition did not balance in the classic sense (that is, it did not try to resist US armed forces directly or send military support to Iraq), but its collective opposition made it safer for lesser powers such as Cameroon or Mexico to resist US pressure during the critical Security Council debate. The result was classic soft balancing: by adopting a unified position, these states denied the United States the legitimacy it had sought and thereby imposed significantly greater political and economic costs on Bush's decision to invade.

Yet the diplomacy of the Iraq War also illustrates the limits of soft balancing. The coalition in the Security Council fell far short of a formal alliance, and the defeat suffered by the United States in the Security Council did not prevent it from going to war. Moreover, the Bush administration was able to obtain political support (as well as symbolic military participation) from Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and a number of other countries.<sup>49</sup> These successes remind us that NATO expansion has made it easier for the United States to employ a divide-and-conquer strategy within the alliance, because expansion has brought in a set of new members that

<sup>48</sup> As a former US official, Stephen Sestanovich, later commented: "The anti-American stance is a familiar French thing. . . After they'd been French for awhile, they'd stop being French. People thought they understood the limits of the game and it would be over at a certain point. And then it wasn't. And it turned out that the Russians were prepared to be French, *as long as the French were being French.*" Quoted in Nicholas Lemann, "How It Came to War," *New Yorker*, March 31, 2003, emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> See Richard Bernstein, "Poland Upstages, and Irks, European Powerhouses," *New York Times*, May 13, 2003; and Ian Fisher, "Romania, Wooed by U.S., Looks to a Big NATO Role," *New York Times*, October 23, 2002.

were especially interested in forging close ties with the United States. Rumsfeld's dismissive remarks about "old Europe" and his praise for "new Europe" may have been undiplomatic, but his comments contained more than a grain of truth.

This last point offers several additional clues about the forms that balancing takes under the condition of unipolarity. First, states that are worried about the sole superpower may tend to engage in covert, tacit, or informal forms of security cooperation, to make it less likely that the sole superpower is aware of their actions or in the hopes that it will choose not to react. US leaders would almost certainly try to disrupt a formal anti-US coalition, for example, but they might be less willing or able to interfere with informal or tacit arrangements that nonetheless have an anti-American dimension. Thus, the sharing of nuclear and missile technology by North Korea, Pakistan, and Iran might offer an example of this sort of behavior: while falling well short of a formal alliance, it is also more than a purely commercial transaction.<sup>50</sup> Collaboration between sympathetic terrorist groups offers another example of this phenomenon, albeit one operating between non-state actors. Finally, as the Iraq case suggests, soft balancing may also be undertaken to constrain the sole superpower from taking actions that the balancers oppose and thus to force it to adjust its policies along the lines preferred by the balancers.

More recent responses to US power are consistent with these conjectures. Both the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program and the EU3 negotiations with Iran have served a dual purpose: on the one hand, they have sought to bring greater pressure to bear on the suspected proliferators; on the other hand, they also make it more difficult (at least in the short term) for the United States to take unilateral action. In each case, the effectiveness of this constraining effort is magnified by coordination among the non-US members: if the EU3 had not taken a unified position and stuck to it, the United States might have adopted policies that are even more confrontational than those it has adopted to date.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the inability of the United States to obtain sufficient backing from the EU3, China, and Russia eventually

<sup>50</sup> This is a central theme in Kroenig, "Enemy of My Enemy."

<sup>51</sup> Of course, having persuaded the United States to try negotiations without success (so far), the EU3 may be unable to convincingly oppose a subsequent US decision to use force.

forced the Bush administration to take a more forthcoming position vis-à-vis direct negotiation with Tehran, a position it had previously rejected strenuously.<sup>52</sup>

*“Leash-slipping”: alignments intended to enhance autonomy*

Under unipolarity, states may also form an alliance not to balance or constrain the unipole but to reduce their dependence on the unipole by pooling their own capabilities. The objective is not to balance the unipole in the near term but to gain a measure of autonomy and hedge against future uncertainties. Layne has termed this response “leash-slipping,” which he describes as “a form of insurance against a hegemon that might someday exercise its power in a predatory and menacing fashion.”<sup>53</sup> Along with Jones, Posen, and Art, Layne sees the European Union’s recent efforts to develop a common foreign and security policy – and especially the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) adopted in 1999 – as an initiative designed to enable European states to protect their security interests without having to depend on US military assets (and thus on US approval). In part this desire reflects growing disagreements with some elements of US foreign policy, but it also reflects the awareness that the United States may not always be willing to act on Europe’s behalf. To increase its own leverage and autonomy, therefore, the EU has been enhancing its own defense production capability and increasing its capacity to impose effective multilateral economic sanctions.<sup>54</sup>

This motivation for enhanced alignment is not purely structural, however. As the EU case illustrates, the desire to gain greater autonomy is most likely to arise when a group of states has become too dependent

<sup>52</sup> For a brief summary, see Paul Kerr, “U.S. Offers Iran Direct Talks,” *Arms Control Today* 36 (June 2006); and Matt Dupuis, “U.S. Shifts Policy on Iran,” *Arms Control Today* 36 (April 2006).

<sup>53</sup> See Layne, “Unipolar Illusion,” 29–30.

<sup>54</sup> Although some of these scholars use the language of balancing, leash-slipping should be seen as a distinct alternative to either soft or hard balancing. See in particular Seth G. Jones, *The Rise of Europe: Great Power Politics and Security Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Layne, “Unipolar Illusion,” 34–36; Barry R. Posen, “ESDP and the Structure of World Power,” *International Spectator* 39 (January 2004); Robert J. Art, “Europe Hedges its Security Bets,” in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*; and Art *et al.*, “Correspondence: Striking the Balance.”



on the unipole's assets. Having allowed their military capabilities to atrophy during the Cold War (because US protection could be taken for granted and free riding was easy), the European states now find themselves in a position where they must develop autonomous military capabilities or eschew a major global role and remain dependent on US leadership.

As Posen has emphasized, Europe's future course is not preordained.<sup>55</sup> A significant improvement in European defense capabilities will be expensive, and Europeans will undoubtedly be tempted to let Uncle Sam do most of the heavy lifting. The replacement of German chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French president Jacques Chirac by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy has already produced a distinct warming in transatlantic relations, and this trend is reinforced by the chastening effects of America's Iraq debacle, Russia's reemergence as a more consequential and assertive power, and the unanticipated difficulties that NATO and the United States have encountered in Afghanistan. Under these conditions, European elites worry less about American power and its possible misuse and may be less interested in developing joint capabilities that would reduce dependence on Washington. It therefore remains to be seen whether Europe will actually strive to build truly autonomous capabilities.<sup>56</sup> Given America's long-standing ambivalence about the entire EU project, we should expect the United States to subtly discourage Europe from becoming a peer competitor and to insist that European efforts to increase their defense capabilities occur within the NATO framework, where they remain subject to US control.

### *Bandwagoning with the unipole*

Bandwagoning occurs when a state chooses to align with the strongest or most threatening state it faces. It is essentially a form of

<sup>55</sup> Posen, "ESDP and the Structure of World Power," 8–9.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed argument suggesting that ESDP is not an example of soft balancing but rather is an attempt to develop complementary capabilities within a complex institutional context, see Jolyon Howorth and Anand Menon, "Complexity and International Institutions: Why the European Union Isn't Balancing the United States" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 1–4, 2007).

appeasement: by bandwagoning, threatened states seek to convince the dominant power to leave them alone.<sup>57</sup> Bandwagoning behavior has been historically rare and has generally been confined to very weak and isolated states. The reason is simple: the decision to bandwagon requires the weaker side to put its fate in the hands of a more powerful state whom it suspects (usually with good reason) of harboring hostile intentions. By bandwagoning with the main source of danger, a threatened state accepts greater vulnerability in the hope that the dominant power's appetites are sated or diverted.

Wohlforth suggests that bandwagoning will be more common in unipolarity, both because it is harder to balance against the unipole and because the unipole is in a better position to punish opponents and reward clients.<sup>58</sup> This view has been echoed by neoconservatives and other hard-liners in the United States, who predicted that various states would bandwagon once the United States demonstrated its power and resolve by conquering Iraq.<sup>59</sup> To date, however, examples of genuine bandwagoning – that is, pro-US alignments induced primarily by fear – are difficult to find. The United States gave convincing demonstrations of its military dominance on several occasions between 1990 and 2003, yet the targets of subsequent US threats – Iraq, North

<sup>57</sup> For detailed discussions of bandwagoning behavior, see Walt, *Origins*, chs. 2, 5; and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 162–164. A slightly different conception can be found in Randall K. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994).

<sup>58</sup> Wohlforth, “Stability,” where he suggests that today’s “second tier states” (all major powers save the United States) “face structural incentives similar to lesser states in a region dominated by one power, such as North America” (p. 25). In other words, these states are likely to bandwagon in unipolarity, just as Canada and Mexico have done in the Western hemisphere.

<sup>59</sup> Some two years before the invasion of Iraq, neoconservative Richard Perle predicted that a successful war would cause other states in the Middle East to cave in to US demands. As he put it in 2001: “After we’ve destroyed the last remnants of the Taliban in Afghanistan . . . and we then go on to destroy the regime of Saddam Hussein . . . I think we would have an impressive case to make to the Syrians, the Somalis and others. We could deliver a short message, a two-word message: ‘You’re next. You’re next unless you stop the practice of supporting terrorism.’ . . . I think there’s a reasonable prospect that . . . they will decide to get out of the terrorist business.” See Richard Perle, “Should Iraq Be Next?” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 16, 2001. The *Wall Street Journal* invoked the same logic after Baghdad fell; see “Those Dictator Dominos,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2003.

Korea, Serbia, and, to a lesser extent, Syria, China, and Iran – were not visibly cowed by these actions. For example, the stunning US victory over Iraq in 1991 did not convince Saddam Hussein to kowtow to the United States and did not make leaders like Slobodan Milosevic or Hafez el-Assad more compliant with US preferences. Similarly, Saddam's ouster in 2003 did not trigger the wave of pro-American shifts that advocates of the war had forecast. Although a number of neighboring countries muted their anti-American rhetoric temporarily, there are few unambiguous instances where states abandoned well-established policy positions because they feared US pressure.<sup>60</sup> Desert Storm, the Kosovo War, the ouster of the Taliban, and Operation Iraqi Freedom all demonstrated that the United States had unmatched military power – as if anyone had real doubts – but these actions did not provoke a wave of realignments toward the United States.

True bandwagoning will be rare – even in unipolarity – because it requires weak states to place their trust in a stronger power with which they have significant conflicts of interest and which is probably directing latent or overt threats at them. In general, bandwagoning is most likely to occur when a weak state believes that aligning with the dominant power will eliminate or deflect the threat and thereby advance its main interests. Yet such circumstances will be rare, because serious military threats generally do not arise unless conflicts of interest are pronounced and compromise is therefore elusive. Put differently, if the conflict of interest were small and if it were easy for a weaker power to adjust its policies, the stronger power would not have to resort to overt threats in order to induce compliance. Overt threats

<sup>60</sup> Syria did not abandon its claims to the Golan Heights, North Korea did not become more forthcoming in the multiparty negotiations over its nuclear program, and Iran has remained defiant with regard to its own nuclear development efforts as well. Iran did make an indirect offer to negotiate with the United States in the immediate aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom, but the overture was rejected by the Bush administration and led nowhere. See Seymour Hersh, "The Syrian Bet," *New Yorker*, July 28, 2003; Gary Samore, "The Korean Nuclear Crisis," *Survival* 45 (Spring 2003); Gareth Porter, "Burnt Offering," *American Prospect*, May 21, 2006; Flynt Leverett, *Dealing with Tehran: Assessing U.S. Diplomatic Options with Iran* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2006), 12–13; and Kamal Nazer Yasin, "U.S. Hard-line Policies Helped Bring about Reformists' Demise in Iran," *Eurasia Insight*, March 8, 2004, at [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org).

arise when the clash of interests is more substantial and when regimes whose interests are sharply at odds with those of the United States are unlikely to abandon their core goals, even if they may occasionally back down over minor issues.

Libya's decision to abandon its anti-Western position and give up its unconventional weapons programs illustrates this basic logic well. Although fear of American power played a role in Libyan decision making, the primary motivation for the decision was Libya's deteriorating economic condition and the concomitant need to escape the highly effective set of multilateral sanctions imposed after the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in 1988.<sup>61</sup> As Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's son, Saif ul-Islam Gaddafi, explained: "The first reason (for the decision to give up WMD) is political, economic, cultural, and military gains that were promised by the Western party . . . The temptation was really great." Libya realigned primarily to end sanctions and obtain economic benefits and only in part because it feared the direct application of US military power.<sup>62</sup> Equally important, convincing Gaddafi to abandon WMD, terrorism, and other "rogue state" policies required the United States to formally abandon the goal of regime change and

<sup>61</sup> See Ronald Bruce St. John, "Libya is Not Iraq: Preemptive Strikes, WMD, and Diplomacy," *Middle East Journal* 58 (Summer 2004); Flynt Leverett, "Why Libya Gave Up on the Bomb," *New York Times*, January 23, 2004; and Martin Indyk, "The Iraq War Did Not Force Gaddafi's Hand," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Libyans clearly saw long-term benefits to associating with the West. As Gaddafi's son put it: "If you have the backing of the West and the United States, you will be able to achieve in a few years what you could not achieve in 50." See "Qadhafi's Son Says Libya Was Promised Economic, Military Gains for WMD Disarmament," *Global Security Newswire*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, March 10, 2004, downloaded from [www.nti.org/d\\_newsire/issues/2004\\_3\\_10.html](http://www.nti.org/d_newsire/issues/2004_3_10.html) (September 12, 2008). According to a comprehensive study by Wyn Q. Bowen: "The decision to disarm was the result of the Gaddafi regime's decade-long quest to end the UN and American embargoes imposed on Libya as a result of its past terrorist related activities . . . [T]he Iraq war in 2003 and the interception of nuclear technology en route to Libya later that year were not principal driving factors in the decision to forego WMD. Nevertheless, both appeared to increase the pressure on the Gadhafi regime and in doing so may have cemented the decision that had already been taken on WMD, and possibly accelerated the process." See Bowen, "Libya and Nuclear Proliferation: Stepping Back from the Brink," *Adelphi Paper* 380 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2006).

to agree that Gaddafi would remain in power.<sup>63</sup> US capabilities clearly played a role in Gaddafi's decision – in this sense, he was choosing not to resist the dominant global power – and thus qualifies as bandwagoning. But the case is not as clear-cut as it is sometimes portrayed, and it is hard to think of other examples.

To be sure, many states are mindful of US power and wary of incurring Washington's wrath. But being prudent in the face of US power is a far cry from bandwagoning, and such states do not endorse US positions or lend direct support to US foreign policy efforts.

### *Regional balancing*

Under unipolarity, an alternative motivation for close ties with the dominant power is the desire for protection, normally against some sort of regional threat. Thus, what might at first glance appear to be bandwagoning (that is, more and more states aligning with the unipole) may actually be a specific form of balancing, where the threat to be countered is a neighboring power or some other local problem.

This motivation for alignment is not new, of course. Throughout the Cold War, local powers sought help from one of the superpowers (and occasionally both) in order to deal with nearby challengers. North and South Korea, North and South Vietnam, Israel, Angola, Cuba, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and a host of others sought US or Soviet support to meet a threat from a nearby power (or in some cases, to quell an internal challenge). These concerns made the United States an especially attractive ally for the medium powers of Europe and Asia: it was strong enough to provide an effective deterrent against the Soviet Union, but it was also far enough away not to pose an equally serious danger. Here the distribution of capabilities and the geographic location of the major powers combined to make alignment with the United States especially attractive for states on the periphery of the Soviet empire. As a result, the United States was able to bring together the industrial powers of Western Europe and Japan (and to some

<sup>63</sup> See the superb analysis in Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, "Who 'Won' Libya?: The Force-Diplomacy Debate and its Implications for Theory and Policy," *International Security* 30 (Winter 2005–2006), esp. 72–75.

degree China) in an anti-Soviet coalition, while the USSR was forced to rely on weak and unpopular regimes such as Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, and North Korea.<sup>64</sup>

Similar motivations remain evident today, with geography once again making US power both less threatening and more highly valued. In Europe, US allies continue to favor an American military presence as an insurance policy against any future renationalization of foreign policy, a development that could turn Europe back toward rivalry and conflict. Although this possibility might seem remote, the fear has been real enough to convince many Europeans that keeping the American “night watchman” in place is still worth it.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, a desire to enhance their security against regional threats (including a resurgent Russia) explains why East European states like Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic countries were so eager to join NATO and so willing to curry favor with Washington by backing the Iraq War. According to Piotr Ogorzinski, director of the America department of the Polish Foreign Ministry: “This is a country that thinks seriously about its security. There’s no doubt that for such a country, it’s good to be a close ally of the United States.” Or as a leading Polish newspaper opined in 2001: “Poland has a tragic historical experience behind it, and it needs an ally on which it can depend.”<sup>66</sup> It is therefore not surprising that new Europe remains more pro-American than old Europe, given that the former has a more obvious reason to worry about a resurgent great power to the East.

In Asia, the end of the Cold War did not eliminate the desire for US protection. In addition to general concerns about the stability of governments in North Korea, Indonesia, and elsewhere, a number of Asian countries share US concerns about the long-term implications of Chinese economic growth. If China continues to grow and develop, it is likely to translate that increased economic strength into greater

<sup>64</sup> See Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, ch. 8.

<sup>65</sup> See Robert J. Art, “Why Europe Needs the United States and NATO,” *Political Science Quarterly* 111 (Spring 1996); and Christoph Bertram, *Europe in the Balance: Securing the Peace Won in the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996).

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Richard Bernstein, “Poland Upstages, and Irks, European Powerhouses,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2003; and “The U.S. and its Leader are Popular with Poles,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2001, A6.

military power and regional influence. In addition to Taiwan (which has long sought US protection against pressure from the PRC), Asian countries like Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and India continue to welcome a close strategic partnership with the United States. Thus, when the United States lost access to its military bases in the Philippines in the late 1980s, Singapore signed a memorandum of understanding giving the US access to facilities there and constructed berthing space (at its own expense) large enough to accommodate US aircraft carriers. Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew justified this policy by saying that “nature does not like a vacuum. And if there is a vacuum, somebody will fill it.”<sup>67</sup> Malaysia endorsed Singapore’s decision and eventually offered the US access to some of its own military installations as well. As one senior Malaysian official commented: “America’s presence is certainly needed, at least to balance other power(s) with contrasting ideology in this region . . . the power balance is needed . . . to ensure that other powers that have far-reaching ambitions in Southeast Asia will not find it easy to act against countries in the region.”<sup>68</sup> Even Vietnam increasingly sees US power as a useful counterweight to China’s looming presence, with the vice chairwoman of the National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs Committee declaring that “everyone know[s] we have to keep a fine balance” and emphasizing that Vietnam will neither “lean over” toward Washington nor “bow” to Beijing.<sup>69</sup> Finally, the United States and India have recently signed a far-reaching but controversial agreement for strategic

<sup>67</sup> Lee also said: “If the Americans are not around, [the Japanese] cannot be sure who will protect their oil tankers. So they have to do something themselves. That will trigger the Koreans, who fear the Japanese, then the Chinese. Will India then come down to our seas with two aircraft carriers?” To avoid a regional competition, Lee wanted to “stick with what has worked so far” – the US military presence – which he regarded as “*essential* for the continuation of international law and order in East Asia.” Quoted in Yuen Foon Khong, “Coping with Strategic Uncertainty: The Role of Institutions and Soft Balancing in Southeast Asia’s Post-Cold War Strategy,” in Allen Carlson, Peter Katzenstein, and J. J. Suh, eds., *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Amitav Acharya, “Containment, Engagement, or Counter-dominance? Malaysia’s Response to the Rise of China,” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), 140.

<sup>69</sup> See Jane Perlez, “U.S. Competes with China for Vietnam’s Allegiance,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2006, A3.

cooperation (including cooperation on nuclear energy) that also reflects shared concerns about China's rise and the overall balance of power in Asia.<sup>70</sup>

The desire for US protection is also evident throughout the Middle East. This motivation is most obvious in the case of Israel – which has depended on a de facto alliance with the United States since the mid-1960s – but it is also central to US relations with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as well as with a number of smaller Persian Gulf states. Although security cooperation with the United States creates domestic political difficulties for these regimes, they still see it as valuable protection against a variety of internal and external challenges. Indeed, America's military role in the Persian Gulf and Middle East has grown dramatically since the 1991 Gulf War, with the smaller Gulf states (Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain) using US power to enhance their freedom of action vis-à-vis their larger neighbors and to help quell potential domestic dissidents. According to Edward Walker of the Middle East Institute: "By seizing on the reform agenda the US has empowered these countries and given them the courage to stand up to the bigger countries."<sup>71</sup>

Last but not least, the heightened fear of international terrorism in the wake of September 11, 2001 provides smaller states with yet another incentive for close collaboration with the world's most powerful country. Whatever their other differences may be, most governments are understandably hostile to non-state movements whose avowed aim is to overthrow existing regimes and foment international conflict and whose preferred tactic is mass violence against innocent civilians. Cooperation against al-Qaeda or its affiliates may fall well short of full alignment, but the shared fear of terrorism does provide another reason for states to overlook their concerns about US power

<sup>70</sup> See R. Nicholas Burns, "America's Strategic Opportunity with India," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (November–December 2007); and C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (May–June 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Walker adds: "This [trend] started some time ago and Qatar led the way . . . It capitalized on this to set up a counterforce with other small countries because everyone had suffered under the shadow of the big boys." Saudi political analyst Jamal Khashoggi adds: "They're all trying to score points with the U.S. at the expense of Saudi Arabia." Quoted in Roula Khalaf, "Arab Minnows Make Waves by Defying Big Neighbours," *Financial Times*, April 5, 2004, 5. See also Craig G. Smith, "A Tiny Gulf Kingdom Bets its Stability on Support for U.S.," *New York Times*, October 24, 2002, A14.



and their reservations about US policies and instead to collaborate with Washington against the shared terrorist danger.<sup>72</sup>

Regional balancing may be a common motivation for alliances with the unipole, but the willingness to ally with the unipole will depend heavily on its geographic proximity and its ability to provide the collective good of security at low cost and risk. As noted above, states often seek alignment with the United States because it is both powerful and far away; they would be much less inclined to form a balancing alliance with a unipole located closer to home. Had the Soviet Union won the Cold War, and emerged as the unipole, for example, the medium powers in Europe and Asia would have been unlikely to seek it out as a potential balancing partner. Their choice would have been either to try to balance the Soviet colossus themselves (which would not have been easy) or to bandwagon with it, in effect giving Moscow hegemony over all of Eurasia. The fact that regional balancing was a common strategy before the advent of unipolarity underscores the importance of the particular ways that power is distributed in different parts of the globe; indeed, this feature of world politics may be just as significant as the number of poles.

### *Summary*

When will these different responses be chosen? As discussed above, hard balancing against the United States remains unlikely, partly for geopolitical reasons and partly because the United States, despite its worrisome emphasis on preemption and unilateralism, is not trying to conquer large swaths of the world and so does not pose an existential threat to most countries. In the unlikely event that it did launch an all-out imperial endeavor (or if the other major powers became convinced that it might), hard balancing would be the likely outcome. But so long as that danger is non-existent or remote, other states will not want to incur the costs and risks entailed in hard balancing.

Instead, medium powers seeking to constrain particular US initiatives through concerted action will rely on some form of soft

<sup>72</sup> Such efforts include the Proliferation Security Initiative (which seeks to interdict WMD components), a large-scale effort to track the illegal money flows that fund terrorist operations, and other forms of law enforcement and intelligence sharing.

balancing. We are likely to see soft balancing whenever the United States contemplates preventive war, for example, unless the object of such a policy was seen as equally threatening by the other major powers. Leash-slipping and other attempts to enhance autonomy are likely to occur when weaker states are concerned about the unipole's ability to manage security problems effectively, and thus seeking a way to distance themselves from its initiatives. Thus, the UAE's recent decision to allow France to establish a small military base on its territory can be seen as an effort to make its dependence on US protection less overt in the wake of the US debacle in Iraq and its counterproductive policy of confrontation with Iran. As Gulf expert Shahram Chubin put it: "Most of the states in the Gulf are not terribly happy (with) – but have no alternative to reliance on – the US, and this diversifies it, or at least gives the appearance of diversifying it."<sup>73</sup>

States will opt for neutrality (1) when they face multiple threats that appear to pose equal dangers, (2) when they foresee no imminent threats at all, or (3) when they are simply trying to remain aloof (or inoffensive) in the face of great power competition. Apart from a few special cases, however (Switzerland comes to mind), true neutrality is likely to be rarer in unipolarity than in other system structures, if only because the unipole is likely to force others to declare their positions openly. President Bush's post-9/11 statement that "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" illustrates the unipole's aversion to neutrality on the part of others and its desire to force others to align with it or bear the full costs of opposition.

Bandwagoning may be slightly more common in unipolarity than in other systems (due to the unipole's increased capacity to pressure others), but it will remain conditional on the unipole's willingness to make credible pledges of restraint. States bandwagon with a threatening power when they believe that resistance will be very costly and that realigning will spare them the threatening power's wrath. As discussed above, Libya's decision to abandon WMD and reengage with the West offers a perfect illustration: coercive diplomacy worked with Libya (but not with Iran, Iraq, or North Korea) because the United States eventually made it clear that it was willing to leave Gaddafi in place as long as he changed his policies.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in "France Signs UAE Base Agreement," at [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080115/ap\\_on\\_re\\_mi\\_ea/france\\_mideast\\_base](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080115/ap_on_re_mi_ea/france_mideast_base).

Lastly, regional balancing will be the preferred course for most states, particularly when they face imminent local threats and are convinced that the single superpower shares their perceptions of the danger. As noted, regional balancers will also go to some lengths to reinforce these perceptions, to convince the strongest state to see the world as they do. But if the unipolar power is smart and clear-eyed, it will recognize the opportunity that the desire for protection affords. The main effect of unipolarity will be to make weaker states more concerned about abandonment and thus more prone to being entrapped, while the unipole will be unconcerned about the former and largely invulnerable to the latter. In unipolarity, most of the time the dominant power can play hard to get and insist that the allies that crave its protection be willing to follow its lead.

These various strategies offer a fairly complete menu of the most common motivations for alliance in a unipolar world. These responses are ideal types, of course, and reality will usually be considerably more complex. States may align with the United States as regional balancers (as Japan has clearly done) but then engage in various forms of soft balancing (as in the Six-Party Talks) in order to pressure the United States to act as they wish. Similarly, one can see major powers such as China collaborating with the United States on certain issues (such as counter-terrorism), while simultaneously trying to build relationships intended to enhance their influence over time (and reduce that of the United States).

### **Managing unipolar alliances**

Members of any alliance are usually tempted to shift the burdens of providing security on to others, while simultaneously seeking to maximize their own influence within the alliance itself. Small and medium powers will try to free ride on the unipole whenever possible, while insisting on alliance norms that retain their voice in alliance decision making. Thus, one would expect them to favor highly institutionalized arrangements aimed at ensuring that the unipole (or other strong allies) do not simply impose their preferences on the weak.

A unipole, by contrast, will try to use its unfettered position to play potential allies off against each other. Instead of favoring highly institutionalized, multilateral arrangements that can tame its power within a web of formal procedures, norms, and rules, the unipole will

prefer to operate with ad hoc coalitions of the willing, even if forming each new arrangement involves somewhat greater transaction costs. In assembling these coalitions – which are needed less for the capabilities they produce than for the appearance of legitimacy they convey – the unipole will naturally prefer to include states it believes will be especially loyal or compliant. And the stronger the unipole is relative to others, the more selective it can be and the greater the premium it can place on loyalty.

US policy since the end of the Cold War is generally consistent with these predictions, and this behavior is especially significant given America's prior commitment to multilateralism.<sup>74</sup> As the chief instigator and alliance leader in the 2003 Gulf War, the United States led the combined military forces, controlled the occupation almost completely, and paid scant attention to the opinions of the other members of its coalition of the willing.<sup>75</sup> This degree of control comes at a price, of course; not only does the United States have to shoulder most of the costs of these wars, but it also ends up solely responsible for anything that goes wrong.

Even so, states that choose to align *with* the United States do not do so passively. Aware that the United States is no longer bound by the need for solidarity against a peer competitor (as it was during the Cold War), America's weaker partners will try to cement relations with Washington in several interrelated ways. Some leaders will try to *bond* with US elites, in effect trying to establish close personal ties with influential Americans and thus gaining greater influence over US actions.<sup>76</sup> Another option is to try to ingratiate oneself with Washington by adopting (or at least appearing to adopt) America's

<sup>74</sup> See John Ruggie, *Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

<sup>75</sup> On US control over the war and occupation, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006); George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005); and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>76</sup> On bonding, see G. John Ikenberry, "Strategic Responses to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity," Report to the National Intelligence Council, July 28, 2003, at [www.cia.gov/nicconreports.stratereact.html](http://www.cia.gov/nicconreports.stratereact.html); and Walt, *Taming American Power*.

own strategic agenda. During the Cold War some US allies won favor by convincing Americans that they were battling communism (even when this was not true); today friendly regimes try to get US help by emphasizing that they too are battling “terrorism.” As Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon put it in 2001, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon: “You in America are in a war against terror. We in Israel are in a war against terror. It’s the same war.”<sup>77</sup> In a particularly brutal and bizarre example of this sort of ingratiating, government officials in Macedonia reportedly tried to curry favor with the United States by murdering a group of refugees and claiming that they had in fact exposed a nascent terrorist cell within their own country.<sup>78</sup>

A third option is to deliberately manipulate American domestic politics, either through formal lobbying efforts or by exploiting sympathetic groups (such as ethnic diasporas) within the United States itself. In addition to well-known cases like the Israeli, Greek, or Armenian lobbies, other governments have recently come to appreciate the influence that a sympathetic diaspora can exert in Washington.<sup>79</sup> In 2002, for example, an Indian government commission noted that “Indo-Americans have effectively mobilized on issues ranging from the nuclear test in 1998 to Kargil, have played a crucial role in generating a favourable climate of opinion in the (US) Congress . . . For the first time, India has a constituency in the United States with real influence and status. *The Indian community in the United States constitutes an invaluable asset in strengthening India’s relationship with the world’s only superpower.*”<sup>80</sup> Not surprisingly, Indian American

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in William Safire, “Israel or Arafat,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2001.

<sup>78</sup> See Nicholas Wood, “A Fake Macedonian Terror Tale That Led to Deaths,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2004; and Juliette Terzief, “A War against Terror That Went Very Wrong: Fabricating Terrorism to Win U.S. Approval,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 20, 2004.

<sup>79</sup> See Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> See *Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora* (New Delhi: Government of India, January 2002), xx–xxi, emphasis added. As former prime minister Atal Vajpayee told a conference of representatives of the Indian diaspora in February 2000: “We would like you to play the role of our unofficial ambassadors by communicating the reality of a new and resurgent

political groups were especially active lobbying Congress to approve the 2006 security treaty between the United States and India, including its controversial provisions for nuclear cooperation.<sup>81</sup> Many other examples of such efforts predate the advent of unipolarity, but in light of the current absence of strong structural constraints on the United States, domestic influences are able to exert relatively greater weight.

Thus, although unipolarity confers real advantages on the United States in its relations with other states, other states do have ways of challenging these structural benefits. Their efforts are facilitated by the permeable nature of the US political system – which makes it easier for special-interest groups to influence policy; by contrast, a different “single superpower” with a less open political system might easily be immune to many forms of manipulation. In any case, the key point is that even when states do seek a genuine alliance with the United States, they do so out of self-interest and will therefore try to get the best deal they can. If US leaders are not careful, US power may end up doing more for its allies than it does for itself.

## Conclusion

Unipolarity is a new phenomenon in world politics, and it is not surprising that scholars and policy makers are just beginning to grasp its essential characteristics. It is equally unsurprising that there is as yet no clear consensus on its implications. With respect to alliance relations, however, the main features of unipolarity are gradually becoming clear. First, the alliance structures inherited from the Cold War are now in flux and are unlikely to persist in their present form. Instead of relying on fixed, multilateral, and highly institutionalized structures that depend on permanent overseas deployments, the United States, as the unipolar power, is likely to rely more heavily on ad hoc coalitions, flexible deployments, and bilateral arrangements that maximize

India to the political, cultural, business, and intellectual establishments in your host countries. Whenever the need and the occasion arise, we would like you to strongly articulate India's case to the various constituencies in your adopted countries.” See Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee, “Address to the Conference on the Contributions of Persons of Indian Origin, New Delhi, February 2000,” at [www.indianembassy.org/special/cabinet/Primeminister/pm\\_feb.12.2000.htm](http://www.indianembassy.org/special/cabinet/Primeminister/pm_feb.12.2000.htm).

<sup>81</sup> See Mike McIntire, “Indian-Americans Test Their Clout on Atom Pact,” *New York Times*, June 5, 2006, 1.

its own leverage and freedom of action. Efforts to constrain US power will occur but will not take the form of formal countervailing coalitions unless the United States adopts an extremely aggressive approach to several different parts of the world. Given the debacle in Iraq, such a course seems unlikely in the near to medium term. When states do balance US power, they will do so through internal effort (such as the acquisition of WMD) or through various forms of soft balancing or leash-slipping. Medium and small powers will compete for influence in Washington, either to prevent US power from being used against them or to encourage its deployment on their behalf.

The record of the past fifteen years also underscores the limits of purely structural explanations. Although unipolarity inevitably heightens concerns about the preferences and actions of the unipole, the distribution of capabilities does not dictate how other states will respond. It matters who the unipole is, where it is located, and how it chooses to use its power. If the unipole is geographically distant, reasonably restrained in its ambitions and conduct, and, most importantly, does not try to conquer others, it is likely to face no more than occasional episodes of soft balancing and may still attract many allies who appreciate the order that the unipole provides and want to use its power to address their own concerns. Their desire for protection will give the unipole considerable influence – including the capacity to restrain others – especially if it shows a decent respect for the interests and amour propre of its weaker partners.

If the unipole is geographically near a number of weaker but still consequential powers, if it is openly committed to imposing its preferences on others, and, most importantly, if it is willing to use force to do so, then hard balancing cannot be ruled out, bandwagoning will be even rarer, and the unipole will be much less likely to retain wide-ranging allied support.

For the United States, being the unipole confers many advantages, which is why US leaders have long sought this position and will not relinquish it voluntarily. One of the most important benefits is greater freedom of choice in the conduct of foreign policy. Paradoxically, a unipolar structure means that purely *structural* constraints on the unipole are sharply reduced. Given the range of choice, therefore, a key question is whether US leaders will decide that the best course is to reduce America's present level of global engagement in order to husband US resources, force other states to bear greater burdens, and

reduce other states' concerns about US power. Alternatively, will the US government try to maintain (or even increase) America's current global commitments, as part of a continuing effort to mold the world according to US preferences? The choice that is ultimately made will have powerful implications for how other states respond, but the decision will depend less on structure and more on internal developments within the United States itself.



## 5

*System maker and privilege taker:  
US power and the international  
political economy*

MICHAEL MASTANDUNO

International relations theorists were slow to recognize that America's unipolar moment had the potential to become an enduring feature of global politics. As that realization has set in, scholars have begun to examine the nature and implications of a one-superpower world. Most of the emphasis has been on the international political and security implications of a distribution of capabilities dominated by the United States. This chapter shifts the focus to an examination of the consequences of unipolarity for the global political economy and for the behavior and influence of the United States within it.

To what extent has the shift in international structure altered the *behavior* of the United States in the world economy? The evidence offered below suggests that the answer is not very much – there is striking consistency in the international economic behavior of the United States across the bipolar and unipolar eras. The role of the United States in the world economy and the nature and pattern of US economic interactions with other major powers are remarkably similar whether we are examining the 1960s, the 1980s, or the 2000s. US *influence*, however, has changed in important ways. During the Cold War the United States dominated international economic adjustment struggles. By contrast, its ability to prevail in those struggles after the Cold War has been significantly compromised.

Over the course of the past sixty years the United States has played a dual role in international economic relations. On the one hand, it has served consistently and self-consciously as the leader of a liberalizing world economy. The United States has created, maintained, defended, and expanded a liberal economic order to serve national economic and security interests. US officials have sought to provide the

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public goods necessary to assure that the system maintains forward momentum. On the other hand, the United States has taken advantage of its privileged position within that international order to serve its own particular ends. It has employed its preponderant power at the core of the world economy to placate domestic constituencies and preserve the autonomy of central decision makers over US foreign, defense, and macroeconomic policy. Across the bipolar and unipolar eras the United States has been simultaneously a system maker and a privilege taker.

The ability of the United States to be both system maker and privilege taker has required the active collaboration of other major powers. During the Cold War America's most important economic supporters were its security partners in Western Europe – in particular, West Germany – and Japan. Since the end of the Cold War the principal supporters are found increasingly in Asia, including Japan, still a security partner, and China, a potential security challenger. The United States and its international economic collaborators have engaged in a series of tacit political deals that preserve the special privileges of the United States while also satisfying the economic and security needs of the supporting actors.

Although America's partners have gradually changed, the tacit political arrangements have remained the same. The United States has maintained the relative openness of its large domestic market to absorb the products of its export-dependent supporters. It has provided security benefits to those supporters. In exchange, they have absorbed and held US dollars, allowing US central decision makers the luxury of maintaining their preferred mix of foreign and domestic policies without having to confront – as ordinary nations must – the standard and politically difficult trade-offs involving guns, butter, and growth.

These recurring deals have proved mutually beneficial yet ultimately unsustainable. The longer they persist, the more they create cumulative economic imbalances that threaten the stability of the international economic order on which they are based. When underlying system stability has been threatened, the United States and its supporters have engaged in a struggle to adjust their policies, with each side seeking to force the burden of adjustment on the others.

During the Cold War the United States dictated the terms of adjustment. It derived the necessary leverage because it provided for the security of its economic partners and because there were no viable

alternatives to an economic order centered on the United States. After the Cold War the outcome of adjustment struggles is less certain because the United States is no longer in a position to dictate the terms. The United States, notwithstanding its preponderant power, no longer enjoys the same type of security leverage it once possessed, and the very success of the US-centered world economy has afforded America's supporters a greater range of international and domestic economic options.

The claim that the United States is unipolar is a statement about its cumulative economic, military, and other capabilities.<sup>1</sup> But preponderant capabilities across the board do not guarantee effective influence in any given arena. US dominance in the international security arena no longer translates into effective leverage in the international economic arena. And although the United States remains a dominant international economic player in absolute terms, after the Cold War it has found itself more vulnerable and constrained than it was during the golden economic era after World War Two. It faces rising economic challengers with their own agendas and with greater discretion in international economic policy than America's Cold War allies had enjoyed. The United States may continue to act its own way, but it can no longer count on getting its own way.

The next section explores the logic of the system making and privilege taking that has characterized postwar US behavior. The following three sections examine three postwar phases of the US international economic project. In the initial phase, US officials constructed the foundation for a liberal economic order; in the second phase they defended that order in the face of internal and external challenges; and in the third phase they enlarged the order geographically and functionally. In each phase the United States took advantage of its privileged position and was forced to confront systemic imbalances and adjustment struggles.

### **Opportunity, obligations, and privilege**

The era of cumulative US dominance in material capabilities has existed for less than two decades. But within the more narrow confines of the international political economy, the United States had already enjoyed

<sup>1</sup> See, generally, Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 131.

a singularly dominant position much earlier. During the Cold War the United States faced the Soviet Union as a peer competitor in international security but was peerless in the world economy.<sup>2</sup> China and the Soviet Union were peripheral economic actors and the states of Western Europe and Japan had economies significantly smaller than that of the United States. Since the end of the Cold War the United States has achieved a singularly dominant position in terms of material military capabilities. And although other major powers have narrowed the relative gap in economic capabilities, in absolute terms the United States continues to command a dominant share of resources.<sup>3</sup>

Dominant states, generally speaking, have the resources to construct the international orders they prefer,<sup>4</sup> and preponderant capabilities in the world economy over some sixty years have offered the United States opportunity, obligation, and privilege. US central decision makers have therefore had the opportunity to shape the world economy according to American values and interests. Although the United States had declined that opportunity during the interwar period, US decision makers proved more open to it after World War Two. As a result, for more than six decades, the United States has pursued the construction, maintenance, and expansion of a liberal international economic

<sup>2</sup> In 1950 US GDP as a percentage of the total of six major powers (the United States, France, Japan, Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union) was 50 percent. The Soviet Union was a distant second at 18 percent. In military outlays the US share was 43 percent, and the Soviet Union's was 46 percent. By 1985 the military outlays of the bipolar competitors remained similar, with the Soviet Union at 44 percent and the United States at 40 percent. In terms of economic capabilities, the United States experienced relative decline but remained dominant in absolute terms among the six major powers plus China. US share of major power GDP was 33 percent, while China possessed 15 percent, and Japan and the Soviet Union each had 13 percent. See William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24 (Summer 1999), 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> By 1997 the US share of military outlays among the seven major powers was 50 percent. Russia was at 13 percent, France at 9 percent, and Japan at 8 percent. The US share of major power GDP was 40 percent, while Japan's was 22 percent and China's 21 percent; Wohlforth, "Stability." The 1997 figures use purchasing power estimates, which greatly increase yet probably exaggerate China's relative share. By the end of 2004, again using purchasing power, the US share was 38 percent and China's was 25 percent; The Economist, *Pocket World in Figures*, 2007 edn. (London: Profile Books, 2007), 26.

<sup>4</sup> John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).

order on an increasingly global scale, an order characterized by the free flow of goods, services, capital, and technology among private rather than state actors. This international economic project has constituted a consistent national interest that both predated and postdates the international security project of the Cold War.

Preponderant power creates international obligations. Great powers have "system maintenance" responsibilities, whether the system is an international political order or the world economy.<sup>5</sup> Scholars in the hegemonic stability tradition conceived loosely of international economic cooperation as a collective good, one that would be underproduced in the absence of a dominant state exercising leadership.<sup>6</sup> Leadership implies taking on system-maintenance tasks such as serving as an open market of last resort, allowing the use of one's currency as an international reserve and exchange unit, intervening to rescue states in financial distress, and providing capital to states with long-term development needs. The postwar United States has embraced these obligations, though not always consistently or unambiguously. Although the United States has long protected certain sectors (for example, agriculture, textiles), its market generally has been among the most open of the major industrial powers. The US dollar has long been the world's most important exchange and reserve currency.<sup>7</sup> US Treasury officials, in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund, have played a prominent role in responding to states in financial distress, for example, during the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s, the Mexican crisis of 1994, or the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For example, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1995); and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Both authors emphasize the special systemic responsibilities of the great powers.

<sup>6</sup> Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); and Bruce Russett, "The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony," *International Organization* 39, 2 (1985). The collective goods claims have been subject to critical scrutiny, for example, Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization* 39 (1985); and David A. Lake, "Leadership, Hegemony, and the International Economy: Naked Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?" *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 4 (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin J. Cohen, *The Geography of Money* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Robert D. Zoellick and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *America and the East Asian Crisis* (New York: Norton, 2000).

A preponderance of capabilities also affords a dominant state the ability to enjoy special privileges. The same collection of resources and assets that makes the dominant state a natural candidate for system leadership also positions it for system exploitation. Robert Gilpin argued that a dominant state is powerful enough to bear the costs of producing international order – but that it is also powerful enough to coerce other states into bearing those costs instead.<sup>9</sup> During the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991, the United States perceived itself as providing a critical service to vulnerable states in the Middle East and to energy-dependent allies in Western Europe and Japan, and it collected sizable financial contributions from other states to finance the war effort.<sup>10</sup> A large, stable domestic economy can generate surpluses to be lent abroad to states in need of scarce capital; that same economy may enjoy the privilege of being a safe haven, that attracts and absorbs the scarce capital of the outside world. The willingness to allow one's national currency to function as an international reserve and exchange currency simultaneously confers on the possessing state the privilege of living beyond its means.

States with preponderant capabilities are also apt to claim, precisely because they contribute disproportionately to the international order, that they deserve special treatment that exempts them from rules that apply to ordinary states. In the early 2000s, in deference to its global military role, the United States demanded special status in international agreements governing landmines and the International Criminal Court. A similar transformation of the burden of obligation into the extraction of special privilege was evident in the “Super 301” legislation of the 1980s and 1990s: US trade officials, acting as self-appointed enforcers of the free trade regime, asserted the right within their own national law to single out and punish countries they judged to be unfair traders, outside the standard rules and norms of that regime.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Bennett, Joseph Leggold, and Danny Unger, eds., *Friends in Need: Burden Sharing in the Persian Gulf War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); and David A. Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in its Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), ch. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Jagdish Bhagwati and Hugh T. Patrick, eds., *Aggressive Unilateralism: America's 301 Trade Policy and the World Trading System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

The underlying tension between obligation and privilege – between doing what is necessary to promote international order and doing what is possible to satisfy more particularistic objectives – has been a defining feature of international political economy during the American era. The United States has been determined to have its cake and eat it. At three critical junctures this tension erupted into a conflict that has jeopardized the overall stability of the world economy. These episodes occurred roughly twenty years apart but share a strikingly similar anatomy. A different US administration has triggered each crisis by emphasizing the preservation of domestic autonomy over the pursuit of international obligation and carrying out a mix of foreign and domestic policies that result in significant US international payments deficits. While ordinary countries in the liberal world economy are forced to finance external deficits by adjusting domestic economic priorities, the United States has enjoyed the extraordinary privilege of having its deficits financed abroad.

America's key partners have enjoyed benefits as well. They have accumulated international reserves needed to defend their own economies from future payments crises. They have gained access to the large open market of the United States and to the flow of vital raw materials guaranteed by the projection of US military power. They have benefited from security arrangements with the United States that have enabled them to devote greater national efforts to the pursuit of economic competitiveness and prosperity. America's supporters have been willing collaborators, having aided and abetted the US program for their own reasons. And in so doing they have reinforced the temptation of the United States to live beyond its means.

If these tacit deals serve mutual interests, why do they break down? Several types of pressures, often working in tandem, have proved most important. First, either the United States or its partners have perceived that the balance of benefits is skewed against them and have sought to renegotiate the tacit deal. Second, at some point governments on either or both sides have reluctantly concluded that although the short-term benefits are attractive, the threat to the stability of the world economy from cumulative economic imbalances is too great a risk to endure. Third, governments are not the only players in the game; financial market forces – those beyond the direct control of governments – have the ability to precipitate or exacerbate the very kinds of crises that cooperating governments seek to avoid. These financial forces have

become increasingly powerful over time, as the globalization of the world economy has progressed.<sup>12</sup>

Adjustment struggles have followed a fairly standard pattern. As the threat of systemic instability has loomed, America's partners have accused it of acting irresponsibly and have urged it to get its domestic house in order. The United States has countered by depicting its partners as ungrateful, free riding beneficiaries of its burdensome, system-sustaining efforts. The United States held the upper hand in these tests of political will during the Cold War, but that is no longer the case in the unipolar era. The US security system is now diffuse rather than tightly organized, and the more globalized world economy offers supporting states options that were far less viable when the United States was, in effect, the only economic game in town.

### Laying the foundations and the initial struggle to adjust

The central role of the United States in the reconstruction of international economic order after World War Two has been well documented.<sup>13</sup> For US officials, economics and security were inextricably linked. Depression had led to war; enemies in the marketplace became enemies on the battlefield. Officials in the Truman administration believed that the restoration of economic prosperity would encourage peaceful relations among the world's powers, and they recognized that the large and dynamic US economy would benefit from open access to as many overseas markets and sources of supply as possible.

The international economic order that emerged reflected US preferences.<sup>14</sup> Global economic activity was to be organized on the basis of multilateralism and non-discrimination, rather than on the

<sup>12</sup> See Jonathan Kirshner, *Globalization and National Security* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See Fred Block, *The Origins of International Economic Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and Robert Pollard, *Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Definitive treatments of the Bretton Woods system include Harold James, *International Monetary Cooperation since Bretton Woods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Richard Gardner, *Sterling–Dollar Diplomacy: Anglo-American Collaboration in the Reconstruction of Multilateral Trade* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).



basis of the exclusionary regional blocs preferred by the economically weaker European powers. The international monetary system, designed to reinforce free trade, would be publicly managed rather than left to market forces. Monetary arrangements would reflect US preferences by emphasizing the control of inflation by the adoption of austerity measures in deficit countries, rather than by the promotion of growth through global deficit spending administered by a world central bank. The US Congress resisted an ambitious plan for an International Trade Organization (ITO) because it would have sanctioned, in deference to developing states, protection of infant industries and other discriminatory measures that violated the US ideal of a liberalized, non-discriminatory commercial order characterized by minimal government intervention.<sup>15</sup>

Although the postwar order bore the decisive imprint of the United States, geopolitical realities and the formidable challenges of postwar reconstruction forced US officials to compromise on their vision of a rapid restoration of a worldwide liberal economy.<sup>16</sup> The exclusion of the Soviet Union and its allies was essentially dictated by the Cold War. The de facto exclusion of most less developed countries followed from the collapse of the ITO and the creation of the austerity-oriented International Monetary Fund (IMF). The initial Bretton Woods system hardly constituted a global order. It was instead a "rich country club" with selective membership, essentially the United States and its security allies in Western Europe and Japan.

The United States was forced to modify its preferred design in other ways as well. The original Bretton Woods agreement called for the IMF to manage exchange rates among a set of participating countries taking on symmetrical arrangements to maintain fixed rates through domestic adjustment measures.<sup>17</sup> But because European economic recovery took so much longer than initially expected, the United States, rather than the IMF, assumed the task of international monetary management through the assumption of a de facto dollar standard. The US

<sup>15</sup> Gardner, *Sterling-Dollar Diplomacy*, ch. 17.

<sup>16</sup> John Ikenberry, "Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony," *Political Science Quarterly* 104 (Fall 1989).

<sup>17</sup> *Articles of Agreement of the International Monetary Fund* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, repr. November 1988); and Joan E. Spero, *The Politics of International Economic Relations*, 4th edn. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 33–35.

preference for multilateral free trade with minimal government intervention was modified by the “embedded liberal” compromise – gradually freer trade internationally had to be accompanied by welfare state liberalism domestically.<sup>18</sup> The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a second-best solution after the failure of the ITO, did provide a forum for successful tariff rate reductions among advanced industrial states. But in its first two decades the GATT did not bring key sectors (for example, agriculture, textiles, and services) under international discipline, and it was unprepared to address the more insidious problem of non-tariff barriers. In short, the US managed to create only the bare foundation for a liberal economic order during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Bretton Woods system was based on a tacit deal between the United States and its principal allies that spanned trade, finance, and security. Western Europe and Japan received American resources – loans, grants, and foreign direct investments – urgently needed for economic recovery and subsequent development. They enjoyed preferential access to the US market as the United States lowered barriers to trade and tolerated discrimination by its more export-dependent allies. West European states gained security protection by pulling an initially reluctant, but eventually willing, United States into the NATO alliance, while Japan relied on the asymmetrical US–Japan security treaty as the core of its postwar security strategy. Benefits to the United States were obvious as well. The United States essentially made a long-term investment in the economic viability and political stability of other advanced industrial states – states that would eventually provide growing markets for US exports and foreign direct investment and serve as anti-communist bulwarks in the two major theaters of the Cold War, Europe and East Asia.

The US dollar was the lynchpin of the transatlantic and transpacific deal. Freer trade depended on monetary stability, which, in turn, depended on the special role of the dollar. While governments in Western Europe and Japan committed to defending the value of their currencies relative to the dollar, the US government took on the more formidable obligations of maintaining a fixed value for the dollar in

<sup>18</sup> John Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

terms of gold and of agreeing to accept dollars from other central banks in exchange for gold at that fixed rate. By upholding a pledge that the dollar was “good as gold,” US officials provided the confidence that public and private actors needed to embrace the special reserve and liquidity functions of the dollar in the world economy.

This critical role for the dollar granted a well-understood privilege to US policy makers.<sup>19</sup> As long as other governments proved willing to hold dollars, US external deficits could be financed essentially by printing money and lending it abroad, enabling the United States to pursue a variety of foreign and domestic policy objectives without necessarily confronting difficult trade-offs in the short term. Allied governments in Western Europe and Japan were willing collaborators. The dollars held by their central banks financed the US commitment to guarantee their security, including the most tangible manifestation of that commitment, the stationing of US troops on their territories. Equally important, as allied economies recovered during the 1950s and 1960s, their central banks purchased and accumulated dollars in order to prevent local currencies from appreciating beyond the acceptable range of their fixed exchange rates. By meeting their obligations they maintained undervalued currencies, which in turn enabled them to maintain a competitive export position in the large US market.

Robert Triffin famously recognized that this elegant monetary system was based on an inherent contradiction.<sup>20</sup> The United States needed to run balance of payments deficits to supply liquidity to the world economy. But the United States also needed to maintain confidence in the dollar as a store of value – confidence that would be undermined by large and persistent external deficits. The success of the arrangement required US policy makers to strike a delicate balance. They needed to run payments deficits large enough to provide adequate dollar flows to the world economy, yet not so large as to trigger an international crisis of confidence in the dollar.

The US balance of payments needed to be responsive to this precise requirement of system management. American officials were aware of this obligation throughout the 1960s yet ultimately chose to give

<sup>19</sup> Susan Strange provides a classic analysis of the political benefits of holding the system’s “top currency”; Strange, *Sterling and British Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Triffin, *Gold and the Dollar Crisis: The Future of Convertibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

priority to US policy autonomy. The US balance of payments position was more a function of US domestic and foreign policy choices than a response to the stringent demands of the liquidity–confidence paradox. This became most apparent during the escalation of the Vietnam War, when the Johnson administration opted for guns and butter – an activist military policy abroad and an ambitious expansion of the welfare state at home – and financed both not by raising taxes but by allowing the expansion of dollar holdings by foreign central banks.

As the dollar scarcity of the 1950s evolved into the dollar overabundance of the 1960s, both the United States and its partners were forced to contemplate the implications for their tacit deal across economics and security. The governments of Western Europe and Japan, with the exception of France, responded to the excess dollar problem by playing a supporting role. They collaborated with the United States throughout the 1960s to preserve the Bretton Woods system. In 1961 central bankers created the gold pool, in recognition of the reality that the decline in US gold reserves and the increase in dollar holdings abroad would continue to force upward pressure on the dollar price of gold.<sup>21</sup> Central banks in the gold pool helped the United States meet its obligation to defend the dollar price of gold by supplying their own gold to the London market to meet growing demand. Collaborating central banks were also willing, beginning in the early 1960s, to purchase dollar-denominated bonds from the United States as an alternative to increasing their gold holdings. Western finance ministers formed the Group of Ten in 1961 and created a \$6 billion collective fund that would be available to forestall or respond to currency crises that might threaten monetary system stability.<sup>22</sup>

Due to its rapidly recovered economy, large dollar holdings, and pivotal position in the forward defense of NATO, the Federal Republic of Germany was the most important supporting state. In 1962 the Kennedy administration forced the West German government to accept

<sup>21</sup> James, *International Monetary Cooperation*, 159–161. Nineteen sixty was the first postwar year in which the value of foreign dollar holdings exceeded the value of US gold reserves. In October 1960 the price of gold on the London market spiked to \$40 an ounce, well above the \$35 price the United States had pledged to defend.

<sup>22</sup> The Group of Ten supporters included Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Canada, Japan, Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States. Switzerland joined in 1964.

an “offset” agreement in which a certain percentage of surplus dollars had to be used by West Germany to purchase US military equipment. This arrangement recycled dollars back to the United States, supported US defense firms, and made West Germany more dependent on its security relationship with the United States.<sup>23</sup> West German support was displayed publicly in 1967 and 1968; as pressure mounted on the dollar, the West German central bank made an explicit pledge to hold surplus dollars rather than turn them back to the United States for gold.<sup>24</sup>

Germany’s role as a key supporter stood in striking contrast to France’s attempt to play the spoiler.<sup>25</sup> De Gaulle’s government resented the “extraordinary privilege” the special role of the dollar conferred on the United States. External deficits had forced France to contract its economy and suffer humiliating devaluations in 1957 and 1958; the United States should similarly be forced to live within its means rather than enjoy “deficits without tears.”<sup>26</sup> De Gaulle’s government also expressed concerns about the viability of a dollar-based international monetary system. A fairer and more stable order, France argued, would place greater emphasis on gold and distribute the privilege of creating reserve assets more symmetrically among G10 members. French officials sought to “talk down” the dollar and pressured the United States by using surplus dollar holdings to make claims on US gold reserves. They urged other G10 countries to follow their lead and force the United States to accept a reformed monetary system.<sup>27</sup> In the face of US–French conflict, other G10 countries took a position closer to that

<sup>23</sup> Francis J. Gavin, “The Gold Battles within the Cold War: American Monetary Policy and the Defense of Europe, 1960–1963,” *Diplomatic History* 26 (January 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Francis J. Gavin, “Ideas, Power, and the Politics of U.S. Monetary Policy during the 1960s,” in Jonathan Kirshner, ed., *Monetary Orders: Ambiguous Economics, Ubiquitous Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Bordo, Dominique Simard, and Eugene White, “France and the Bretton Woods International Monetary System: 1960 to 1968,” *NBER Working Paper Series*, no. 4642 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, February 1994).

<sup>26</sup> See Jonathan Kirshner, *Currency and Coercion: The Political Economy of International Monetary Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 192–203. The quote is from de Gaulle adviser Jacques Rueff (p. 195).

<sup>27</sup> France also went after Great Britain, which played a supporting role in the US system as a secondary reserve currency country. One condition France imposed on Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community was that Britain abandon sterling’s reserve currency status; Bordo *et al.*, “France and the Bretton Woods International Monetary System,” 19.

of Germany, choosing to support the United States rather than subvert the asymmetrical Bretton Woods arrangement.

Although the Johnson administration appreciated the links between US global commitments, US deficits, and the dollar depreciation, it proved unwilling to make fundamental adjustments. The president would neither revise the US strategy of global engagement nor accept domestic austerity measures as the price for restoring international confidence in the dollar. Devaluation – considered by Johnson to be as humiliating as losing the Vietnam War – was out of the question as well. The president confided to a close aide in 1966 that “if you think I am going to go protectionist, twist our foreign aid programs worse, or change the main lines of our defense and foreign policy, just so the French can buy gold from us at \$35 an ounce, you’ve got another thing coming.”<sup>28</sup> Rather than undertake fundamental adjustment, the US addressed the confidence problem with a series of incremental steps designed to forestall a full-blown dollar crisis. The Johnson administration imposed some restrictions on US foreign direct investment and took steps to promote exports and discourage tourism. It asked partnering governments not to request gold for their surplus dollars. Joanne Gowa aptly captures the US response: “Through a series of seemingly never-ending ad hoc adjustments at the margins of the system, the United States attempted to extend the life span of the system without affecting its own privileged position within it.”<sup>29</sup>

By 1968 the Bretton Woods system was in disarray. The full convertibility of West European and Japanese currencies, the rise of multinational banks, and the development of dollar-denominated markets within Europe (“Euro-currency” markets) significantly increased the volume of private international financial transactions. These capital movements complicated the ability of governments to manage exchange rates and forced them to confront the struggle to adjust. The collapse and devaluation of the British pound in November 1967 signaled that speculative market pressure would henceforth focus directly on the overvalued dollar.

The predicament of Japan and West European governments was clear. The tacit deal had served them well. They did not want the

<sup>28</sup> John Odell, *U.S. International Monetary Policy: Markets, Power, and Ideas as Sources of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 153.

<sup>29</sup> Joanne Gowa, *Closing the Gold Window: Domestic Politics and the End of Bretton Woods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 47.

dollar devalued and their currencies appreciated, as that would make their exports less competitive in the US market and would decrease the value of their substantial dollar holdings. They also did not want the United States to renege on its defense commitments, which were the foundation of their own postwar security strategies. But they did want the United States to adjust domestically and adhere to the kind of monetary and fiscal policies that would restore a sufficient degree of confidence in the dollar to preserve system stability.

For their part, the Johnson administration and, subsequently, the Nixon administration became increasingly impatient with what they perceived as ingratitude and intransigence on the part of their economic and security partners. European and Japanese economies had recovered, but their governments seemed unwilling to accept the obligations that accompanied their renewed economic strength. The United States called on its partners to adjust – to revalue their currencies relative to the dollar (as opposed to having the dollar devalued relative to gold), to abandon trade protection and open markets to US exports, and to accept a greater share of the burden of the alliance defense effort.

Although adjustments were ultimately made by both sides, the terms and outcome of the struggle were dictated by the United States. In 1968 the Johnson administration nullified potential French leverage by forcing its partners to accept a two-tier market for gold. Once the United States no longer recognized its obligation to keep the market price of gold close to the official US price, France's strategy of pressuring US policy change by driving up the market price and forcing the United States to scramble in reaction was no longer viable.<sup>30</sup> The United States did maintain its formal commitment to exchange dollars for gold among central banks at \$35 per ounce – while also making clear to other governments its reluctance to actually meet the commitment. This left allied governments in the awkward position of having to continue to accumulate dollar reserves in order to defend the fixed values of their now undervalued currencies, currencies that would appreciate in the absence of government intervention. The Nixon administration pursued this strategy of benign neglect until 1971, at which point it was forced to respond to the combination of a deteriorating US

<sup>30</sup> Bordo *et al.*, "France and the Bretton Woods International Monetary System," 17. The two-tier market ended the need for the gold pool.

payments position, increased foreign demands on US gold reserves, and speculative pressure against the dollar.<sup>31</sup>

Nixon's now infamous response in August 1971 was intended to force adjustment on US partners. Closing the gold window meant excess dollar holdings abroad could no longer be exchanged for the more secure and tangible asset. An import surcharge levied on goods coming into the US market was intended to force European and Japanese revaluation and a commitment to market opening. US partners, as part of the Smithsonian Agreement of December 1971, did agree to revalue their currencies and participate in a new market-opening GATT round. The United States in turn did devalue the dollar in terms of gold, although it still refused to allow the exchange of dollars for gold. Subsequent efforts to restore fixed exchange rates failed in the context of sustained market pressure against the dollar and finally the OPEC price shocks of 1973, essentially terminating the Bretton Woods system but not the *de facto* special role of the US dollar.

The United States prevailed for two major reasons. First, during the 1960s there were no viable alternatives to a dollar-centered monetary system.<sup>32</sup> British sterling was at best a second-string reserve currency whose weakness prompted a series of crises that culminated in the dramatic devaluation of 1967. The French economy was not sufficiently strong for the franc to serve even as a European alternative to the dollar, a point driven home by the French domestic turmoil and currency crisis in 1968 and devaluation in 1969. The Japanese economy showed remarkable strength by the late 1960s, but Japan's singular obsession with export-led growth, its underdeveloped financial markets, and its modest international political profile made the yen an implausible candidate for reserve currency status. The German mark may have been a viable European alternative, but West Germany, the strongest supporter of the US-centered system, was not about to partner with France and lead an alternative coalition.

West German support suggests the second key source of US leverage. It was widely recognized on both sides of the Atlantic that the most

<sup>31</sup> By the middle of 1971 the US gold holdings had dwindled to \$10 billion, while foreign dollar holdings had increased to \$80 billion.

<sup>32</sup> Barry Eichengreen, "Global Imbalances and the Lessons of Bretton Woods," *NBER Working Paper Series*, no. 10497 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2004).



obvious remedy to the US balance-of-payments problem was the withdrawal of US troops from Europe. US central decision makers were obviously reluctant to *take* this step in light of US defense strategy; they were, however, equally prepared to *contemplate* it in light of the extraordinary importance they placed on defending the prestige of the dollar. The public US commitment to the dollar made troop reductions a credible threat, something the United States might have little choice but to carry out. The message was not lost on US European partners, particularly West Germany, which feared by the late 1960s that US balance-of-payments difficulties could combine with geopolitical factors (the debacle in Vietnam and détente with the Soviet Union) to force an agonizing US reappraisal of its forward defense posture. The Johnson administration did remove one division from West Germany in 1967, and members of Congress, forced to address painful economic adjustments at home while a recovered Europe prospered as a perceived free rider, seemed willing to contemplate deeper cuts.<sup>33</sup> Neither the United States nor its partners wanted to jeopardize the US defense commitment, however. But it was the United States that enjoyed the greater leverage, because forcing adjustment on the United States would credibly call the US defense commitment into question. Forcing adjustment on Europe would not threaten NATO and arguably could even strengthen it by increasing Europe's contribution to the collective Western defense effort.

### Defending the liberal order and maintaining special privileges

Following the demise of Bretton Woods, successive US administrations were determined to maintain the liberal economic project in the face of oil shocks, inflation, and slower growth worldwide. This required defensive measures at home and abroad. Externally US officials confronted alternative visions of economic order, first from developing countries and later from East Asia. At home they faced increased demands for protection from import-sensitive interests. With the collapse of fixed rates, they also needed to devise a monetary mechanism to stabilize currencies and reinforce freer trade. The US dollar and

<sup>33</sup> Gavin, "Ideas," 196–197, 211.

the domestic market maintained their special role, again affording US policy makers the opportunity to be privilege takers as well as system makers.

A challenge to the US liberal vision emerged during the 1970s in the form of developing country demands for a New International Economic Order (NIEO).<sup>34</sup> Leaders of the NIEO movement argued that the liberal world economy was biased in favor of advanced industrial states, and demanded a set of compensatory arrangements that would have increased significantly the role of national governments and international regulators. The NIEO envisioned, in essence, a global welfare state.<sup>35</sup> This vision gained political salience because the OPEC cartel initially placed its formidable economic and political leverage behind NIEO demands. The United States resisted these demands and disrupted Southern unity by separating the particular concerns of OPEC states from the broader systemic demands of the developing world. They bought off key oil producers such as Iran (until 1979) and Saudi Arabia with military assistance packages, closer geopolitical ties, and the promise of a secure investment outlet for their considerable petrodollar profits.<sup>36</sup> The NIEO died quietly.

A subsequent challenge emerged from Japan during the 1980s. To American eyes, Japan posed a threat to the liberal economic order even though it was among the most loyal US economic and security partners.<sup>37</sup> Japan's success was based on state intervention to maximize industrial development and export competitiveness. The United States tolerated Japan as a mercantilist exception to the liberal order during the initial postwar decades, but once Japan recovered, its model of developmental capitalism posed a double challenge. Japan's economic success threatened to undermine the dominant economic position of

<sup>34</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Stephen C. Neff, *Friends but No Allies: Economic Liberalism and the Law of Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 178–196.

<sup>36</sup> David E. Spiro, *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). Spiro elaborates the tacit US–Saudi deal: Saudi Arabia assured Western access to Persian Gulf oil, and the United States recycled petrodollar profits by selling US government securities to the Saudi government.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Mastanduno, “Models, Markets and Power: Political Economy and the Asia-Pacific, 1989–99,” *Review of International Studies* 26, 4 (2000).

the United States.<sup>38</sup> US officials also worried that the popularity and spread of the Japanese state-centered model in East Asia and beyond would work at cross-purposes with US efforts to foster global economic liberalization and privatization. The image of East Asian countries as geese flying in formation behind Japan was problematic if Japan was not necessarily flying behind the United States.

The Japanese challenge reflected a deeper problem at home. The postwar United States had enjoyed the best of both worlds. It had low tariffs and open domestic markets, allowing it to serve credibly as the leader of a liberalizing global economy without having its domestic producers face stiff competition from abroad. The picture changed as Europe's producers recovered and new Asian competitors emerged with export-led growth strategies targeting the US market. The year 1971 marked a transition; the United States ran a merchandise trade deficit for the first time since the 1930s. Domestic producers and organized labor responded to the pressure of foreign competition and slower growth with demands for protection. The US Congress became more assertive in response to these societal demands.<sup>39</sup> Executive officials, accustomed to pressing economic liberalization on reluctant partners abroad yet from a secure base of support at home, now faced the prospect of contested liberalism both internationally and domestically.

A threefold response to protectionist pressure during the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated the US penchant for system making and privilege taking. First, officials in the executive branch pushed GATT negotiations to maintain momentum for multilateral free trade. The Tokyo Round commenced in 1973 to integrate Japan more fully into the liberal order and to address an array of non-tariff barriers that remained as protectionist devices in the developed world after tariffs had been effectively lowered.<sup>40</sup> But progress was slow and results were modest. The six-year effort failed to address agricultural restrictions and

<sup>38</sup> Clyde V. Prestowitz, Jr., *Trading Places: How We are Giving our Future to Japan and How to Reclaim It*, 2nd edn. (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> The authoritative source is I. M. Destler, *American Trade Politics: System under Stress*, 2nd edn. (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Gilbert Winham, *International Trade and the Tokyo Round Negotiations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

could produce only a set of vague codes on non-tariff barriers. It took seven years before the next round could even begin. With domestic producers unwilling to wait decades for multilateral negotiations to yield results, executive officials adopted a second, parallel strategy. The Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations forced America's trading partners to accept "voluntary" export restraints (VERs) and orderly marketing arrangements (OMAs) that provided relief to import-competing interests at home. These managed-trade arrangements violated the spirit if not the letter of the GATT. Other states were forced to tolerate US hypocrisy and acquiesce because of their dependence on the large US market.

Third, US officials sought to deflect even greater protectionist pressures at home by pressuring selected governments bilaterally to open markets. Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1971 gave the executive the authority to address "unreasonable and discriminatory" foreign trade practices by demanding negotiations with the offending government and if necessary imposing retaliatory trade sanctions against them. Section 301 spawned "Super 301" to address the most blatant state practitioners of unfair trade. The first Bush administration created an international outcry in 1989 when it publicly singled out Japan, Brazil, and India for negotiations under the auspices of Super 301.<sup>41</sup> From the perspective of US trading partners, Section 301 granted the United States the outrageous privilege of acting simultaneously as the self-appointed prosecutor, jury, and judge in adjudicating what it perceived to be the unfair trading practices of others. US officials in turn perceived themselves as the guardians of last resort of the international trading order and believed that unilateral and coercive means were justified as long as they served the ultimate goal of furthering multilateral free trade.

The challenge of sustaining momentum for freer trade was compounded by the potential for monetary instability. Industrial states were forced to abandon fixed rates in 1973 and allow their currencies to float according to market values. The lack of any explicit government commitments raised anew the specter of the instability of the interwar years. How to assure that governments did not manipulate their currency values to gain trade advantages? How to avoid

<sup>41</sup> Bhagwati and Patrick, *Aggressive Unilateralism*.

the fluctuations in market-driven currency values that might discourage international trade and investment? IMF member governments were sensitive to these problems but could not legislate a solution. The new monetary regime adopted in 1976 called on member states to exercise good monetary citizenship, to avoid exchange rate manipulation to gain unfair competitive advantages, and “to intervene in the exchange market if necessary to counter disorderly conditions.”<sup>42</sup> It did not suggest how to assure that these sensible practices would be observed.

A practical political solution emerged. The formal obligations of Bretton Woods were replaced by the commitment of advanced industrial states to informal coordination through G7 summits.<sup>43</sup> Governments would manage fluctuations in exchange rates by coordinating the underlying national monetary and fiscal policies that determined their currency values. As long as no major economy grew too quickly (or too slowly) or allowed interest rates or inflation to move too high (or too low), floating currency values could remain relatively stable even without explicit government commitments to maintain them within a fixed range.

The rhetoric of “interdependence” and “collective leadership” emanating from Washington did not disguise the fact that the US economy remained dominant. The US market remained the world’s largest and most attractive to global exporters, and the dollar, notwithstanding the collapse of Bretton Woods, was still the primary currency of the global economy. The continued centrality of the United States was illuminated in 1977 and 1978, when a US–West German economic conflict and the subsequent depreciation of the dollar disrupted West European economies, leading West Germany and France to create a European Monetary System (EMS) to foster intra-European monetary stability and help individual European economies withstand fluctuations in the value of the all-important dollar.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The language, added in 1976, is from article IV of the IMF Articles of Agreement, cited in Odell, *U.S. International Monetary Policy*, 329.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. Putnam and Nicholas Bayne, *Hanging Together: Cooperation and Conflict in the Seven-Power Summits*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> C. Randall Henning, *Currencies and Politics in the United States, Germany, and Japan* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1994), 185–186, 267–270.

US primacy in trade and monetary relations left open the possibility that the imperatives of system management would come into conflict once again with the desire of a US administration to exercise autonomy in pursuit of a particular set of foreign and domestic policy objectives. The Reagan administration precipitated this conflict. To combat the protracted inflation of the 1970s, it endorsed a tight monetary policy, which drove US interest rates to record levels. But Reagan officials coupled tight money with an expansive fiscal policy based on deep tax cuts and a \$1.5 trillion rearmament initiative to regain the upper hand in the Cold War. The impact of this set of priorities was a rapidly appreciating dollar, a deep recession in 1981–1982, and record US fiscal deficits that spiked from \$74 billion in 1981 to \$238 billion by 1986.<sup>45</sup>

The impact of America's domestic choices left West European states in a frustrating predicament. High US interest rates attracted funds from European economies, helping to finance US deficits but draining capital from needed investments in Europe. European central banks could retain capital by allowing interest rates to rise to match those of the United States, but that would lead European economies into recession alongside the United States. At the G7 summits in 1981 and 1982, European ministers pleaded with their US counterparts to relieve the pressure by reducing what Helmut Schmidt termed "the highest real interest rates since the birth of Christ."<sup>46</sup> The Reagan administration responded with benign neglect, reminding European officials that the United States was under no obligation to adjust interest and exchange rate policies. Administration officials suggested the strong dollar and capital flows from Europe reflected a dynamic US economy in contrast to "Eurosclerosis" and lectured European officials on the virtues of American-style capitalism.<sup>47</sup>

Pressure on Europe began to abate in 1983 as the United States made some interest-rate reductions and its economy moved from recession to a powerful demand-led recovery. US imports jumped 27 percent by

<sup>45</sup> Robert Paarlberg, *Leadership Abroad Begins at Home: U.S. Foreign Economic Policy after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995), 57–61.

<sup>46</sup> Putnam and Bayne, *Hanging Together*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> A frustrated German official concluded, "We have simply never before seen an American administration that displayed this degree of indifference to the effects of its actions on its allies"; *ibid.*, 132.

1984, the largest jump in four decades, and the US market was responsible for 70 percent of the growth in OECD area demand.<sup>48</sup> Western Europe and Japan were the primary beneficiaries. Although they still expressed concerns about destabilizing US domestic policies, they were happy to reap the export benefits of the overvalued dollar. The Reagan administration was happy to maintain domestic policy autonomy and attributed US fiscal and current account deficits to the US obligation to defend the West and stimulate global economic growth.

Although the tacit deal was revived, it once again proved unsustainable. This time the pressure for adjustment came from the United States. By 1985 the strong dollar produced a record US trade deficit to match record budget deficits, and that sparked a broad protectionist backlash from US industry and Congress.<sup>49</sup> The strong dollar also helped to cause and exacerbate the Latin American debt crisis of 1982–1985, a crisis that depressed US export markets and jeopardized what Reagan officials were touting as a transition to democracy in the Western hemisphere. Europe's problem was now America's problem, and the Reagan administration abruptly shifted from ignoring pleas for policy coordination to demanding it of its allies, particularly Japan and West Germany.

The temptation to say "I told you so" and defect from cooperation must have been great. But West Germany and Japan had little choice but to resist it. The Plaza Accord of September 1985 reflected a successful, coordinated effort by governments to intervene in currency markets to ease the dollar down and the mark and yen up.<sup>50</sup> Between September 1985 and February 1987 the dollar value of the yen appreciated from 240 to 150, and of the mark, from 2.85 to 1.85. The adjustment was particularly painful for Japan, and by the late 1980s the challenge of the high yen helped precipitate Japan's bubble economy, deep recession, and decade-long stagnation.

Japanese cooperation was driven by its economic and security dependence on the United States. Excessive reliance on the US market meant that protection in the United States was as significant a threat to Japan

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 184–185.

<sup>49</sup> The US current account deficit moved from \$28 billion in 1981 to \$133 billion in 1985 and \$155 billion in 1986; International Monetary Fund, *Direction of Trade Statistics* (various years).

<sup>50</sup> Yoichi Funabashi, *Managing the Dollar: From the Plaza to the Louvre* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1988).

economically as to the Reagan administration ideologically; cooperation with the executive on exchange rates to manage the problem was preferable to leaving its solution in the hands of a not so friendly Congress. Japan also perceived a growing security threat from the Soviet Union during the 1980s. The Soviets built up forces in North-east Asia and in the disputed Northern Territories, shot down a Korean airliner over the Pacific, and operated nuclear submarines with greater regularity in proximity to Japan. In response, Prime Minister Nakasone embraced the Reagan administration's objective of transforming Japan from a reluctant ally into a more strategic one. Japan increased defense spending, accepted responsibility to defend its sea lanes to a distance of one thousand nautical miles, and increased economic aid to countries such as Egypt and Turkey deemed critical by the United States.<sup>51</sup> Having committed to a closer bilateral partnership as America's "unsinkable aircraft carrier," Japan was hardly in a position to resist exchange rate cooperation.

West German security was similarly tied to the United States, although the German concern was less the Soviet threat and more the provocative East-West behavior of the Reagan administration. By 1985 Germany was anxious to reinforce the more accommodative strategy Reagan adopted in his second term toward the new Soviet leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. But German cooperation in Plaza had more to do with its growing economic role in Europe. Although German officials perceived global economic imbalances as largely the fault and problem of the United States, they were concerned about the impact on exchange rate stability within Europe.<sup>52</sup> The mark was now the dominant currency in Europe, and a hard landing of the overvalued dollar would force funds too quickly into the mark, driving it beyond its established EMS range. Dollar adjustment, if mishandled, could disrupt Germany's role in an integrating Europe; it was thus prudent for German officials to cooperate in easing the dollar's fall.

The United States demanded not just exchange rate adjustment but also the expansion of the German and Japanese economies through fiscal and monetary policies. This intrusion into domestic political

<sup>51</sup> Mike M. Mochizuki, "To Change or to Contain: Dilemmas of American Policy toward Japan," in Kenneth Oye, Robert Lieber, and Donald Rothchild, eds., *Eagle in a New World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 347–348.

<sup>52</sup> Funabashi, *Managing the Dollar*, ch. 5.



priorities was harder to swallow, especially for West Germany given its longstanding fear of inflation. US officials derived leverage from the fact that they could continue to “talk the dollar down” and threaten the hard landing that Europe-sensitive Germany and export-sensitive Japan wished to avoid. This tactic bore some fruit and in the Louvre Accord of February 1987 the United States agreed publicly that further falls in the dollar would be “counter productive,” and its reluctant partners committed to taking a series of domestic reflationary steps.<sup>53</sup>

As it had done in 1968–1971, the United States largely determined the outcome of the struggle to adjust. It forced its export-sensitive partners to revalue their currencies and to accept some measure of monetary and fiscal adjustment, in order to address a systemic imbalance prompted by US domestic policies. Although it accepted dollar depreciation, the Reagan administration resisted external pressure to adjust the US economy more fundamentally by bringing US fiscal deficits more into balance.<sup>54</sup> It also proved unwilling to concede that US policies were in any way responsible for the imbalances that the Plaza and Louvre agreements sought to address. The official Plaza communiqué made no mention of the overvalued dollar, stating instead that in the present circumstances, “some orderly appreciation of the main *non-dollar* currencies is desirable.”<sup>55</sup>

### Enlarging the order: same pattern, less dependent partners

In the unipolar era the US security project changed from containment of the Soviet Union to preservation of US primacy and defense against the combination of terrorism, rogue states, and weapons of mass destruction. The overall US economic project remained the same. Unipolarity, however, provided strong incentives for the United States to pursue its economic agenda far more aggressively than it had in the past. During the Cold War, US officials promoted liberalization but

<sup>53</sup> Putnam and Bayne, *Hanging Together*, 220–221; and Funabashi, *Managing the Dollar*, ch. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Wendy Dobson, *Economic Policy Coordination: Requiem or Prologue?* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1991); and Paarlberg, *Leadership Abroad*, 61–66. US adjustment came only when the Clinton administration made deficit reduction its priority.

<sup>55</sup> Funabashi, *Managing the Dollar*, 9, emphasis added.

also understood the need to compromise and defer to some extent to the welfare state and developmental capitalist variants favored by their allies and less developed countries. After the Cold War they became less restrained in championing the American model of capitalism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the global struggle against communism reinforced the belief among US policy makers that there were no viable alternatives to following the logic and dictates of the free market. The Clinton administration in particular sought to take globalization to a new level by enlarging the liberal order geographically and deepening it functionally.

New states that arose out of the Soviet collapse, along with the post-communist states of Central Europe, became candidates for inclusion after having been walled off from the liberal world economy for forty years. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations made the consolidation of political and economic reforms in these countries a high priority. Similarly, the Uruguay and Doha Development Rounds reflected explicit efforts to integrate developing countries more fully into multilateral trade negotiations with the intent of liberalizing their economies rather than perpetuating special arrangements for them.

The Uruguay Round, at the urging of the United States, sought to deepen the liberal order by addressing politically sensitive issues that had previously eluded multilateral liberalization (agriculture and textiles) and new issues such as trade in services and intellectual property protection that had never fallen under the purview of the GATT. The GATT was itself transformed into the more formidable World Trade Organization (WTO) with its greater enforcement powers and its additional mechanisms for dispute settlement.

During the Cold War, the financial markets of most countries were insulated from the pressures for liberalization that the United States applied in the trade area. During the 1990s the Clinton administration took this next step and used the IMF and World Bank to prod developing economies in particular to liberalize their closely guarded financial markets. These coordinated efforts to pry open banking, stock, and bond markets around the world, known as the Washington Consensus, stalled only with the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998.<sup>56</sup> Not to be deterred, the Clinton administration worked with the IMF to

<sup>56</sup> Morris Goldstein, *The Asian Financial Crisis: Causes, Cures, and Systemic Implications* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1998).

promote the view in crisis-stricken South Korea and elsewhere that the proper prescription for recovery required even larger, rather than smaller, doses of liberalization. The Bush team took up where Clinton's left off; its 2002 National Security Strategy opened by stating that the great struggles of the twentieth century had ended with a decisive victory for freedom and "a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."<sup>57</sup>

This triumphalism was premature. The liberal order remains an ongoing project. The future success of multilateral trade rounds is uncertain, particularly as negotiations focus on issues that penetrate the domestic political economies of advanced and emerging countries. The transition to market-based liberalism in the former Soviet area and elsewhere is neither guaranteed nor irreversible, and the danger of a backlash against globalization is ever present not only abroad but in the United States as well.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the United States found itself in an enviable economic position at the turn of the century. Its seeming economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s had been arrested and then reversed during the 1990s. The US economy flourished while its former adversaries collapsed and its principal economic competitors struggled to generate growth. Countries in Latin America, East Asia, and Central Europe moved from state-led industrialization strategies to reliance on market forces. Though not complete, the liberal project made remarkable progress from its inauspicious origins after World War Two.

During the 1990s the United States reduced its budget deficits, and between 1998 and 2001 it enjoyed four consecutive years of budget surpluses. But by 2005 deficit reduction was a distant memory, as the United States accumulated current account and fiscal deficits that far exceeded even the record numbers of the Reagan era. The federal budget moved from a surplus of \$127 billion in FY2001 to deficits of \$158 billion in 2002, \$375 billion in 2003, \$412 billion in 2004,

<sup>57</sup> US National Security Council, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), iv.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Benjamin J. Cohen, "Containing Backlash: Foreign Economic Policy in an Age of Globalization," in Robert J. Lieber, ed., *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the Twenty-first Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002).

and \$318 billion in 2005.<sup>59</sup> The current account deficit for 1998 was \$220 billion, 2.8 percent of GDP. At the end of 2002 it registered \$480 billion, 4.6 percent of GDP, and at the end of 2004, \$668 billion, 5.7 percent of GDP.<sup>60</sup> The 2005 deficit of \$767 billion was about 6.5 percent of GDP, almost twice as large as the Reagan era peak in 1987 of 3.4 percent of GDP.<sup>61</sup>

The attacks of September 11, 2001, shocked the US economy and served as a short-term catalyst for the decline in the US fiscal position. But the domestic and foreign policy priorities of the Bush administration were the more fundamental causes of the decline. In an echo of the Reagan era, the administration combined deep tax cuts with sizable increases in defense spending. US tax revenues constituted 20 percent of GDP in 2000, and only 16 percent by 2004.<sup>62</sup> Between 2003 and 2006 annual US defense spending was greater in real terms than during any of the years of the Reagan buildup, and it had been exceeded in the postwar era only in 1952, the peak year of the Korean War. During the late 1990s, US defense spending averaged about \$300 billion annually; between 2003 and 2006 the Bush administration spent over \$400 billion annually – *not* including supplemental appropriations for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars of some \$60–80 billion each year.<sup>63</sup> Along with the current wars these dollars financed the maintenance of a global US military presence and the expansion of US power projection capabilities. The tax cuts matched by an expansionist monetary policy fueled US imports and consumption.

It is hard to imagine any country other than the United States generating such massive imbalances, even in a single year much less over time, without suffering painful economic consequences. Sustained borrowing would lead ordinary countries to currency and financial

<sup>59</sup> US Department of Treasury, *Financial Report of the U.S. Government* (various years), at [www.fms.treas.gov/fr/06frusg](http://www.fms.treas.gov/fr/06frusg).

<sup>60</sup> The Economist, *Pocket World in Figures*, 2001 edn. (London: Profile Books, 2001), 219; 2005 edn., 235; 2007 edn., 235.

<sup>61</sup> William R. Cline, "The Case for a New Plaza Agreement," *Policy Briefs in International Economics* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, December 2005). Cline observes that the long-term US current account deficit must remain under 3 percent of GDP annually to minimize the risk of severe financial crisis.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "More Defense Spending, Less Security," International Institute for Strategic Studies, February 16, 2006, at [www.iss.org](http://www.iss.org).

crises. Governments would be forced to adjust either by austerity at home to finance the military effort abroad or perhaps by retrenchment abroad and by an export surge to maintain domestic consumption and imports. Between 2003 and 2006 the United States not only avoided hard choices and financial crisis, it also enjoyed steady growth and low inflation while running record deficits. The reconstruction of a tacit deal once again granted the United States the privilege of living beyond its means while putting difficult choices off to the future.

As the weight of global economic activity shifted gradually from the Atlantic to the Pacific, so too did the key US collaborators. Germany was the key partner during the 1960s and Japan and Germany during the 1980s; by the mid-2000s that role was assumed by Japan and China and to a lesser extent by the countries of Southeast Asia. The deal was familiar. The United States served as an engine of growth, taking in the exports of Asian states, which in turn financed US current account and fiscal deficits by holding dollars as reserve assets. As Stephen Cohen observed: "The world's sole superpower and biggest national economy is addicted to borrowing and consuming at the same time that foreign economies, mainly in East Asia, are addicted to lending and exporting."<sup>64</sup>

By the middle of the decade, over half of US federal debt was held abroad. Foreigners held over \$2 *trillion* of US debt by September 2005, with Japan and China accounting for nearly half. Japan held \$687 billion, 33 percent of the total held by foreigners, and China held \$252 billion, 12 percent of the total.<sup>65</sup> As of October 2006 Japan's holdings tapered off to 30 percent of the total (\$641 billion), while China's increased to 16 percent (\$345 billion).<sup>66</sup> The willingness of foreign governments and private investors to participate in what has

<sup>64</sup> Stephen D. Cohen, "The Superpower as Super-Debtor: Implications of Economic Disequilibria for U.S.-Asian Relations," in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2006-07: Trade, Interdependence, and Security* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2006), 30.

<sup>65</sup> Justin Murray and Marc Labonte, "Foreign Holdings of Federal Debt," *CRS Report for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, November 23, 2005). Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore accounted for an additional 10 percent.

<sup>66</sup> Monthly data may be accessed at [www.ustreas.gov/tic/mfh.txt](http://www.ustreas.gov/tic/mfh.txt). With the exception of Great Britain, the holdings of US allies in Europe were modest by comparison. Britain held \$207 billion, while Germany and France held only \$52 billion and \$30 billion, respectively.

aply been termed the “biggest foreign aid program in world history” reflects the continued ability of the United States to use its dominant position in the world economy to transform obligation – investment funds ideally should flow from the leading economy to capital-scarce developing economies – into extraordinary privilege.<sup>67</sup>

Between 2001 and 2006 Japan and China each had sound economic and security reasons to serve as willing partners of the United States.<sup>68</sup> For Japan the relative inability to stimulate domestic demand left officials to rely on the old habit of export-led growth to revive the struggling economy. Since export-led growth benefits from an undervalued currency, the Japanese central bank proved willing to buy and hold dollars to prevent the yen from appreciating. Its willingness was reinforced by the near absence of economic frictions with the United States – frictions that dominated the bilateral agenda in prior decades. Japan’s security rationale to cooperate with the United States was similarly powerful. Its post-Cold War security strategy centered on ever closer ties with the United States. Between 2001 and 2005 Japanese officials revised their defense guidelines to provide greater support to US military operations, joined with the United States in a missile defense initiative, and backed the US hard-line position on North Korea. Japan curried favor with the United States even at the expense of its relations with neighboring China and South Korea. In Afghanistan and Iraq, Japan was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the 1991 Gulf War, when its sizable contributions were denigrated as “check-book diplomacy.” This time around Japan developed a presence on the ground to demonstrate, within the confines of its constitution, that it is a loyal ally willing to stand side by side with the United States.

China similarly relied on an export-led growth strategy buttressed by an undervalued currency between 2001 and 2006. The United States was its most important market. Beyond some modest measures taken in 2005, Chinese officials resisted pressure from the United States to allow the Chinese currency to appreciate significantly and instead took measures to hold down its value.<sup>69</sup> Like Japan, China was willing for

<sup>67</sup> “A Survey of the World Economy,” *Economist* (September 16, 2006), 25.

<sup>68</sup> On Japan, see Michael Mastanduno, “Back to Normal? The Promise and Pitfalls of Japan’s Economic Integration,” in Tellis and Wills, *Strategic Asia*, 105–137.

<sup>69</sup> Morris Goldstein, “Paulson’s First Challenge,” *International Economy* (Summer 2006), 11–15.

its own economic reasons to accumulate the dollars the United States dispensed into the world economy.

China, of course, was not a loyal US security partner like Japan. But China still had good security reasons to collaborate, albeit warily, with the United States. China is a patient, long-term challenger to US hegemony. Its near-term priority has been economic development, and it has sought to avoid being perceived as a threat or drawing the sustained, negative attention of the world's only superpower.<sup>70</sup> It is not surprising that China was relatively uncritical of US foreign policy activism in the wars on terrorism and Iraq. That US agenda, however distasteful, at least deflected US attention from the project of containing China, which was the initial foreign policy instinct of the incoming Bush administration in 2001. Chinese leaders no doubt are aware that the relationship with the United States could eventually sour. Yet, as long as the international security environment remains sufficiently benign to enable China to sustain economic growth, Chinese leaders have scant interest in upsetting the international status quo politically or economically.

The tacit transpacific deal appeared sufficiently robust in 2004–2005 for one set of authors to declare that the Bretton Woods system had been reinstated and for another to assert that “the startling large U.S. current account deficit is not only sustainable but a natural feature of today’s highly globalized economy.”<sup>71</sup> These views are excessively optimistic. They reflect the hope, however illusory, that the current arrangement can be sustained indefinitely, because it is founded on a complementary set of economic and security interests. By 2006 both the United States and its partners seemed to have recognized that the mounting imbalances created by their mutually beneficial arrangement could threaten global economic stability. Yet neither displayed any eagerness to adjust, and the United States fell into its familiar habit of assigning responsibility for global imbalances to its partners abroad. Bush administration officials consistently cited China’s undervalued

<sup>70</sup> Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China’s Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Michael Dooley, David Folkerts-Landau, and Peter Garber, “The Revised Bretton Woods System,” *International Journal of Finance and Economics* 9 (October 2004), 307–313; and Richard N. Cooper, “Living with Global Imbalances: A Contrarian View,” *Policy Briefs in International Economics* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, November 2005), 1.

currency as the main source of international economic disequilibria, and Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke at one point implausibly attributed the lopsided US current account to a “savings glut” in emerging economies.<sup>72</sup>

Past experience makes clear that seemingly stable arrangements cannot persist indefinitely in the face of large systemic imbalances. The relevant issue is not whether but when and how the struggle to adjust will play out. It might be triggered, as in the 1980s, by slower growth and a protectionist backlash in the United States or, as in the 1960s, by private market pressures on the dollar coupled with the growing reluctance among US partners to continue accumulating dollar holdings, or by some combination of the two. Either way, we should expect US officials to seek, as they have in the past, to preserve their autonomy and force the burden of adjustment on to others. US officials will accelerate demands that their Asian partners open their markets, appreciate their currencies, and take on a greater share of the cost of providing international public goods – while allowing the United States to manage its monetary, fiscal, and foreign policies as it sees fit.

Although the United States determined the outcome of Cold War adjustment struggles, the outcome of the impending post-Cold War struggle promises to be different. The United States should not be expected to prevail because each of the three key sources of leverage US policy makers had enjoyed in earlier struggles – the security dependence of its partners, the unique position of its currency, and the indispensability of its market – eroded after the Cold War.

First, the most current US economic partners and major holders of US debt are no longer bound together in a security alliance against a common external threat. Japan remains a close security partner, and its bilateral alliance with the United States has strengthened since the end of the Cold War. Beyond this regional anchor, the security externality quickly dissipates. China and the United States may have a mutual interest in security cooperation in the short term, but the cooperation is fragile in that they are competing, however quietly, for regional hegemony in Asia with the potential for conflict over the Taiwan Straits or the Korean Peninsula. Southeast Asian states, security allies of the United States during the Cold War, face more complicated security calculations with the rise of China and inherent

<sup>72</sup> *Economist*, “Survey of the World Economy,” 26.



uncertainty of the US commitment of attention and resources after the Cold War.<sup>73</sup> The surge in oil revenues since 2003 has elevated once again the financial clout and potential adjustment role of OPEC states in the Middle East and others such as Venezuela whose security commitments to and inclination to cooperate with the United States vary considerably.<sup>74</sup> By 2007 oil-rich Russia had moved into third place behind China and Japan on the list of countries with the largest foreign reserve holdings. Russia's growing financial clout coincides with increasing tensions in US–Russian relations over human rights, Middle East policy, and authoritarianism in Russian domestic politics.

The NATO security alliance still exists and has been enlarged. But NATO is no longer focused on a common external threat and its members do not necessarily share the same security priorities, as evidenced by the alliance conflict over Iraq in 2003. Equally important, America's partners in NATO are no longer the dominant holders of US dollars in reserve as they were during the Cold War. The connection between dollar holders and security partners has been severed so that US policy makers can no longer turn to a select group of close friends, within a US-dominated institutional framework, to manage the adjustment process. Any attempt to craft a new Plaza Agreement, much less a more formal type of Bretton Woods arrangement, would require the cooperation of up to two dozen disparate actors and would pose a formidable collective action problem.<sup>75</sup>

Second, the US dollar may still be the world's dominant currency, but it is no longer the world's *only* viable exchange and reserve asset. By the 1980s the German mark had assumed a dominant role in Europe and the yen had appreciated as well, but neither posed a serious challenge to the dollar's global hegemony. But by 2005 the euro had emerged as a clear regional and plausible global alternative to the dollar.<sup>76</sup> The

<sup>73</sup> Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies*, Policy Studies 16 (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2003).

<sup>74</sup> "Global Imbalances: Petrodollar Power," *Economist* (December 9, 2006), 14–16.

<sup>75</sup> Cline, "The Case for a New Plaza Agreement," recognizes but underestimates the collective action task.

<sup>76</sup> Gabriele Galati and Philip Wooldridge, "The Euro as a Reserve Currency: A Challenge to the Pre-eminence of the U.S. Dollar?" *BIS Working Papers*, no. 218 (2006); and Adam Posen, ed., *The Euro at Five: Ready for a Global Role?* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2005).

euro's share of global foreign reserves moved from 17.9 percent in 1999 to 25.8 percent in 2006, while in the same period the dollar's share dropped from 71 percent to 64 percent. By some estimates, the euro share will rise to 30–40 percent of the global total by 2010.<sup>77</sup> The euro's role as a medium of international exchange has increased as well. By 2006 roughly half of euro area trade with non-euro area residents was invoiced in euros.<sup>78</sup> OPEC members and US adversaries Iran and Venezuela have lobbied for members to shift from dollars to euros in pricing in. OPEC resisted that move due in part to the clout wielded in OPEC by America's ally Saudi Arabia, but the very fact that the discussion has emerged reflects the relative shift in the dollar–euro balance. During the Bretton Woods crisis US Treasury secretary John Connally was fond of telling America's allies that “the dollar is our currency but your problem.” Today, European officials are telling global traders and bankers that “the euro is our currency but everyone's asset.”<sup>79</sup>

The euro is unlikely to replace the dollar as the dominant global currency anytime soon. Europe currently lacks the requisite political power that would serve as the foundation of a top currency role.<sup>80</sup> History suggests that it takes considerable time to unseat completely a dominant international currency. The US economy overtook that of Britain by the end of the nineteenth century, but the pound sterling held on as the world's principal exchange and reserve currency until after World War Two. It remains to be seen whether a similar transformation is in its early stages. But it is clear that the dollar has moved over time from being unambiguously the world's key currency to being perhaps a first among equals, with the euro a plausible alternative today and perhaps the Chinese currency assuming that role in the next decade or so. The euro already provides a realistic option for public and private actors who wish to hedge their dollar

<sup>77</sup> For example, Werner Becker, “Euro Riding High as an International Reserve Currency,” *Deutsche Bank Research: Reports on European Integration* (May 4, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> Menzie Chinn and Jeffrey A. Frankel, “Will the Euro Eventually Surpass the Dollar as Leading International Reserve Currency?” in Richard Clarida, ed., *G7 Current Account Imbalances: Sustainability and Adjustment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 297.

<sup>79</sup> Becker, “Euro Riding High,” 3.

<sup>80</sup> Kathleen McNamara, “A Rivalry in the Making? The Euro and International Monetary Power,” *Review of International Political Economy* (forthcoming).

bets in the face of mounting US deficits and the dollar's declining value.

The implications for adjustment struggles are clear. America's Asian economic partners have at least a partial alternative to the dollar, affording them a source of leverage that America's Cold War partners lacked. America's European security partners are no longer beholden to the dollar and so are not forced to rush to America's side, on America's terms, in the face of global economic imbalances.

Further, the US market is no longer the sole, indispensable engine of global economic growth. Europe's growth relies increasingly on the integrated European Union market, one that is now larger than that of the United States. The growth of domestic demand in Asia is less well recognized but equally important. Both Japan and China are in transition from export-led to domestically generated growth strategies. Asia is now a significant engine of the world economy, accounting for over half of global growth between 2001 and 2006.<sup>81</sup> Trade within Asia by 2005 was more important than trade between particular Asian countries and the United States. Japan's exports to Asia increased from 27 percent of total exports to 38 percent between 1991 and 2001, and exports to the United States dropped from 34 percent to 29 percent. By 2004 Japan accounted for China's imports at twice the rate of the United States, and China exported as much to South Korea and Japan together as to the United States. Between 2001 and 2006 the US share of total Asian exports fell from 25 percent to 20 percent.<sup>82</sup>

Since at least the 1970s the United States has urged its economic partners to serve as alternative engines of economic growth. The fact that Asian economies, led by Japan and China, have begun to take up that challenge is desirable for the world economy but not for US leverage. As China, Japan, and other Asian states become less dependent on the US market and more on their domestic and regional markets, they have less need to finance US deficits by accumulating dollars to hold down the values of their own currencies to facilitate transpacific export promotion.

The erosion of leverage will not only make it difficult for the United States to dictate adjustment outcomes, it will also complicate US efforts

<sup>81</sup> "Asia and the World Economy: The Alternative Engine," *Economist* (October 21, 2006), 79–81.

<sup>82</sup> Mastanduno, "Back to Normal," 130–131; The Economist, *Pocket World in Figures*, 2007 edn., 131; and "Asia and the World Economy," 80.

to orchestrate a soft landing or a gradual, crisis-free adjustment process. The United States precipitated a hard landing by choice at the end of Bretton Woods to force adjustment on its partners. In the adjustment of the mid-1980s it managed a soft landing for the US economy – at the expense of a hard landing for Japan. It will be considerably more difficult in the current context to engineer a soft landing replay of the Plaza Agreement. The systemic imbalances represented by US deficits in 2006 are much larger than in 1985. Market forces – the magnitude and volatility of private capital flows – have grown more powerful and are harder for governments to control.<sup>83</sup> The collective action problem to be overcome to sustain effective cooperation is more formidable. And the United States will have to sit down not just with good friends but also with potential adversaries and others uncomfortable with America's dominant international position. Chinese officials demonstrated the predicament in 2007 by suggesting they might employ the “nuclear option” of selling off massive dollar holdings to counter pressure from the US Congress for China to appreciate its currency and open its markets.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

The experience of US foreign economic policy during and after the Cold War suggests that preponderant power is consequential. Dominance in the distribution of international economic capabilities has afforded the United States the opportunity to shape the international economic order, the obligation to manage it, and the temptation to take advantage of it. Dominance in the international security structure – in the Western context during the Cold War and globally since the end of it – has reinforced the incentive of the United States to be a system maker and justified to US policy makers the role of privilege taker.

The United States has responded to these structural incentives with remarkable consistency. Successive administrations over sixty years have treated the creation, management, and expansion of the liberal economic order as an enduring national interest. With less frequency, yet still with regularity, different administrations have sought to take

<sup>83</sup> Erik Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance: From Bretton Woods to the 1990s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Cohen, *Geography of Money*, ch. 8.

<sup>84</sup> Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “China Threatens Nuclear Option of Dollar Sales,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 8, 2007.

advantage of the US structural position to protect domestic autonomy and undertake combinations of domestic and foreign policies beyond the reach of ordinary economic powers. US privilege taking has not been exercised unilaterally. It has required willing and active collaborators seeking to satisfy their own interests while facilitating the US habit of living beyond its means.

Although US behavior has remained consistent, its ability to dictate the terms of adjustment outcomes has changed. Preponderant capabilities do not guarantee control over outcomes. It is ironic that the United States exercised greater control over international economic adjustment struggles during the Cold War, when it was locked in a geopolitical struggle with a peer competitor, than after the Cold War, when it has enjoyed the status of sole superpower. US policy makers were able to use the security dependence of their Cold War allies as a source of leverage in adjustment struggles. Even though the United States is relatively more powerful in security terms after the Cold War, its allies are less dependent.

The United States may be a singularly dominant power in international security, but it no longer enjoys that status in the world economy. The post-Cold War US economy has less autonomy and more vulnerability. Energy producers, including Russia, have enjoyed a massive transfer of wealth that translates into renewed influence in the world economy. The European Union and China have become major and more independent players, and their relative ascendance means the United States may no longer count on others to fall into line behind it on the basis of the singular importance of its currency or its domestic market. The United States continues to embrace the role of system maker and privilege taker as if little has changed, but the cumulative effect of changes in its relative security and economic position has been to dissipate, rather than to increase, its ability to exercise influence over international economic outcomes.

Over time, the United States has become the victim of its own success. Its victory in the Cold War necessarily loosened the security ties that underpinned its economic arrangements with allied states. Its support for European integration during the Cold War helped to facilitate a process that took on a life of its own, culminating in the creation of a single currency with the potential to challenge the unique systemic role of the dollar. Its pressure on Japan and other Asian states to open their markets, integrate their economies, and help to stimulate

global growth has been successful enough to diminish Asia's economic dependence on the United States. Its embrace of China and ongoing effort to integrate it into the global liberal order have facilitated the emergence of an alternative regional and increasing global engine of economic growth and activity. Its promotion of financial liberalization has helped global financial markets grow in size and sophistication to the point that cooperating governments, much less the United States alone, have difficulty exercising meaningful control over them.

The restoration and globalization of the liberal world economy has been a remarkably successful sixty-year project for the United States. America's formidable capabilities have facilitated globalization, and the United States has reaped economic, strategic, and ideological benefits. But globalization is a double-edged sword. The very successes of the US liberal economic project will increasingly constrain the ability of the United States to continue to enjoy the special privileges to which it has become accustomed.

## 6 *Free hand abroad, divide and rule at home*

JACK SNYDER, ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO, AND  
Yaeli Bloch-Elkon

Why did America invade Iraq? The glib answer is “because it could.” In the unipolar moment the immediate costs and risks of using military force against Saddam Hussein’s hollow, troublesome regime seemed low to US leaders.<sup>1</sup>

But this explanation begs the important questions. Disproportionate power allows greater freedom of action, but it is consistent with a broad spectrum of policies, ranging from messianic attempts to impose a new world order to smug attempts to insulate oneself from the world’s quagmires. How this freedom is used depends on how threats and opportunities are interpreted when viewed through the prism of ideology and domestic politics.

The exercise of a free hand in strategy is an enduring feature of American foreign policy. Unipolarity simply gave it unprecedented latitude. During the twentieth century, whether under multipolarity, bipolarity, or unipolarity, America enjoyed the luxury of disproportionate power and geographical buffering, which allowed – even required – ideology to define America’s strategically underdetermined world role. This ideology was normally liberalism, sometimes that of the disengaged

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Jervis, “The Compulsive Empire,” *Foreign Policy* 137 (July–August 2003), 82–87.

“city on a hill,” sometimes that of the crusading reformer.<sup>2</sup> Writing in the wake of the Vietnam War, Stephen Krasner worried that the more powerful the United States became, the more this ideological leeway would express itself as imperialism: “Only states whose resources are very large, both absolutely and relatively, can engage in imperial policies, can attempt to impose their vision on other countries and the global system. And it is only here that ideology becomes a critical determinant of the objectives of foreign policy.”<sup>3</sup> And yet when unipolarity arrived in the 1990s, skittishness about costs and casualties severely constrained American liberal idealism abroad.

This changed after September 11, 2001, not only because of the heightened fear of terrorism but also because of the domestic political and ideological environment that made the most of it. Three factors – America’s unprecedented international power, the opportunity presented by the World Trade Center attack, and the increased polarization of the American party system – combined to permit the Bush administration to reframe the assumptions behind American global strategy.

Since the late 1970s the American party system has become increasingly polarized, as Democrats became more uniformly liberal on a whole range of issues and Republicans became uniformly conservative. While the overall proportion of moderate voters did not markedly decline, party politicians increasingly took ideologically divergent stances that forced voters to choose between starkly different platforms.<sup>4</sup> Republicans in particular developed an effective strategy of taking polarizing positions on non-economic wedge issues to mobilize their conservative base and at the same time raid voters from the Democrats’ traditional middle- and working-class constituencies. Under President Ronald Reagan, the Republicans staked out divisive

<sup>2</sup> Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 340.

<sup>4</sup> Morris P. Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2nd edn. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006); Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Barbara Sinclair, *Polarization and the Politics of National Policy Making* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).



stances on social issues such as abortion, affirmative action for minorities, homosexuality, and religion, while also trying to consolidate ownership of the national security issue. Although the end of the Cold War initially blurred the ideological distinction between the parties in foreign affairs, a hard core of neoconservatives worked to sharpen an ambitious, ideologically coherent program to exploit America's potential for global primacy. By the late 1990s the Republicans' electoral payoff from domestic wedge issues was fading.<sup>5</sup> But September 11 presented an opportunity to create a new wedge issue: preventive war on global terrorism, very broadly defined.<sup>6</sup>

We do not claim that the Bush administration invaded Iraq *in order* to reap domestic political benefits. And whatever political benefits it *did* gain were short-lived due to the disappointing outcome of the invasion. Rather, we argue that party polarization interacted with America's unipolar dominance and the shock of September 11 to create a situation in which preventive war seemed an attractive option to the Bush administration, both internationally and domestically. The Republicans' long-term strategy of ideological polarization had fostered a confrontational foreign policy cohort that was eager to seize this opportunity to use military power decisively to solve knotty global problems. At the same time, the well-honed wedge issue strategy made taking a divisive position on Iraq seem like a plausible formula for partisan gain. As Colin Dueck puts it: "The idea of taking the 'war on terror' into Iraq offered something to Bush's conservative supporters, kept Democrats divided, and maintained the focus of debate on issues of national security where Republicans were strong."<sup>7</sup>

The US since 1991 is the only case of a modern unipolar power. Our task is to place this unique case in a general conceptual framework, both to draw on general theory to explain it and to use the case to illuminate general propositions. To do this, we adopt several strategies of inference. First, we advance some logical arguments about the effect of domestic politics and ideology on the likelihood of

<sup>5</sup> Larry M. Bartels, "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1, 2 (March 2006), 218.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Lemann, "The Controller: Karl Rove is Working to Get George Bush Reelected, but He Has Bigger Plans," *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Colin Dueck, "Presidents, Domestic Politics, and Major Military Interventions" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 1, 2007), 17. Dueck argues that domestic political considerations were at most secondary in several U.S. interventions.

discretionary war, such as the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, initiated by a great power under loose strategic constraints. Second, we examine the behavior of the United States in the twentieth century as a relatively unconstrained great power. Third, we theorize about the interaction of domestic regime type and the degree of international constraint in shaping strategic ideology. Whether the increased scope for ideology in the foreign policy of a strategically unconstrained state increases the likelihood of discretionary war depends on the regime type and the political incentives of the ruling coalition.

Finally, we look at the theoretical literature on American party polarization and derive from it more narrowly focused arguments about US foreign policy under unipolarity. We argue not that party polarization in a unipolar power necessarily leads to doctrines favoring discretionary war, but rather simply that party polarization made discretionary preventive war a tempting wedge issue given neoconservative ideology and habitual Republican political tactics. We treat rising public threat perception following September 11 as a facilitating opportunity to exploit this as a wedge issue, not as a necessary precondition (and certainly not a sufficient one).

The initial sections of the chapter draw on a range of historical illustrations to probe the generality of our arguments. The remainder of the chapter looks more closely at the foreign policy implications of polarized American wedge issue politics in the unipolar period.

### **How does unipolarity affect foreign policy ideas and choices?**

A logical and venerable proposition holds that states are more likely to succumb to the lure of ideology in foreign policy when they are geopolitically unconstrained – that is, when they are very strong, unthreatened, or distant from trouble. A corollary proposition, advanced by Krasner, is that disproportionate strength is likely to increase the temptation to pursue ideologically driven expansionism and the use of force. The Bush preventive war doctrine and Iraq policy seem to confirm these predictions.<sup>8</sup> However, alternative consequences of unipolarity are also logically plausible and empirically supportable.

The absence of pressing material constraints may open the door to ideology in foreign policy for two reasons. First, it might allow the

<sup>8</sup> Office of the President, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, September 2002, at [www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html).

state to indulge its ideological preferences without fear of negative consequences for its survival and wealth. Humanitarian intervention, for example, might be a luxury consumption item for states whose own security and prosperity are not in doubt. Similarly, Stephen Walt has argued that states choose allies based on ideological affinity only if the threats they face are relatively weak.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the national interest is always ambiguous, but this is especially so when material power is great and threats are indirect, distant, long-term, or diffuse. In this situation circumstances do not force different observers to converge on a consensus view; ideology is indispensable as both a road map to action and a tool of persuasion. As Dean Acheson said about overselling the Cold War containment strategy at a peak moment of America's relative power, "We made our points clearer than the truth" to convince the mass public.<sup>10</sup>

Plausible as these arguments may be, the opposite case may be equally plausible. States that are under intense international pressure may be especially vulnerable to myth-ridden foreign policies. Hostile encirclements heighten the enemy images, bunker mentalities, and double standards in perception that are common in competitive relationships of all kinds, especially in international relations.<sup>11</sup> Nationalist and garrison-state ideologies are reinforced. Likewise, Charles Kupchan argues that declining empires typically adopt strategic ideologies of aggressive forward defense in an attempt to mask the truth about their growing weakness from their opponents.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, diplomatic historians commonly applaud the pragmatism of powerful offshore balancers, whose privileged position grants them the freedom to be selective and fact driven and to wait for developments to play out before committing troops. Whether powerful, unconstrained states are more ideological than weaker or highly constrained states depends

<sup>9</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 33–40.

<sup>10</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: Norton, 1969), 374–375; see also Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Arnold Wolfers, "'National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67 (December 1952).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chs. 2, 3, 8, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

greatly on their domestic politics, not simply on their position in the international system.<sup>13</sup>

Krasner's corollary hypothesis – that powerful or unconstrained states are likely to succumb to an ideology of expansionism – is also an oversimplification. Yes, powerful, secure states have the option of expressing their ideological values through coercion, but they also have other options. They might choose to engage with the world pragmatically, taking what they need and ignoring the global problems from which good fortune insulates them. Or they might adopt a highly principled foreign policy that increases humanitarian assistance abroad but eschews empire and declines to meddle in the internal politics of foreign peoples. Finally, they might be tempted by policies of limited liability, embarking on good works and moralistic hectoring abroad but then heading for the exit when backlash raises the cost of the intervention.<sup>14</sup> Simply being powerful says little about whether or how ideology will express itself.

A further complication arises when the state is extraordinarily powerful but is threatened nonetheless – precisely the situation of the United States after September 11. Unipolar power grants uncommon freedom to act, and the high level of threat rules out strategies of indifference. As the Bush strategists argued, this situation required an assertive strategy of self-defense. One need not invoke any distinctive characteristics of the Bush administration or its national security strategy to understand why the United States attacked Afghanistan to remove al-Qaeda training camps. But such necessary responses can sometimes be overgeneralized into an ideology that portrays the world as a place where ubiquitous threats must be countered by decisive, ongoing preventive action. Whether that framing prevails in policy debate will depend on the domestic political context, not just on the international setting.

### American power, variations in polarity, and strategic ideas

During the twentieth century America's great power and geographical distance from threats affected its strategic ideas. However, variations

<sup>13</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, 26–30.

in its relative power and in the polarity of the international system have not determined its strategic ideology in a simple or direct way. Instead, America's prevailing strategic mindset has been a product of the interaction of its international position and its domestic politics.

Colin Dueck's recent study of American strategic culture in the twentieth century describes an enduring tension between the ideological commitment to remake the world in America's image and the countervailing urge to do it on the cheap. US power and geographical isolation set up this tension but did not determine how it would be resolved. Dueck portrays an endemic contest among four schools of thought: assertive internationalist liberals such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy; progressive liberals such as Henry Wallace and George McGovern who seek to reform the world by example, not by intervention; nationalists such as Robert Taft and Jesse Helms who seek to limit international involvements and shun liberal rationales; and realists such as Richard Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge who also set aside liberal ideals but are willing to use force to compete for dominance abroad. Dueck argues that the urge to limit liability abates under conditions of rising threat. In practice, he says, this means that foreign threats play into the hands of assertive liberal internationalists, because realism does not resonate with American political culture.<sup>15</sup>

However, Dueck also shows how party politics shapes outcomes in ways that cannot simply be read from international circumstances or even from the strategic preferences of the various schools of thought. An example is the demise of Wilson's plan for the US to enter the League of Nations. As threats declined after World War One, Americans' ingrained inclination to limit liability undercut Wilson's proposed automatic commitment to collective security. Realist critics like Lodge wanted a policy based on flexible, bilateral agreements with the powerful European democracies, a sensible outcome that would have been consistent with America's liberal strategic culture. Dueck shows, however, that the realists' rhetorical battle against the League had the unintended consequence of bolstering the position of isolationist elements in the Republican Party.<sup>16</sup>

Although the rise and decline of threats affected the fortunes of competing strategic ideas, this did not directly track variations in polarity.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.      <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

As one might expect, ideas of limited liability (a form of free riding or buck-passing) were prominent in the multipolar period. However, the US ultimately balanced against rising great power threats under multipolarity during the two world wars. The US often limited its liability under unipolarity, too: the elder Bush's refusal to intervene in Bosnia, Republican attacks on Clinton's "mission creep" in the Somali intervention, Clinton's turning a blind eye to the Rwanda genocide, Clinton's zero-casualty approach to resisting the expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo, and the younger Bush's 2000 campaign promise of a "humble foreign policy" that would eschew "nation-building" abroad. Unipolar America's major military effort of the 1990s was the limited-aims war to reverse Saddam Hussein's aggression in Kuwait, aggression that threatened the world's oil supply. Carried out by a realist-packed administration, the Gulf War was realist in motivation and strategy, not an ideological crusade. Even after September 11 the younger Bush declined to apply the principle of preventive war to the problem of North Korean nuclear proliferation on the practical grounds that the North Koreans could level the South Korean capital in retaliation against a preventive strike.

Conversely, US Cold War strategy under the tight constraints of the bipolar nuclear stalemate was highly ideological, founded on the encompassing rationale of a struggle to the death of antithetical social systems. Military interventions anywhere and everywhere were justified by the sweeping claims of the domino theory, which held that small setbacks in geopolitical backwaters would exert a ripple effect undercutting commitments to central allies. The Cold War consensus was in part a reaction to the rising communist threat, but it was also a result of the selling of Cold War ideology and the policy of global containment. This ideology was shaped by the domestic political project of reconciling various constituencies – the Asia-first Republican nationalists, the Europe-first liberal internationalists, and the realists – within government and among the broader public.<sup>17</sup>

In short, the degree of American power preponderance and the polarity of the international system are insufficient to explain how ideological or interventionist American strategy was in a given era. To

<sup>17</sup> For two somewhat different ways of making this case, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), ch. 7; and Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, chs. 2–4.

understand those ideas and outcomes, it is also necessary to look at the domestic political setting.

### Strategic ideology and domestic politics

Different types of domestic political systems manifest different ideological propensities in foreign policy. They differ in the degree to which they are ideological, in the content of their ideology, and in the ability to correct their ideologically driven errors in foreign policy. Even the realist Stephen Walt notes, for example, that revolutionary states are prone to a highly ideological form of foreign relations, conflict-provoking images of their adversaries, and a comparatively painful process of “socialization” to the realities of the international balance of power system.<sup>18</sup> As Walt explains, “Revolutionary ideologies should not be seen as wholly different from other forms of political belief,” but should be seen simply as an acute form of normal practices.<sup>19</sup>

Unipolarity – and more generally the lack of strategic constraint – may offer the freedom to indulge in a highly ideological foreign policy, but whether this leeway is exploited depends also on the features of the state’s domestic political system: its regime type, the interests of its ruling group, the domestic political incentives associated with foreign policy, and the role of foreign policy ideology in capitalizing on those incentives. In the case of the United States since 1991, the only modern instance of unipolarity, we argue that its democratic regime type is in general a factor moderating the impact of ideology on foreign policy but that variable features of US domestic politics, such as its recent period of unusual party polarization, worked to undermine that moderation. In this section we discuss several general hypotheses on the interaction of the international distribution of power and domestic political structure in shaping strategic ideology. In the following sections, we look more closely at the more specific impact on strategic ideology of wedge issue tactics under conditions of party polarization.

A useful dictionary definition of ideology is “the integrated assertions, theories, and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5, 22–43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1969), 413.

A strategic ideology includes assertions about goals and values (for example, all states should be democracies), categories for defining situations or problems (for example, the axis of evil, weapons of mass destruction), and causal theories or empirical hypotheses (for example, offense is the best defense; Saddam Hussein is undeterrable; the Arab street will bandwagon with whoever is most powerful). The more integrated these elements are in a coherent package that supports a political program and the more resistant they are to disconfirming evidence, the more pronounced is their ideological character.

Although virtually all periods of twentieth-century American foreign policy have been influenced to some degree by its liberal ideology, by these criteria the Bush strategy has arguably been more ideological than most. Neoconservative thinkers have been explicit about their aim of producing a coherent sociopolitical program that integrates assertions across the full range of domestic and international issues.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, core supporters of this outlook have been unusually resistant to evidence that others have seen as disconfirming its foreign policy assumptions. Public opinion surveys found that six of ten Bush supporters in the 2004 presidential election believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and three of four believed that Iraq had provided substantial support to al-Qaeda.<sup>22</sup> Public opinion scholar Steven Kull says this echoes Leon Festinger's research on the psychology of cognitive dissonance in millenarian sects that believed more strongly in the impending end of the world after their prophecies had failed to materialize.<sup>23</sup> But Democrats who had initially supported the war were far less prone to these misperceptions, suggesting that partisan ideological framing reveals more than individual psychology.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* 29 (Spring 2005); George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Steven Kull, "Americans and Iraq on the Eve of the Presidential Election," Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), October 28, 2004; see also Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (Winter 2003–2004).

<sup>23</sup> Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> Democrats should have been under more pressure from cognitive dissonance than Republicans, who could rationalize their support for the war in terms of the partisan imperative to back their own team's policy.



The domestic political setting affects strategic ideas and ideologies at several levels. Most basic is the effect of regime type – in particular, whether the country is a well-institutionalized democracy. The traditional view, articulated by Walter Lippmann, portrayed democratic publics as fickle, ill-informed, and swayed by passions rather than reason.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, scholars of the democratic peace now see democracies as strategically astute. The democratic marketplace of ideas evaluates strategies more effectively than do closed authoritarian cabals.<sup>26</sup> As a result, democracies not only do not fight each other, but they also tend to win the wars they start, pay fewer costs in war, exercise more prudence in choosing conflicts than do non-democracies, and learn lessons from imperial setbacks more astutely.

Such claims about the intelligence of democracy have been tarnished by the poor quality of the American public debate between September 11 and the Iraq invasion, especially the failure of the Democratic opposition and the media to mount sustained scrutiny of manipulated intelligence and dubious strategic assertions.<sup>27</sup> Over the long term, however, the system worked more or less as democratic peace theorists would expect: congressional hearings and journalistic inquiries exposed errors, the disappointing strategic situation in Iraq shifted public opinion against the war, and Democrats exploited this skepticism to gain a congressional majority in the 2006 election. In this view, democracies make mistakes but eventually move toward correcting them or limiting the strategic damage they cause. By contrast, non-democratic expansionist great powers like Germany and Japan have been more likely to keep pushing ahead when strategy fails and the costs of expansion rise steeply.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922).

<sup>26</sup> Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 19–25.

<sup>27</sup> Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 29 (Summer 2004); Ronald Krebs, “Selling the Market Short?”; and rebuttal by Kaufmann, both in *International Security* 29 (Spring 2005). For an assessment of the argument that democratic publics are only as rational as the information they have, see Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, “Do the Facts Speak for Themselves? Partisan Disagreement as a Challenge to Democratic Competence,” *Critical Review* 20, 1–2 (2008).

<sup>28</sup> Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 49–52 and chs. 3, 4.

The quality of strategic ideas may be affected not only by the broad regime type but also by the specific character of the ruling coalition, elite divisions and consensus, and the dynamic of party competition. When the ruling coalition contains powerful groups with a bureaucratic, commercial, or ideological stake in military expansion, they may use the public relations resources and bully pulpit of national government to promote the “myths of empire” – that is, the assertions that security requires expansion, offense is the best defense, the enemy is undeterrable but hollow, conquest is cheap and easy, dominoes fall, threats gain allies, and policies that benefit the ruling group also benefit the nation. Although such myth-making is more blatant in undemocratic or semi-democratic regimes, a weaker version of the same dynamic may also color strategic debate in democracies.<sup>29</sup> Where imperial interests (such as business, military, or colonial settler groups) were well positioned as veto players in democratic empires, they effectively advanced creative rationales to drag their feet on decolonization.<sup>30</sup> Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld revived the domino theory to explain why the US could not withdraw from Iraq, telling the Senate Armed Services Committee that this would lead to a series of challenges from radical movements and that America would wind up fighting closer to home.<sup>31</sup> Unipolarity (or any preponderance of power) should be conducive to selling some of the myths of empire (for example, the argument that the conquest of Iraq would be, as one enthusiast claimed, “a cakewalk”), but it may complicate the selling of others (for example, the assertion that a small, distant rogue state threatens the fundamental security of the superpower).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., chs. 5, 7; Jack Snyder, “Imperial Temptations,” *National Interest* 71 (Spring 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Hendrik Spruyt, *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 26–28; see also Miles Kahler, *Decolonization in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> According to Rumsfeld, “If we left Iraq prematurely as the terrorists demand, the enemy would tell us to leave Afghanistan and then withdraw from the Middle East. And if we left the Middle East, they’d order us and all those who don’t share their militant ideology to leave what they call the occupied Muslim lands from Spain to the Philippines”; testimony of August 3, 2006 Senate Armed Services Committee; subject of a *New York Times* editorial, “The Sound of One Domino Falling,” August 4, 2006.

Even in democracies the strategic ideas of the executive go essentially unchallenged unless leading figures of the opposition party speak out against them. Media critics and non-governmental experts have little clout on their own. Bipartisan consensus behind the executive can reflect true agreement on policy, but it can also reflect the opposition's fear of challenging a popular president who commands the advantages of information, initiative, and symbolism of national unity in a time of crisis. Only one Senate Democrat who faced a close race for reelection in 2002 voted against the resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Consensus can also reflect a logroll in which potential opponents refrain from voicing their criticism in exchange for deference to their interests on other issues. In the late 1940s, before the forging of the Cold War consensus, a large bloc of neo-isolationist Midwestern Republicans and some conservative Southern Democrats were highly skeptical of economic and military commitments to Europe, though they were more inclined to back the Chinese nationalists against the communists. Conversely, Eastern internationalists and realist foreign policy professionals like George Kennan had their eye mainly on the struggle for mastery in the power centers of Europe. Acheson's NSC-68 global containment study, which argued that geopolitical setbacks anywhere would undermine containment everywhere, provided a rationale that forged a consensus among these disparate, mistrustful groups. Unipolarity does not guarantee such consensus, but the vast resources available to the predominant power in the international system can facilitate logrolls in which all objectives – neoconservative, assertive realist, humanitarian – are addressed simultaneously.

When partisan or intra-governmental divisions do emerge, the side with the greatest propaganda resources wins, according to Jon Western's study of American military interventions. These resources include the uniquely persuasive platform of the presidency, the informational advantages of the contending sides (including access to facts, analytical expertise, persuasive credibility, and access to media), and the duration of the crisis (the longer the crisis, the greater the chance for critics of the executive to make their case). A successful advocate for intervention needs to convince the public that a credible threat exists and

<sup>32</sup> Douglas C. Foyle, "Leading the Public to War? The Influence of American Public Opinion on the Bush Administration's Decision to Go to War in Iraq," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 16, 3 (2004), 284.

that there is a convincing plan to achieve victory.<sup>33</sup> Unipolarity should make it easier to convince the public that victory is likely, assuming that the credibility of the threat is not in question.<sup>34</sup>

Western points out that the plausibility of the case for intervention depends in part on the “latent opinion” of the audience, which is colored by expectations formed in the most recent relevant case. The case for attacking Iraq after September 11, for example, was assessed in light of previous confrontations that primed the public to think the worst of Saddam’s regime. Latent opinion may also be heavily conditioned by a prevailing strategic frame.<sup>35</sup> For example, universally disseminated and widely accepted Cold War assumptions primed reactions to the spurious Gulf of Tonkin incident and to other escalatory moves in the Vietnam conflict. When a ready-made consensual frame is not available, as was the case in the 1990s, the case for intervention is more difficult to make.<sup>36</sup> The elder Bush tried out several frames for the 1991 Gulf War, starting with the threat to oil supplies, which fell flat, and subsequently emphasizing the danger from Saddam’s nuclear and chemical programs. What worked best of all was framing through *fait accompli*: Americans decided that war was inevitable once Bush had deployed half a million troops in the Saudi desert, so it was better to get it over with.<sup>37</sup> Even discounting the short-lived “rally round the flag” effect at the beginning of a conflict, a *fait accompli* allows the president to argue that American prestige is already at stake and that criticism undermines the morale of “our troops in the field.” Unilateral

<sup>33</sup> Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 14–23.

<sup>34</sup> On the selling of the Iraq intervention, see Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, “Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11–Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration’s Rhetoric,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (September 2005).

<sup>35</sup> For an innovative treatment of President Bush’s framing of the “war on terror,” see Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz, “Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq,” *Security Studies* 16 (July–September 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 49–51; Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 39, 56–58.

actions of this kind are easier to undertake under unipolarity because of their lesser risk.

Finally, partisan electoral incentives can affect the motivation and ability of politicians to propound foreign policy ideologies, including doctrines justifying military intervention abroad. International relations scholars have argued that leaders sometimes have incentives to launch a “diversionary war” to distract voters from domestic problems, demonstrate competence through easy victories, or gamble against long odds to salvage their declining reputations.<sup>38</sup> Hard-pressed leaders of collapsing dictatorships or unstable semi-democratic states might “gamble for resurrection” in this way, but this is too cynical a view of foreign policy making in stable democracies. However, there may be subtler partisan political attractions of military intervention that do not require so cynical a view of leaders’ motives. We argue that national security strategy played this role as a wedge issue for the Bush administration. Insofar as unipolarity increases the executive’s freedom of action in foreign affairs, it may create opportunities to reframe foreign policy assumptions to advance partisan projects in this way.

### National security policy as a wedge issue

In the parlance of American politics, a party adopts a wedge issue strategy when it takes a polarizing stance on an issue that (1) lies off the main axis of cleavage that separates the two parties, (2) fits the values and attitudes of the party’s own base, yet (3) can win votes among some independents or members of the opposing party who can be persuaded to place a high priority on this issue.

It is worth stressing what this strategy is *not*. It is *not* just playing to one’s own base; it is also designed to raid the opponent’s base. It is *not* shifting the main axis of alignment, but adding an issue orthogonal to that axis. Indeed, a central purpose of the wedge strategy is to gain votes from the off-axis issue that allow the party to win office and thereby achieve policy dominance on the main axis of cleavage. This strategy does *not* necessarily involve moving toward the position of the median voter on the wedge issue. Wedge issues can work if they appeal

<sup>38</sup> Alastair Smith, “Diversionary Foreign Policy in Democratic Systems,” *International Studies Quarterly* 40 (March 1996).

to the party's base, as well as to an intensely interested segment of the rival party's constituency. And they can work even if the majority of voters disagree on the issue, so long as they do not switch their votes for that reason. Finally, a wedge issue is *not* what students of American politics call a "valence issue" on which there is consensus. It is what they call a "positional issue," which partisans make salient in a voter's decision by taking a stand that is distinctive from the opponent's. In one type of positional issue one of the parties enjoys special credibility, such that highlighting the issue works in its favor even if the opposing party decides belatedly to copy its stance.

In many political systems the principal axis of partisan alignment has been economic. The richer portion of the voting population seeks to protect its property rights, limit progressive taxation and taxes on capital, and get state subsidies and protection for its business activities; the poorer portion seeks exactly the opposite. General theories of political development, including ones that are very much *au courant*, are based largely on this assumption.<sup>39</sup> Since many of the benefits that the rich seek would accrue only to a small minority of the voters (for example, repealing the estate tax), achieving a majority in favor of these measures is a daunting task in a political system based on universal suffrage. Extending such economic payoffs down to the second-highest economic quartile is costly, and economic propaganda aimed at the middle class can accomplish only so much. To get what they want in a democracy, economic elites have an incentive to pitch their appeal on the basis of a second dimension of cleavage that can attract voters who do not share their economic interests.

The quintessential example of this strategy is playing the ethnic card in order to divide and rule. In India, for example, the BJP is a Hindu nationalist party with strong representation among upper-caste Hindus. One of their motives has been to protect their economic position and career opportunities against the Congress Party's affirmative action policies for lower castes and minorities.<sup>40</sup> To succeed, the BJP needs to win votes from precisely the lower-caste constituencies that would benefit economically from its defeat. The BJP strategy has

<sup>39</sup> Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Modern Hate," *New Republic*, March 22, 1993.

therefore been to convince lower-caste Hindus that the most important cleavage is not the economic one between lower and upper classes but rather the religious and cultural one between Hindus and Muslims. To increase the salience of the religious cleavage, the party has promoted divisive issues such as the demand to tear down a historic mosque on an allegedly holy Hindu site and build a Hindu temple there. On the eve of close elections in ethnically mixed cities, upper-caste Indian politicians have repeatedly staged provocative marches through Muslim neighborhoods, spread false rumors of defilements perpetrated by Muslims, and hired thugs to start riots.<sup>41</sup> When ethnicity is polarized in this way, the lower castes have voted with the BJP or other ethnically based parties, rather than as poor people with the Congress or class-based parties. Once the BJP has won office in a given state, many in the electorate have found its performance disappointing and voted to oust it in the subsequent election, but the strategy of emphasizing the non-economic cleavage works for a time.

Different non-economic issues can be used for this purpose as the circumstances require. In the American South the economic elite won the votes of poor whites by playing the race card. Today wealthy, conservative Republicans try to appeal to voters who do not share their economic interests by stressing their stance on social issues like abortion, gay rights, and school prayer. Sectoral and regional economic interests can also be emphasized against class interests: sun belt versus rust belt; import-competing sectors against exporting sectors.

Foreign policy can also be used as a wedge issue. This is especially apt if the economic elite really *does* hold a significant foreign policy interest in common with the poorer classes. For example, the coalition of free trade and empire was held together in Britain for a century by the complementary interests of the City of London financiers in capital mobility and the working classes in cheap imported food.<sup>42</sup>

The most common strategy for using foreign policy as a wedge issue is to emphasize looming foreign threats that are alleged to overshadow domestic class divisions. This works especially well for elites when it

<sup>41</sup> Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Peter Gourevitch, *Politics in Hard Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 76–83.

can be combined with two other claims. The first is that concessions to elite economic interests are necessary on national security grounds. Thus, the Wilhelmine German elite coalition of “iron and rye” argued that a battle fleet and agricultural protection were needed in case of war with perfidious Britain. The second is the claim that domestic critics of the government are a fifth column for the external enemy. President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, for example, attacked Democrats who accused them of misleading the nation about Iraqi weapons programs, calling their criticisms “deeply irresponsible” and suggesting that they were undermining the war effort and abetting terrorism.<sup>43</sup> Although Democrats tried to neutralize this charge by supporting many of the Bush policies on terrorism and Iraq, the Republicans’ longstanding hawkishness initially gave them greater credibility as stewards of the “war on terror.” Thus, their wedge strategy was difficult to counter.

Assertive foreign policies can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy to create the foreign enemies that are needed to justify these rationales, whether cynical or sincere. Insofar as unipolarity gives the executive more room for engaging in unilateral action and creating *faits accomplis*, it should facilitate this strategy.

For a wedge strategy to achieve its purpose, it must leave the ruling elite free to carry out its economic policy agenda. This is easiest if the economic policy rationale can be directly tied, as the Wilhelmine elites did, to the logic of the second cleavage issue. It is hardest if the foreign policy undermines the rationale for the economic policy, but even then creative rhetoric might sell it. For example, Ronald Reagan managed to reconcile tax cuts for the wealthy with a navy of 600 ships by appealing to the logic of supply-side economics, which rationalized the resulting budget deficits as good for growth. The intellectual cohesiveness of this package was also enhanced by drawing the symbolic connection between free enterprise (that is, freed from tax-and-spend government) and the free world (militarily powerful enough to stay free from the communist threat), both well-established tropes of Cold War ideology.

<sup>43</sup> On Bush, see Richard W. Stevenson, “Bush Contends Partisan Critics Hurt War Effort,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2005, A1, A10; Cheney said in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 8, 2004, that if Americans elect Kerry, “then the danger is that we’ll get hit again . . . in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.”



Attracting votes by emphasizing a secondary cleavage works best if the underlying assumptions are well primed in public thinking as a result of a long-term campaign. The “Harry and Louise” television advertisements sponsored by a health insurance trade association undermined the Clinton health plan by piggybacking on well-established Republican rhetoric about the evils of big government, which resonated with an increasingly affluent middle class that had less need of a government safety net. However, priming can work too well, taking away the freedom of action of the governing elites. For example, the overselling of Cold War containment ideology handcuffed Lyndon Johnson in dealing with the escalation dilemma in Vietnam.

A well-institutionalized network of policy analysts helps the intellectual frame underpinning a wedge strategy to take hold and endure. Neoconservatives invested heavily in policy research institutes, human capital, and media presence that created and promoted an unusually integrated set of ideas across economic, social, and foreign policy questions.<sup>44</sup> This effort explained how the non-economic wedge issues were part of a coherent world view that included the economic dimension as well, decreasing the risk that issues on the secondary axes would simply replace the primary one.

In short, a move to open up a secondary dimension of cleavage, such as one based on foreign policy, requires priming and institutionalization. It also requires an opportunity, such as a favorable shift in relative power or a new threat that calls attention to the issue. In that sense the convergence of unipolarity, September 11, and neoconservative ideological priming offered the perfect political opportunity.

## Polarization and wedge issue politics

Along a one-dimensional policy spectrum where voter preferences bunch toward the middle, parties must become more moderate to attract more votes. Since the mid-1970s, American party competition has reflected the opposite strategy, despite the fact that the underlying distribution of voter preferences on issues and liberal-conservative

<sup>44</sup> Sinclair, *Party Wars*, ch. 2; Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ch. 6.

ideology still follows a bell curve. Politicians and activists in both parties have declined to moderate their appeals to attract the independent median voter and instead have emphasized ideologically assertive stances in order to mobilize their party base. Karl Rove says, "There is no middle!"<sup>45</sup> As a complement to this strategy, they have sought to peel off targeted constituencies from the opposing camp by emphasizing secondary cleavages. Until September 11 these wedge issues were mainly social or racial. Subsequently, foreign policy was added to the repertoire.

Unlike the competition for the median voter described in the theory of Anthony Downs, this approach works not through moderation but through polarization.<sup>46</sup> To make a secondary cleavage salient, a party's stance needs to be distinctive enough to make it worthwhile for a voter to choose based on that dimension.<sup>47</sup> Wedge issue politics is a politics of divisive position taking.

Students of American politics agree that the political parties' stances on issues have become increasingly polarized in domestic issue-areas since 1975. Party identification has become increasingly correlated with ideology on the liberal-conservative dimension, defined both in terms of self-identification and in terms of attitudes on a set of salient issues including big government, the economy, race, social issues such as gay rights and abortion, and – recently – foreign and defense policy.<sup>48</sup> This is true despite the fact that public attitudes are not substantially less moderate than before. What has happened is that the two parties put forward policy platforms that are more ideologically differentiated than they were in the past. The Republican Party has moved far to the right, and the Democratic Party has moved somewhat to the left.<sup>49</sup> As a result, voters have been re-sorting themselves, with liberal Republicans becoming Democrats and conservative Democrats becoming Republicans.<sup>50</sup> Elites, especially party leaders and activists, are more polarized in their views than the public at large,

<sup>45</sup> Lemann, "The Controller."

<sup>46</sup> Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1957).

<sup>47</sup> Fiorina, *Culture War?*, 167–182.

<sup>48</sup> Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, "Why Can't We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America," *Forum* 3 (2005), at <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol3/iss2/art1>.

<sup>49</sup> McCarty *et al.*, *Polarized America*, 11. <sup>50</sup> Fiorina, *Culture War?*, 57–77.

which suggests that elites are taking the initiative in the polarization process.<sup>51</sup>

Contributing to this process was the breakup of the Democratic “solid South” as a result of the civil rights revolution. Gradually, Southern whites who had remained in the Democratic Party under the logroll of racial segregation and New Deal social programs moved into the Republican Party. White Republican Southerners disproportionately embody a number of the characteristics of the polarizing conservative syndrome: increasingly affluent, traditional in religion and morals, resistant to increasing big government programs and regulatory measures to assist African-Americans, and hawkish on foreign policy.<sup>52</sup> Statistically, region accounts for a substantial proportion of the polarization effect. However, polarization has also occurred outside the South, so that is not the whole explanation. Several hypotheses are in play.

McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal argue that polarization was mainly the result of the large increase in the number of affluent Americans who no longer need the governmental social safety net. They have voted their economic interests at the expense of immigrants who use social programs but lack the vote to defend them.<sup>53</sup> The result is a Republican coalition that blocks efforts to redistribute benefits to the less well-off; that, in turn, leads to a dramatic increase in economic inequality. These authors also see soft money from ideologically extreme campaign contributors as a secondary cause of polarization.

Other authors point to the political turmoil of the late 1960s, which led to the increased adoption of primary elections instead of conventions and caucuses to determine each party’s candidates for the general election.<sup>54</sup> At the same time cohorts of ideologically motivated activists took over from an earlier generation of pragmatic politicians

<sup>51</sup> Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, “Ideological Partisanship and American Public Opinion toward Foreign Policy,” in Morton H. Halperin, Jeffrey Laurenti, Peter Rundlet, and Spencer P. Boyer, eds., *Power and Superpower: Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21st Century* (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 41–44.

<sup>53</sup> McCarty et al., *Polarized America*, 108 and ch. 4.

<sup>54</sup> James A. Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jacobs and Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander*, 17–19.

in both parties. Increasingly, the winning candidates appealed to the median voter in the party's primary rather than the median voter in the general election. Mobilizing one's own base with ideologically purist causes and attacking the opposition's base with wedge issues became the prevailing strategy. With both parties doing it simultaneously, the median voter had no attractive options. As a result, some public opinion research suggests a substantial decline in office-holders' responsiveness to changes in public opinion over recent decades.<sup>55</sup>

Polarization developed at different rates for different issue-areas. Polarization on economic issues was already central to the New Deal cleavage structure, and that has remained largely unchanged. Income level is the strongest predictor of the vote even of born-again evangelicals in the South.<sup>56</sup>

Polarization based on economic issues presents an endemic problem for Republicans, because a majority of American voters *always* says it wants the government to "do more" on big-ticket items such as education, health care, and the environment. Even at the low ebb of support for big-government liberalism when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, about half of the public said the government was spending too little on such items and only one-tenth said it was spending too much.<sup>57</sup> Even most Americans who self-identify as conservative are operationally liberal in the sense that they want government to spend more money on such programs.<sup>58</sup> This conflicted group constitutes 22 percent of the entire electorate.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that most Americans want liberal spending policies by an activist government puts Republicans in a chronic bind. One rhetorical solution has been to emphasize conservative symbols, including patriotism, which resonate more strongly than liberal symbols with the majority of voters.<sup>60</sup> On the symbol of "big government," most Americans agree with the Republicans, but on actual big-government policies, they usually agree with the Democrats.

A second solution has been to use non-economic wedge issues to try to overcome the chronic Republican disadvantage on economic issues. The Republicans have experimented with various issues in attempts to increase the party fold without having to compromise

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., ch. 2.      <sup>56</sup> McCarty *et al.*, *Polarized America*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> Stimson, *Tides of Consent*, 7.      <sup>58</sup> Ibid., ch. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 90.      <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 94–95.

on their basic economic platform. They exploited race and affirmative action between 1964 and 1980, after which they broadened their scope to include gender and abortion.<sup>61</sup> Then, in the 1990s, polarization increased further over social and cultural values issues such as abortion, gay rights, and the role of religion in public life.

This strategy achieved mixed results. Larry Bartels calculates that the Republicans' electoral payoff from the abortion issue has declined among non-college-educated white voters since 1996. Among this group, the impact of seven cultural wedge issues – abortion, gun control, school vouchers, gay marriage, the death penalty, immigration, and gender – on voting in the 2004 election was about two-thirds that of a comparable set of economic issues. By contrast, defense spending and military intervention ranked near the top of the list of politically potent issues.<sup>62</sup> Preventive war on global terrorism became the new wedge issue, picking up where social issues left off.

Foreign policy was for a long time the laggard in polarization. Support for the Vietnam War declined in lockstep among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Democratic support briefly declined more steeply when Vietnam became Nixon's war in 1969, but the Republican trend caught up by 1971.<sup>63</sup> The partisan difference averaged only 5 percent.<sup>64</sup> Partisan differences in support for the Korean, Persian Gulf, Kosovo, and Afghanistan wars were also relatively small, with the Gulf War recording the greatest difference, averaging about 20 percent.<sup>65</sup> The Reagan period widened the divergence in foreign policy views between Republicans and Democrats, but the gap closed again with the end of the Cold War.<sup>66</sup> Even at the time of peak divergence in the 1980s, the two parties remained "parallel publics": their attitudes moved in the same direction over time in response to events.<sup>67</sup>

There are two main reasons for the lag in partisan polarization in foreign policy. First, Democratic foreign policy establishment figures such as Zbigniew Brzezinski remained well within the Cold War

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 71–74. <sup>62</sup> Bartels, "What's the Matter," 218.

<sup>63</sup> Mueller, *Policy and Opinion*, 119.

<sup>64</sup> Jacobson, *Divider*, 132. <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 134–138.

<sup>66</sup> Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, rev. edn. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 168–174.

<sup>67</sup> Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), ch. 7; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, "Ideological Partisanship."

consensus in response to Soviet military buildups and Soviet adventures in Angola, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. Although the Republicans had a post-Vietnam advantage as the more credible party on national defense, their politically exploitable wedge on this issue remained limited. Second, the end of the Cold War left Americans without a convincing frame for foreign policy as a wedge issue, and notwithstanding the Gulf War, no sufficiently galvanizing threat triggered the formulation of a new one during the 1990s.

Despite the neoconservatives' ideological preparations in the 1990s for a more polarizing foreign policy, the initial months of the Bush administration still provided no opportunity for a push to implement it. The Bush administration took office with a mixed foreign affairs team of cautious realists like Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, traditional Cold War hawks like Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, neo-conservative idealists like Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and an uncommitted president who had argued for a restrained foreign policy during the campaign. The idea of unilaterally asserting American primacy to forestall the development of new post-Cold War power centers in Europe or Asia was an old one for this group. Under the elder Bush, Wolfowitz had been too bold in putting that idea at the center of a draft defense guidance document, and the document was suppressed. During the 1990s, neoconservative intellectuals and pundits wrote openly about the use of the "unipolar moment" to reshape global politics to America's liking, by force if necessary. Still, the moment was not right: Republicans shied away from "nation-building" in the developing world, associating it with quixotic do-gooder Democrats. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were on record as calling for regime change in Iraq, but so was Bill Clinton. Rice was prominent in arguing in favor of deterring Saddam from further aggression, implying that he was in fact deterrable.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, after a decade of Iraqi defiance over no-fly zones and inspections, the public was well primed for the

<sup>68</sup> She wrote that "the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence – if they do acquire WMD, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration." Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79 (January–February 2000), 61. More generally, see George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), chs. 1, 2.

possibility of a renewed war with Saddam's regime: in February 2001, 52 percent favored "military action to force Saddam Hussein from power [even] if it would result in substantial U.S. military casualties"; 42 percent were opposed.<sup>69</sup>

### September 11 and the wedge politics of the Bush doctrine

September 11 created the opportunity not only to depose Saddam but also to reframe American foreign policy in a dramatic new way that would unleash conservative Republican principles for purposes that would resonate broadly with the American public. The new doctrine, unveiled in the president's West Point speech of July 2002 and codified in the September 2002 National Security Strategy memorandum, argued that in an era of global terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the United States could not wait to be attacked; it needed to attack preventively to transform states that harbor terrorists and other rogue states into cooperative democracies. The United States would act unilaterally if necessary: it would explain its ideas to the world, but it would not ask for a "permission slip" to "shift the balance of power in favor of freedom."<sup>70</sup> These ideas were presented as relevant not only to the struggle against al-Qaeda, but also to the struggle against the "axis of evil" of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, to an open-ended "global war on terror," and even to promotion of democracy in China.

This was the ultimate wedge issue. The Bush doctrine was well prepared ideologically by neoconservative thinkers. It was grounded in the hawkish, unilateralist instincts of the Republican elites and their conservative base, including the traditionally military-oriented South. Ideologically and psychologically, it resonated with the Republicans' instincts to be tough on domestic threats and evil-doers, for example, their characteristic hard-line stance on crime, the death penalty, and social deviance of all kinds. It neutralized criticism from liberal Democrats through its promotion of democracy. It exploited what scholars of public opinion call a "valence" (or consensus) issue – the overriding security issues of concern to all Americans after

<sup>69</sup> Foyle "Leading the Public to War?" 274.

<sup>70</sup> Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, 11; The Office of the President, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, September 2002.

September 11 – but it went far beyond that. The application of the doctrine to Iraq, well primed among the public, would demonstrate more effectively than the too-easy Afghan mission that this was a problem-solving concept of wide utility. Thus, Iraq was a “positional issue” that would differentiate Republican from Democratic policies, hold the Republican base, and gain some votes among Independents and Democrats who could be convinced of the high priority of this issue.<sup>71</sup> To accomplish this, however, Iraq would have to be seen as part of the bigger picture. Asked how voters would view the Iraq issue in the 2004 election, Rove predicted: “They will see the battle for Iraq as a chapter in a longer, bigger struggle, as a part of the war on terrorism.”<sup>72</sup>

Unipolarity helped to make the wedge issue feasible. America’s unipolar power made implementation seem low risk and low cost, especially important to Rumsfeld’s plan for a streamlined, more usable army. If this worked – and the administration could see no reason why it would not – the strategy might transform the Middle East and at the same time give the Republicans a lock on American politics as the principled, problem-solving party.

An early glimpse of the political benefits that the strategy might bring was evident in the congressional elections of 2002. In preelection polls, notes Gary Jacobson, “most respondents thought that the Democrats would do a better job dealing with health care, education, Social Security, prescription drug benefits, taxes, abortion, unemployment, the environment, and corporate corruption” and that the Republicans would be better at dealing “with terrorism, the possibility of war with Iraq, the situation in the Middle East, and foreign affairs generally.”<sup>73</sup> Bush’s popularity scared off well-qualified Democratic challengers: only a tenth of Republican incumbents faced Democratic challengers who had ever held public elective office, as opposed to the usual figure of a quarter.<sup>74</sup> On the eve of the election, Rove is said to have recommended pushing for a largely unconditional Senate endorsement of the use of force against Iraq, rather than accepting greater bipartisan backing for the somewhat more equivocal Biden–Lugar bill.<sup>75</sup> In classic wedge issue style, Rove wanted the sharpest

<sup>71</sup> On valence and positional issues, see Stimson, *Tides of Consent*, 62.

<sup>72</sup> Lemann, “The Controller.” <sup>73</sup> Jacobson, *Divider*, 89.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 89, n. 30. <sup>75</sup> Packer, *Assassins’ Gate*, 388.



possible difference between Republicans and Democrats in order to heighten the political salience of the war vote relative to economic concerns. Overall, Rove's private PowerPoint presentation on campaign strategy advised Republican candidates to "focus on the war."<sup>76</sup> Buoyed by a huge turnout among the Republican base, the Republicans picked up six seats in the House and two in the Senate, bucking the normal tendency for parties in power to slip in midterm elections.

These political benefits could not be sustained because of the failure to pacify Iraq and the unraveling of the central public rationales for the war – Saddam's alleged WMD and support for al-Qaeda. In retrospect, it seems clear that Bush would have done far better politically by focusing on the "war on terror" and staying out of Iraq. The 19 percent of voters who said that terrorism was the most important issue voted heavily for Bush in 2004, but the 15 percent of voters who identified Iraq as the key issue voted disproportionately for Kerry.<sup>77</sup> Despite the electoral drag of Iraq and in the face of skepticism about his economic agenda, support for Bush on the war on terror provided his margin of victory in 2004.<sup>78</sup> Instead of exploiting the Iraq War as a wedge issue, the Bush administration had instead created the most polarizing issue ever in the history of American foreign policy – and one that ultimately worked to the Republicans' disadvantage.

<sup>76</sup> James Carney, "General Karl Rove, Reporting for Duty," *Time Magazine*, September 29, 2002.

<sup>77</sup> Jacobson, *Divider*, 191. See John H. Aldrich, Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, Jason Reifler, and Kristin Thompson Sharp, "Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection," *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006); the authors review the debate on the electoral impact of the Iraq issue. Writing about J. E. Campbell, they note that he "argues that Bush's margin of victory was smaller than one would predict based on economic variables. He attributes the gap to Iraq and notes that respondents who believed that the war was not going well voted heavily for Kerry." By contrast, they note that Christopher Wlezien and Robert Erikson "conclude – based on their aggregate predictive model – that the Iraq war did not substantially hurt the president's electoral performance." See Campbell, "The Presidential Election of 2004: The Fundamentals and the Campaign," *Forum* 2 (2004), [www.bepress.com/forum/vol2/iss4/art1/](http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol2/iss4/art1/) and Wlezien and Erikson, "Post-Election Reflections on our Pre-Election Predictions," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 38, 1 (January 2005), 25–26.

<sup>78</sup> Gary Langer and Jon Cohen, "Voters and Values in the 2004 Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, 5 (2005, special issue); Sunshine D. Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, "Moral Issues and Voter Decision Making in the 2004 Presidential Election," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 38 (April 2005), 201–209.

## The polarizing consequences of the war

After some initial months of bipartisan support, the partisan divergence in support for the Iraq War ranged between 40 percent and 90 percent, depending on the question asked.<sup>79</sup> The gap between Republicans and Democrats also widened across a broad range of foreign policy issues, and their views sometimes moved in opposite directions in response to new information. In 1998, 31 percent of Republicans believed that the planet was warming, but by 2006 only 26 percent did, whereas Democrats increased from 39 percent to 46 percent and Independents from 31 percent to 45 percent.<sup>80</sup> Partisans increasingly lived in conceptually different foreign policy worlds.

On the first day of the war, the Bush administration had the support of 73 percent of respondents, but support among Democrats remained soft and conditional: 51 percent of them said they supported having gone to war, but only 38 percent supported the troops *and* the policy, whereas 12 percent supported the troops but opposed the policy. If the war and Iraqi democracy had gone well, the weakness of the WMD and al-Qaeda rationales might not have mattered. In the brief moment in March 2003 when a cheap, quick victory seemed assured, the proportion saying that the war would have been worth it even if no WMD were found jumped 20 percentage points among Republicans, 10 points among Democrats, and 13 among Independents.<sup>81</sup> Success might have been its own justification, strategically and politically. But this was not to be.

Attitude trends after the invasion confirm that Democratic and Independent support was conditional on the evidence behind the WMD and terrorism rationales, whereas Republicans were largely unaffected by new evidence. In February 2003, 79 percent of Democrats believed that Iraq had WMD, and fifteen months later only 33 percent did. By contrast, as late as 2005, Republican belief in WMD actually increased to 81 percent. Between April 2003 and October 2005, belief in Saddam's involvement in 9/11 declined among Republicans from 65 to 44 percent, among Independents from 51 to 32 percent, and among Democrats from 49 to 25 percent.<sup>82</sup> Coinciding with these trends, an

<sup>79</sup> Jacobson, *Divider*, 131–133; *New York Times*, March 27, 2006.

<sup>80</sup> ABC News/Time/Stanford poll, *Global Warming*, March 26, 2006.

<sup>81</sup> Jacobson, *Divider*, 130, 143. <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–141.

unprecedented 60 percent gap opened up between Republicans and Democrats during 2004 and 2005 on whether the war had been “the right thing to do” or “worth the cost,” with Independents in between but closer to the Democrats. In April 2004 Democrats were most skeptical of the two rationales for war: of the 58 percent of Democrats who believed neither, only 8 percent thought the war had been the right thing to do. In contrast, the 34 percent of Republicans who were white, born-again evangelical Christians supported the war at an unchanging rate of 85 percent and accepted the administration’s rationales for it unquestioningly. Not surprisingly, self-proclaimed conservative ideology was also a strong predictor of support for both the war and the Bush rationales for it.<sup>83</sup>

Were the Republicans becoming so ideological in their view of foreign affairs that they were impervious to information, or were they realistic though dogged partisans sticking with their team as the best strategy in the face of adversity? And if they were increasingly ideological, was this a spontaneous reflection of grassroots thinking, a consequence of the Bush administration’s neoconservative framing of foreign policy ideology, or simply a measure of who was left in the party after three decades of polarized sorting? Is the highly ideological foreign policy stance of the Republican base a passing phenomenon of the Bush era, or has it become locked in by political strategy or ideological internalization?

These questions cannot be answered definitively, but an analysis of the unprecedented polarization of foreign affairs attitudes during the Bush presidency suggests an elite-driven ideological pattern. Democrats increasingly self-identified as liberal and Republicans as conservative. Moreover, people increasingly decided their views on specific issues based on their prior partisan and ideological commitments. During the early 1990s, panel data had shown that changes in respondents’ attitudes on specific issues had a reciprocal effect on changes in their party identification, with a significant influence in both directions.<sup>84</sup> By contrast, panel data including both domestic and foreign policy issues from 2000, 2002, and 2004 showed that the effect of

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 144, 155–159.

<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas Carsey, “Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (October 2002).

changes of party identification and of general ideology on specific issue attitudes overwhelms the reverse effect (see Table 6.1). This finding is consistent with the view that Bush's highly ideological framing of both domestic and foreign issues effectively polarized the way people evaluate these issues, whether positively or negatively, along partisan and ideological lines. Since this finding rests on data about short-term changes in the attitudes of individuals rather than of aggregates, it would not seem consistent with the view that the changes are simply the result of long-term sorting of individuals into ideologically homogeneous parties through the polarized policies offered by the parties' candidates.<sup>85</sup>

A comparison of the 1998, 2002, 2004, 2006, and most recent 2008 Chicago Council on Global Affairs (formerly known as the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations) surveys of elite and mass attitudes shows an unprecedented level of partisan and ideological polarization on key foreign policy issues across the board, not just on Iraq.<sup>86</sup> On several issues, the vectors of change correspond closely to policy leadership by the Bush administration, suggesting a top-down process of attitude change. The elite surveys show increasing polarization on maintaining superior military power worldwide and on spreading democracy abroad, goals that have become the centerpiece of the neoconservative

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), which reports similar panel data findings emphasizing partisan-driven effects on issue positions. While party identification and ideology appear to affect *individual* issue opinions much more than the reverse, our further data analysis could not reject the possibility of an effect on partisanship and ideology of simultaneous opinion changes on *multiple* issues.

<sup>86</sup> The surveys interviewed samples of the American public and a sample of leaders who have foreign policy powers, specialization, or expertise. The leaders include members of Congress or their senior staff, presidential administration officials, and senior staff in agencies or offices dealing with foreign policy issues, university administrators or academics who teach in the area of international relations, journalists and editorial staff who handle international news, presidents of large labor unions, business executives of Fortune 1000 corporations, religious leaders, presidents of major private foreign policy organizations, and presidents of major special interest groups relevant to foreign policy. Marshall M. Bouton, Catherine Hug, Steven Kull, Benjamin I. Page, Robert Y. Shapiro, Jennie Taylor, and Christopher B. Whitney, *Global Views 2004: American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2004). For a fuller analysis, see Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, "Ideological Partisanship." There was a public survey but no elite survey for 2006 and 2008.

Table 6.1 *Reciprocal effects of party identification and policy opinions<sup>a</sup>*

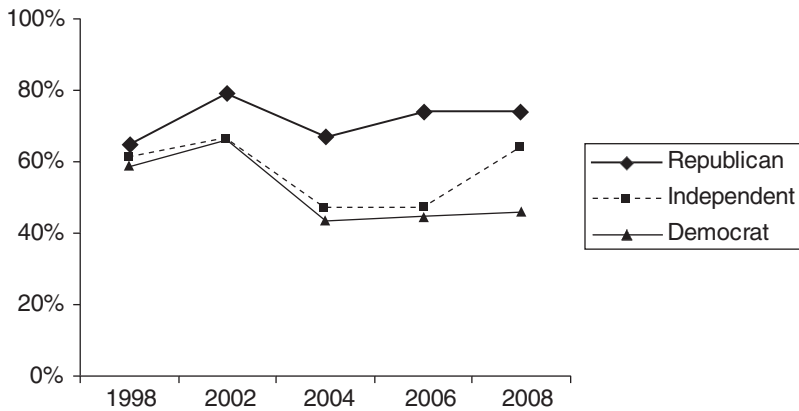
Policy issue	Effect of party on opinion change ( <i>t</i> -value, * <i>p</i> < 05)	Effect of opinion on party ID change ( <i>t</i> -value, * <i>p</i> < 05)
Affirmative action	2.36*	0.95
Equal pay for women	3.70*	0.62
Social security spending	2.39*	0.67
“Welfare” spending	3.33*	1.79
Child care spending	2.97*	0.18
Aid to poor people	2.92*	1.25
Aid to working poor	0.42	0.50
Aid to blacks	2.65*	0.13
Public school aid	2.43*	0.35
Big city school aid	1.08	1.72
Early education aid	0.74	0.03
Crime spending	0.40	0.20
AIDS research spending	1.99*	1.11
Environmental protection spending	4.03*	0.53
Foreign aid spending	0.05	0.81
Defense spending	1.50	1.26
Homeland security spending	2.35*	1.64
War on terror spending	2.20*	1.31
Border security spending	3.40*	2.89*
Tax cut	9.18*	2.35*
Foreign policy – stay home?	3.96*	1.38
Afghanistan – worth cost?	8.44*	1.11

<sup>a</sup> We used the American National Election Study 2000–2002–2004 panel data to explore whether the effect of party identification on policy opinions was greater than the reverse effect. Specifically, to estimate the effect of party identification on opinion change from 2002 to 2004, we regressed opinion in 2004 on prior opinion in 2002 and prior party identification. To estimate the effect of opinion on party identification change, we regressed party identification in 2004 on prior party identification and prior opinion. Based on the magnitudes of the *t*-values for coefficients of the relevant variables, we see that party more often had a significant effect on opinion change from 2002 to 2004 than the reverse. We found similar results overall for liberal-conservative ideology and policy opinions.

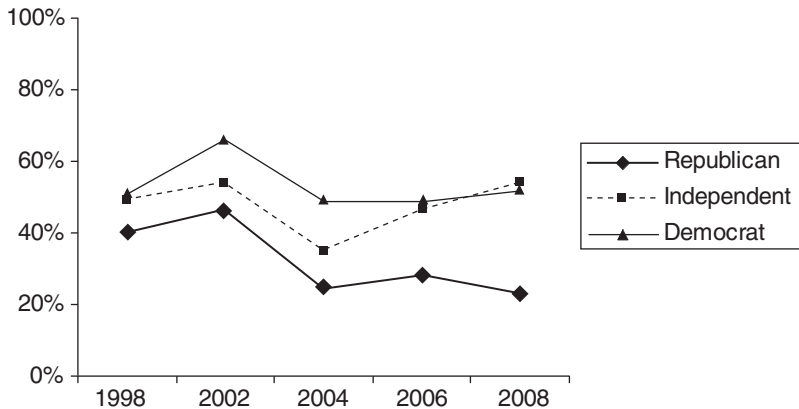
agenda. In 1998, 31 percent more Republican than Democratic elites thought maintaining superior military power was a “very important” foreign policy goal; this gap rose by 18 points to about 49 percent in 2004. In 1998 and 2002 more Democratic than Republican elites thought democracy promotion was a very important goal, but by 2004, after the Bush administration had increased its emphasis on democratization as a rationale for the Iraq War and the Bush doctrine, these opinions reversed, with 14 percent more Republican than Democratic leaders holding this view. The stance of the Bush administration against the International Criminal Court has also led to a growing divergence among partisan elites, rising from 38 percent in 2002 to 50 percent in 2004. The gap on this issue between self-identified conservatives versus liberals rose in 2004 to 54 percent. Overall, for the sixty-two questions asked of elites, we find seventeen cases of partisan divergence and six cases of partisan convergence. Ideological divergence and convergence occurred in eleven cases each.<sup>87</sup>

Mass public respondents are somewhat less divided by party but more divided by ideology. Based on responses to 122 questions, Democrats and Republicans diverged by more than 9 percentage points on 19 questions between 1998 and 2004, and converged on only 4 questions. Self-identified liberals and conservatives diverged on 23 questions and converged on 9. Partisan divergence emerged in particular on defense spending, foreign military aid, gathering intelligence information about other countries, strengthening the United Nations, combating international terrorism, and maintaining superior military power worldwide. From 2002 to 2004 Republicans moved from 6 percentage points to 20 points more likely than Democrats to favor toppling regimes that supported terrorist groups. [Figures 6.1–6.3](#) show some of the trends based on responses to the question: “Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each

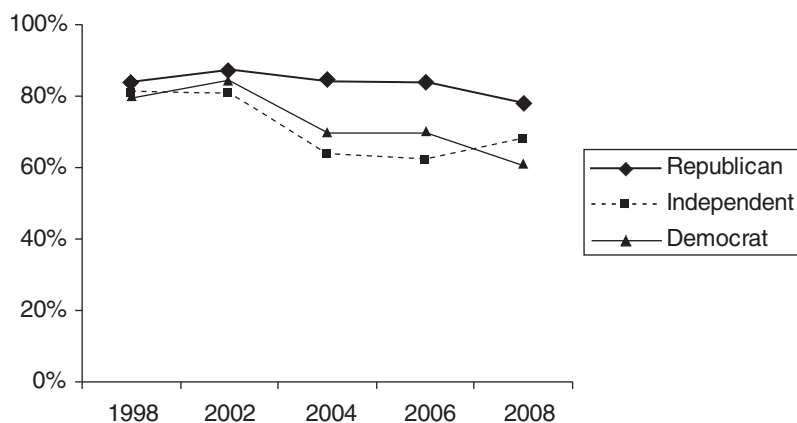
<sup>87</sup> Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, “Political Polarization and the Rational Public” (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 18–21, 2006); and Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, “Partisan Conflict, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy” (paper presented at the Inequality & Social Policy Seminar, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, December 12, 2005). For more on elite polarization, see Peter Trubowitz and Nicole Mellow, “Going Bipartisan: Politics by Other Means,” *Political Science Quarterly* 120 (Fall 2005), fig. 2.



**Figure 6.1** Percent by party affiliation saying that “Maintaining superior military power worldwide” is a “very important” US foreign policy goal  
*Source:* Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys. The question asked was, “Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Maintaining superior military power worldwide?”



**Figure 6.2** Percent by party affiliation saying that “Strengthening the United Nations” is a “very important” US foreign policy goal  
*Source:* Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys. The question asked was, “Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Strengthening the United Nations?”



**Figure 6.3** Percent by party affiliation saying that “Combating international terrorism” is a “very important” US foreign policy goal

*Source:* Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys. The question asked was, “Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Combating international terrorism?”

one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Strengthening the United Nations? Combating international terrorism? Maintaining superior military power worldwide?” The widening gap between Democrats and Republicans from 1998 continuing through 2008 is quite striking, with Democrats moving away from the opinions of Republicans in the cases of considering maintaining superior military power and combating international terrorism as “very important” foreign policy goals. In the case of strengthening the UN as an international institution, by 2008 Republicans were 29 percentage points less supportive of this goal than were Democrats, at 23 percent to 52 percent, compared to an 11 point gap in 1998. This strong partisan divergence extends into global environmental issues as well. From 1998 to 2008 the percentage of Republicans who thought global warming/climate change was a “critical threat” to the vital interests of the US dropped, surprisingly, from 39 percent to 21 percent, *down* 18 points. In sharp contrast, the



percentage of Democrats who gave the same response increased from 51 percent to 62 percent, *up* 12 points.<sup>88</sup>

In sum, there is evidence for increasing partisan and ideological differences among both elites and the public. This has occurred more widely and sharply among elites, but these divisions have penetrated the public as well, continuing well into 2008. Elite polarization seems directly driven by the policy commitments of the president. Mass-level polarization is harder to interpret. It might reflect a more diffuse impact of presidential framing of issues through broad ideology rather than through specific policies, but it might also be influenced by unrelated grassroots trends.

In a further effort to assess whether public polarization is mainly responding to presidential framing or to popular currents of opinion, we conducted a factor analysis to see which issues, based on the American National Election Study data, seem more tightly linked to party, ideology, and each other. We found that issues that have been central to the president's rhetoric and policy agenda – the Iraq War and tax cuts – were most tightly linked in this way. By contrast, attitudes on issues like the death penalty, which has not been central to the Bush administration's framing efforts, were more loosely tied to the others. Although the Bush doctrine seems to have failed as an enduring wedge issue for Republican partisan advantage, its polarizing effect may be more long-lived if it has become embedded in Republican grassroots ideology.

### **Obama and beyond: unipolarity, partisan ideology, and the likelihood of war**

Does unipolarity per se free the United States to use force abroad cheaply and successfully and thus make war more likely? No. As the United States is learning, war can still be politically and economically costly for a sole superpower. However, under unipolarity, the immediate, self-evident costs and risks of war are more likely to *seem* manageable, especially for a militarily dominant power like the US. This does not necessarily make the use of force cheap or wise, but it means that the costs and risks of the use of force are comparatively indirect, long-term, and thus highly subject to interpretation. This interpretive

<sup>88</sup> Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, "Political Polarization" and "Partisan Conflict."

leeway may open the door to domestic political impulses that lead the unipolar power to overreach its capabilities.

Unipolarity opened a space for interpretation that tempted a highly ideological foreign policy cohort to seize on international terrorism as an issue that could transform the balance of power in both the international system and American party politics. This cohort had its hands near the levers of power on September 11, 2001, as a result of three decades of partisan ideological polarization on domestic issues. Its response to the terrorist attack was grounded in ideological sincerity but also in routine practices of wedge issue politics. From conviction and from tactical habit, successful Republican politicians had learned that polarizing on non-economic issues is a political necessity in a country where most voters want costly welfare state policies that are at odds with the upper-income tax cuts that are the bread and butter of the Republicans' central constituency. Because even America's great power was not up to the task set for it by the Bush strategists, their wedge strategy was only briefly successful in winning elections. However, so far their approach seems to have had a more lasting effect in deepening the ideological polarization of American party politics.

If our theoretical analyses are right, what predictions follow for the future of American strategy under conditions of unipolarity? The politics of foreign policy in the Bush era reflected the rare convergence of unipolarity with a galvanizing threat and a party governing with a highly distinctive domestic strategy of ideological polarization and wedge politics. Unipolarity is likely to look very different as those ancillary conditions change.

President Barack Obama's administration has for the most part sought (as of this writing at the beginning of its third year in office) bipartisan support, rather than polarization, in its foreign policies. Retaining the Republican Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, and appointing a Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who supported the Iraq War and took a hard line on Iran's nuclear program, President Obama chose the middle option for troop levels for the counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, thereby increasing his approval on that issue among Republicans at the expense of his support among Democrats. His political strategy on foreign affairs issues, as well as on key domestic issues such as health care, was to move to the center of the political spectrum, not to employ polarizing wedge tactics that appeal to his base while dividing the opposition.

The Republicans, however, continued to take polarizing stances on most domestic and foreign issues even while in opposition. Though not in a position to implement wedge policies, they positioned themselves for electoral competition using their standard strategy of appealing to the base while seeking ways to divide the now-ruling Democrats. In foreign affairs, it became more difficult for Republicans to find wedge issues because the Obama administration's move to occupy the middle ground defused them. At the same time, international wedge issues became less necessary for Republicans because of Republican success in tapping dissatisfaction with Obama's handling of issues on the main cleavage axis of economic and social welfare policy: unemployment, bank bailouts, budget deficits, and the cost of health care reforms.<sup>89</sup>

A degree of party polarization over foreign affairs may continue for a time because of the lingering effects of sorting and ideological internalization, but polarization is not structurally inevitable. Polarization and wedge issue politics yielded the equilibrium that emerged from the particular legacies of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the Vietnam War. But they were not the *only* possible equilibrium that could have emerged. Even if the Republican Party retains some incentives to continue such a strategy, the success of a militarized, unilateralist foreign policy as a political wedge issue depends on the existence of a galvanizing threat and on devising a foreign policy that really works as an answer to it. After the sobering experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, domestic questions may seem more attractive as issues for polarization.

That has clearly been the case during the Obama administration. When President Obama decided to send initially 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan, fully 75 percent of Republicans and 65 percent of Democrats supported this according to a February 2009 Gallup poll. On the other hand, closing Guantanamo and moving some prisoners to the domestic soil of the United States remained more divisive, supported by only 8 percent of Republicans compared to 50 percent of Democrats in November 2009. Differences on other more squarely domestic issues have been more striking. From September 2009 to January 2010, the partisan difference in Americans' support for

<sup>89</sup> For background, see Mark A. Smith, *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

having their members of Congress vote for health care reform averaged 62 percentage points. This was virtually the same average difference that ABC News/*Washington Post* polls found in responses to their question on reform (61 points) and in approval of the President's handling of this issue (62 points). And it was the same as the partisan difference (61 points) that Gallup found in public support for suspending work and considering alternatives to the stalled health care reform bill. It is not surprising, then, that a January 2010 ABC/*Washington Post* poll found a 67 percentage point Democrat–Republican difference in Obama's overall presidential approval rating, down only 5 points from its largest partisan difference (72 points) in September 2009; this was not far from President Bush's 76 point difference in 2004.<sup>90</sup>

If party polarization diminishes in foreign affairs and the parties increasingly compete in this issue-area by trying to attract the average voter, we would predict a lessening in the ideological character of American foreign policy and an increasing prudence in its use of force abroad, notwithstanding the temptations of unipolarity.

<sup>90</sup> According to the Gallup poll record, the average partisan difference in Obama's approval rating during his first year in office was 65 percentage points – greater than that of other presidents during their first year, beginning with Eisenhower. The average difference for Bush was 45 points, Clinton 52 points, G. H. W. Bush 32, Reagan 45, Carter 27, Ford 28, Nixon 34, Johnson 19, Kennedy 29, and Eisenhower 32 points. These and other data cited above were obtained from the following Gallup poll reports: Jeffrey M. Jones, "Obama's Approval Most Polarized for First-Year President," January 25, 2010; Frank Newport, "Strong Bipartisan Support for Obama's Move on Afghanistan," February 23, 2009; Frank Newport, "Americans Oppose Closing Gitmo, Moving Prisoners to U.S.," December 16, 2009; Jeffrey M. Jones, "In U.S., Majority Favors Suspending Work on Healthcare Bill," January 22, 2010; and from ABC News/*Washington Post* poll results provided by Gary Langer, personal communication of February 8, 2010, and in his report, "Perspectives on Partisanship," January 29, 2010.

## 7

*The liberal sources of American unipolarity*

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

**Introduction**

The United States emerged from the end of the Cold War as the world's first unipolar state. The global distribution of power was new and distinctive. The collapse of the Soviet Union had resulted in an international system dominated by a single state. In previous eras, the global distribution of power tended to be multipolar – that is, shared among several major states. During the Cold War, the global distribution of power was bipolar. Material capabilities were concentrated in the hands of the two superpowers. But beginning in the 1990s, the global system suddenly became unipolar. An international system is unipolar if it “contains one state whose overall share of capabilities places it unambiguously in a class by itself compared to all other states.”<sup>1</sup> Over the last two decades, the United States has stood above other states with unrivaled and unprecedented material capabilities – military, technological, economic, political.

This volume probes the “effects” of unipolarity on world politics. That is, it begins with an observation about the distribution of material capabilities and explores its “impact” on the relations among states. Power is defined in terms of material capabilities rather than in terms of influence or outcomes. As such, we are interested in how a unipolar distribution of power affects the grand strategies of the unipolar state, the responses of weaker and secondary states, and the overall patterns of the global system. Specific chapters look at the impact of unipolarity on alliances, grand strategy, the world economy, and patterns of conflict and cooperation. Contrasts are drawn with patterns and outcomes that emerge under conditions of multipolarity and bipolarity.

<sup>1</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, “Introduction,” this volume, p. 6.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between unipolarity and liberal international order. I argue that the causal arrows move in both directions. Certainly the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity has had impacts on American hegemonic leadership and the organization and character of liberal international order. But, just as importantly, *unipolarity – defined broadly as a one-pole global system – is itself an “effect” of liberal international order*. Unipolarity is created by a distinctive distribution of material capabilities but it is also created by the absence of other poles or states attempting to become poles. My argument requires the introduction of a distinction between poles as aggregations of power, and poles as “hubs” around which states organize and cooperate. Poles, as defined in the literature, are complexes of hard power. But states can also be “hubs” that other states connect to. They provide the organizing infrastructure of international relations and the rules and institutions around which states operate.<sup>2</sup> The United States is not just unipolar in the sense of possessing disproportionate material capabilities. It is also unipolar in the sense that it is the organizational center of a wider system of order. It is the “Grand Central Station” of world politics. Other countries have connected themselves to the United States and the wider rules and institutions that make up the liberal international order. Unipolarity emerged in the post-Cold War era as alternative “hubs” fell away.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, unipolarity – as a one-hub world order – is an artifact of the American-led political formation that surrounds it. In the decades after World War Two, under conditions of bipolarity, the United States led in the creation of a liberal international order – that is, an order that was open and loosely rule-based. It was a liberal hegemonic order. The

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I use the term “pole” to refer to states with aggregated material power capabilities, which is the standard definition. I refer to “hub” as the political and organizational character of leading states in the international system. The two terms are sometimes conflated. The imagery of polarity often includes organizational features of states: their ability to build alliances and spheres of influence and thereby compete against other poles. And indeed, the power of a state – and its ability to be a pole – is at least partly defined by its ability to aggregate material capabilities and organizationally engage in power politics. But in this chapter, the two aspects of a powerful state are distinguished.

<sup>3</sup> As Jeffrey W. Legro argues in Chapter 11 in this volume, “[g]reat powers can choose to become poles – or not.” Great powers must make a decision to become a pole by generating military, technological, and political capabilities.

United States provided public goods in support of economic openness, stability, and security. More generally, the liberal international order provided benefits and services for states that operated within it. Over the decades, a growing array of states have wanted these benefits and services. Liberal order – managed by the United States and strategic partners – has become a sort of “mutual aid society.” What liberal order has to offer states tends to be benefits and services that alternative orders or spheres cannot offer. So states buy into this liberal order. In this way, unipolarity – manifest as power and political order – is the consequence of the gradual disappearance of alternative mutual aid societies.

In this chapter, I will explore the logic of unipolarity and liberal international order. I will look at both directions of the causal relationship. I will look at how the United States has used its power capacities to establish and manage the postwar liberal international order, and I will explore how that liberal order has, in turn, reinforced a one-world, single-hub system with the United States at the center. There are several ways in which liberal order encourages and reinforces a one-hub system. There are economies of scale that make it hard for alternative mutual aid societies to prosper. That is, there are “increasing returns” to one big liberal order. Also, there tend to be growing numbers of stakeholders and deeper stakes that actors have in this liberal order. The political character of American-led liberal international order is also self-reinforcing. The institutions of this order are “easy to join and hard to overturn.” Together, this puts states seeking to establish rival poles at a disadvantage – and it reinforces unipolarity.

If this argument is correct, the global system should retain political characteristics of a one-hub global system even as the distribution of material capabilities shift away from the United States. A relative decline in American power disparities will not inevitably lead to the formation of new hubs or a balance of power system. The fact that China has taken steps to join this order is evidence of the way in which the logic and character of liberal order reinforces a one-hub system. Beyond this, a critical question is whether the United States, under conditions of unipolarity, will continue to support liberal order – that is, an open and loosely rule-based system. The Bush administration’s famous unilateralism and reluctance to play the role of liberal hegemonic leader raises doubts. But the failure of the Bush administration

to recast hegemonic bargains, together with the commitment of the new Obama administration to multilateralism and the logic of liberal international order, suggests that under conditions of unipolarity – and certainly under conditions of declining American preponderance of material capabilities – the United States has incentives to support liberal international order.

Together, I make five arguments. First, I argue that a pole in world politics is more than an aggregation of hard capabilities. It is an organizational hub around which other states connect and operate. Second, the United States built the world's most elaborate and expansive hub during the decades of the Cold War. It provided benefits and services to other states and an organizing logic for the wider system. Third, when the Cold War ended, the last rival organizing hub fell away and new hubs failed to emerge. The costs for major states to create new hubs have been greater than the benefits. The result is American unipolarity. Fourth, the pathway toward a "return to multipolarity" has several stops along the way: the diffusion of power, the rise of new hubs, and the igniting of power balancing and security competition. Each is a possible stopping point. Finally, the liberal character of the political formation that has emerged around American unipolarity will influence the "return to multipolarity." Even if there is a diffusion of material capabilities away from the United States, the rise of full-scale new hubs and the return of balancing and security competition is not inevitable.

This chapter begins by exploring the conceptual and historical landscape. I look at notions of polarity and the character of poles as power complexes. After this, I look at the logic and character of liberal internationalism and American-led liberal hegemonic order. I identify the ways in which American-led liberal international order creates incentives and stakes that favor a one-world, single-hub international system. Finally, I look at the prospects for long-term decline in American power and its implications for liberal international order. The United States continues to have incentives to support liberal order. The preferences of rising power and the ability of the United States to leverage its military power will bear on the shape of the coming world order. But, generally, the costs of building new hubs – at least full-scale global hubs – will tend to be greater than the benefits that flow from an open and loosely rule-based liberal international order.



## Poles and polarity in international politics

Polarity in world politics is a term used to describe the international distribution of power. It is a way of characterizing the global power structure. Thus, an international system in which a small group of powerful states holds sway is described as multipolar, and a system in which two major states dominate the system is described as bipolar. A unipolar system is one where a single state stands above all others in terms of its aggregated power capabilities.<sup>4</sup>

These characterizations have been invoked by scholars who offer general depictions of the global distribution of power over many centuries. In these accounts, the modern state system has tended to be multipolar from its European beginnings in the seventeenth century into the mid-twentieth century. During these centuries a small group of major states has organized the system and competed for influence and control. After World War Two, the era of great power multipolarity gave way to a bipolar global system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The power structure became unipolar in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the continuing growth of America's material capabilities relative to the other major states.

Realist theory offers the most systematic characterizations of state power and the dynamics that flow from various polarity configurations. In the realist rendering, a pole is a state that is powerful by virtue of its aggregation of various material capabilities: wealth, technology, military capacity, and so forth. Kenneth Waltz provides the classic definition of a pole. A state takes on the position of a pole within the larger system if it possesses an unusually large share of resources or capabilities and if it excels in all the various components of state capabilities, most importantly including the "size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military strength, political stability and competence."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, 1 (January 2009), 190–194; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 131.

From this simple formulation, scholars have explored the patterns of conflict and cooperation that flow from these alternative power configurations. As Kenneth Waltz poses the question: "What are the likely results of a given distribution?"<sup>6</sup> Or as Barry Buzan queries: "first, what are the effects on the behavior of states of being inside any particular polarity structure; and second, what are the likely consequences of changes from one degree of polarity to another?"<sup>7</sup> These questions follow from a view of polarity as a depiction of a given structure of power. The challenge is to identify the patterns of state behavior – or what Waltz calls the logic of "small-number systems" – that follow from a particular distribution of power defined in terms of the array of poles.

But while poles and "polarity structure" are put forward as descriptions of the international distribution of power, the character of a pole remains somewhat ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> Waltz's definition is essentially a depiction of material capabilities, but it also includes political-institutional features such as "competence," which presumably entails the ability of a major state to translate its material assets into influence. The original usage of the term by realists included the idea that poles were analogies to magnetism, where each pole is a center of attraction and repulsion. This imagery suggests that "poles" are not just materially capable states but also organizational forces that shape and bend movements and connections between states. The "society of states" literature also talks about poles as more than hard power entities. These states also have roles and functions within the wider international society. Poles are great powers – and great powers play a role in organizing and managing the system.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>8</sup> As James and Brecher observe, "[o]ne of the basic problems in the literature is the uncertain meaning of systemic polarity." Patrick James and Michael Brecher, "Stability and Polarity: New Paths for Inquiry," *Journal of Peace Research* 25, 1 (1988), 32. Nogree argues, "[p]art of the difficulty lies in the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept of polarity. Surprisingly, few of the many analysts using polar concepts have explicitly defined them, nor is there a universally recognized empirical referent for a 'pole' in international affairs." Joseph L. Nogree, "Polarity: An Ambiguous Concept," *Orbis* 18, 4 (1974), 1193.

<sup>9</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1977); and Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*. See also Jeffrey Legro, Chapter 11 in this volume.

It is a small step from these ideas to talk about poles as organizational “hubs” within the global system. That is, a powerful state can be defined in terms of not just its material capabilities but also its role and capacity to organize relations among states.<sup>10</sup> As such, in this chapter, I distinguish between poles and hubs. A pole is defined in the traditional realist way as a state with substantial material power capabilities. A state that reaches a certain threshold of capabilities and becomes a great power is identified as a pole. It is the number of poles in the system and their interaction that concern realists. A hub is understood more broadly in terms of its characteristics as an organizational entity or complex in world politics. It is the wider organizational reach of the powerful state that makes it a hub. A state is a hub to the extent that it provides the organizing infrastructure of international relations within a geographical region, a functional sphere, or, more generally, within the wider global system. In this way, hubs can differ in their size, character, and significance within the global system.

Introducing the notion of hubs into the study of unipolarity allows us to ask and answer different questions, including questions about why states that are “poles” differ in their ability to construct organizing rules and institutions, acquire allies and partners, and dominate the global system. To be sure, a state is not likely to be a “hub” if it does not possess sufficient power capabilities. But the focus on poles as organizing hubs allows us to see instances where a state has large amounts of material power but is unable or unwilling to translate that power into the building of a wider organizational sphere in which weaker and secondary states are drawn in, and instances in which a state continues to act as a “hub” within the international system even as its material capabilities shift or decline.<sup>11</sup> We can observe, for example,

<sup>10</sup> As Barry Buzan argues, “Polarity can be used to move forward into realist assumptions about conflict of interest, balance of power, and war, but it can just as easily fit with international political economy concerns with leadership and the provision of collective goods, Gramscian ones about hegemony, globalist ones about a dominant core, world system ones about world empires and world economies, and English school ones about great power management and international society.” Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars have introduced a variety of distinctions and classifications of polarity-shaped systems to generate more specificity and variation in models of global order. Some have combined polarity types to create more hybrid types. Rosecrance, for example, has argued that “bi-multipolar” systems are the most

that Britain in the nineteenth century operated in a multipolar system but it was the only truly global “hub” in world politics. The world in the decades after the Cold War was a unipolar system and a one-hub order. The United States was preeminent in power capabilities and it was also the great hub of the global system. In the decades ahead, as China rises, the world could well turn into a bipolar system – but one with only one global hub.<sup>12</sup>

One can think about a powerful state as an organizing hub of world politics in at least three related ways.<sup>13</sup> First, a state is a hub to the extent to which it provides “goods and services” for other states that affiliate with it. The most basic service is security protection. A state is a hub when it builds alliance partnerships and organizes regional and global cooperative security relations. Other states come to rely on the leading state for security and stability. For example, the European great powers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century state system all tended to acquire junior alliance partners. Indeed, their ability to

stable. Richard Rosecrance, “Bipolarity, Multipolarity, and the Future,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 10, 3 (1966): 314–327. James and Brecher distinguish between various types of “polycentric” systems which have two centers of military power and multiple centers of “political decision.” James and Brecher, “Stability and Polarity,” 33. Many other types and distinctions are offered in the literature.

<sup>12</sup> This possibility is suggested in the last section of this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> The notion of states as organizing hubs draws on the literature on hegemonic power and hegemonic stability theory. The literature on hegemonic stability argues that a single dominant state – by virtue of its power – is able to act on its long-term interests rather than struggle over short-term distributional gains. The classic statements of this thesis are Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–30* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), expanded edition. In Keohane’s formulation, the theory holds that “hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a single country, are most conducive to the development of strong international regimes whose rules are relatively precise and well obeyed.” Such states have the capacity to maintain regimes that they favor, through the use of coercion or positive sanctions. The hegemonic state gains the ability to shape and dominate the international order, while providing a flow of benefits to smaller states that is sufficient to persuade them to acquiesce. See Robert Keohane, “The Theory of Hegemonic Stability and Changes in International Economic Regimes, 1967–1977,” in Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George, eds., *Change in the International System* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), 132.

Functional Scale	A hub can be more or less far reaching in the benefits and services that it provides as an organizational hub, doing so across security, economic, and political realms.
Public Goods Provision	A hub can provide public goods or more selective “club” benefits.
Global Scope	A hub can operate within a region or globally across regions.
Mode of Organization	A hub may operate through consensual agreements or exercise control through coercion.

**Figure 7.1** Characteristics of great powers as organizational hubs

operate as a pole within the multipolar system hinged in part on this capacity to acquire allies.<sup>14</sup> During the Cold War struggle, once again, the ability of the two superpowers to acquire security partners was integral to bipolar dynamics. The hub can provide other goods and services as well, including access to markets and the provision of foreign aid and technical assistance. In doing so, the hub acquires client states and junior partners. (See [Figure 7.1](#).)

Second, a state is a hub to the extent that it is a provider of rules and normative principles for the organization of international relations. The pole provides organizational ideas and frameworks for cooperation.<sup>15</sup> It promulgates standards and practices that other states accept for the conduct of relations. The analogy here might be computer software giants, such as Microsoft, that provide a general operating language around which consumers, software companies, and others communicate and innovate. The hub facilitates coordination among states that are arrayed around it.<sup>16</sup> China played this role in East Asia for hundreds of years, presiding over a system of rules and principles

<sup>14</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> These characteristics of “poles” – as a provider of rules and principles – are discussed in detail by theories of hegemonic stability. See Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*.

<sup>16</sup> In effect, in game theoretic terms, the “pole” is solving problems of coordination.

of hierarchy – with China at the center – held together through evolved cultural and diplomatic practices.<sup>17</sup> The United States played this role among Western democracies after World War Two as it led in the creation of an array of multilateral rules and principles for the organization of trade and monetary relations, international political and legal rights, and global collective security.

Finally, a state can act as a hub as it provides a political-institutional venue for the conduct of interstate relations. The state takes on the role of a pole as it becomes the venue for commerce, diplomacy, and other forms of international exchange. This is the hub as a geopolitical crossroads location – as a sort of “Grand Central Station” for world politics. In effect, the hub operates as a primitive mechanism for global or regional governance. Its “good offices” are provided for the bargaining and negotiations that take place between states that are arrayed around the hub. This is the sense in which a state is a hub and other states around it are “spokes.” Other states work through the leading state – and the institutions that are organized around it – rather than dealing directly with each other.<sup>18</sup>

In all these ways, a hub is a state that organizes and assists an array of smaller and secondary states. It is a hub to the extent that other states connect to and depend on that state for various benefits and services, including stability and protection. They are geopolitical hubs around which less powerful states affiliate.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> The logic of “hub and spoke” is discussed in Alexander J. Motyl, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), ch. 7; and Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *American Political Science Review* 101, 2 (May 2007): 253–271.

<sup>19</sup> Donnelly similarly argues that the more restricted realist notion of polarity misses the ways in which great powers develop vertical power relations with weaker and secondary states. Great powers – or poles – do not just exist on a playing field with other great powers. They also project power and authority in various ways downward into the rest of the state system. It is this wider way in which poles organize and operate that helps us understand long-term shifts in the polarity of the global system. See Jack Donnelly, “Rethinking Political Structures: From ‘Ordering Principles’ to ‘Vertical Differentiation’ – and Beyond,” *International Theory* 1, 1 (2009): 49–86.

As such, we can compare and contrast states as organizational hubs – and we can do so along at least four dimensions. First, hubs can be more or less comprehensive as centers of power and order. The most fully developed hub will be a powerful state that organizes the full range of functional areas: security, economics, politics, and so forth. A state might be a hub in a less comprehensive sense if it plays a role in a specific area, such as the organization of regional trade relations. The most powerful and consequential hub will be states that are “full service” organizational hubs. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European great powers were primarily security providers for weaker alliance partners and not purveyors of wider political and economic goods and services. Britain’s nineteenth-century role as a hub was more comprehensive, involving not just security protection but also, at least among Imperial and Commonwealth states, wider preferential economic and political benefits.

Second, a hub may provide services and benefits that are more or less exclusive to a specific array of weaker and secondary states. On the one hand, a leading state can provide essentially public goods, manifest, for example, in its efforts to uphold an open system of trade or a multilateral system of collective security. In this sense, hubs are purveyors of non-discriminatory and open systems. On the other hand, a leading state can offer exclusive services and benefits to specific junior partners and client states. This might entail offering selective access to its domestic market or bilateral commitments to the security of specific client states. Rather than offer public goods, the hub might offer “club goods.” For example, a hub may give trade or aid benefits to countries that are part of a “club of democracy” or other selective groupings.

Third, hubs may differ in terms of the scale of the organizational sphere in which they operate. Some states act as an organizational hub primarily at a regional level. Japan and China have variously played such a role in East Asia over the centuries. France and Britain have played such a role in Western Europe in various historical eras. Other hubs operate at a global level, drawing in states from across geographical regions. Britain in the nineteenth century was perhaps the first global hub. The United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War were even more globally far-flung in their organizational reach.

Finally, hubs can differ in terms of the mode of their organization and control. They can be more or less coercive in building and managing their outreach to weaker and secondary states. The Soviet

Union was a hub during the Cold War that relied on coercion and direct intervention to draw in and build its sphere of domination. The United States also used a range of tools to manage allied relations.<sup>20</sup> It too used coercion – and covert intervention – in some instances. But it also built more consensual and reciprocal relations with key allies in Europe and Asia.

Overall, we can see that major states can be both poles and hubs. They can be poles in world politics simply through the aggregation of material capabilities. They can also become hubs to the extent that they are also complexes of power with organizational and geopolitical reach. Hubs capture the political-institutional features of states' power. They are realms around which states organize and cooperate. Webs of networks and institutions radiate outward from hubs. Powerful states become hubs to the extent they offer benefits and services to other states. But, as we have seen, the political-institutional character of hubs can vary widely. They can be quite limited in character – operating regionally within a narrow functional area, such as trade or monetary relations. Or they can be far-reaching political-institutional entities that operate worldwide and along all the functional dimensions of world politics.

### Liberal order building and the rise of an American pole

For over half a century, the United States has been the most powerful, expansive, and far-reaching hub the world has ever seen. In terms of the dimensions sketched above, it is a hub that is more functionally comprehensive, public goods providing, global in scale, and politically open and consensual in its organization and control than previous or rival hubs. We can look more closely at why and how this is so.

The United States emerged from World War Two as the most powerful state in the world – and it proceeded to construct a postwar

<sup>20</sup> For comparisons of American and Soviet styles of political control within their alliance spheres, see John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Edy Kaufman, *The Superpowers and Their Spheres of Influence: The United States and the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).



order. In fits and starts, it undertook to build military alliances, reconstruct defeated states, establish frameworks of cooperation, and take on responsibilities to stabilize and manage the wider system. As the Cold War took off, the United States expanded its commitments and responsibilities. The result was a liberal international order, characterized by its openness and loosely rule-based organizational logic. Along the way, liberal international order turned into liberal hegemonic order. That is, the United States assumed various responsibilities to provide public goods, build and manage rules and institutions, and facilitate political cooperation and exchange. Behind the scenes, the United States pursued institutional strategies that bound liberal democratic states together, thereby making them collectively more powerful in the face of non-democratic challengers and making them less threatening to each other. Under American auspices the world economy was opened, facilitating the expansion of trade and interdependence across the global system. In these and other ways, the United States turned itself into the central hub of a vast international order.

The extraordinary material capacities that the United States possessed at the end of World War Two made it inevitable that it would be a pole in world politics.<sup>21</sup> But it was the elaborate order building that the United States pursued with these capacities that gave the American pole its distinctive characteristics – and ultimately what has made it so expansive, integrative, and durable as a geopolitical hub. More than other great powers or hegemonic states of the past, including Great Britain in the nineteenth century, the United States built order around institutionalized strategic relationships. This is order built around multilateralism, alliance partnership, strategic restraint, cooperative security, and institutionalized and rule-based relationships. The institutional underpinnings of this order made America's material power position both more durable and less threatening to other states. It is this order that has continued to expand over the postwar decades, integrating countries along the way, and dominating world politics for half a century – surviving the end of the Cold War and other upheavals to emerge as a unipolar system.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

The building of the American pole moved through several phases. In the last years of the war, the Roosevelt administration did not foresee the United States taking on the commitments of a global hegemonic power. Instead, they had a vision of a multipolar order in which the United States and the other major states would cooperate to uphold a system of stable peace and open trade. The Bretton Woods institutions would be the vehicle for opening and managing the world economy, and the United Nations Security Council would enshrine great power restraint and accommodation. However, this vision was soon undermined by postwar realities. The weakness of Europe – in particular Great Britain’s inability to retain its great power holdings and commitments – and the rise of antagonism with the Soviet Union pushed and pulled American order building in new and more expansive directions. As the Cold War intensified and the world became divided into bipolar blocs, the United States began to take on a more direct role in the organization and management of the extended Western system.

The American-led order that eventually emerged was a very specific type of order. The United States did not just encourage open and rule-based order. It gradually became the hegemonic organizer and manager of Western liberal order. The American political system – and its alliances, technology, currency, and markets – became fused to the wider liberal order. In the shadow of the Cold War, the United States became the “owner and operator” of the liberal capitalist political system. The United States supported the rules and institutions of liberal internationalism but it was also given special rights and privileges. It organized and led an extended political system built around multilateral institutions, alliances, strategic partners, and client states. It was an order infused with strategic understandings and hegemonic bargains. The United States provided “services” to other states through the provision of security and its commitment to stability and open markets. In these ways, the United States was more than just a powerful country that dominated the global system. It created a political order, a hierarchical order with liberal characteristics.<sup>23</sup>

The United States turned itself into an organizational hub through its order building and the provision of services and benefits. Three features

<sup>23</sup> For descriptions of this rolling process of American-led order building, see Ikenberry, *After Victory*, ch. 6; and Stewart Patrick, *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2009).

were most important in giving this emerging order its expansive and integrative character. First, the United States provided various public and club goods. Security provision was most important. As the Cold War unfolded, the United States took on expanding commitments to the security of allies in both Europe and Asia. Defense treaties, forward deployment of forces, and extended deterrence provided a security architecture connecting the United States – at the center – to states around the world. NATO in Europe and bilateral security pacts in East Asia were the main components of this evolving hub-like structure. The United States also provided public goods in its efforts to open the world economy and underwrite the multilateral institutions that were created to manage trade and monetary affairs. Specific countries and regions were beneficiaries of these security commitments and economic ties but the resulting stability and openness of the system offered more diffuse opportunities and benefits.

Second, the United States built order around arrays of multilateral rules and institutions. It is this web of institutions that is the most distinctive mark of the postwar American-led order. The United States launched history's most ambitious era of institution building. The UN, IMF, World Bank, NATO, GATT, and other institutions that emerged over the decades provided the most rule-based structure for political and economic relations in history. The United States was deeply ambivalent about making permanent security commitments to other countries or allowing its political and economic policies to be dictated by intergovernmental bodies. The Soviet threat and the dynamics of bipolarity were critical in overcoming these doubts. American-sponsored rules and institutions provided the organizational infrastructure for expanding networks of political relationships. Countries that operated within these American-centered rules and institutions were provided with frameworks for cooperation and collective action.

Third, the overall system of rules and institutions created a sort of primitive governance system. The United States occupied the center of this loose organizational structure, but it did not unilaterally command other states. It operated – as did other states – within the rules and institutions. Other countries were given opportunities to engage and influence the United States. The open and decentralized character of the United States government itself also facilitated interactive political engagement. These institutional characteristics created what can be called “voice opportunities” – opportunities for political access and,

with it, the means for states surrounding the United States to engage and influence the way the “pole” exercises power. This open and institutionalized organizational terrain facilitates bargaining, reciprocity, and joint governance of the larger system.

These organizational features of the American-led pole have operated to draw in allies and partners. The array of multilateral institutions and security pacts are not simply functional mechanisms that generate collective action. They are also elements of political architecture that allow for states within the hegemonic order to do business with each other. In championing these postwar institutions and in agreeing to operate within them, the United States is, in effect, agreeing to open itself up to an ongoing political process with other democratic states. The liberal character of the hegemonic order provides access points and opportunities for political communication and reciprocal influence. The pluralistic and regularized way in which American foreign and security policy is made reduces surprises and allows other states to build long-term, mutually beneficial relations. By providing other states with opportunities to play the game in Washington, the United States draws them into active, ongoing partnerships that serve its long-term strategic interests. In effect, the political architecture gave the postwar order its distinctive liberal hegemonic character: networks and political relationships were built that – paradoxically – both made American power more far-reaching and durable but also more predictable and malleable.

The effect of these organizational features has been to make the American hub unusually expansive and integrative. This is true in three ways. First, the unusually dense, encompassing, and broadly endorsed system of rules and institutions reduces the role of brute power – arbitrary and indiscriminate or not – in the operation of the system. It is a more open and rule-based order than previous historical orders. This has made it easier for other states to work with and connect to the United States. The United States is powerful and retains the ability to exercise its power in self-interested ways. But the overall system of rules and institutions puts bounds on that power and makes it less threatening. The United States has bound itself to allies and partners in ways that reduce the incentives that these states might otherwise have to resist and balance against the lead state.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> These features are discussed in Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

Second, the barriers to entry are relatively low. Unlike imperial systems of the past, the American-led order is built around rules and norms of non-discrimination and market openness, creating conditions for countries – including rising countries on the periphery of this order – to advance their economic and political goals within it. Across history, international orders have varied widely in terms of whether the material benefits that are generated accrue disproportionately to the leading state or are widely shared. In the American-led system, the barriers to economic participation are low, and the potential benefits are high. States can join by adopting political and economic practices that are congruent with the open world system. Command decisions are not made at the center of the system about whether to include or exclude states. States have it within their own hands to make these decisions.

This openness of the American hub extends beyond the state system. The low barriers to entry provide opportunities for non-governmental actors – transnational activists, entrepreneurs, professional groups – to operate in and with others across the order. Anne-Marie Slaughter describes this quality of a country – and its outward organizational characteristics – as its capacity for “connectivity.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the United States is “network friendly.” It is an open and expandable organizational social and political system. English language, universal standards, open access, immigrant connections to all regions of the world – these are aspects of the American hub that attract partners and participants.

Third is the coalition-based character of its leadership. Past orders have tended to be dominated by one state. The stakeholders of the current liberal international order include a coalition of powers arrayed around the United States – an important distinction. These leading states, most of them advanced liberal democracies, do not always agree, but they are engaged in a continuous process of give-and-take over economics, politics, and security. Unlike an imperial system, governance in this order takes place in a variety of formal and informal venues in

<sup>25</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, “America’s Edge: Power in the Networked Century,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2009). See also David Singh Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For a discussion of networks and international conflict, see Zeev Maoz *et al.*, “Network Centrality and International Conflict, 1816–2001: Does it Pay to be Important?” *Working Paper*, November 2004.

which multiple states take the lead or operate in concert. The so-called G7/8 process and the more recent G20 process are emblematic of this open style of multilateral and expandable governance.

Overall, the liberal character of the political order that has surrounded American power has given the American pole an unusually expansive and integrative character. Other countries have made systematic decisions to connect to and operate within this order rather than resist and oppose it. The liberal character of the American pole has made it an organizational hub that is “easy to join and hard to overturn.”

### **Expansion and integration of the American pole**

The expansive and integrative logic of the American hub can be seen in its trajectory of growth over the last fifty years. Soon after World War Two, the United States came to be the organizational hub to an expanding complex of allies, partners, institutions, and activities. At various junctures, other great powers – and other would-be hubs – made strategic choices to tie themselves to the United States and its spreading system of institutions and relationships. Despite periodic shifts in the distribution of power, the American pole continued to expand and consolidate over the decades. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet sphere, the last rival hub fell away and new hubs did not emerge. The American hub did not rise; rival hubs fell. Out of this process, the global system became politically unipolar.

The dynamic features of the American hub were on display from the start with the early postwar integration of Japan and West Germany. These former enemy states were defeated and occupied. But they were also reformed and integrated. In both instances, the American (and, in West Germany, allied) occupation focused initially on economic reform and democratization. As the Cold War intensified, the United States shifted its efforts to rebuilding their economies and integrating them into Western economic and alliance systems.<sup>26</sup> West Germany

<sup>26</sup> There is a large literature on the occupation and reintegration of Japan and West Germany. See John Montgomery, *Forced to be Free: The Artificial Revolution in Germany and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

was bound to its democratic Western European neighbors through the European Coal and Steel Community (and, later, the European Community) and to the United States through the Atlantic security pact. Japan was bound to the United States through an alliance partnership and expanding economic ties. The Bretton Woods meeting in 1944 laid down the monetary and trade rules that facilitated the opening and subsequent flourishing of the world economy. Additional agreements between the United States, Western Europe, and Japan solidified the open and multilateral character of the postwar world economy. After the onset of the Cold War, the Marshall Plan in Europe and the 1951 security pact between the United States and Japan further integrated the defeated Axis powers into the American-led order.

America's extraordinary power position after World War Two provided resources and other capacities for the United States to pursue an expansive and integrative postwar grand strategy. The Cold War was also critical in creating incentives and domestic support within the United States for the building of these alliance and economic ties. But also at work was the liberal logic of American order building. The United States saw its own security and prosperity advanced through constructing global and regional institutions, providing security to East Asia and Western Europe, and binding itself to other Western and allied great powers, including former enemies. At least some American officials expected – and even desired – the postwar system to take on a multipolar character. As late as 1947, Policy Planning director George Kennan offered a vision of the United States and Western Europe as somewhat distinct poles. The idea was to encourage a multipolar postwar system, with Europe as a relatively independent center of power, in which Germany was integrated into a wider unified Europe.<sup>27</sup> But Western European governments ultimately sought to tie themselves to an integrated Western system with the United States as its hub.

A similar dynamic played out at the end of the Cold War. In the great upheaval triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unraveling of the Soviet sphere, it was the institutions of the West – NATO, the European Community, and the wider liberal international order – that shaped and facilitated the flow of events. When the Soviet Union

<sup>27</sup> For George Kennan's notion of a "third force," see John Lewis Gaddis, "Spheres of Influence," in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 58.

collapsed, the American-led order offered a set of rules and institutions that provided Soviet leaders with both reassurances and points of access – effectively encouraging them to become part of the system. These Western liberal institutions were accessible, integrative, and vehicles for the restraint on power. The initial choices were focused on how to handle a unified Germany, and Soviet leaders sought to create new pan-European structures that would replace Cold War alliances. In the diplomatic pulling and hauling that followed, the Western structures proved most useful to the search by all the major states for mechanisms of restraint, reassurance, and integration. The Bush administration championed this logic, including in a Berlin speech by Secretary of State James Baker who argued that the three great institutions of Europe – NATO, the EC, and CSCE – should be adapted to provide the multilevel framework to absorb the coming changes. The slogan was a “new Atlanticism for a new era.”<sup>28</sup> The existing Western institutions were expansive and integrative – allowing new members and new configurations of states.

In the background, the shared leadership of the Western order facilitated accommodation of the Soviet Union. As the Reagan administration pursued a hard-line policy toward Moscow, the Europeans pursued détente and engagement. For every hard-line “push,” there was a moderating “pull,” allowing Mikhail Gorbachev to pursue high-risk reforms. The United States and the Western system manifest paradoxical characteristics. The West was able to generate power and wealth much more efficiently – and on a greater scale – than the Soviet Union. This put the Soviets at a structural and persistent disadvantage. But the West – as a complex political-economic entity anchored by the United States – was also sufficiently benign and integrative to draw the Soviets into a peaceful end of hostilities. The pluralistic and democratic character of the countries, and the transnational and domestic

<sup>28</sup> See James A. Baker, III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace* (New York: Putnam, 1995), 172–173. For accounts of the negotiations that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall over the unification of Germany and the wider Cold War settlement, see Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of U.S. Policy in Europe, 1989–1992* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).



opposition movements toward hard-line policies all worked to soften the face that the Soviet Union saw as it looked westward. The Western alliance itself, with its norms of unanimity, made an aggressive policy by one country difficult to pursue. The United States pursued a grand strategy toward Gorbachev and the ending of the Cold War as it did toward Japan and West Germany after World War Two. It sought to channel the rapidly unfolding political changes in the direction of peaceful integration and democratic reform. In the years that followed, the Western order once again managed the integration of a new wave of countries, this time from the formerly communist world.<sup>29</sup>

If the end of the Cold War was a surprise to many observers, so, too, was what followed: the remarkable stability and continuity of cooperation within the American-led order. Few observers expected this outcome. Rather than continuity and consolidation, the widespread expectation was for its gradual breakdown and movement toward a more competitive multipolar system.<sup>30</sup> One prominent view was that with the end of the Cold War – and the disappearance of bipolarity and the unifying threat of Soviet power – the global system would return to its older pattern of multipolar balance of power. This, of course, was the pattern of international politics that more or less prevailed for centuries – from 1648 to 1945. No single state dominated the system and alliance commitments were flexible. For traditional realist scholars, the bipolar system was an historical anomaly. The expectation was that the global system would return to its old pattern rather than persist as an even more anomalous “unipolar” system. The classic statement of this logic was articulated by Kenneth Waltz, namely, that states balance against power and, as a result, the appearance of a single dominant state will stimulate the rise of other great powers or coalitions of states to balance against the leading state.<sup>31</sup> This was the view of John Mearsheimer, who argued in 1992 that “bipolarity will disappear with the passing of the Cold War, and multipolarity

<sup>29</sup> See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The International Sources of Soviet Change,” *International Security* 16, 3 (Winter 1991–1992): 74–118.

<sup>30</sup> See survey of views by Michael Mastanduno, “A Realist View: Three Images of the Coming International Order,” in T. V. Paul and John A. Hall, eds., *International Order and the Future of World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19–40.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

will emerge in the new international order.”<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Waltz also speculated on the prospects for the reemergence of an array of great powers – Japan, Germany, China, the European Union, and a revived Russia.<sup>33</sup> Christopher Layne argued that the extreme preponderance of American power would trigger counterbalancing reactions by Asian and European allies, or at least a loosening of the political and security ties that marked the Cold War era.<sup>34</sup> Anticipations also existed for a return to competitive multipolarity in East Asia.<sup>35</sup>

Some American government officials at this time also worried about a return to a competitive multipolar system. During the last years of the first Bush administration, Defense Department officials, led by Paul Wolfowitz, came forward with a strategic planning document – the Defense Planning Guidance of 1992 – charting America’s global security challenges after the Cold War. A draft of the report argued that a central goal of American security policy must be to block the rise of rival states or peer competitors. As James Mann observes: “Vague as it was, this language seemed to apply to Japan, Germany or a united Europe, as well as to China and Russia. The draft said the United States should discourage the ‘advanced industrial nations’ from challenging America’s leadership, in part by taking their countries’ interests into account but also through unmatched military strength.”<sup>36</sup> The leaked document triggered criticism from Europeans and others offended by the suggestion that the United States would seek to block the advance of its allies. The revised document dropped this language but the

<sup>32</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Disorder Restored,” in Graham Allison and Gregory Trevorton, eds., *Rethinking America’s Security* (New York: Norton, 1992), 227. See also Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability of Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15 (Summer 1990): 5–57; Mearsheimer, “Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War,” *Atlantic Monthly* 266 (August 1990): 35–50.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18 (1993): 45–73.

<sup>34</sup> See Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise,” *International Security* 17 (Spring 1993): 5–51.

<sup>35</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Era,” *International Security* 18, 3 (Winter 1993–1994): 5–33.

<sup>36</sup> James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), 210. See also Barton Gellman, “Keeping the U.S. First: Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1992, p. A1; and Gellman, “Pentagon Abandons Goal of Thwarting U.S. Rivals,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1992, p. A1.

central argument remained that America must maintain its commanding military position and, in the report's words, "preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests."<sup>37</sup>

But movement toward multipolarity – or more precisely, a multi-hub order – did not occur. In the years that followed the end of the Cold War, relations among the advanced industrial countries remained stable and open. During the 1990s, the Cold War alliances were reaffirmed – NATO increased its membership and the US–Japan alliance was deepened. Trade and investment across these regions has grown, and institutionalized cooperation in some areas has expanded. There are several surprises here – about the post-Cold War distribution of power and the responses to it. Rather than a return to a multipolar distribution of power, the United States emerged during the 1990s as a unipolar state. It began the decade as the only superpower and it grew faster than its European and Japanese partners. Likewise, the realist expectation of a return to the problems of anarchy – great power rivalry and security competition – did not emerge. Europe and Japan remained tied to the United States through security alliances, and Russia and China did not engage in great power balancing.

The American-centered order continued to expand and integrate transitioning states throughout the postwar decades. Various indicators show this steady growth and expansion of security, political, and economic ties to the American hub. One indicator is alliance ties. The United States added allies over the last half century but it has not tended to shed them – and so there has been a steady growth in the number and variety of security partnerships. As [Table 7.1](#) indicates, the United States began the postwar era with fifteen alliance partners and this grew over the decades, increasing rather than contracting after the Cold War. The expansion of NATO membership into Eastern Europe and the former Soviet sphere was the critical step in this regard, a movement driven as much by liberal aspirations for assisting and integrating newly democratic states as by a traditional logic of security protection.<sup>38</sup> The United States is utterly unique in the number and

<sup>37</sup> Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1993), 3. Quoted in Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 212.

<sup>38</sup> On NATO expansion, see James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999). For reflections on the liberal sources of NATO and NATO expansion,

**Table 7.1 Alliance partners: United States, China, and the Soviet Union/Russia**

Year	United States	PRC	USSR/Russia
1946	21		8
1951	37	1	10
1956	42	1	10
1961	43	2	11
1966	43	2	11
1971	45	2	10
1976	47	2	10
1981	50	1	9
1986	52	1	9
1991	53	1	8
1996	52	1	10
2001	55	1	9
2003	62	1	8

Definition: A state is an alliance partner if the state has a defensive obligation toward another state during the year of observation. (*Note:* This variable captures whether the state has promised to defend another state, not whether the defense obligation is reciprocal.)

*Note:* The alliance partners of the Soviet Union and Russia are different, except for North Korea. Soviet alliance partners in 1989 were: East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Finland, Mongolia, and North Korea. Russian alliance partners in 1995 were: Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and North Korea.

*Source:* Brett Ashley Leeds, Jeffrey M. Ritter, Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, and Andrew G. Long, "Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions, 1915–1944," *International Interactions* 28 (2002): 237–260.

range of security pacts. No other great power has so many alliance ties. Russia and China have a few security agreements – but they are limited and regional. In contrast, the United States has an expansive array of security relationships organized on a global scale. When it has taken on security partners, it has tended to keep them – even when the specific circumstances that triggered the partnership have shifted or disappeared.

see Mary Hampton, *The Wilsonian Impulse: U.S. Foreign Policy, the Alliance, and German Unification* (Boulder, CO: Praeger, 1996).

The economic and political relations that are organized around or connected to the American hub have also steadily expanded and deepened over the decades. Trade and investment, measured in various ways, have grown outward from the core postwar Western states. Trade as a share of GNP has increased in all the liberal democracies. Trade and investment do not exhibit the same “hub and spoke” features as the US-led security relationships. Regional trade has increased in Asia and Europe, and new bilateral trade pacts have emerged as an overlay to the global multilateral trading system. The European Union and, increasingly, China can be seen as hubs within the larger system. But these concentrations of trade remain embedded in the wider global system – and the United States remains the leading market for both European and Asian trade. There are no widespread constituencies in either Asia or Europe for more exclusive trade blocs that are tied to a regional pole. The World Trade Organization (WTO) remains the centerpiece of the open and relatively rule-based trading system. In the decades since the end of the Cold War, states – including the non-Western great powers – have sought to integrate into this trading system rather than to build alternatives to it.

Finally, the political-institutional organization of the American hub has continued to expand and deepen. An informal grouping of major industrial powers emerged in the early 1970s as a G5, expanding and turning into an annual G7 process in the following decade. After the Cold War, Russia was invited into this grouping, and it moved beyond its original focus on trade and monetary policy cooperation to political and security issues. More recently, the G20 has emerged as a larger grouping of global “stakeholders.”<sup>39</sup> Formalized diplomatic meetings have also expanded. The European Union and the United States have developed formal annual meetings. Below this level, a complex array of intergovernmental networks have proliferated in recent decades that tie the United States and the other liberal democracies together.<sup>40</sup> Generally, the trajectory of growth and cooperation

<sup>39</sup> On the growth and evolution of the G8 and other leadership groupings, see John J. Kirton and Junichi Takase, eds., *New Directions in Global Governance: The G8 and International Order in the Twenty-First Century* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> On these intergovernmental networks, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler, and Alexander H. Montgomery, “Network

among the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reflects the deeper growth and integration of the political and institutional system surrounding the United States. The OECD was founded in 1948 as a framework for cooperation to administer Marshall Plan funds. In the following decades it has grown into a more global institution for the world's liberal democracies to study common problems and cooperate on domestic and international policies. The OECD now has thirty member states, including all the advanced industrial countries as well as upper middle-tier countries such as Mexico, Poland, and Turkey. Twenty-five additional countries are associated with the OECD as non-members. Along the way, it has also expanded its activities, creating functional organizations such as the International Energy Agency. Together these thirty members of the OECD compass the center of gravity of the world political and economic system. The postwar trajectory of the OECD is emblematic of the growth of the more general American-centered global system: it has expanded to incorporate more states, it has grown in the breadth and depth of economic interdependence, it has steadily built and expanded multilateral institutional rules and mechanisms for cooperation, and it has remained at the center of the overall global system.

### Liberal unipolarity and the return to multipolarity

How durable is this “one-hub” international system? Many observers anticipate a “return to multipolarity” and an end to the American unipolar system. The global distribution of power is slowly shifting. New great powers are rising up – particularly in Asia. America's advantages in material capabilities are declining somewhat. It is through this process of shifting power that the American hold on the global system will end, yielding a more multipolar system.<sup>41</sup> But, as we have

Analysis in International Relations,” *International Organization* 63 (Spring 2009): 559–592.

<sup>41</sup> For arguments that unipolarity is giving way to a multipolar system, see the report by the National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2009). See also Barry Posen, “Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?” *Current History* (November 2009): 347–360; and Coral Bell, “The Twilight of the Unipolar World,” *The American Interest* (Winter 2005). For a discussion of unipolarity from a world-system perspective, see William R. Thompson, “Systemic Leadership,

seen, the American pole is not built only or entirely on power capabilities. It is an organizational complex in which the United States is the organizational hub. For this reason, the movement to a more multipolar system may be a slower and less complete process than anticipated. We can look more closely at the pathways toward multipolarity and the sources of continuity within a “one-pole” international order.

A “return to multipolarity” involves a movement away from American unipolarity to a more decentralized global power structure inhabited by rival great powers. But there are various stopping points along this pathway. In fact, we can identify at least three steps along the way to multipolarity. One is the simple diffusion of power. Here it is really a story of a gradual transition in the distribution of power. In this situation the United States will experience an erosion of its relative advantages in material capabilities. Its share of world GNP, in market size, in military capabilities will shrink.<sup>42</sup> Other states will acquire material capabilities and the power disparities between the United States and the other major states will decline. New power centers will emerge. A second step toward multipolarity involves not just a redistribution of power but the rise of new hubs. This entails the emergence of great powers that take on characteristics of an organizational complex. These leading states take on their own security alliances, commercial partners, political networks, and so forth. Other great powers are not just more powerful, they are also rival organizational hubs. The third step toward multipolarity would involve not just a diffusion of power and the rise of new hubs but the triggering of multipolar balancing and security competition. This would be a world in which the restraints and accommodations that the major states have made within the post-war American-led order would give way to more traditional power balancing.<sup>43</sup> Understood this way, it is possible to observe a diffusion

Evolutionary Processes, and International Relations Theory: The Unipolarity Question,” *International Studies Quarterly* 8, 1 (June 2006): 1–22.

<sup>42</sup> In this way, Schweller argues that the concentration of power in America’s hands is giving way to a diffusion of power and a slow disarticulation of order – but not the rise of new poles. See Randall Schweller, “Ennui Becomes Us,” *The National Interest* 105 (January/February 2010).

<sup>43</sup> For a description of this full-scale end of unipolarity and the rise of competing great powers, see Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the American Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 31, 2 (Fall 2006): 7–41.

of power and not see the emergence of new hubs, and it is possible to see the rise of new hubs without the commencement of great power security competition and balance of power politics.<sup>44</sup>

It is easier to detect a diffusion of power than it is to see the rise of full-scale global hubs. The American pole has characteristics that reinforce its centrality and durability within the global system. These are ordering characteristics that are not dependent narrowly on specific American power capabilities. States – such as China – seeking to turn themselves into hubs will remain at a decided disadvantage. The existing order is easier to join and gain benefits from than it is to oppose. The construction of alternative hubs – hubs that are comprehensive and global – will be hard, if not impossible, to construct.

These are several ways in which the existing liberal order reinforces a “one-hub” system. First, the open and loosely rule-based character of the political order surrounding the United States encourages an expanding array of stakeholders and vested interests that want to keep the current order in place. This occurs across economic, political, and security spheres. The existing unipolar system provides the political and institutional supports for an open world economy. To enter into the world trading system and to join the WTO is to buy into the existing order. Not only do governments gain a stake in the multilateral economic system but so do an expanding array of societal actors, such as business firms and consumers. Governments and various types of private actors also have become stakeholders in the political institutions of the “one-hub” system.<sup>45</sup> It provides access to the United States and venues for bargaining and cooperation. The security order – with

<sup>44</sup> Conversely, it is also possible that the United States could remain preponderant in its material capabilities and yet see itself decline as a political-institutional “hub.” See David Wilkinson, “Unipolarity without Hegemony,” *International Studies Review* 1, 2 (Summer 1999): 141–172.

<sup>45</sup> In their study of complex interdependence, Nye and Keohane argue that “a set of networks, norms, and institutions, once established, will be difficult either to eradicate or drastically to rearrange.” Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977), 55. Keohane’s function theory of institutions suggests that the persistence of complex sets of rules and institutions is derived from the role of communication and information that is generated and the value that an expanding array of actors attach to this flow of communication and information. See Robert O. Keohane, “The Demand for International Regimes,” in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 164.



the United States at the center of a far-flung system of alliances – also creates stakeholders that have long-term interests in the stability of the existing system. In all these ways, actors large and small, scattered across the global system, are a large and growing constituency for the existing American-centered international order.

Second, there are economies of scale and efficiencies that are generated by the existing “one-hub” system that put rival hubs at a disadvantage. Once established, the liberal international order creates “system effects” that provide additional incentives for a “one-world” system. This is primarily a point about the organization of modern liberal societies and capitalism. In particular, a system of open trade – championed by liberal polities – facilitates growth and wealth creation among the trading states. This in turn expands the scope of the world capitalist system and creates incentives and opportunities for other states – transitional and non-capitalist states – to join in. The functional logic of liberal capitalism leads states to seek economic gains from specialization and operation within the global division of labor. Specialization, division of labor, and scale economies are all part of the system-level efficiencies that give long-term advantages to states that operate within an open and integrated liberal international order.<sup>46</sup> States outside this expanding order become increasingly weak in relative terms and marginalized – and so they face increasing incentives to seek liberal reforms and accommodate to the liberal capitalist system.

The division of labor within the “one-hub” system extends into security relations. Both Japan and Germany have tied themselves to the United States and its global security alliance system. These countries – for decades the second and third largest economies in the world – have embedded themselves within the American hub system. In the case of Japan, its security integration within the American alliance system extends deeply into its society – and is formalized within its “peace

<sup>46</sup> This argument draws on trade and macroeconomic theory, dating back to David Ricardo on the efficiencies that are derived from specialization, division of labor, and exchange. It is, of course, possible for rival great powers to develop their own exclusive regional areas where these advantages are achieved within the region and outside the world capitalist system. The Soviet Union had its own economic bloc with a Soviet version of division of labor, specialization, and exchange. But any such rival sphere today would necessarily be on a much smaller scale than the existing world capitalist system and therefore it would retain its disadvantages.

constitution.” Germany also has embedded itself within NATO, and its decision to forsake nuclear weapons also shows the extent of the integration and division of labor within the larger American-led security system. As “civilian” great powers, these states have made strategic decisions not to bear the costs associated with becoming nuclear powers or security providers on their own.<sup>47</sup>

In these various ways, the “one-hub” liberal order creates opportunities for states that operate within it. The economic growth and wealth creation that are generated within it make it easier for leading states to offer to provide aid and other benefits for weaker and smaller states. The multilateral rules and institutions within this order also provide mechanisms for states seeking to manage economic crises or reforms. Coordination is facilitated and resources – policy knowledge, standby funds, etc. – are available for participating states. In effect, the liberal order takes on the form of a “mutual aid society.” States join the order and benefit accordingly. Alternative hubs – existing or imagined – offer fewer attractions.

Third, the traditional mechanism for overturning international orders does not operate today. In the past, the great moments of order building came in the aftermath of war when the old order was destroyed. War itself was a ratification of the view that the old order was no longer sustainable. War broke the old order apart, propelled shifts in world power, and opened up the international landscape for new negotiations over the rules and principles of world politics.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the American-led system exists in the longest period of “great power peace” in modern history. The great powers have not gone to war with each other since the end of World War Two. This non-war outcome is certainly influenced by two realities: nuclear deterrence, which raises the costs of war, and the dominance of democracies, who have found their own pathway to peace. The traditional mechanism for order destruction and building has been eliminated. This means that rising states seeking to establish a new international order – organized around a new hub – will find it hard to do so. Again, the status quo has an organizational advantage.

<sup>47</sup> This argument is developed in Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (April 1999): 179–196.

<sup>48</sup> The classic statement of this view is Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*.

### The rise of China and the emergence of a Chinese hub

The rise of China puts these arguments about unipolarity to a test. If a country is to rise in power and establish a rival hub, China is the most likely candidate. It has many of the markings of not just a rising state but of a new hub in the global system. The size of its economy has quadrupled since the launch of market reforms in the late 1970s and, by some estimates, it will double again over the next decade. It has accumulated massive foreign exchange reserves, its military spending has increased at an inflation-adjusted rate of over 18 percent a year, and its diplomacy has extended its reach not just to Asia but also to Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Indeed, whereas the Soviet Union rivaled the United States as a military competitor only, China is emerging as both a military and economic rival – heralding a profound shift in the global distribution of power.<sup>49</sup>

As China grows in power, it will no doubt take on some characteristics of a geopolitical hub. But if there are far-reaching advantages to a “one-hub” system, China’s transformation into a global organizational hub will be slow and incomplete. Even now China faces incentives to operate inside this “one-hub” liberal order rather than resist or seek to overturn it.<sup>50</sup>

To begin, China is already integrating into this liberal international order. China’s growth is heavily dependent on trade within the world economy, including most importantly the United States. China has become a capitalist country, and its ability to grow and develop depend on working with and inside the world capitalist economy. Chinese economic interests are quite congruent with the current global economic system – and a system that is open and loosely institutionalized and that China has embraced and thrived within. State power today is ultimately based on sustained economic growth, and China is aware that no major state can modernize without integrating into the globalized capitalist system. China cannot simultaneously integrate into the

<sup>49</sup> For the argument that China is emerging as the next global superpower, see Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China: Power, Institutions, and the Western Order,” in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China’s Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

world economy and also seek to overturn the political and institutional structures that support it.

China not only needs continued access to the global capitalist system. It also will want the protections that the system's rules and institutions provide. The WTO's multilateral trade principles and dispute-settlement mechanisms, for example, offer China tools to defend against the threats of discrimination and protectionism that rising economic powers often confront. The evolution of China's policy suggests that Chinese leaders recognize these advantages: as Beijing's growing commitment to economic liberalization has increased the foreign investment and trade China has enjoyed, so has Beijing increasingly embraced global trade rules.

The existing international economic institutions also offer opportunities for new powers, such as China, to rise up through their hierarchies. In the IMF and the World Bank, governance is based on economic shares, which growing countries can translate into greater institutional voice. To be sure, the process of adjustment has been slow. The United States and Europe still dominate the IMF. Washington has a 17 percent voting share (down from 30 percent) – a controlling amount because 85 percent approval is needed for action – and the European Union has a major say in the appointment of ten of the twenty-four members of the board. But there are growing pressures, notably the need for resources and the need to maintain relevance, that will likely persuade the Western states to admit China into the inner circle of these economic governance institutions. The IMF's existing shareholders, for example, see a bigger role for rising developing countries as necessary to renew the institution and reorient its mission.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond economic relations, the more general rules and institutions of the liberal order should be useful to China. China is already a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This gives China the same authority and advantages as other established great powers. The Chinese government has taken systematic steps to engage and work within various regional and global institutions. It has surely done this, in part, for defensive purposes: protecting its sovereignty and economic

<sup>51</sup> For a study of the ways in which China is seeking great authority and status within existing institutions, see Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

interests while seeking to reassure other states of its peaceful intentions by getting involved in regional and global groupings. More so than rising states in the past, China is rising up into a highly integrated and institutionalized international order.<sup>52</sup> China has made use of these institutions to serve its interests – and the distinctive openness and accessibility of these institutions push and pull China ever more closely into the existing system's internal workings.

To be sure, as China's military power grows, it will be better able to contest American security presence in its region. Countries in the region that are growing more economically dependent on China might will discover incentives to also tie their security to China. As a result, as China grows, countries in East Asia may find themselves needing to "pick sides" – tying their security to either China or the United States. China could follow the example of the United States and extend its security umbrella outward to neighboring countries, thereby strengthening its political position and ability to control events. But China's security interests may be more complex. To the extent China wants to pursue more cooperative security relations with the United States – perhaps with the hope of developing joint security management of the region – the existing bilateral security system provides opportunities for China to integrate into it. In effect, the organizational barriers to entry are low. The current regional security order is organized around bilateral security ties to the United States – the so-called "hub and spoke" system. For Beijing to join this system, it merely has to establish a working security relationship with the United States. Of course, the logic of this security order leaves the United States at the center – as the hub. But China can gain the prestige and authority that comes with its "special relationship" with the United States and by its participation in the wider array of shared leadership institutions.

Taken together, for many decades to come, China will face a global system that is massively weighted in favor of the liberal democratic world. It faces not just the United States and its specific power capacities – capacities that may rise, decline, or stay the same. More importantly, it faces an entire liberal world system – a complex and open system in which the United States is centrally situated. As China grows, it may well become a hub of some sort within East Asia, drawing in

<sup>52</sup> See Marc Lanteigne, *China and International Institutions: Alternative Paths to Global Power* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

trade and political partners. It is less certain that it can build a global organizational hub of the scale and scope of the existing American-led liberal order. The distinctive character of the American hub will inevitably influence how China thinks about the costs and benefits of strategies of integration and challenge. The sheer weight and complexity of the capitalist-democratic complex makes it hard to overturn. What can a large state rising up on the edges of this system really do to overturn and replace its rules and institutions? At the same time, China has powerful incentives to work with and integrate into the existing order, even as it looks for advantages and authority within it. China will rise up and grow more powerful. It is less clear that the global system will “return to multipolarity” as a result.

## **Conclusion**

The United States emerged after World War Two as the world’s most powerful state. In this sense, it was instantly and inevitably a pole in the postwar system. But it became an organizational hub in world politics because of the distinctive political order that it constructed around its power capabilities. The United States constructed a liberal international order – or, more precisely, a hierarchical order with liberal characteristics. This sort of order building was made possible by American power – and the geopolitical competition of the Cold War also created pressures and incentives for the construction of a political order around the American pole.

In the narrow sense, the scholarly interest in polarity comes from the possibility of finding patterns of conflict and cooperation that follow from specific configurations of power. Multipolar systems of power have different dynamics and tendencies than bipolar or unipolar systems. This volume offers a variety of theoretical claims and insights about how the United States might act differently under conditions of unipolarity than it did in multipolar and bipolar settings. In this chapter, I turn the focus around. I am interested in how poles differ in their wider organizational and political manifestations. The literature on polarity offers a theoretical opening here. The realist notion of polarity does emphasize the material power character of poles. A state can only be a pole if it has sufficient material capabilities. But there is at least a hint in the literature that poles can be more than stark aggregates of economic and military power. Great powers are salient

and significant because they also have capacities to organize and aggregate states. Weaker and secondary states are understood to cluster around great powers, understood as poles. The imagery of bipolarity is that two great states are peer global competitors and lesser states are organized around these two power centers. But how do leading states build these larger aggregates of states? How do they differ? These questions lead us to talk about poles as organizational hubs.

Understood as an organizational hub, the United States has been an overachiever. It has built the most expansive, integrated, and durable order the world has yet seen – and it has positioned itself at the center of it all. The argument of this chapter is that these qualities of the American hub have shaped the character of the unipolar moment. In both the early postwar years and in the decade after the Cold War, other major states had choices about whether to connect to and operate within an American-led hegemonic order. The specific qualities of this order gave these other states incentives and opportunities to do so. Perhaps Western European states and Japan did not develop into rival “poles” after World War Two because they simply were not powerful enough to do so. But they also decided to forgo efforts to build rival hubs because of the attractions and trade-offs that were associated with working with the United States. It is in this sense that we can talk about the liberal sources of unipolarity.

This argument is relevant to the question of how unipolarity might transform back to multipolarity. I have suggested that the “return to multipolarity” has several steps and stopping points. The most obvious step is a diffusion of power away from the United States. This diffusion of power might simply spread out among many states, which might or might not result in new “poles.” The question here is whether other major states are the recipient of this diffusion of power. But if new poles do arise, this still leaves open the question of whether these new poles would actually be hubs. That is, they might have economic and military capacities but not the wider organizational capacities and associations that we have described in this chapter. China is rising but it does not have alliances or a rival set of rules and institutions around which to organize a global hub system. Even if other states, such as China, do become hubs, it still remains an open question whether this multipolar hub system will be a traditional balance of power order.

The return to multipolarity must travel along this pathway, and there are stopping points along the way.

It is precisely because the American hub is so expansive, integrative, and durable that other rising states have reasons to work within it rather than build rival hubs. The fact that this order is relatively benign – it is not an imperial system of coercive power – makes it all the more likely that the return to multipolarity will not travel all the way to a competitive balancing system. Rival poles will want to become hubs and engage in balancing if they are threatened. But if this geopolitical insecurity does not emerge, it is less likely these states will move in this direction. If this is true, the political manifestations of unipolarity could last long after the power concentrations associated with it have shifted.



# 8

## *Unipolarity: a structural perspective*

ROBERT JERVIS

### **Introduction**

To say that the world is now unipolar is neither to praise American power, let alone its leadership, nor to accuse the United States of having established a worldwide empire. It is to state a fact, but one whose meaning is far from clear, as we have neither a powerful theory nor much evidence about how unipolar systems operate. A central difficulty for sorting this out entails determining the extent to which behavior and outcomes we have seen stem from structure, rather than from other levels of analysis, such as idiosyncratic aspects of the international environment, the American domestic system, and the role of individual leaders. How might the system function if the unipole were Nazi Germany, Stalin's USSR (or Brezhnev's), or a traditional autocracy? Or if it were the United States in a different era? There would surely be major differences, but we should still start our analysis with structure. In fact, this takes us quite far and, as well, to some unexpected places. Realism indicates that the unipole is likely to be difficult to restrain, no matter how benign its intentions or domestic regime. Furthermore, it is far from clear that it should seek to maintain existing arrangements. Both normal ambitions and, in the current context, American values and beliefs may lead the superpower to seek to change the system rather than preserve it.

### **World politics and the study of world politics**

Academic analyses are influenced both by events in the world and by scholars' political outlooks and preferences. The growth of realism was obviously entangled with the Cold War; revisionism about the origins of this conflict was sparked by the war in Vietnam (although this approach in fact was unable to explain the self-defeating American policy); the subfield of international political economy (IPE) developed

rapidly in the wake of the American abandonment of the gold standard, the growth of OPEC, and the oil boycott following the 1973 Middle East War. The other side of this coin is that things that are not happening lead to subjects being ignored. The role of religion in international politics, for example, received little attention until the emergence of "political Islam." Similarly, civil wars are important and interesting analytically but were intensively studied in the US only during the Vietnam conflict (when the subject was considered under the topics of "counter-insurgency" or "internal war"), falling back into quiescence until such types of conflict returned in the 1990s.

It is therefore no accident (to borrow a phrase from a different intellectual tradition) that we do not have a large body of work on unipolarity. Despite the popularity of systems theorizing, only Morton Kaplan devoted more than a few sentences to this configuration, although, like everyone else, he paid most attention to bipolar systems.<sup>1</sup> Who, until the end of the Cold War, would have written an article on unipolarity or encouraged a graduate student to work on this topic?

A stronger claim is that what scholars think as well as what they think about is influenced by the politics of the day. Discussions of bipolarity provide a nice example. At first glance, nothing could be further from policy than Kaplan's highly abstract if not impenetrable discussion of systems. But much of it concerns a bipolar system in which one side is internally disciplined and the other is not. He argues that the latter is at a great disadvantage, and it does not take long to see that the integrated pole corresponds to the Soviet bloc and the less disciplined one to the American side. Clearly, Kaplan's analysis of this abstract system was derived from his view of the Cold War and the handicap that he saw the West as laboring under due to the diversity of opinions within and among its members and the difficulty weak states have in following the national interest. Waltz's well-known view was different, and what is important here is that one strand of his argument was that the superpowers did not have to care about the peripheries, and that this in turn implied that the US did not have to fight in Vietnam, which corresponded to Waltz's own policy preference.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> He did not use the term but referred to "universal" and "hierarchical" systems; Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), 45–50.

<sup>2</sup> See Kenneth Waltz, "The Politics of Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 11 (September 1967).

It is a safe prediction that analyses of unipolarity, which are only just beginning to appear, will be influenced both by contemporary world events and by the authors' attitudes toward American policy. Constructivists and liberals will be particularly critical, not because of something deeply embedded in those theoretical frameworks, but rather because most scholars of these persuasions want to minimize the use of force and are on the political left. Realists span the political spectrum and if for no other reason their analyses are likely to be diverse. The influence of political preferences is easier to detect in retrospect but will be significant, especially because opinion on current US foreign policy is so polarized.<sup>3</sup> It should not be taken as capitulation to full subjectivity to say that our political theories are touched by our politics.

## Definitions

The best definitions do a great deal of theoretical work, as is true of Waltz's definition, or rather redefinition, of bipolarity. Earlier scholars had considered bipolar systems to be ones in which the bulk of the power was concentrated in two camps. Thus, pre-1914 Europe as well as the postwar era qualified. Waltz showed that this conceptualization was flawed because the actors were individual states, not alliances among them. Once this simple point was grasped, not only was the analogy between the pre-World War One "bipolarity" and the post-World War Two system seen as faulty, but the instability of the former could also be used to show why the latter was stable. Because under bipolarity states balanced through mobilizing their own economies and populations (internal balancing) rather than through alliances (external balancing), small allies could not drag their partners into war and the latter could not shirk their responsibilities and try to pass the buck to others, which were major causes of war under multipolarity.

In retrospect we can see that this definition also pointed toward the way in which the Cold War would end. If the superpowers had to rely on internal balancing, then if one of them were significantly more efficient than the other, the other would not be able to keep up the pace and, unlike the situation in multipolarity, would not be able

<sup>3</sup> See Jack Snyder, Robert Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, [Chapter 6](#) in this volume.

to compensate by seeking allies. The Soviet Union was unusually maladapted to winning allies, but even without this handicap the weakness in its domestic economy meant that it would have been hard pressed to compete.

It would be nice if a definition of unipolarity could incorporate this much analytical power. Even if it does not, however, exploring definitional questions leads us to several significant issues. We can start with a negative: although unipolarity and empire are sometimes conflated (and the latter is not without its definitional problems as well), they are different because unipolarity implies the existence of many juridically equal nation-states, something an empire denies. Empire also implies that the unipole is receiving tribute; under unipolarity the flows can go either way.

There are two obvious related definitions of unipolarity. One is adopted by Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, as well as by other contributors to this literature: a system in which one state has significantly more capabilities than any other.<sup>4</sup> Another is a system in which the unipole's security and perhaps other values cannot be threatened by others, just as in bipolarity the other superpower alone poses a fundamental threat. The two definitions are linked through the assumption that such a privileged position leads to security. Both this assumption and the proposed definitions raise questions. Should we compare the capabilities of the superpower to other individual states or to possible coalitions? If the latter, can we determine what coalitions are serious possibilities without assuming a theory of behavior under unipolarity? How should we characterize a system in which only a very large coalition could threaten the unipole? What kinds of threats concern scholars (and the superpower)? What level of security satisfies it? Is it only security or other values that are of concern? Even if threats from other states are limited, what about the menace from non-state actors, obviously of concern today?

The most clear or extreme case of unipolarity would be one in which the superpower could not be matched if the entire world united against it. Indeed, today American military spending is almost as great as that

<sup>4</sup> For related definitions of unipolarity, see Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, [Chapter 1](#) in this volume; William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 21 (Summer 1999); Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005), 11–13.

of all the other nations combined. But the United States does not have half the world's GDP (the figure is roughly one-quarter), and the American military preponderance is produced by a combination of its large economy and a military spending rate that is high compared to others (but not compared to past rates). Were the rest of the world to unite, it could easily mount a much larger military than that of the US, and even a united Europe would return the world to bipolarity, although presumably one that would be very different from the hostility of the Cold War (which reminds us that structure influences but does not determine patterns of behavior).

It is even more difficult to measure and generalize about other forms of capability, often summarized under the heading "soft power."<sup>5</sup> It seems likely, however, that the distribution of most forms of soft power will roughly correlate with the distribution of economic and military resources. Soft power matters but by itself cannot establish or alter the international hierarchy. Some small countries are widely admired (for example, Canada), but it is unclear whether this redounds to their benefit in some way or helps spread their values. Although states that lose economic and military strength often like to think that they can have a disproportionate role by virtue of their culture, traditions, and ideas, this rarely is the case. Intellectual and cultural strength can feed economic growth and perhaps bolster the confidence required for a state to play a leading role on the world stage, but material capabilities also tend to make the state's ideas and culture attractive. This is not automatic, however. As I will discuss further below, economic and military power are not sufficient to reach some objectives, and a unipole whose values or behavior are unappealing will find its influence reduced.

The preceding discussion should not be taken as implying that power is a simple concept.<sup>6</sup> Even capability is not entirely straightforward. In the military arena, for example, it is a complex compound, involving skill and motivation in addition to hardware. More important, what we (and the actors) care about are the outcomes of international interactions, and moving from capabilities to influence is a major challenge

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See the classic set of essays by David Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

for national leaders and central to analyzing politics. Here it may be particularly difficult to talk about unipolarity in general rather than the current unipolarity, and I will return to the topic in this context.

One way to pose the question of the relationship between capabilities and power is to ask whether the unipole can get most of what it wants. Putting it this way has the advantage of highlighting the fact that the answer turns in part on what it is that the superpower wants. Although I argue that desires are likely to expand with capabilities, there is no reason to expect unipolar systems to be identical in this regard, because much depends on the particular characteristics of the superpower. Whether others will comply also depends on non-structural factors, especially the coincidence or discrepancy between the worlds they prefer and the one sought by the superpower. Of course the actors' preferences may themselves be subject to influence, and we would expect the unipole to make serious efforts to persuade or coerce (and the line between the two is often blurred) the others to develop goals, values, and beliefs that are compatible with its own. Indeed, inducing such a consciousness (false or otherwise) is over the long run the cheapest and most secure form of influence.<sup>7</sup> Whether these efforts will succeed depends in large part on how compatible the unipole's objectives are with those of the others and the skill with which it acts.<sup>8</sup>

A related question is what kinds of threat can challenge the security of the unipole and which ones cannot. Standard theories of the rise and fall of great powers point out that the leading power is often brought

<sup>7</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). The *dependencia* literature argues that in the postcolonial era the developed countries maintained their control by influencing the social structure of the Third World states and the interests and values of their elites, and today many scholars stress the actual or potential role of legitimacy in unipolarity: see Martha Finnemore, [Chapter 3](#), this volume.

<sup>8</sup> For the argument that attempts by Germany to secure dominance in the twentieth century were fatally flawed because it was unwilling or unable to contemplate a world that provided a place for diversity and others' interests, see David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978). By contrast, a major source of ancient Rome's power was its willingness to incorporate other units and elites into its polity; see Arthur Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 244–257.

low because the relative strength of its economy wanes as the cost of protecting its position increases and because the public goods of peace and an open economic system that it provides allow others to grow faster than it does.<sup>9</sup> If the burden of being a sole superpower is similarly great, unipolarity could erode, but, conversely, if it is able to profit from its position, the structure can be self-sustaining. In the contemporary system, the US is running large budget and current account deficits, but it would be wrong to conclude that this shows the hallmarks of imperial overstretch. The defense and associated burdens are small as a percentage of GDP and the deficits could be wiped out by slightly higher taxes. It is domestic and idiosyncratic rather than structural factors that are at work here.

Unipolarity is no guarantee against economic shocks, widespread disease, or environmental degradation. These might be more likely under unipolarity if the absence of peers leads the unipole to act without restraint and induces irresponsibility in other actors. But the contrary argument that concentration of power makes it more likely that the superpower will produce public goods was the central claim of hegemonic stability theory (HST) in the economic area, and while the theory has been battered by encounters with evidence, it still retains enough life so that a recovery is possible. On balance, then, we are left with only the milder conclusion that even if unipolarity almost by definition involves security against other state actors in the system, it is not necessarily stable against all forms of threat.

At the extreme, then, unipolarity takes states out of anarchy and transforms if not dissolves international politics in two related ways. First, security concerns are greatly reduced for the unipole and for others it protects (although the superpower itself may be a source of threat as well as of protection). Since such concerns are the main drivers of traditional international politics, the implications are likely to be far-reaching. Second, some of the relations under unipolarity will embody a degree of hierarchy. Although seen in the past within empires and non-democratic alliances, hierarchies have been little studied by IR scholars since they represent the antithesis of what makes

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987); Arthur Stein, "The Hegemon's Dilemma," *International Organization* 38 (Spring 1984).

international politics distinct.<sup>10</sup> The unipole cannot dictate, but it can set at least some of the rules and can enforce agreements among others (although it itself cannot be bound). If it chooses to do so, it can then provide a significant degree of security for others while also limiting their autonomy. Although unipolarity does not constitute the end of international history, it may represent a bigger break from other systems than was the emergence of bipolarity, which left security fears and anarchy intact. A unipole that exerts itself in this way will produce a system that is stripped of many of the unique characteristics associated with international politics. This raises the question of how many of our traditional ideas can be carried over into the new world.

### Dependent variables

One question that has bedeviled the study of international systems is the identity of the relevant dependent variables; that is, what is it that we are trying to explain? In the 1950s and 1960s, when systems theories developed, the dependent variables were peace and stability, which were seen as identical – but which are not. This was a conceptual mistake prompted by the fact that the use of nuclear weapons would destroy the system.<sup>11</sup> Under other technologies and conditions, stability can be maintained through the exercise of force, as many theorists argue is true in a balance of power system.

With unipolarity, world war is less of a problem and more obviously separated from instability. Since no other state, and perhaps no likely coalition, can threaten the security of the superpower, war is no longer the means for challenging it and changing the structure of the

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Kaplan, *System and Process*; Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, "Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State," *International Organization* 49 (Autumn 1955); Katja Weber, *Hierarchy amidst Anarchy: Transaction Costs and Institutional Choice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); David Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy and Its Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Paul Macdonald, "Hierarchic Realism and Imperial Rule in International Politics" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 94–102; Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18 (Fall 1993), 45.



system. Other factors unique to the contemporary system also push great power war further from central concern, as will be discussed below. Of course this does not tell us about the expected patterns for other kinds of war under unipolarity, and the determinants here probably lie outside the polarity of the system in such factors as local dynamics and the choices the superpower makes. It has the capability to intervene and limit if not prevent many wars, but whether it will do so depends on its values and outlook, combined with the behavior of the local actors. It is also possible that the lack of wars among the major powers would lead to the spread of norms conducive to peace throughout the world, but although structure would play a role here, it would at most be an enabling one.<sup>12</sup>

Another dependent variable of interest is the provision of public goods, the other side of the coin of the unipole as a threat to others.<sup>13</sup> We can find a parallel in the discussion of HST, which comes in both benign and malign versions.<sup>14</sup> Are general world problems more likely to be solved when there is one dominant power than when there are two or more? Does power bring with it responsibility or does it permit exploitation? It is more than a generalization from the current situation that leads to the expectations that the superpower will provide what it sees as public goods and at the same time that there will be much room for hypocrisy and disagreements over whether something is a public good or a private one – or perhaps even a public bad. Even more than in bipolarity, others have reason to engage in free riding. This does not mean they will be inactive, but many of their efforts will be directed at influencing the superpower by pricking its conscience, exploiting its domestic politics, or otherwise prodding it into action. As this implies, the unipole will have a great deal of discretion in determining the extent and the nature of the goods it provides. Domestic politics and values are likely to play a large role here.

Linked to the question of whether the unipole will provide public goods is the question of whether it is likely to produce international justice or perhaps of what kind of international justice it is likely to produce. This question too arises in part because of current concerns,

<sup>12</sup> The best statement is John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, Chapter 1 in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization* 25 (Autumn 1985).

but this does not mean that it is without theoretical import. Unipolarity brings the international system closer to the domestic one in distancing it from anarchy and enabling the emergence of justice, law, and morality. Indeed, since threats and bribes are expensive ways to achieve compliance, one might expect the superpower to try spreading its principles of justice and, at least at the margins, to be willing to accept adverse judgments in order to seduce others into supporting the unipolar system. Values as well as structure play a role; this form of institutionalization would not occur under a Nazi superpower.

The different schools of IR thought generate different expectations here. Classical liberalism would argue that to the extent that unipolarity leads to more extensive economic intercourse, it will not only spread incentives and values conducive to peace and cooperation but it will also encourage common rules, procedures, and understandings. The superpower, having such a large stake in the system, should play the leading role here. Constructivists (and some modern liberals) would go further and expect the unipole to come to believe its own arguments about acting impartially. It should become socialized as much as it socializes others, its form of discourse should develop a life of its own and shape much of the way the superpower thinks and acts, and the role of justice and principle should grow and that of power conventionally conceived should decrease.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, a more realist view would lead us to expect the only form of justice to be victor's justice: the hegemon would do what is needed to maintain its position ("the strong do what they will"), and unipolarity should be characterized by double standards. The obvious and cynical explication is that the temptations for the superpower to act on narrow self-interests are too strong to be resisted. The fact that it has great ability to act on its own will militate against its being bound by impartial justice and meaningful standards of appropriate behavior. But there is a less cynical side to this argument in the claim

<sup>15</sup> For a related discussion, see G. John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization* 44 (Summer 1990). Psychological grounding for this argument is provided by Daryl Bem's self-perception theory: Bem, "Self-Perception Theory," in Leonard Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. VI (New York: Academic Press, 1972); for an application to IR, see Deborah Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

that it would make no sense for states differently positioned in the international system to follow the same rules. The superpower is not morally better than others, but it does have special responsibilities.<sup>16</sup> In this light the Bush administration's claim that the preventive war doctrine is not for others and its rejection of the International Criminal Court (ICC) make a great deal of sense. Only the superpower can nip problems (including others' problems) in the bud, and the very fact that it acts preventively means that others need not do so, indeed, must not do so. Hegemony similarly requires the use of military force in a way that exposes the unipole to ICC action. Its forces are the ones engaged in the most difficult activities, and its status makes it a target for those whose motives range from jealousy to domestic ambitions to regional aspirations. Given the difficulties of the task the unipole has undertaken, it is unlikely that it can live by any predefined set of rules since such cannot possibly anticipate all the unforeseen circumstances in which it will have to act.

Perhaps the obvious dependent variable is the system's durability. This is often linked to stability, as it refers to how long the system will last and stability is the system's ability to preserve itself in the face of shocks and forces for change. My earlier contention that war will not end unipolarity does not mean that the latter will last indefinitely. To analyze this question, we turn first to the dynamics of unipolarity and then to the special circumstances that characterize the current era.

## Dynamics

The central dynamic of the system stems from its structure. If the characteristic error of states in a multipolar world is to underreact to threats or allow themselves to be drawn into others' quarrels and if the characteristic error in bipolarity is to overreact and engage in unnecessary conflicts along the peripheries, then the characteristic error – or vice, as Waltz calls it – of unipolarity is excessive expansion,

<sup>16</sup> This was true during the Cold War, and American leaders annoyed their European counterparts by pointing it out, as when Kissinger declared: "The United States has global interests and responsibilities. Our European allies have regional interests"; quoted in Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 276.

although not necessarily involving annexing territory.<sup>17</sup> The causes are a permissive structure combined with human nature, a factor omitted by neorealism but stressed by classical realism. When asked how he explained his affair with Monica Lewinsky, Bill Clinton said: “I did [it] for the worst possible reason – just because I could.”<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that the unipole will try to do everything, but the ability to press others and expand is more than a background condition; rather, it is likely to be acted on at some point.

Although I will consider some of the particularities of the current American hegemony, much US behavior is consistent with what realism would lead us to expect from any state that is a unipole (even though most realist scholars prefer a more restrained policy).<sup>19</sup> There are four facets to this argument. First and most general is the core of the realist outlook that power is checked most effectively, if not only, by counterbalancing power. This view provided the bedrock for the US Constitution, and it applies even more to international politics. Thucydides puts these words into the mouths of the Athenians in the famous Melian dialogue, and while he disapproves and knows the attitude will bring ruin, he probably agrees with the generalization:

Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25 (Summer 2000), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Dan Rather, “Clinton Cheated ‘Because I Could,’” June 17, 2004, at [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/06/16/eveningnews/printable](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/06/16/eveningnews/printable).

<sup>19</sup> This discussion is drawn from Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005), ch. 4. See also Christopher Layne, “The War on Terrorism and the Balance of Power: The Paradoxes of American Hegemony,” in T. V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 109–115; and Christopher Layne, “The ‘Poster Child for Offensive Realism’: America as a Global Hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12 (Winter 2002–2003). For realists who describe America similarly but evaluate it positively, see Robert Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Stanley Renshon, *The Bush Doctrine and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (forthcoming).

accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.<sup>20</sup>

It follows from the propensity of states to use the power at their disposal that those who are not subject to external restraints tend to feel few restraints at all. As Edmund Burke put it, in a position endorsed by Hans Morgenthau: "I dread our *own* power and our *own* ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded. It is ridiculous to say that we are not men, and that, as men, we shall never wish to aggrandize ourselves."<sup>21</sup> For Waltz this was a driving idea: as soon as the Cold War ended, he drew on structure to predict the likelihood of America's current behavior:

The powerful state may, and the United States does, think of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world. But these terms will be defined to the liking of the powerful, which may conflict with the preferences and the interests of others. . . . With benign intent, the United States has behaved, and until its power is brought into a semblance of balance, will continue to behave in ways that annoy and frighten others.<sup>22</sup>

Without a requirement to do otherwise, not only will the unipole resolve the conflict between its views and interests and those of others

<sup>20</sup> *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 363. I should note that this generalization, although apparently secure, rests to a considerable extent on our searching on the dependent variable. That is, we are drawn to cases of such expansion because they are dramatic, especially when they come to grief, but we lack a systematic way of looking for instances in which a state had the ability to expand its sphere of influence but declined to do so.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th rev. edn. (New York: Knopf, 1978), 169–170, emphasis in original; see also Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 121.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24 (December 1991), 69; for Waltz's discussion of the Gulf War in these terms, see Kenneth Waltz, "A Necessary War?" in Harry Kriesler, ed., *Confrontation in the Gulf* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, 1992), 59–65. See also Bruce Cronin, "Paradoxes of Hegemony: America's Ambiguous Relationship with the United Nations," *European Journal of International Relations* 7 (March 2001). Krauthammer expected this kind of behavior but believed that it would serve world interests as well as American interests; Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, 1 (1971).

in favor of the former, but it will also fail to see that there is any tension at all.

Second and relatedly, states' definitions of their interests tend to expand along with their power.<sup>23</sup> Increasing capabilities make it possible to pursue a whole host of objectives that were out of reach when the state's security was in doubt and all efforts had to be directed at achieving primary objectives. Unipolarity presents the state with a great opportunity to seek what Arnold Wolfers called "milieu goals" and to try to remake the world in its own image.<sup>24</sup> The unipole can pursue luxuries, and once a state has started to do so, it, like an individual, soon comes to see them as necessities.

The unipole also feels a compulsion to seek more because increased power brings with it new fears. As major threats disappear, people elevate ones that previously were seen as quite manageable.<sup>25</sup> But there is more to it than psychology. A dominant state acquires interests throughout the globe. Most countries are primarily concerned with what happens in their neighborhoods, but the world is the unipole's neighborhood, and it is not only hubris that leads it to be concerned with everything that happens anywhere. The growth of power and influence establishes new positions to be defended. Thus colonialism expanded in part through the dynamic of the "turbulent frontier." As European powers gained an enclave in Africa or Asia, they also gained an unpacified boundary that had to be policed. This led to further expansion of influence and often of settlement, and this in turn

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security* 17 (Summer 1992); Robert Tucker, *The Radical Left and American Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 69–70, 74–77, 106–111; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 86; Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 25. This process is also fed by the psychological resistance to giving up any position once it is gained; see Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). For a discussion of alternative possibilities suggested by American history, see Edward Rhodes, "The Imperial Logic of Bush's Liberal Agenda," *Survival* 45 (Spring 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Wolfers, *Discord*, ch. 5.

<sup>25</sup> John Mueller, "The Catastrophe Quota: Trouble after the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38 (September 1994); see also Frederick Hartmann, *The Conservation of Enemies: A Study in Enmity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982). And see the classic essay by Arnold Wolfers, "National Security as Ambiguous Symbol," in Wolfers, *Discord*.

produced a new area that had to be protected and a new zone of threat.<sup>26</sup> This was a process with few natural limits.

The fourth facet can be seen as a broader conception of the previous point. As realists stress, even states that are content with the status quo must worry about the future. Indeed, the more an actor sees the current situation as satisfactory, the more it will expect the future to be worse. Psychology is important here too: prospect theory argues that actors are prone to accept great risks when they believe they will suffer losses unless they act boldly. The adoption of a preventive war doctrine may be a mistake, especially if taken too far, but it is not foreign to normal state behavior and it appeals to states that have a valued position to maintain. However secure states are, only rarely can they be secure enough, and if they are currently very powerful they will feel strong impulses to act now to prevent a deterioration. The same refusal to accept losses can operate with interests other than security, so even if the unipole is not in danger it may seek to expand rather than accept a loss.

### Unipolarity, current unipolarity, or American unipolarity?

One difficulty with analyzing unipolarity is that we have mainly the current case, although examining Rome and ancient China could be illuminating.<sup>27</sup> We should then note aspects of the current system that

<sup>26</sup> John S. Galbraith, "The 'Turbulent Frontier' as a Factor in British Expansion," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (January 1960); John S. Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire: British Policy on the South African Frontier, 1834–1854* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963). See also Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1961); John LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650–1831* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). A related imperial dynamic that is likely to recur is that turning a previously recalcitrant state into a client usually weakens it internally and requires further intervention.

<sup>27</sup> For three excellent collections of essays on the current unipolar system, see G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Paul et al., *Balance of Power*. For imperial China, see John Fairbanks, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic*

would not necessarily characterize other unipolar ones. Some of these concern the nature of the unipole; others deal with the situation it finds itself in. To start with the latter, the current era is distinguished by four factors: a security community among the leading states, the existence of nuclear weapons, the prevalence of liberal norms, and the menace of terrorism.

### *Current circumstances*

Today the leading states in the system (the US, Western Europe either as a unit or as individual states, and Japan) do not fear war with each other. They form what Karl Deutsch called a security community.<sup>28</sup> This is a revolutionary development at least as striking and unprecedented as unipolarity itself. Of course it can be argued that it is the latter that has produced the former, but several other factors are at work as well: the high costs of war, the great benefits of peace (most obviously economic benefits), and the changes in values that have turned away from honor and glory and made war at best a necessary evil. The security community does not include China or Russia, but the basic point remains that a unipolar system would be very different from the current one if the leading states in the second tier wanted to fight the superpower, if they thought that it might conquer them, or if they were preparing to fight each other. The latter characteristic is particularly important. It means that the unipole has less influence

*Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1984). For Rome, Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*; Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Andrew Lintott, *Imperium Romanum: Politics and Administration* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For a comparison of the current system and others that are arguably unipolar, see William Thompson, "Systemic Leadership, Evolutionary Processes, and International Relations Theory: The Unipolar Question," *International Studies Review* 8 (March 2006); and David Wilkinson, "Unipolarity without Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 1 (Summer 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Karl Deutsch, Sidney Burrell, Robert Kann, Maurice Lee, Jr., Martin Lichterman, Raymond Lindgren, Francis Loewenheim, and Richard Van Wagenen, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); for a further discussion, see Jervis, *American Foreign Policy*, ch. 1; for a more radical view, see Mueller, *Remnants of War*.



because the tactic of divide and rule is less available to it and the leading states have less need of it for their protection. But it also relieves the unipole of the burden of keeping these states from going at one another.<sup>29</sup>

One reason for the existence of the security community is the high cost of war, something that is guaranteed by nuclear weapons. (Although Germany and Japan do not have a nuclear stockpile, they could build one in less time than it would take for a major threat to emerge.) At the present time, unipolarity does not seem deeply affected by nuclear weapons, but if other countries build them the results would be more significant, as I will explore at the end of this chapter.

A third important circumstance not directly linked to unipolarity is the dominance of liberal if not capitalist values. When President Bush said that “[t]he great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom – and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise,”<sup>30</sup> he was not bragging, or at least was not only bragging. Fundamentalist Islam has appeal for some populations, but by its nature it can be adopted by only a few. Almost all states now pay at least lip service to democracy, human rights, and a fairly open economic system, and few espouse violence as a tool for political change. Talk of “Asian values” has subsided, and while many states and large numbers of people reject the imposition of a Western form of society and polity, none presents a comprehensive alternative.

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion, see Stephen Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume.

<sup>30</sup> White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States” (Washington, DC, September 2002), i, 1. Bush’s West Point speech similarly declared: “Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil.” “When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations”; “Remarks by the President at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy,” White House Press Release, June 1, 2002, 3. After a standard recitation of American values, Colin Powell similarly declaimed: “These ideals aren’t ours alone. They are born of the experience of all mankind, and so they are the endowment of all mankind. These ideals are cherished on each and every continent . . . These ideals are a blueprint for the brotherhood of man.” In an irony that he probably missed, he said this in a speech commemorating George Kennan’s 100th birthday, from which Kennan was fortunately absent; Powell, “Remarks on the Occasion of George Kennan’s Centenary Birthday,” Princeton, February 20, 2004, at [www.princeton.edu/robertson/documents/docs/Sec\\_Colin\\_Powell\\_speech\\_2-20-04.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/robertson/documents/docs/Sec_Colin_Powell_speech_2-20-04.pdf).

The implications for international politics include the encouragement of the transformationalist policy being pursued by the US discussed below, a degree of integration of the global economy that goes beyond what would follow from unipolarity alone, and the potential for cooperation among states because they are like-minded. The liberal consensus may also be an irritant for the unipole, however, as others will be quick to complain about unfair double standards and seek to hold it to its liberal values.

These values, furthermore, may not be fully compatible with unipolarity. International liberalism implies juridical equality among the states, but under unipolarity states differently positioned claim different rights and responsibilities. In an earlier era with different norms the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein would hardly have been remarked on by countries whose interests were not directly harmed. But in 2003 the US had to offer justifications in terms of accepted standards, especially self-defense. Neither punishment for past sins, grievous as they were, nor the goal of establishing democracy, as desirable as that was, constituted acceptable reasons. The US had to argue that Saddam's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) constituted a pressing danger to the US and others, in part because of his previous record of aggressive behavior and in part because of the danger that he might pass on these weapons to terrorists. For similar reasons, the Bush administration characterized its general policy as one of "preemption" rather than prevention because acting against threats that are latent rather than imminent does not fit with the current notion of self-defense.<sup>31</sup> In earlier eras – and perhaps in subsequent ones as well – looking further into the future would be acceptable and so leaders could openly say that they were fighting a preventive war. But they cannot say it now.

Another and perhaps related feature of the current system that accompanies the current unipolarity but is not a necessary part of such a system is the rise of non-state actors. This important area is still lacking in satisfactory theories, and they may not even be possible given the diverse nature of the phenomena, which include Amnesty

<sup>31</sup> For the changing American perspective, see Scott Silverstone, *Preventive War and American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007); see also George Quester, "Two Hundred Years of Preemption," *Naval War College Review* 60 (Autumn 2007).

International and Hezbollah. The relationship between non-state actors and the state system is complex, with the former largely depending on the latter and strengthening its members in some ways while weakening them in others. Non-state actors increased before the emergence of unipolarity but may now assume a greater role, or at least a higher public profile, because unipolarity decreases the prominence of other state challengers. Non-state actors are also likely to focus attention on the unipole, both criticizing and seeking to influence it, which could have the unintended consequence of underlining rather than undermining the unipole's position.

The non-state actors that have had the most impact recently have been terrorists. Even if many people exaggerate the magnitude of the threat,<sup>32</sup> it has shaped the current world yet is not a defining characteristic of unipolarity. The rise of terrorism is not entirely divorced from it, however. The enormous power in the hands of the unipole encourages terrorism in part by taking so many weapons out of others' hands, in part by making it the target of discontent almost anywhere, and in part by its intrusive presence throughout the world.<sup>33</sup> But it would be going too far to say that terrorism is an automatic concomitant of this kind of system. Instead, it is largely the product of the particular circumstances of the current world, and indeed is a significant menace only because it coexists with modern technologies, especially WMD.

It was of course the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, that triggered an enormous change in American policy. In the interval between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, US withdrawal or shirking was seen as likely, and Bush's election campaign and first nine months in office made clear that American military forces were to be used only against military threats to vital national interests, that peacekeeping and nation-building were to be left to others, and that maintaining order was not of prime concern. Had terrorism not intervened, we might be talking about decaying or potential unipolarity rather than real unipolarity, as awkward a distinction as this is from the standpoint of structure.

<sup>32</sup> For a strong argument to this effect, see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Richard Betts, "The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy: Tactical Advantages of Terror," *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (Spring 2002).

*America as the unipole*

If it is hard to separate the general analysis of unipolarity from the current unipolar system, it is even harder to determine the impact of America's values, outlook, and political system (which in turn are hard to separate from the characteristics of the current president). The strongest structuralist claim would be that any unipole would behave as the US has. This is unlikely. Clearly, the current world would be very different if it had been the US and Western Europe rather than the USSR that had collapsed. Indeed regime and leadership characteristics are likely to matter more in unipolarity than in other systems because of the weakness of external restraints. What is most striking about American behavior since 9/11 is the extent to which it has sought not to maintain the international system but to change it.<sup>34</sup> One might think that the unipole would be conservative, seeking to bolster the status quo that serves it so well. But this has not been the case. Three linked elements are central to US outlook and policy, and although they are consistent with the general forces and incentives highlighted by realism that I discussed earlier, it is doubtful that they would operate as strongly in any unipole. First, the international system can and must be transformed; it is futile and dangerous to try to keep the system functioning as it is. Second, a vital instrument is prevention, including preventive war. Deterrence is passive and of doubtful efficacy; problems cannot be permitted to fester and grow but must be met decisively while they are still manageable. Third, peace and cooperation will come when and only when all important states are democratic. A country's foreign policy reflects the nature of its domestic regime, which means that states that rule by law and express the interests of their people will conduct benign foreign policies and that tyrannies will inflict misery abroad as they do at home. American policy is now guided by second-image thinking, which has always been more influential in the US than in Europe.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Robert Jervis, "The Remaking of a Unipolar World," *Washington Quarterly* 29 (Summer 2006). For the best analysis of alternative American approaches, see Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Wolfers, *Discord*, ch. 15; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955). More recently, Tony

The second element in this trilogy can perhaps be squared with a conservative role for the superpower; the other two cannot. The three together argue that even if the status quo is satisfactory, it cannot last. World politics will change drastically, but will this change be for the better or for the worse? In a strong version of bandwagon thinking,<sup>36</sup> Bush and his colleagues believed that if the US is complacent, dangers and alternative power centers will increase. The US then has to master them. In the extreme case, as in Iraq, preventive wars are necessary.

But preventive actions will be a stopgap only if international politics proceeds on its normal trajectory. To bring lasting peace and stability, a transformation is needed. The key is to lead other states and societies to become liberal democracies, respecting individual rights, law, and their neighbors. This makes the US a truly revolutionary power, since it seeks not only to shape international politics but, as both a means to that end and a goal in itself, also to remake domestic regimes and societies around the world. Although in his second term Bush avoided calling for overthrowing the regimes in North Korea and Iran, the logic of his policy clearly pointed in that direction. Even the most effective anti-proliferation policies leave room for cheating, and the only sure way to ensure that the mullahs of Iran or the dictator of North Korea do not get nuclear weapons and menace their neighbors if not the US itself is to remove them from power. This view of course has deep roots in American anti-realist thinking that sees foreign policy behavior as reflecting domestic arrangements. During the Cold War the US vacillated between accepting a heterogeneous world and believing that the USSR would be a threat as long as it was communist. The current lack of a superpower competitor has not made the US comfortable with other kinds of regimes.<sup>37</sup>

Smith has traced the Bush Doctrine not only to the neoconservatives, but also to liberal thinking about the importance of democracy for a state's foreign policy and of the possibilities for making other countries democratic; Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> For discussions of heterogeneous and homogeneous systems, see Raymond Aron, *Peace and War*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 99–114, 373–403; Stanley Hoffmann, "International Systems and International Law," in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba, eds., *The International System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 207–209; Henry Kissinger, "Domestic Structure and

Transformation can be sought because of unipolarity, the lack of a competing model as noted above, and the galvanizing effect of September 11. A week after the attacks, Bush is reported to have told a close adviser: "We have an opportunity to restructure the world toward freedom, and we have to get it right."<sup>38</sup> This perception perhaps is particularly liberal or even particularly American. It embodies the belief in progress if not in the perfectibility of human affairs, which is what Hans Morgenthau saw as the crucial failing in the American view of life, with its failure to understand the limits of knowledge, the evil that remained within people even if they lived in democratic regimes, and the tragic core of politics.<sup>39</sup> Bush's faith in the possibility of international transformation probably also stemmed from his experience in having his own life transformed – indeed saved – by his religious conversion. It would be hard to convince him that only incremental changes are possible in human affairs.<sup>40</sup>

### Limits on American power, balancing, and proliferation

In discussing the final set of questions of how others will react to unipolarity and the limits on the power of the unipole, it is even harder to separate what is general about unipolarity from what is particular

Foreign Policy," *Daedalus* 95 (Spring 1966), 503–506. For critiques, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 43–49; and Jervis, *System Effects*, 99–102. During the Cold War, international politics scholars and American policy makers vacillated between believing that the US could be secure and the international system could be stable despite being composed of heterogeneous units and believing that only homogeneity would bring with it safety. Homogeneity was generally sought, but heterogeneity was accepted, albeit often grudgingly.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Frank Bruni, "For President, a Mission and a Role in History," *New York Times*, September 22, 2001; see also "President Thanks World Coalition for Anti-Terrorism Efforts," White House Press Release, March 11, 2002, 3–4; "President Bush, Prime Minister Koizumi Hold Press Conference," White House Press Release, February 18, 2002, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

<sup>40</sup> For the role that religion plays, see Bruni, "For President"; Steve Erickson, "George Bush and the Treacherous Country," *LA Weekly*, February 13, 2004, 28–33. For a discussion of the utopian strain in Bush's thinking, see Michael Boyle, "Utopianism and the Bush Foreign Policy," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17 (April 2004); Michael Mazarr, "George W. Bush, Idealist," *International Affairs* 79 (May 2003).

about the current era. Rather than having sections on each, I will treat them together, indicating the special considerations they raise.

*Will unipolarity last? The changed role of balancing*

If the most pressing question about the bipolar system that emerged after World War Two was whether it would lead to superpower war, the obvious question today is whether unipolarity will last.<sup>41</sup> One position is that it will not, that following balance of power reasoning others will unite to contest American dominance.<sup>42</sup> But while balance of power theory argues that states will unite in the face of a *potential* hegemon, it does not speak to what to expect once unipolarity is established. It makes sense for states to join together even in the face of the collective goods problem if they think that doing so can contain or defeat the would-be unipole, but once there *is* a dominant state the chances of unseating it are much less. Balance theory tells us that states will do what appears effective in order to protect their positions; it does not lead us to expect them to adopt policies that are costly and futile. In the wake of Bush's reelection, France's Chirac declared: "It is evident that Europe, now more than ever, must strengthen its unity and dynamism when faced with this great world power." Britain's Blair replied, however, that "[t]here's a new reality, so let's work with that reality," rather than remain in "a state of denial."<sup>43</sup> If Blair's reasoning prevails, a countervailing coalition will not form, and its absence would not contradict balance of power theory.

What is equally crucial is that balance of power dynamics arise in the context of the use, threat, and fear of force. But as we have seen, the leading powers now form a security community. The incentives to

<sup>41</sup> Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, [Chapter 1](#), this volume; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Waltz, "Emerging Structure," 44–79; Waltz, "Structural Realism," 5–41, but also note the discussion on p. 38; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17 (Spring 1993); Christopher Layne "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment," *International Security* 31 (Fall 2006); Christopher Layne, "US Hegemony and the Perpetuation of NATO," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23 (September 2000); Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Graham Bowley, "Chirac Issues Call for Strong Europe," *International Herald Tribune*, November 6, 2004.

try to overturn unipolarity are much less when states do not fear that the superpower will invade them or greatly diminish their sovereignty. Indeed, if they believe that the unipole will provide a degree of order and public goods and that rivalry would be destabilizing, they may actively support unipolarity.<sup>44</sup> While self-interest may underlie the Bush administration's argument that the rise of any other country or group of countries to challenge the US would lead to conflict if it failed and to instability if it succeeded, the claim may be correct and/or may be seen as such by many other countries. The record of bipolarity and multipolarity is not attractive, and while I have argued that the forces now conducive to peace and cooperation among the major powers would remain if the system were not unipolar, cautious men and women might not opt to run the experiment.<sup>45</sup>

Some classical balance thinking still applies, however. States have a variety of security concerns that require influencing or acting independently of the superpower, and they have interests that extend beyond security that may call for a form of counterbalancing. Even if others do not fear attack from the unipole, they may believe that the latter's behavior endangers them, a worry that parallels that of traditional alliance entrapment.<sup>46</sup> Thus today some states believe that the way the US is pursuing its "war on terror" increases the chance they will be the victim of terrorist attacks and decreases stability in the Middle East, an area they depend on for oil. So there is reason for them to act in concert to restrain the US.<sup>47</sup> The point is

<sup>44</sup> For discussions of secondary powers supporting the leader in the economic area in previous international systems, see David Lake, *Power, Protection, and Free Trade: International Sources of U.S. Commercial Strategy, 1887–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Richard Rosecrance and Jennifer Taw, "Japan and the Theory of International Leadership," *World Politics* 42 (January 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Jervis, *American Foreign Policy*, ch. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics before and after Hiroshima* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 6; Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> Pape, "Soft Balancing"; T. V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005). For doubts that such attempts are being made, see Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (September 2005); Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security* 30 (Summer 2005); Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30 (Summer



not to block the US from conquering them, as in traditional balancing, but to increase their influence over it. Although such efforts will not be automatic and their occurrence will depend on complex calculations of costs, benefits, and the possibilities of success, these concerns provide an impetus for trying to make it harder for the unipole to act alone.

Others may also fear that the unipole will refuse to act when their security, but not its own security, is at stake. As Waltz notes, “absence of threat permits [the superpower’s] policy to become capricious.”<sup>48</sup> It is not surprising that American policy has changed more from one administration to the next after the Cold War than it did during it, and the fear of abandonment may be the main motive behind the Europeans’ pursuit of a rapid reaction force. With it they would have the capability to act in the Balkans or East Europe if the US chose not to, to intervene in small humanitarian crises independently of the US, and perhaps to trigger American action by starting something that only the US could finish. This is not balancing against American power, but, rather, is a hedge against the possibility that the US would withhold it, perhaps in response to European actions of which the US disapproved.<sup>49</sup>

The struggle for influence then continues under unipolarity, and as Paul Schroeder has shown, alliances can be a means by which a state gains sway over its partner.<sup>50</sup> Thus by providing the US with specialized and effective military forces, Great Britain is taken inside the

2005). See also the exchange between Robert Art and these authors in *International Security* 30 (Winter 2005–2006).

<sup>48</sup> Waltz, “Structural Realism,” 29; see also Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1967), 16; Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume. Note the assumption that threat more than any other stimulus produces constancy of behavior. I believe this is reasonable.

<sup>49</sup> For a related view, see Barry Posen, “European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?” *Security Studies* 15 (April–June 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Paul Schroeder, “Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management,” in Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, ed. David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack Levy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), ch. 9; see also Patricia Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); and, for the current situation, Galia Press-Barnathan, “Managing the Hegemon: NATO under Unipolarity,” *Security Studies* 15 (April–June 2006).

American decision-making process, although it has lost some leverage by being unwilling to break from the US even when the latter pays little heed to British advice. Similarly, other states may accept American bases in the hope that they bring with them not only a veto over operations for which they might be used but also a voice in a range of American policies.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps a unipole would welcome others' ability to act alone as reducing the burdens on it and would cede to them some influence in order to bind them to the unipolar system.<sup>52</sup> The US has not done so, however. It has looked askance at an independent European force, seeing it as weakening NATO, which the US dominates, and possibly as having the potential to develop into a rival. Indeed, the draft of the Defense Guidance produced at the end of George H. W. Bush's administration called for the US to handle others' problems so that they would not have any need for such military forces, and although Clinton did not endorse this stance, his actions in the Balkans were consistent with it.<sup>53</sup>

The changes and continuities in American foreign policy since September 11 are interesting in this regard. As realists would expect, there was a mellowing during Bush's second term as his overly ambitious goals met continuing resistance, especially but not only in Iraq. It became clear both that democratic transformations were more difficult

<sup>51</sup> Hirschman's classic analysis can be applied to relations between allies: Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>52</sup> For a related argument focused on postwar settlements, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> See the stories in the *New York Times*, March 8 and May 24, 1992. See also Zalmay Khalilzad, *From Containment to Global Leadership? America and the World after the Cold War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1995); and Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000). Although the draft guidance was too bellicose for public taste and had to be modified once it was leaked to the press, it reflected the views of both Bush presidents: see, for example, Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks delivered to the International Institute for Strategic Studies," June 26, 2003, at [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/06/20030626.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/06/20030626.html). For a different but not entirely incompatible approach, see Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," in Kapstein and Mastanduno, *Unipolar Politics*.

than he and many of his colleagues had expected and that putting pressure on friendly regimes to perform was harder and more dangerous. The US then began behaving more like a normal country. But realists could not be entirely pleased as it was only the intensity rather than the direction of American policy that altered. Many observers hoped and others feared that an Obama administration would see more far-reaching change, but the first year produced only “change that you can believe in.” More troops were sent to Afghanistan and the goal of making it and other countries democratic, although downplayed, was not abandoned. American unipolarity then retained at least a degree of distinctively American beliefs, values, and interests.

*Limits on power: change in or of the system?*

To say that the system is unipolar is not to argue that the unipole can get everything it wants or that it has no need for others. American power is very great, but it is still subject to two familiar limitations: it is harder to build than to destroy, and success usually depends on others' decisions. This is particularly true of the current system because of what the US wants. If Hitler had won World War Two, he might have been able to maintain his system for some period of time with little cooperation from others because “all” he wanted was to establish the supremacy of the Aryan race. The US wants not only to prevent the rise of a peer competitor but also to stamp out terrorism, maintain an open international economic system, spread democracy throughout the world, and establish a high degree of cooperation among countries that remain juridically equal. Even in the military arena, the US cannot act completely alone. Bases and overflight rights are always needed, and support from allies, especially Great Britain, is important to validate military action in the eyes of the American public. When one matches American forces, not against those of an adversary but against the tasks at hand, they often fall short.<sup>54</sup>

Against terrorism, force is ineffective without excellent intelligence. Given the international nature of the threat and the difficulties of gaining information about it, international cooperation is the only route to success. The maintenance of international prosperity also requires

<sup>54</sup> Barry Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28 (Summer 2003).

joint efforts, even leaving aside the danger that other countries could trigger a run on the dollar by cashing in their holdings. Despite its lack of political unity, Europe is in many respects an economic unit, and one with a greater GDP than that of the US. Especially because of the growing Chinese economy, economic power is spread around the world much more equally than is military power, and the open economic system could easily disintegrate despite continued unipolarity. In parallel, on a whole host of problems such as AIDS, poverty, and international crime (even leaving aside climate change), the unipole can lead and exert pressure but cannot dictate. Joint actions may be necessary to apply sanctions to various unpleasant and recalcitrant regimes; proliferation can be stopped only if all the major states (and many minor ones) work to this end; unipolarity did not automatically enable the US to maintain the coalition against Iraq after the first Gulf War; close ties within the West are needed to reduce the ability of China, Russia, and other states to play one Western country off against the others.

But in comparison with the Cold War era, there are fewer incentives today for allies to cooperate with the US. During the earlier period unity and close coordination not only permitted military efficiencies but, more importantly, gave credibility to the American nuclear umbrella that protected the allies. Serious splits were dangerous because they entailed the risk that the Soviet Union would be emboldened. This reason for avoiding squabbles disappeared along with the USSR, and the point is likely to generalize to other unipolar systems if they involve a decrease of threats that call for maintaining good relations with the superpower.

This does not mean that even in this particular unipolar system the superpower is like Gulliver tied down by the Lilliputians. In some areas opposition can be self-defeating. Thus for any country to undermine American leadership of the international economy would be to put its own economy at risk, even if the US did not retaliate, and for a country to sell a large proportion of its dollar holdings would be to depress the value of the dollar, thereby diminishing the worth of the country's remaining stock of this currency. Furthermore, cooperation often follows strong and essentially unilateral action. Without the war in Iraq it is not likely that we would have seen the degree of cooperation that the US obtained from Europe in combating the Iranian nuclear program and from Japan and the PRC in containing North Korea.

Nevertheless, many of the American goals depend on persuading others, not coercing them. Although incentives and even force are not irrelevant to spreading democracy and the free market, at bottom this requires people to embrace a set of institutions and values. Building the world that the US seeks is a political, social, and even psychological task for which unilateral measures are likely to be unsuited and for which American military and economic strength can at best play a supporting role. Success requires that others share the American vision and believe that its leadership is benign.

Failure would not mean that the system will soon cease being unipolar, however. Only if Europe truly unites (an increasingly distant prospect) could bipolarity be restored. Barring drastic internal instability, the PRC is likely to continue to rise but cannot be a global challenger in the foreseeable future. The most likely system-changing force is proliferation, and ironically unipolarity gives many states good reasons to seek nuclear weapons. Although allies sometimes doubted the American commitment during the Cold War, the very strength of the Soviet Union meant that the US would pay a high price if it did not live up to its promises to defend them. The unipole has more freedom of action. Even if the unipole's costs of protecting others are lower, those states have less reason to be confident that it will stand by them forever. The existence of a security community does not entirely displace the fear of an uncertain future that is the hallmark of international politics. American enemies like North Korea and Iran face more immediate incentives to defend themselves, incentives that were increased but not created by the overthrow of Saddam's regime. Indeed, the US has spurred proliferation by stressing the danger posed by "rogue" states with nuclear weapons, treating North Korea much more gingerly than Iraq, and indicating that it can be deterred by even a few atomic bombs. Its very efforts to stop other countries from getting nuclear weapons imply that the consequences of their succeeding will be great, a belief that is questionable but could easily be self-fulfilling. Furthermore, regional domino effects are likely: a growing North Korean nuclear force could lead Japan to develop nuclear weapons, and if Iran continues its program others in the region may follow suit. Thus both American overexpansion and the fear that it will eventually withdraw will encourage others to get nuclear weapons.

This raises the question of what would remain of a unipolar system in a proliferated world. The American ability to coerce others would

decrease but so would its need to defend friendly powers that would now have their own deterrents.<sup>55</sup> The world would still be unipolar by most measures and considerations, but many countries would be able to protect themselves, perhaps even against the superpower. How they would use this increased security is far from clear, however. They might intensify conflict with neighbors because they no longer fear all-out war, or, on the contrary, they might be willing to engage in greater cooperation because the risks of becoming dependent on others would be reduced. In any event, the polarity of the system may become less important. Unipolarity – at least under current circumstances – may then have within it the seeds if not of its own destruction, then at least of its modification, and the resulting world would pose interesting challenges to both scholars and national leaders.

<sup>55</sup> The 1998 Rumsfeld Commission argued that the spread of missile technology would be greatly contrary to US interests; “Executive Summary of the Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States,” at [www.fas.org/irp/threat/bm-threat.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/bm-threat.htm).

## 9

*Unipolarity and nuclear weapons*

DANIEL DEUDNEY

**Introduction***The nuclear–unipolarity puzzle*

What are the implications of nuclear weapons for unipolarity? Both unipolarity and nuclear weapons have been subject to extensive analysis. Virtually every treatment of contemporary unipolarity makes reference to nuclear weapons, but virtually no analysis of nuclear weapons considers unipolarity. Exploring the impact of nuclear weapons on unipolarity would seem straightforward enough, but in reality is very complicated because theorists disagree about so many important aspects of both nuclear weapons and unipolarity.

Theorizing about nuclear weapons has been a central part of international theory for more than six decades. While there are still some outliers, theorists of the effects of nuclear weapons on international politics have a near consensus on the central importance of nuclear deterrence. Dispute remains about what is necessary to achieve deterrence, and how prone it is to failure. But the proposition that nuclear weapons deter conflicts by vastly raising the cost of war is both theoretically robust and widely held. According to this view nuclear deterrence has made international politics much more peaceful than in pre-nuclear times. The topic of nuclear weapons and unipolarity therefore can be simplified into a consideration of the relationship between nuclear deterrence and unipolarity.

This focus on deterrence comes, however, with an important caveat, because it is also widely recognized that the near consensus about deterrence rests on thin empirical ground. Great power war has not occurred in the nuclear era, but it is impossible to say with full confidence that this non-event results from the presence of nuclear weapons or from some other source. Indeed, arguably the two most important questions about nuclear weapons (How likely is deterrence failure? What will

happen after nuclear use?) are unanswerable with any assurance. The detonation of nuclear weapons would shatter the deterrence consensus, and possibly catalyze far-reaching changes in international order. Given these uncertainties, theorizing about nuclear weapons has an inescapably provisional character.

In contrast, unipolarity is more recent and less settled as a major topic in international theory. Theorizing unipolarity emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and bipolarity two decades ago, and theorists remain very divided about it. Speaking broadly, theorists of unipolarity are split into three main camps. First are those realists who believe unipolarity is rare and “unnatural,” likely to produce encroachment and counterbalancing, and thus not last very long.<sup>1</sup> Second are those realists who see concentrations of power as both historically widespread and intrinsically prone to stability and durability.<sup>2</sup> This divide over unipolarity among realists essentially reproduces the long-running dispute between two of the main branches of realist theory, one seeing balances and counterbalancing as typical of stable and durable international orders, with the other seeing stable and durable order (both internally and externally) arising from concentrations of power.<sup>3</sup> A third position sees contemporary unipolarity as stable primarily because of the liberal character of the unipolar state and various restraints and incentives for restraint produced by the liberal aspects of the international system.<sup>4</sup> In this view, significant counterbalancing against the unipolar state is absent due to the self-restraint of the liberal unipolar state and the restraining features of its liberal hegemonic system.

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, 2 (Fall 1993); and Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, 1 (Summer 1999): 5–41; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For historical cases of the failure of balancing and presence of preponderance, see Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).



This chapter proceeds in three main steps. The remainder of the introduction provides general observations about the implications of nuclear weapons as deterrents of major war. Then three topics are examined at greater length. Part I examines the relationships between nuclear weapons and the four main traditional types of power (central military balance, conventional forces, economic capacity, and soft power). If nuclear weapons define the central balance of power, then the current international system cannot be unipolar. But nuclear deterrence also undermines the implications of power in ways that diminish the relevance of polarity. Nuclear weapons largely paralyze the first two types of power, robbing unipolarity of much of the influence derived from concentrations of power in pre-nuclear eras. At the same time, nuclear weapons as war deterrents may unexpectedly enhance the potential influences of economic power and soft power. Part II examines how nuclear weapons as war deterrents shape several well-known syndromes of power concentration (encroachment and counterbalancing, overextension, and hegemonic transitions). Here nuclear weapons are seen as significantly mitigating power political patterns inimical to or subversive of concentrated power. Unipolarity in the nuclear age may be less influential than it once might have been, but at the same time unipolarity is spared many of the costs and risks and problems historically associated with it. Part III considers the implications of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism for unipolarity and the American liberal hegemony. The key assumption of thinking about this emerging “second nuclear era” is that deterrence failure is much more likely than during the Cold War. The implications of these trends and possibilities for the position of a unipolar state are mixed, but largely negative. Proliferation is likely to further reduce the leverage and raise the costs of American hegemonic influence. Potential leakage of nuclear capability to non-state actors is likely to be even more damaging to the position of a unipolar state, particularly a liberal hegemonic unipolar state such as the United States. But containment of this threat may be possible and could be facilitated by unipolarity and liberal hegemony.

### *Power polarity, deterrence and war avoidance*

At first glance assessing the relationship between nuclear weapons and unipolarity seems quite straightforward. Unipolarity is a particular

distribution of power in which power is concentrated. Nuclear weapons are power assets, and so their distribution should be readily measured and assessed as part of the general distribution of power. However, this type of calculation essentially obscures or ignores the main effect of nuclear weapons, as understood by the deterrence revolution view of nuclear weapons: their tendency to paralyze their possessors from recourse both to nuclear arms and use of non-nuclear arms which might lead to the use of nuclear arms.

The assumption that nuclear weapons paralyze states, particularly great power states, is widely held by theorists of international politics. Nuclear weapons profoundly alter the incentives of states to use military force, and particularly their paramount military force, to achieve political effects. The dominant deterrence view of nuclear weapons is that they are so destructive that they readily deter attacks. Thus the revolutionary destructiveness of nuclear weapons also revolutionizes the relations among states with regard to war-making. The strongest contemporary argument that unipolarity exists and matters, by Brooks and Wohlforth, acknowledges this fact, but observes that the system is significantly unipolar in *non-nuclear assets* and then argues that this concentration of power outside the core strategic nuclear balance between great powers significantly shapes international outcomes.

If nuclear weapons do provide such a ready and robust ability to deter at least major war among great power states equipped with nuclear weapons, can the system be usefully characterized as having significant polarity? If the deterrence argument is correct, then it is doubtful that the system is actually and meaningfully characterized as polar. Polarity is about power and nuclear weapons change the implications of power for politics. In some ways, nuclear weapons are power, indeed a paramount form of power. But in other ways they greatly inhibit the expression of power. Assuming they mainly deter war, nuclear weapons greatly diminish the ability of power to do what power has traditionally done, namely achieve outcomes favorable to more powerful states.

The distribution of power has traditionally been an indicator of what states could do. States mobilize and deploy power assets in order to achieve their objectives in conflicts with other states. States with relatively more power can be expected to achieve relatively more of their objectives than states with relatively less power. Power matters because

it shapes outcomes and the overall distribution of power among states roughly determines which outcomes occur. To say "power" is to imply use of power, and nuclear weapons as war deterrents render nuclear power unusable. Thus, if nuclear weapons significantly deter war, then their implications for the meaning of unipolarity are far-reaching. Nuclear deterrence robs a unipolar state of what in the pre-nuclear era would have been the reasonably expected fruits of its relative power over other states.

Interstate power polarity traditionally mattered because it indicated a particular balance or configuration of capacity to do something of importance. The relationship between nuclear weapons and the balance of power is very much unlike the pre-nuclear pattern. Nuclear weapons make the *balance* of power between nuclear armed states so robust that *balancing* ceases to matter much (except perhaps in a very dangerous way). Nuclear weapons, by making states secure against direct military encroachment and aggression, solve the problem that balancing sought to address. In pre-nuclear times, balancing to achieve security from aggression was necessary, often difficult, and sometimes impossible. In the nuclear era, the balance is so robust that strenuous balancing is largely unnecessary.

A revolution in security affairs of the magnitude produced by nuclear weapons is profoundly disorienting to traditional state security practices centered around strenuous internal power mobilization and routine external power employment. It is therefore to be expected that some states will lag in fully comprehending these realities and in implementing new approaches suitable to these realities. The persistence of pre-nuclear patterns provides evidence for those who doubt the nuclear revolution and insist that traditional polarity is still fully meaningful. But so long as these lagging states do not actually employ nuclear weapons, they can be viewed as an expensive but largely harmless "hangover from conventional days."<sup>5</sup> The revolutionary character of nuclear weapons also poses the further question, largely beyond the scope of this chapter, as to whether the standard deterrence postures of nuclear states are themselves but a transitional first stage of adjustment to an international order in which interstate arms control and its associated institutions mark the supplanting rather than simply the

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review* 84, 3 (September 1990): 731–744.

paralysis of interstate anarchy.<sup>6</sup> It also remains to be seen whether the nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism widely thought to define the emerging second nuclear age will provide the catalytic impetus to a fuller revolution not just in the conduct of states but in the basic practices and structures of the anarchic interstate system itself.

### **Part I: power assessment, unipolarity and nuclear weapons**

In order to gain a fuller appreciation of the extent and limits of the paralytic effects of nuclear deterrence on the potential political influence of a unipolar state, it is useful to employ a rough list of the major components of power. Broadly speaking, there are at least four contemporary categories of power assets: (1) central nuclear military forces; (2) non-nuclear conventional forces (land, naval, air) and their various supports; (3) economic assets, necessary for generating and sustaining military force structures, as well as directly potentially influential; and (4) a significant but conceptually ill-defined category of “soft power” assets such as culture, ideological appeal, and prestige.<sup>7</sup>

Given these distinctions, there are four main questions, each about a type of power asset, and each addressed in a subsequent section. First, what are the implications for unipolarity of the deterrence revolution view that Type I power assets are paralyzed by nuclear deterrence? Second, to what degree does the shadow of the paralysis and war avoidance produced by nuclear weapons in Type I shadow or spill over into the realm of Type II (conventional forces) power assets? Third, what is the relationship between nuclear capabilities and Type III (economic capacity) power assets? And fourth, what are the effects of nuclear weapons on the exercise of Type IV (soft power) assets?

#### *The nuclear military balance and unipolarity*

The central military balance has historically been accorded top status in power calculations because of the role such assets play in shaping war outcomes, which in turn frequently decisively shaped the survival

<sup>6</sup> For a short statement of the transformational view, see Daniel Deudney, “Nuclear Weapons and the Waning of the Real-State,” *Daedalus* 124, 2 (Spring 1995): 209–231.

<sup>7</sup> Ashley Tellis, Janice Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Arroyo Center, 2000); and Richard J. Stoll and Michael D. Ward, eds., *Power in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1989).

and security of states. This fact justifies ranking these power assets at the top of the list. The central military balance is composed of actually existing military capacities, roughly measured as an aggregate of paramount weaponry and aggregate military expenditures. The other assets of state power also matter in part because of their potential contribution to the central military balance, and thus the survival and security of states. Historically, the entire calculus of power analysis is centered on military capacity, and the factors that shape the ability to generate military capacity. Thus factors such as the size of a state's economy, the size of its population, and its organizational capacity matter because they are indicators of the overall military capacity which a state could generate to make war.

Scholars making military power assessments acknowledge that their enterprise has ambiguities and uncertainties, and inevitably involves "comparing apples and oranges," the aggregation of at least partially qualitatively incommensurate assets and capabilities. How many triremes equal how many hoplites? How many battleships equal how many tanks? Acknowledging these difficulties, analysts of the military balance of power routinely place more weight on larger military violence capabilities than smaller ones. For example, an analysis of the balance between Germany, France, and Britain in 1914 would acknowledge the difficulty of weighing battleships against army divisions, but would center on the distribution of battleships more than destroyers, and on heavy artillery more than machine guns. Better armed and trained divisions of ground forces are weighed more heavily than less armed and trained ones. The basic counting rule is "more bang, more weight." This rough basic counting rule had the added feature that the more capable ("more bang") cost roughly proportionately more than the less capable. Battleships not only did more than destroyers, they also cost roughly proportionately more.

Nuclear weapons are, and are nearly universally recognized to be, the paramount destructive capability deployed by states since the end of World War Two. It is the vastness of their destructive power that seems to make them "absolute" and this is the source of their being widely seen as having "revolutionary" implications for interstate relations.<sup>8</sup> The one bomb dropped on Hiroshima by one bomber

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Brodie, "War in the Atomic Age," and "Implications for Military Strategy," in Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World*

was as destructive as the many thousands of conventional high explosive bombs previously dropped on Tokyo by hundreds of bombers. For the first half century of the nuclear era, the strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, a topic of intense and continuous concern for both sides, was centered on nuclear weapons and the various systems to deliver them.

Given this very traditionally realist view of the paramount role of deployed military force, what happens to assessment of the system's polarity if nuclear weapons and the balance of nuclear forces are put into the center of calculus? The answer, of course, is that the current system is not plausibly classified as unipolar.<sup>9</sup> If nuclear weapons matter as much as the nuclear revolution hypothesis asserts, then putting the nuclear assets of the central military balance at the center of calculations of system polarity would seem warranted. But with such a move, the system does not look unipolar. Overall, the United States does have the most extensive and capable nuclear arsenal, but Russia is not far behind. Russia (inheriting most of the nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union), possesses nuclear forces capable of rapidly obliterating the United States. Russia's nuclear forces are less extensive than the Soviet Union's. But most of the decline in Russian strategic forces since the collapse of the Soviet Union results from mutually agreed upon arms control and disarmament agreements. The large decreases in Russian conventional forces, economic output, population size, organizational capability, and territorial size have not been the main cause of the decline in Russia's nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> While the broad scope of Russian decline has severely hobbled Russia's ability to sustain a full spectrum military

*Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1946); Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Some maintain that the United States has usable nuclear superiority as well, but only within the very circumscribed scenario of a "bolt from the blue" attack. Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30, 4 (Spring 2006): 7–44. For the difficulties associated with the brief period of American nuclear monopoly, see George Quester, *Nuclear Monopoly* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

competition with the United States, it has not appreciably reduced the ability of Russia to obliterate the United States. The fact that the most decisive violence capacity in the international system is distributed in this bipolar pattern poses severe limits on viewing the system as unipolar. Furthermore, even this characterization of the system as bipolar may overstate the degree of concentration. Secondary great powers equipped with nuclear weapons (China, Britain, and France) have enough deployed nuclear capability to wreak catastrophic damage on other major states, suggesting that the system is, at least in this important regard, multipolar.<sup>11</sup>

### *Conventional forces and unipolarity*

Nuclear weapons dominate and paralyze the central military balance, but they certainly are not the only military power asset that matters. As noted earlier, the most prominent and well-developed argument that the system is unipolar in ways that matter (Brooks and Wohlforth) essentially concedes that nuclear weapons have a paralytic effect on great power war, but still holds that asymmetries in other military capabilities, and the concentration of non-nuclear conventional forces, provide their possessor (the United States) with significant sources of influence on international political outcomes. This argument assumes, however, that there is not a significant paralytic “shadow” or “spill over” from the nuclear to the non-nuclear realm. To what degree do nuclear weapons as war inhibitors also inhibit the use of conventional forces?

The question of the relationship between nuclear and conventional forces was a topic of extreme interest during the Cold War. The United States and Soviet Union at least partially behaved as if they thought that both nuclear *and* conventional forces had major roles to play, as evidenced by the vast conventional forces they deployed, at an economic cost that considerably exceeded the cost of their strategic nuclear forces. Yet at the same time, both the United States and the Soviet Union also behaved as if they believed that nuclear weapons provided a major paralyzing effect on the willingness to use conventional forces. Both did use their vast conventional forces in a number of wars, invasions, and interventions (Korea, Hungary, Vietnam, and

<sup>11</sup> Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Afghanistan). During this period many other states, including the other nuclear weapon states, also used conventional forces on several occasions. Overall, however, the superpowers seemed to exercise extreme caution in employing their conventional forces against each other, or close allies. While both the United States and the Soviet Union seemed to partially view conventional forces as substitutes or supplements for nuclear forces, they also seemed to view a clash of conventional forces against each other (or core allies) as a very dangerous precursor to a nuclear exchange that could readily escalate into a catastrophic general war of unprecedented destructiveness. Given these stakes, both the United States and the Soviet Union took extreme caution to avoid clashes of conventional arms.<sup>12</sup> Thus, generalizing from the Cold War experience of the United States and the Soviet Union seems strongly to support the claim that there is (or at least was) a significant shadow or spill over of paralysis from the nuclear to the conventional realm. This conclusion must be partly provisional because of the small number of actors in play, and the possibility that these nuclear inhibiting effects might have been lesser or greater with different actors in the mix.

But what is the relationship between nuclear weapons and conventional forces after the Cold War? The basic logic of the argument for a nuclear shadow of paralysis on conventional forces should also largely apply after the Cold War. States with nuclear weapons, whatever their other asymmetries of capability, can be expected to be extremely cautious in employing conventional forces in ways that significantly risk clashes with the conventional forces of other nuclear weapons states. If this continuity is present then the use of conventional forces in a great many of the possible combinations of potentially clashing states is unlikely. This means that for a wide range of interstate relations in the contemporary world the nuclear shadow makes improbable the exercise of conventional military force to achieve political outcomes.

What potential for influence does this leave for conventional forces that is not substantially inhibited by the nuclear shadow? The record of US foreign and military policy since the end of the Cold War is in its main features a continuation of many of the patterns of the Cold War and before, but with far less inhibition. The United States has pronounced advantages in conventional forces, particularly in the

<sup>12</sup> Part of the reason for this caution was the intermingling of conventional and nuclear forces, analyzed in Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).



logistical capacities to sustain military activities with global reach.<sup>13</sup> The United States has repeatedly used its conventional forces against a variety of non-nuclear weapons states (Persian Gulf War, Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq War, Afghanistan). Fear of escalation to nuclear use has largely been absent in these cases. These uses of conventional forces were significant features of overall US foreign policy. Several employed substantial portions of total US conventional forces, absorbed significant leadership attention and diplomatic energy, and sometimes imposed major economic costs.<sup>14</sup> Given all of this, it is clear that the inhibiting effect of nuclear weapons on conventional forces is not complete and that the United States behaves as if it believes it is employing conventional forces to gain its preferred outcomes. However, it is notable that the United States has not used its conventional forces against any state with nuclear weapons or against the close ally of any state with nuclear weapons. This suggests either that conventional forces remain substantially inhibited by the possibility of nuclear use and escalation, or perhaps that conflicts with other nuclear weapon states have simply not arisen.

However, within the fuller historical spectrum of the use of military capability for political gains, these conventional military activities of the United States in the post-Cold War era do not look very impressive or significant. None of them really touched upon core American national interests, or even the core national interests of significant American allies (with the possible exceptions of Kuwait for Saudi Arabia, and Iraq for Israel). Although vastly destructive by the standards of historical policing activities by great powers, these American uses of its conventional forces are best viewed as policing activities because of their limited aims and in their marginal role in shaping international politics. Also, there are serious doubts as to whether these US efforts accomplished very much compared to their direct and indirect costs.

### *Economic capacity and nuclear weapons*

Economic capabilities are next on the list of the power assets weighed in calculating the international balance of power and polarity.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America between the Wars* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

Historically, economic capacity has been a powerful indicator of potential military capacity. Particularly during the long modern era in which the military and naval employment of gunpowder weaponry (across successive technological iterations) has been militarily paramount, economic capabilities to produce and sustain capital- and technology-intensive warfare have tightly linked military power potential to overall economic capability.<sup>15</sup>

In the nuclear era, however, the relationship between economic power and the ability to acquire violence capacity has changed in significant ways. The key fact is that nuclear weapons are, relative to the violence capacity they provide, very cheap. Although nuclear weapons are relatively inexpensive, they are still beyond the reach of many poor states in the international system. But they are still readily available to a very large number of states, most of whom have chosen not to acquire them. Because the nuclear world is so power access abundant, variations in economic capacity have a diminished role as a restraint on the acquisition of the paramount violence capacity in the system.

The case for the contemporary existence of a unipolarity that still shapes important international political outcomes rests significantly upon claims about the impacts of relative economic power. The case for the United States being the current unipolar state rests heavily on the claim that the United States possesses a substantial concentration of economic power. While the United States is seen as having a balanced portfolio of power assets compared to major potential competitors, its economic assets are central to its abilities to influence significant political outcomes. The overall US economic position is one of slow relative decline, but nevertheless it is still quite far ahead economically, and appears to be even more so when per capita averages are factored in. The second largest economy, Japan (closely followed or roughly equaled by China), is less than half the aggregate size of the American economy. Whatever is going on with regard to the strategic military balance of major deployed capital weapons, the United States can reasonably be said to have something approaching economic unipolarity in the current system. On the other hand, the high levels of public and private debt diminish the ability of the United States (and many

<sup>15</sup> William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society, AD 1000–1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

of its main allies) to derive influence from its relatively preponderant economic capabilities.

Does American economic superiority matter as much in the nuclear world as in the pre-nuclear modern state system? Certainly economic assets still matter in a variety of important ways, both directly and indirectly. Economic assets can be used to induce other states to produce political or other outcomes in the interests of the wealthier state. Conventional military forces, whatever the degree of inhibition produced by nuclear weapons, remain expensive, particularly at the upper end of capabilities (naval and air and heavy ground forces).

Overall, however, the relative cheapness of nuclear weapons limits the advantages of economic superiority. The key fact is that the costs of achieving robust nuclear deterrence capability are low in comparison to the overall wealth of a very large number of states in the international system. States have, of course, demonstrated widely variable abilities to extract and mobilize economic resources and convert them into actual military capability. Sometimes states are woefully constrained in this effort, typically for some domestic reason, and sometimes have suffered severely as a result. But a great many modern states have demonstrated the ability to mobilize and deploy a substantial fraction (10–30 percent) of their aggregate economic output on military expenditures (and much more for shorter periods of time).

In short, aggregate economic output calculations are importantly misleading with regard to military power potential because they fail adequately to take into account how relatively little nuclear weapons and their various support systems cost as a share of overall military expenditure and national wealth. Starting at the top, the United States and Russia (as the core of the Soviet Union), the two most nuclear-capable states, have over the course of the six decades of the nuclear era spent enormous aggregate amounts on nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> This expenditure has produced quantities of nuclear weapons, nuclear materials, and support capabilities with astoundingly large destructive capabilities. But this staggeringly destructive power has been purchased by a relatively small share of their military expenditures and national wealth. Over the course of the Cold War, these two states spent about

<sup>16</sup> For the American effort, see Stephen I. Schwartz, ed., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons since 1940* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998).

10 percent of their military expenditure on nuclear weapons and their support systems. For these two states, there has been a significant decoupling of the indicators of general asset power analysis and the achievement of very robust nuclear forces.

Further evidence for this decoupling of economic and nuclear military potential is found in the less powerful states with nuclear weapons. There are now thought to be nine states with nuclear weapons (United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea). At the top of the list are many (but not all) of the leading states in economic output. However, Germany, Japan, and Brazil have large economies but no nuclear weapons. But the states at the bottom of the list are quite different. Several of them are extremely small, poor and weak by the indicators of general asset power analysis. Looking at the lower end of the spectrum, Israel has a tiny population (well under ten million) and a modest aggregate GDP, but has acquired several hundred nuclear weapons, a force capable of essentially obliterating the other states in its regional state system.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Pakistan is very poor, cannot even exercise control over large parts of its territory, but has fielded a potent nuclear arsenal.

### *Soft power hegemony and nuclear weapons*

Finally, what is the relationship between nuclear weapons and Type IV, soft power, and its operation in a unipolar system in which the paralytic effects of nuclear weapons loom so large? At first glance the connections between the nuclear world and the exercise of soft power would seem to be negligible, and little attention has been paid to this relationship.<sup>18</sup>

Prestige provides one possible link between nuclear weapons and soft power. Traditional realist analysis of power relations holds that states enjoy various advantages from reputation and prestige.<sup>19</sup> Nuclear weapons, being paramount destructive capabilities, might thus be seen

<sup>17</sup> For description of Israel's nuclear capabilities and their origins, see Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> For this concept, see Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> For a strong statement of the relevance of prestige, see William C. Wohlforth, [Chapter 2](#), this volume.

as providing their possessors with advantages of prestige that are independent of their actual use. France may be an example of a state which gains, or at least thinks it gains, status advantages from the possession of nuclear weapons. Yet at the same time, major states that forgo nuclear acquisition may also be seen as gaining status and prestige advantages. Japan and Germany may be the leading examples of such states. Prestige exists in the minds of observers, and what is viewed as prestigious may be highly variable, and subject to change. Overall, this link between nuclear weapons and soft power is difficult to assess, but does not seem to be particularly significant.

There may, however, be another, overlooked and unexpected, link between nuclear weapons and both economic power and soft power. If the previous analysis about the paralyzing and decoupling effects of nuclear weapons is accurate, then there may be reasons to believe that economic power and soft power assets might be *more effective* than in previous international systems. How might this happen? If in fact nuclear weapons extensively paralyze the use of military capabilities measured against historical patterns, then most states in the international system are secure in their pursuit of the historically core national interests of physical survival and political independence. A world with nuclear weapons raises the costs of conquest to inhibiting degrees and so states of lesser overall capabilities are more secure than they were in pre-nuclear times. States which in the past would have been subject to significant military attack and conquest enjoy an unprecedented degree of easy security.

A world of states secure in this core way might be one in which states are willing to open themselves to the various types of influence and suasion that in the past they would have reasonably associated with positions of vulnerability that could be exploited to the detriment of their core security interests. In a secure state world, states do not have to view political, economic, or cultural influences from more powerful states as jeopardizing their core interests. Allowing outsiders to wield influence is no longer a sign of weakness jeopardizing security. Outside influence does not have to be viewed as a bridgehead for a potential "fifth column" that could be employed by a more powerful state to weaken and divide. Secure states can also accept extensive levels of economic interdependence without fear that asymmetries of interdependence might be exploited in ways inimical to survival and independence.

In short, a world of secure states is one in which the various forms of openness to outside political, economic, and cultural influences are more likely to occur. Of course, this sort of multi-sided openness, interdependence, and penetration is widely viewed as a hallmark of the contemporary American liberal project and system. Theorists and advocates of the contemporary liberal international order emphasize the American interest and role in exporting and promoting a package of political, economic, and cultural forms. They also emphasize the great absolute gains (particularly in wealth) that states in such arrangements can reap in the contemporary world. If nuclear weapons make states secure, and if this security lowers fears of security losses from openness, interdependence, and penetration, then the overall liberal project may be much easier to realize in a world with nuclear weapons. This suggests that the character of world politics may be appreciably more liberal due to these indirect effects of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, because the contemporary unipolar state is also particularly liberal, the paralytic effects of nuclear weapons may make the exercise of American soft power hegemony much easier than it would have been (or was) in the pre-nuclear era of insecure states.

In sum, nuclear weapons may be simultaneously weakening and enhancing the ability of a unipolar state to shape international outcomes, making for a world in which the main traditional vectors of power (in central strategic balance, conventional balance, and economic foundations of the central strategic balance) are also diminished in their ability to shape outcomes is diminished at the same time that soft power can be more effective than ever before.

## **Part II: hegemony and nuclear weapons**

Theorists of international politics have also advanced a cluster of arguments about how they expect unipolar states to interact with the other states in the system. These expectations about unipolarity are several, and in disagreement. Three clusters of argument are important. First, some theorists, building on a long line of balance of power theory, argue that a unipolar state will tend to encroach (or be seen as threatening to encroach) upon the interests of other states. These theories suggest that encroachment, both actual and possible, will stimulate various counterbalancing actions against the paramount state. Second, building on a long line of theory about hegemonic orders, other realist

theorists argue that a hegemonic state will tend to become overextended. Over time this overextension is expected to undermine the foundations of its paramount position. Third, theorists of change and transition argue that inevitable changes (from many sources) in the relative power of states will trigger “power transitions” in which a rising power comes to displace, or attempts to displace, the previously paramount state.

Nuclear weapons as war deterrents have significant implications for all three of these claims about unipolar concentrations of power. Here I argue that nuclear weapons greatly diminish the problems or syndromes traditionally associated with concentrations of power in international politics. Nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood that unipolarity will trigger counterbalancing. Nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood that a hegemonic state will become overextended. And nuclear weapons also reduce the likelihood that hegemonic states will be subject to violent challenges and transitions.

### *Encroachment, counterbalancing, and nuclear weapons*

For theories of international equilibrium, the existence of a unipolar concentration is an unnatural, and probably temporary, phenomenon. This variant of balance of power theory, most developed over the course of the modern European and modern global state system, anticipates that a state which has a relative concentration of power over potential rivals will come to be seen, simply because of its power, as potentially threatening to their core interests and ultimate independence.<sup>20</sup> In this view, a disproportionate concentration of power in the hands of one state is likely to alarm other states by posing the possibility that international anarchy will be replaced by empire, or what used to be called “universal monarchy.” In the face of this prospect, balance of power theorists, as we saw earlier, expect other states to counterbalance against the paramount state, with some combination of external alliance and internal power mobilization. Since the emergence of American unipolarity, neorealist balance of power

<sup>20</sup> Edward V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1967); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

theorists have, consistent with their overall theory, predicted that various types of balancing against American power would inevitably occur.

The expectation that unipolar power concentrations will stimulate counterbalancing is further strengthened by a corollary argument about the relationship between power and foreign policy goals. In this view, states with a disproportion of relative power will come over time to expand the scope of their foreign policy interests in ways that encroach upon other states. With a relative concentration of power, a state has surplus power beyond what is necessary to secure its core interests, and will tend to seek to export its domestic political system and ideology in ways that other states will find threatening and intrusive.

There are, however, strong reasons to think that the presence of nuclear weapons makes both encroachment and counterbalancing less likely. Deterred from making war against other great powers, unipolar states in a nuclear world are much less threatening to the other states of the system. As a result, these states have little or no need to counterbalance against the paramount state. In effect, the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of secondary states provides a very robust check on the ability of the paramount state to use its relative preponderance of power in ways that encroach on other states. The implication of this view is not that balance of power theory is inaccurate. Quite the contrary, the claim is that further balancing of the sort predicted by balance of power theorists is not necessary because nuclear weapons are such powerful counterweights. In short, the *balance* with nuclear weapons is so robust that further *balancing* is redundant and unnecessary. This argument may also apply to states that could readily possess nuclear weapons but do not actually possess them.

What is the implication of this argument for the debate over the durability of unipolarity and American hegemony? In a world of nuclear weapons, contemporary American unipolarity may have a durability that is significantly decoupled from its level of power concentration. Similarly, the absence of balancing against the United States, which was expected by countervailance balance theory (particularly contemporary neorealism), may result from the existence of widely diffused and robust nuclear deterrence among the great powers. In short, American hegemony may gain a durability distinct from American unipolarity.



*Overextension and nuclear weapons*

Another body of theory, also realist and based on substantial historical experience, connects unipolarity with hegemony and advances arguments about hegemonic self-subversion through overextension.<sup>21</sup> Unipolarity is not identical with hegemony, but the expectation is that most states with a disproportion of relative power will attempt to hegemonically order their international system in ways compatible with their security interests, as well as domestic interests and ideology. Where balance of power theorists see such hegemonic ordering efforts as either doomed to fail or very difficult to achieve due to counterbalancing, theorists of hegemony view hegemonic ordering as generally beneficial to other states, who are seen as receiving the benefits of the hegemonic state's efforts. Hegemonic theorists point to the ways in which both Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the United States in the second half of the twentieth century behaved in ways consistent with these theoretical expectations.

Theorists point, however, to an important source of instability in hegemonic systems, rooted in the tendency for a hegemonic state to overextend and overcommit. In this view, hegemony is more beneficial to the recipients of hegemonic ordering than to the hegemon. The expectation of hegemonic theorists is that hegemonic states will tend to take on more responsibilities and roles than their power capabilities can ultimately support. Hegemony burdens the hegemon and saps the foundations of hegemony. Overextension and the related free riding of secondary states eventually creates a crisis of solvency for the hegemonic state as resources become insufficient to meet the responsibilities and sustain the roles that the hegemon has assumed.

As with encroachment and counterbalancing, the existence of nuclear weapons reduces the likelihood of hegemonic overextension and insolvency. Nuclear weapons are relatively cheap and so diminish the likelihood that resources will be outstripped by responsibilities. Nuclear weapons as deterrents of major military conflicts with other states also reduce the costs which the hegemonic state must bear to sustain its position.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict, 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

*Power transitions and nuclear weapons*

A third set of arguments about power distribution, concerning power transitions, also generate expectations about unipolarity. The basic assumption of power transition theory is that power diffuses and that the relative power of states inevitably changes as technology, population, and political systems change.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not hegemony undermines hegemony, changes in relative power caused by other factors will undermine hegemony. As the relative power of states is altered, the expectation is that states rising in relative power will come to challenge the position of states with declining power. The general line of thinking in power transition theory is that such changes trigger wars in which the challenger attempts to convert its rising strength into greater international security or influence (and thus further augment its strength) while the declining defender of the status quo will find its capacities to maintain its position diminished.

The existence of nuclear weapons makes wars stemming from power transitions much less likely. Given the relative cheapness and vast destructiveness of nuclear weapons, status quo states in decline will be able to sustain their position against rising challengers much more easily. Conversely, states with rising capabilities will find it much more difficult to convert their rising relative power into military gains. Assuming nuclear weapons significantly deter major war, the status quo is likely to persist long after the distribution of power that led to its formation has changed. In effect the major mechanism for translating additional capacity into additional gain is blocked when nuclear weapons greatly raise the costs of conflict and thus the threshold of conflict.

In sum, this assessment of the implications of nuclear weapons for the three major syndromes traditionally associated with unipolarity and hegemony provides reason to believe that these dynamics are likely to be greatly diminished. Power analysis in a nuclear world suggested that nuclear weapons largely robbed power concentrations and advantages of the benefits they gave their possessor in pre-nuclear times. But its previous disadvantages also diminished as well. Encroachment,

<sup>22</sup> Ronald L. Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Carole Alsharabati, Brian Efrid, and A. F. K. Organski, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000).

counterbalancing, hegemonic overextension, and power transitions are likely to be much less salient features of international politics in a nuclear world, making the overall international system less tumultuous and conflictual than in pre-nuclear times.

### Part III: proliferation, nuclear terrorism, and unipolarity

Thus far this examination of nuclear weapons and unipolarity has focused almost entirely on major states. For the many decades of the Cold War, the question of nuclear weapons centered almost exclusively on states and major states, because only states and major states had access to nuclear weapons capability. States had, of course, long dominated world security politics, but states in the first nuclear era did so to an exceptional degree. However, it is widely recognized that world politics has entered a second nuclear age.<sup>23</sup> The two defining features of the second nuclear age are the diffusion of nuclear weapons capability to small and often revisionist states, and possibly also to non-state actors. The relative ease of nuclear proliferation and the prospect of nuclear terrorism by non-state actors pose major new possible threats because of the rising probability that nuclear weapons will be used. These ominous possibilities open major new questions for understanding the relationship between unipolarity and nuclear weapons.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons into the hands of additional states has been a feature of world politics since the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union in 1949.<sup>24</sup> Without proliferation, only one state (the United States) would have nuclear weapons. Indeed, the premise of the dominant nuclear age view that nuclear weapons deter major war is that enough proliferation has occurred to enough major states to deter great power war. But because nuclear weapons are so powerful, their proliferation, more than any other historical case of the diffusion of other military technologies, has the ability to alter decisively the balance of military power between states.

<sup>23</sup> This is dated by some beginning with the proliferation after China's nuclear test in 1964, but now more widely dated from the end of the Cold War. For example, see Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas C. Reed and Danny B. Stillman, *The Nuclear Express: A Political History of the Bomb and Its Proliferation* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009).

This fact, coupled with the fact that nuclear weapons are so relatively cheap, and thus not prohibitively difficult to obtain, means that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is likely to further diminish the ability of concentrations of conventional military force to shape outcomes favorable to a unipolar state.

The second defining feature of the emerging second nuclear age is the prospect of nuclear terrorism, which may ultimately be more far-reaching in its impact on unipolarity than proliferation. Unlike proliferation, nuclear terrorism has not yet occurred. Nuclear terrorist acts were recognized as a possibility during the first nuclear age, but were widely discounted as very improbable. Since the early 1990s, however, the plausibility of such acts has risen considerably. Nuclear terrorism, like nuclear war more generally, is essentially a speculative and hypothetical construct. Unfortunately, due to its relatively recent arrival as a serious concern, and due to the non-state character of the prospective nuclear actors, theories are relatively underdeveloped, especially in comparison with the topics of deterrence, power assessment, balance of power, hegemony, and power transitions.

One simple avenue for thinking about the relationship between unipolarity and the prospect of nuclear terrorism is deterrence failure. Non-state actors are widely seen to be significantly less deterrable than territorial states (although they have compensating weaknesses and vulnerabilities due to their statelessness). If nuclear capability leaks into the hands of non-state, less deterrable actors, then the prospect for nuclear use rises. Assuming this is the case, what does this mean for the position of the unipolar state in the system?

Unipolarity may have costs and benefits in the second nuclear era that are quite different than in the first nuclear era. The implications of nuclear weapons during the first nuclear age were largely favorable to a unipolar state, particularly a liberal hegemon. Overall, assuming the unipolar state is not revisionist in its ambitions, the effects of nuclear weapons on it are largely positive, avoiding problems, solving problems, and lowering costs. These optimistic conclusions depend crucially upon the premise that deterrence failure is extremely unlikely. Skeptics of deterrence, both the hawkish nuclear war fighters and the dovish advocates of international arms control, have advanced a range of ways in which deterrence might fail. But the ways in which deterrence failure might occur in the second nuclear age are significantly different than in the first.

What are the implications of deterrence failure for a unipolar state generally, and for the United States as a unipolar state? There are a great many unknowables here, but there are good reasons to think that proliferation and nuclear terrorism may be *disproportionately disadvantageous* to the unipolar and hegemonic state. First, proliferation is likely to significantly diminish the ability of the unipolar state to employ its non-nuclear military assets for political gains, while increasing the potential costs and risks associated with its hegemonic extended alliance system. Second, regarding the prospect of nuclear terrorism, a unipolar state, particularly a liberal one, is likely to be disproportionately vulnerable. It thus has higher incentives to combat or eliminate this problem. A liberal hegemonic unipolar state may also have greater capabilities to address the problem, but whether these incentives and capabilities are sufficient remains very much in doubt.

### *Proliferation and unipolarity*

Technology, and thus power based on technology, tends to diffuse.<sup>25</sup> The diffusion of nuclear weapons capability, privileged with the special term “proliferation,” has been intensively worried about and studied since the beginning of the nuclear era. Perhaps the single most important fact is that the diffusion of nuclear weapons has been much less than anticipated, and is greatly less than is possible. The gap between the number of actual nuclear states (nine) and the potential number of nuclear states (certainly several dozen, if not more) is commonly referred to as the “nuclear overhang.” The nuclear overhang is large and inexorably growing. Most states that could have nuclear weapons do not now appear to want them.<sup>26</sup> The non-acquisition aspects of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and regime appear to be deeply embedded features of world politics. But this regime would not be an insurmountable barrier to a large number of states if they made a serious effort to acquire nuclear weapons. Rather, this regime primarily exists as a way for states to express their preference not to possess nuclear weapons.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey L. Herrera, *Technology and International Transformation: The Railroad, the Atom Bomb and the Politics of Technological Change* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press, 1995).

The diffusion of nuclear weapons in the international system is significantly entangled with the role of the unipolar hegemonic state. The existence of a unipolar state playing the role of liberal hegemon has arguably been a major constraint on the rate and extent of proliferation. The extended military alliance system of the United States has been a major reason why many potentially nuclear states have forgone acquisition. Starting with Germany and Japan, and extending to a long list of European and East Asian states, the American alliances are widely understood to provide a “nuclear umbrella.” Overall, without such a state playing this role, proliferation would likely have been much more extensive.

The liberal features of the American hegemonic state also have contributed to constrain the rate and extent of proliferation. American leadership, and the general liberal internationalist vision of law-governed cooperative international politics, both enabled and infuses the non-proliferation regime. Similarly, the robust and inclusive liberal world trading system that has been a distinctive and salient feature of the American liberal hegemonic system offers integrating states paths to secure themselves that make nuclear acquisition less attractive.<sup>27</sup>

Unipolarity and hegemony can also stimulate proliferation. From the beginning, proliferation has been motivated by the effort of states to check American power and influence. Soviet and Chinese acquisition of nuclear weapons was certainly motivated by this goal. States and regimes which perceive themselves to be threatened or potentially threatened by American unipolarity and hegemony continue to find nuclear weapons an appealing means to check American influence and intimidation.<sup>28</sup> The nuclear acquisition efforts of North Korea, Libya, Iraq, and Iran all appear to be motivated, at least in significant part, by the desire to establish a restraint on American power. In some of these cases, the desire to deter American military power is rooted in agendas of regional revisionism. In others it appears based on fears that the

<sup>27</sup> Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Derek D. Smith, *Deterring America: Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Peter R. Lavoy, Scott D. Sagan, and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

United States would intervene to overthrow the regime. To the extent the liberal hegemonic state attempts to coercively impose its preferred domestic regime type of democracy upon non-democratic states, such states have a heightened incentive to acquire nuclear weapons. Other more diffuse features of the liberal hegemonic order, particularly its expansive trade and travel opportunities, may also facilitate access to nuclear weapons.<sup>29</sup> And as more states become wealthier and technologically sophisticated due to the growth of world trade facilitated by the liberal economic order, their ability to acquire nuclear weapons grows as well.

Shaped by these inhibitions and incentives, proliferation has slowly but surely occurred, and it has largely been to the disadvantage of the unipolar state. While there would be more proliferation without a unipolar hegemonic state, the proliferation which is most likely to occur next diminishes the power and influence and role of the unipolar hegemonic state. States that are revisionists in the regions in which the extended American alliance system operates (Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Middle East) have significant incentives to acquire nuclear weapons. To the extent such proliferation occurs, it reduces the conventional military superiority which the United States has acquired at such great cost. Nuclear proliferation will thus further narrow the usable influence which a unipolar state can derive from its preponderance of non-nuclear power.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, proliferation may seriously raise the cost of the extended American alliance system. The presence of extensive American conventional forces in these unsettled regions means that US forces become targets at greater risk of devastating attacks. A nuclear attack on a major American base (Guam, Diego Garcia, etc.) or a capital naval asset (particularly large aircraft carriers) would produce many thousand American casualties.

On the other hand, a world with more nuclear states might also make the extended US military alliance system much less necessary. American influence would decline, but so too would American costs

<sup>29</sup> Gordon Corra, *Shopping for Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity, and the Rise and Fall of the A. Q. Khan Network* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and William Langewiesche, *The Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Barry Posen, "U.S. Security Policy in a Nuclear-Armed World, or What If Iraq Had Had Nuclear Weapons," *Security Studies* 6 (Spring 1997): 1–31.

and vulnerabilities. If major American allies acquired nuclear weapons, the value of their alliance with the United States would be significantly reduced. Core American homeland security interests do not depend on the United States playing the role of hegemonic protector of the system, and substantial proliferation in the rimlands of Eurasia might evoke an American retrenchment to an “offshore balancing” posture advocated by isolationists, some realists, and anti-big government libertarians.<sup>31</sup> Such an American withdrawal, however, would probably stimulate further proliferation. This is likely to increase the likelihood of deterrence failure, but reduce the likelihood that use would occur against the United States or American military forces.

### *Nuclear terrorism and unipolarity*

Over the long Cold War period, the study of both polarity and nuclear weapons largely operated from the assumption that states (and particularly great power states) were the sole or primary object of analysis. Long viewed as very implausible, the prospect of nuclear terrorism by small non-state actors is increasingly seen as a major possibility, with dire implications. In the wake of the attacks by the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan, the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, and the anthrax letters shortly afterward, the threat of nuclear terrorism has come to be widely perceived to be a major national security threat, particularly in the United States.<sup>32</sup> It is now widely feared and anticipated that non-state actors, groups the size of criminal gangs, could obtain or construct a nuclear weapon and employ it in a devastating attack to achieve various political goals. Lacking a state territorial base, such actors may not be readily deterred by the threat of retaliation.

<sup>31</sup> Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 17, 4 (Spring 1993): 5–51; and Christopher Preble, *The Power Problem* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Among the vast literature, see Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Richard A. Falkenrath, Robert D. Newman, and Bradley Thayer, *America’s Achilles Heel: Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); and particularly Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).



In an important way, the nuclear terrorism problem is a continuation of the proliferation problem, namely diffusion to more actors.<sup>33</sup> To capture this new situation, it has become conventional to speak of nuclear capability “leaking” into the hands of an altogether different type of (non-state) actor, posing the altogether novel situation of “omniviolence.” Given that there is enough reprocessed plutonium (the preferred key ingredient in nuclear explosive devices) to make some 400,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs, this prospect has considerable credibility. Leakage differs from proliferation because it alters not just the relations among states, but the monopoly (or near monopoly) of capital weapons by states that has been a stable feature of world politics for many centuries.

Anticipation and response to the threat of nuclear terrorism has already emerged as a factor of significance in US foreign policy. The Bush administration’s policy leading to the Iraq War had many dimensions, but the threat of nuclear terrorism was widely voiced as a motive for the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the regime.<sup>34</sup> This was in part a war of counter-proliferation, seeking to coercively disarm to reverse the perceived Iraqi nuclear acquisition. It also appears to have been significantly motivated by the prospect of nuclear terrorism, because many key decision makers in Iraq War policy making in and around the Bush administration thought that there was a significant risk that Iraq would transfer nuclear weapons capability to non-state proxies for use in terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies.

What might this new security environment of leakage and omniviolence mean for the American unipolar hegemonic state? The empirical basis to substantiate claims on this topic is thin and ambiguous, and it could be that these threats are greatly exaggerated.<sup>35</sup> Two arguments are advanced. First, a unipolar state also acting as hegemon can be expected to have particularly high vulnerabilities to this threat. These

<sup>33</sup> Terrorist groups may also be supported by states. Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> For critical analysis of the Iraq War justifications, see Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

vulnerabilities are further amplified by the internally liberal democratic constitutional features of the United States as unipolar state. As a result of this greater vulnerability, a unipolar state, and particularly a liberal unipolar state like the United States, should have very high incentives to prevent nuclear terrorism. Second, the capabilities of a unipolar state, particularly a liberal hegemonic state, while substantial, may be insufficient to adequately contain this threat. The liberal features of the American unipolar state both decrease and increase capabilities to respond to this threat.

First, the diffusion of nuclear weapons capability to non-state actors with revisionist or revolutionary political objectives is likely to disproportionately diminish the security of a unipolar state, particularly one playing the role of liberal hegemon. The United States' extended system of alliances (many with domestically repressive regimes) makes it a target of numerous grievances, as does its general military, economic, and cultural preponderance. The American role as guarantor of various regional systems with numerous client states increases the prospect that the United States will be targeted by revisionist and revolutionary non-state actors. For example, al-Qaeda and its affiliates target the United States because of the role of the United States in defending the Saudi Arabian regime, which the group aims to overthrow. Also, the corrosive effects of terrorism and anti-terrorism on limited government and on civil liberties adds further incentive for a liberal-democratic state to contain the nuclear terrorist threat.<sup>36</sup> Overall, it seems likely that the prospect of nuclear terrorism by non-state actors raises the cost of maintaining the American system.<sup>37</sup>

Given this vulnerability, the United States has a very strong incentive to combat this threat. What capabilities might a unipolar state have to achieve its goals? Four possibilities<sup>38</sup> are considered: (1) coercive counter-proliferation; (2) defense via border control and internal policing; (3) interstate cooperative policing and intelligence; and (4) nuclear arms and fissile material control regimes. Over the first

<sup>36</sup> Fred Charles Ikle, *Annihilation from Within: The Ultimate Threat to Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Richard Betts, "The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy: Tactical Advantages of Terror," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, 1 (2002): 19–36.

<sup>38</sup> For the fuller range of possible responses, see Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, eds., *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

decade in which the nuclear terrorism threat has been of primary concern to US national security, each of these options has been pursued to some extent, but none has been fully or consistently pursued. Each has major limitations and each faces major impediments.

Coercive non-proliferation, via sanctions as well as military strikes, has been a prominent part of the response of the United States to the revisionist state proliferation and nuclear terrorism threats. Coercive counter-proliferation was considered, but not pursued, by the United States in the years the Soviet Union was acquiring nuclear weapons, and the Soviet Union and the United States considered, but did not exercise, this option when China was acquiring nuclear weapons. The most extreme instance of coercive counter-proliferation, the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003, was in part a “war of choice” enabled by American unipolarity. But it was powerfully motivated by the vulnerability created by nuclear weapons in the hands of a state viewed as regionally revisionist and potentially a sponsor of non-state terrorist groups. In retrospect, Iraq did not, in fact, have nuclear weapons (or even make much of an effort to acquire them). But before the invasion, the United States government believed it did (or soon would) and found this seriously threatening. American unipolar preponderance of conventional force enabled the Iraq War, but the vulnerability associated with nuclear weapons (and other weapons of mass destruction, particularly bioweapons) seems to have been a significant motivation (both to the leadership and the public) for the war. A combination of unipolar strength (conventional forces, global basing network, economic resources, allies) and nuclear vulnerability shaped American policy. Unfortunately for this effort, the war both diminished American preponderance (cost, alienation of allies, etc.), and the public credibility of nuclear vulnerability as a paramount problem for US grand strategy to address. Quite aside from the potentially large direct costs of coercive counter-proliferation is the strong possibility that such strategies are also counterproductive because they stimulate other states to seek nuclear capabilities to deter American attack.

Second, the nuclear terrorism threat can be potentially countered by increased border controls and internal policing. Terrorism long predates nuclear terrorism, and border controls and internal policing have been widely employed to combat it. As the nuclear terrorism threat

has emerged, the United States has greatly increased the resources and authority of its internal policing and border surveillance. But these measures may fall significantly short of what is necessary to contain the threat. Furthermore, such measures are resisted by a wide array of powerful domestic interest groups, who are particularly influential in the formation of policy in the American polity due to its liberal, democratic, and constitutional features.<sup>39</sup> It may also be the case that liberal democratic constitutional states committed to international openness in trade and travel are at a serious disadvantage compared to authoritarian states that close themselves to extensive international intercourse.

Third, the nuclear terrorism threat can potentially be countered by increased cooperative policing and intelligence. In response to the emerging threat of non-state nuclear terrorism, almost all states in the international system arguably have a strong security interest in preventing leakage and implementing measures, both unilateral and multilateral, to secure themselves and sustain the primacy of states. There have been significant steps in this direction, but they fall far short of what might be expected. This suggests either that the threat is overblown, or states are slow learners about qualitatively new threat vectors, or perhaps that minor relative gains considerations still outweigh high absolute gains from cooperation. Cooperation among states to combat various criminal activities has a long history, being a salient part of the Concert of Europe, and playing a major role in the development of international cooperation to combat a wide array of criminal activities.<sup>40</sup> The emergence of dynamite bomb terrorism in the late nineteenth century provided a substantial impetus to interstate police cooperation.<sup>41</sup> Over the last several decades air hijacking and

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Kroenig and Jay Stowsky, "War Makes States, But Not As It Pleases: Homeland Security and American Anti-Statism," *Security Studies* 15, 2 (2006): 225–270.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelmann, *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> For historical overviews of terrorism and counter-terrorism, see Matthew Carr, *The Infernal Machine: A History of Terrorism from the Assassination of Tsar Alexander II to Al-Qaeda* (New York: New Press, 2006); and Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

terrorism have stimulated a major increase in cooperation between the policing agencies of states, with the United States playing a major leadership role. The liberal character of the United States and its system of international regimes has greatly facilitated these international cooperative efforts,<sup>42</sup> while domestic liberal and constitutional features have impeded them.

Fourth, the nuclear terrorism threat can be potentially countered by strengthened regimes for nuclear arms control and fissile material. The fact that the current unipolar state is also a liberal hegemonic state increases the prospects for the expansion and deepening of the global nuclear control regime.<sup>43</sup> Over the decades of the nuclear era, arms control has been a much more significant feature of the international system and of great power grand strategy than ever before. But, with the very significant exception of the end of the Cold War period during the late 1980s and early 1990s, nuclear arms control has played a secondary role in American grand strategy.<sup>44</sup> Rejecting the emphasis on coercive counter-proliferation of the Bush administration, the Obama administration has put greater emphasis on international arms control as a means of reducing the nuclear terrorist threat. Building on efforts that stretch back to the beginning of the nuclear era, the Obama administration has launched a variety of initiatives (renewed calls for abolition, Europe missile defense pull-back, START follow-on negotiations, terrorism-centered Nuclear Posture Review) that are advanced in large measure as responses to the threat of nuclear terrorism in motivating and justifying them.

It is very unlikely that this reinvigorated global nuclear arms control project can be achieved by the United States alone. Nearly universal compliance will be needed and the ability of other states to resist, whether actively or passively, is large. Over the last several decades, and even more so after 9/11, virtually all states have condemned and

<sup>42</sup> Barak Mendelson, *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> For robust international arms control as a support for the survival of limited government constitutionalism, see Daniel Deudney, "Omniviolence, Arms Control, and Limited Government," in Jeffrey Tulis and Stephen Macedo, eds., *The Limits of Constitutionalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> For the extent of the arms control and disarmament at the end of the Cold War, see Joseph Cirincione, *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

outlawed (via domestic criminal sanctions) nuclear and other WMD terrorism and expressed this consensus in a variety of UN Security Council resolutions and other instruments.<sup>45</sup> Yet, it also seems clear that other states place a much lower priority on this problem than does the United States. With a focused effort, the United States could plausibly make headway in this direction, but subordinating competing foreign policy goals and interests (notoriously difficult in large fractious liberal democracies) may make this grand strategy unrealizable. Also, other states, particularly rising potential rivals (China) or resentful former rivals (Russia), may see the problem of mass terrorist attacks as a preponderantly American problem and passively obstruct US initiatives. The difficulties faced by the Bush and Obama administrations in orchestrating sanctions against Iran for its nuclear activities support the argument that states do not uniformly view this threat as very great. The diffusion of nuclear capabilities into the hands of more states is also amplifying the collective action barriers to global nuclear arms control. Finally, the still largely hypothetical character of the nuclear terrorist threat makes it difficult to sustain attention and support for often costly measures of remediation.

Given the significant limits to the four strategies, the question of what a nuclear terrorist attack on United States or allied soil would mean for the American position as unipolar hegemonic state warrants consideration. Unlike a general nuclear war between nuclear-armed states, a nuclear terrorist attack would hardly be a civilization-collapse level of calamity. But such an attack is likely to have severe effects on the United States and its relationship with the world. Internally, it is widely expected that such an attack would lead to a great expansion of policing and intelligence activities, and tightening of borders to the flow of people and material. The overall effect is likely to be a great reduction in the liberal, democratic, and constitutional features of the American political order. Externally, if the historical record of American reaction to military attacks is any guide, the American response is likely to be rapid and violent.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Boulden and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *Terrorism and the UN: Before and After September 11* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004); and David Cortwright and George A. Lopez, eds., *United against Terror: Cooperative Nonmilitary Responses to the Global Terrorist Threat* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

At the same time, it may also be the case that a nuclear terrorist attack would serve as an internationally catalytic event, a tipping point on this issue, creating a widespread realization (or perception) of the salience of this threat by many states. A serious attack might both harden hierarchy internally at the expense of traditional broadly liberal, constitutional regime features in the liberal hegemon, while at the same time stimulating major international institutional change to alter, if not authoritatively abridge, interstate anarchy. Effective international collective action in this domain may not require much more than the active consensus of five major states (or actors) (US, Russia, Europe, China, India) in a concert-like arrangement, based on minimal common security interests. If these states employed their collective economic weight, and diplomatic problem-solving to induce universal compliance with a robust fissile containment regime the threat of nuclear terrorism would be substantially reduced.

## **Conclusions**

Five overall conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, the widespread characterization of the contemporary international system as unipolar is significantly unfounded. The paramount military capability of nuclear weapons is not distributed in a unipolar pattern. The system is at least bipolar and perhaps multipolar. The United States does have a significant lead over other states in secondary and tertiary power capacities of conventional military force, economic output, and soft power, but these concentrations make for at most a very truncated unipolarity.

Second, nuclear weapons call into question the more general relevance of polarity as a category for analyzing international systems. If the dominant view of the nuclear revolution centered around deterrence is correct, then the relationship between military power and international political outcomes has profoundly changed. If states are in fact primarily deterred by nuclear weapons, then their capacity to coercively achieve favorable outcomes is greatly reduced. In short, power as a factor in international politics has been significantly altered, producing a decreased relevance of polarity. The paralysis of power

produced by nuclear deterrence robs polar concentrations of their potency.

Third, the truncated unipolarity that exists outside the paralysis of core military power is altered by the shadow of nuclear deterrence. Most importantly, conventional forces, while not completely paralyzed, are substantially circumscribed, and come to play something closer to a policing role than that of an arbiter of great power interstate disputes. At the same time, the widespread security afforded to states by the nuclear revolution may unexpectedly amplify the impacts of concentrations of economic and soft power. If nuclear weapons greatly diminish the threat of conquest, weaker states can more confidently open themselves to economic interdependence and cultural penetration by stronger states.

Fourth, unipolarity, to the extent it still exists, is made much easier and more durable by nuclear weapons. Major syndromes and dynamics historically associated with concentrated power become much less pronounced in a nuclear world. Encroachment and counterbalancing, overcommitment and overextension, and violent power transitions all diminish in a world with nuclear weapons. This conclusion also casts new light on the triangular debate about unipolarity among variants of realism and liberalism. If nuclear weapons mean the balance is robust, then the absence of balancing is at least partially explained. If nuclear weapons make unipolarity more durable, then it may be persisting for reasons unrelated to power asymmetries. If nuclear weapons provide security and facilitate openness to interdependence and penetration, then the liberal order may have an under-recognized source of strength and support.

Fifth and finally, the emerging patterns of nuclear proliferation and the prospect of nuclear terrorism pose major problems for both practice and theory. Most importantly, further proliferation and possible nuclear terrorism challenge the non-use of nuclear weapons produced by deterrence. Unipolarity and hegemony both inhibit and stimulate proliferation. Further proliferation is likely to further disadvantage the American unipolar state, further truncating the already limited range of uses of its advantage in conventional forces. Nuclear terrorism, made more likely by further proliferation, poses a far-reaching threat not only to the American hegemonic position, but also to the liberal character of the hegemon's polity. Unipolarity and hegemony



probably increase the ability of the United States and other states to address this problem, but the measures likely to be implemented may be insufficient. The trajectory of the second nuclear age thus opens the possibility that major systemic shock and adjustment lie ahead, suggesting that the equilibrium of interstate deterrence emerging from the first nuclear age is but a preliminary stage of the nuclear revolution.

# 10

## *From unipolarity to multipolarity: transition in sight?*

BARRY R. POSEN

### Introduction

This volume has three premises: the distribution of power in international politics tells us something important about the patterns and processes of international politics; an unusually concentrated “unipolar” distribution of power emerged with the end of the Cold War; and the unipolar distribution of power is likely to be with us for some time to come.

The purpose of this chapter is to suggest that unipolarity is on the wane and that multipolarity is in sight, to explain why this is happening, and to imagine the dynamics of the emergent multipolar system. First, I offer a definition of polarity. My main observation is that a useful working definition of unipolarity is of necessity very demanding: the “unipole” must be very strong indeed. Second, I briefly offer my own assessment of whether unipolarity is waning and why. I examine a few material indices of polarity, past and present, to suggest that unipolarity may already be on the wane, as the National Intelligence Council recently reported. Here I also address what the arguments presented in the key chapters of the book suggest about the likely behavior of unipolar systems and the durability of unipolarity. Though the introductory chapter asserts “The contemporary structure is extraordinary and has the potential to endure beyond a historical moment,” I will show that the arguments presented in the chapters suggest something else – unipolarity is a strangely “self-abrasive” structure.<sup>1</sup> It will be surprising if it lasts very long. Finally, I will discuss how multipolarity is expected to shape behaviors, and speculate about how some specific

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<sup>1</sup> G. J. Ikenberry, M. Mastanduno, and W. C. Wohlforth, Chapter 1, this volume.

present-day material facts, not normally captured in structural arguments, but close cousins, may shape how the next multipolar world will work.<sup>2</sup>

This volume is premised on the notion that polarity matters, and this view is now widespread. The National Intelligence Council's recent finding that unipolarity is on the wane, to be slowly replaced by multipolarity, accepts this premise.<sup>3</sup> The notion of polarity as an important causal variable emerges from the realist school of international relations. Realist theory depicts international politics as a self-help system. With no sovereign to adjudicate disputes and impose settlements, each actor must look to its own interests relative to the others. Each state can, if it has the power, despoil or conquer the others. Thus each looks to its own capabilities relative to the others in order to defend itself.

Realists observe that the structure of world power has followed different patterns and believe that these patterns naturally have consequences, since security is the preeminent issue of an anarchic world, and thus the distribution of capabilities to attack and defend should matter. Some base this belief on observation, and others on deduction. Regardless, it is important to remember that structural realism is a theory of environmental constraints and incentives. Structures constrain. They push and they pull. The combination of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities create fields of force that affect all the states in the system, but do not "determine" anything.

Different structures appear to encourage different patterns of behavior; and in the abstract it seems that they should.<sup>4</sup> Modern international politics has mainly been a multipolar affair, with a handful of states with significant capabilities, all of them warily watching one another. If there is a distinctive feature of multipolarity it is that the principal states often underreact when one or more of them begins to improve its power position. There is a tendency toward "buck passing," because the number and relative equality of the key players

<sup>2</sup> Parts of this chapter draw on "Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?" *Current History* 108, 721 (November 2009): 347–352.

<sup>3</sup> *2025\_Global\_Trends\_Final\_Report* (National Intelligence Council), vi–xiii, [http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF\\_2025/2025\\_Global\\_Trends\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_2025/2025_Global_Trends_Final_Report.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> I rely here mainly on the seminal discussion in Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Causes and Military Effects," *Theory of International Politics* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 161–193.

allows each of them to believe that one of the others can and will stop the ambitious ones. This allows the ambitious a head start, and when the others finally wake up, it is costly to reverse the initial damage. Alliances are a key way to amass fighting power in a multipolar world, but alliance management itself is a major problem, which can contribute to miscalculation and/or loss of control, because optimists hope that the other alliance will suffer defections, and pessimists fear that their own allies may defect. Alliance management problems may also make for long and destructive wars. Though the role of polarity as a cause can be debated, the modern multipolar system saw four world wars between 1756 and 1945: the Seven Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, and World Wars One and Two.

During the Cold War, we saw for the first time in modern history a “bipolar” structure of power, which lasted perhaps four decades. The characteristic problem of bipolarity is “overreaction.” Each of the major powers knows that only it can contain the other. Even profitless foreign gambits by one will attract countervailing action by the other. In my judgment, a pernicious aspect of bipolarity is a fetishization of military power. Because useful allies are not immediately available, the parties rely very heavily on their own military capabilities, and are obsessed with those of the other. The competition should be quite intense, though theorists believe that war should be somewhat less likely than in a multipolar system because intense mutual scrutiny makes it difficult for one to get a usable military advantage over the other. Miscalculations arising from alliance management problems should be missing. As we have one modern bipolar system to study, and this system coincided with the nuclear age, it is difficult to tell whether bipolarity or nuclear deterrence is responsible for the absence of systemic war, and the thankfully anti-climactic end of the competition. It does seem plausible, however, that bipolarity contains within it the seeds of its own end; chronic overreaction would seem naturally to lead to the exhaustion of one or both of the competitors. The post-Cold War world has seen an equally rare “unipolar” structure of power, which is unlikely to outlast the Cold War bipolar structure of power. Below I discuss the nature of unipolarity. Current discourse seems to expect that the structure of power will, if anything, revert quickly to bipolarity with the rise of China. It seems more plausible, however, that there will first be a prolonged period of multipolarity, and that a return to bipolarity is less likely.

## Measuring power and polarity

Though political scientists strive for objective measures of relative power, they are elusive. In international politics relative power is measured by the powerful, and these assessments, though not fully auditable, are the ones that matter. This is not to say that statesmen spend their days speculating on the polarity of the international system they inhabit. Rather they respond to the constraints and possibilities they perceive. Over time their behaviors will tell us which powers they believe matter and why.

Analysts typically measure polarity by the distribution of capabilities, but capabilities can be imminent or latent and patterns of political behavior can deviate from seemingly objective measures. And polarity is not synonymous with equality. In any given historical period there seems to be a murky threshold that separates most nation-states from the handful that constitute the great powers. The great powers themselves vary in their capabilities.

Since the industrial revolution, military power has depended on the economic power from which it is distilled. Yet most states typically do not distill as much as they could *in extremis*. World War Two showed what industrial powers can do when they really care, with the US spending roughly 40 percent of GDP on the war effort at its peak, and other combatants spending an even greater share. Peacetime expenditures seldom rise to this level. The US, the most powerful war machine of World War Two, distilled very little prior to the war. Today the US distills 4–5 percent of its GDP for military purposes. None of the other major powers distills this much, though some could.<sup>5</sup> The US high “propensity to distill,” compared to that of the rest of the world, today contributes substantially to the pattern of politics we describe as unipolar. It is plausible that fiscal imbalances will require over the next ten or fifteen years a significant reduction in the share of GDP that the US devotes to military spending.<sup>6</sup> A threatened US can continue to

<sup>5</sup> Sam Perlo-Freeman, Catalina Perdomo, Elisabeth Sköns, and Petter Stålenheim, “Military Expenditure,” *SIPRI Yearbook 2009: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, 179–211. In 2007 the US allocated 4%, China 2%, France 2.3%, the UK 2.4%, and Russia 3.5% of GDP to defense, though the source is less certain of the China and Russia shares.

<sup>6</sup> Given politically realistic expectations about tax and spending policy, the United States now risks a rate of deficit spending that is unsustainable, and which could significantly lower US economic output over the next forty years.

dig deep to sustain its defense spending, but to the extent that global hegemony is a luxury rather than a necessity, military spending to sustain it may need to compete with other public goods for funding, especially if the US economy is in danger of losing its vitality.

Two examples serve to demonstrate the disjunction between seemingly objective measures of polarity and statesmen's behaviors. The Soviet Union was only barely in the US league for most of the Cold War in terms of economic capacity but we think of the era as a bipolar order, in part because the gap between the Soviet Union and the third ranking power in the immediate aftermath of World War Two and for much of the Cold War was so great. The US was far and away the most economically capable state in the system on the eve of World War Two, enjoying a share of gross world economic capacity higher than it does at present, yet we view that period as one of multipolarity.

The existence of a bipolar world was seldom questioned, but in retrospect one marvels a bit that the Soviet Union stayed in the game as long as it did. Its latent power, its GDP, only briefly surpassed half that of the US, according to the CIA.<sup>7</sup> They simply distilled a greater percentage of it into military power. This effort probably helped to drive the Soviet economy into its ultimate downward spiral. Latent Soviet power did exceed that of any actor other than the US for many years, but was barely competitive with the US. The world was "bipolar," but the Soviet grip on its position was not very firm. By the early 1980s even Japan's economic capacity surpassed that of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, the writing was on the wall for the bipolar order in 1975.<sup>8</sup>

Tax increases and spending cuts will be necessary to bring revenues and expenditures into a sustainable equilibrium. Though social security and health care are the major sources of expenditure growth, it is unlikely that defense can escape the paring knife. See Congressional Budget Office, *The Long Term Budget Outlook* (December 2007), 14. See also Stephen Szabo, "The Washington Bubble: Why US Foreign Policy is Oversized," *Current History* 108, 721 (November 2009): 369–370.

<sup>7</sup> "The Soviet economy on average grew faster than the US economy from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, raising Soviet GNP from 49 to 57 percent of US GNP. After 1975, however, the US economy grew faster, and Soviet GNP fell to 52 percent of the US level in 1984." US Central Intelligence Agency, *A Comparison of the US and Soviet Economies: Evaluating the Performance of the Soviet System*, A Reference Aid, Office of Soviet Analysis, Directorate of Intelligence, October 1985, Confidential (Released as Sanitized 1999), p. v.

<sup>8</sup> US Central Intelligence Agency, "The Soviet Economy, Selected Topics, Briefing for Secretary Stans, (S-3916), November 10, 1971 (Released as Sanitized 1999, [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov), accessed January 25, 2010). Though cautious, this document

Table 10.1 *Various relative power measures, 1937 (A multipolar world?)*

Country	Share of world manufacturing	Relative war potential	National income (\$ billion)	Percentage on defense
United States	35.1	41.7	68	1.5
USSR	14.1	14.4	19	26.4
Germany	11.4	14.0	17	23.5
UK	9.4	10.2	22 (Empire)	5.7
France	4.5	4.2	10	9.1
Japan	3.5	3.5	4	28.2
Italy	3.1	2.5	6	14.5

Source: Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), figures from Tables 30, 31, 32, pp. 330–332; for the original sources of these data see Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 672 and H. C. Hillmann, “Comparative Strength of the Great Powers,” Part II of *The World in March 1939*, ed. Arnold Toynbee and Frank T. Ashton-Gwatkin, *Survey of International Affairs 1939–1946*. Royal Institute of International Affairs (London: Oxford University Press, 1952). Hillmann measures war potential as “relative strength in the distribution of the production of capital goods” (p. 440). “Capital goods industries are taken to mean the optical, engineering, metal goods, shipbuilding, vehicles, chemical and part of the heavy industries (i.e. pig iron and crude steel)” (p. 491).

The last “multipolar” world also looks quite unequal when economic power, latent war potential, is measured across the states that most analysts agree to have been the key powers. Various measures of economic capability and war potential in the late 1930s show the US to be wildly superior to other great powers. In 1937, the US had double the economic potential for war of the sum of the three states that would ultimately constitute the Axis, and nearly half of all the war potential in the system (see Table 10.1). This world was “multipolar” because the US spent a tiny percentage of its wealth on military power, and involved itself only haltingly and episodically in the relations among the other great powers in Europe and Asia. We should also note that once the US did mobilize for war, the capabilities of the

suggests that the Soviet economy had already entered a period of slow growth, from which it could emerge only with radical reforms.

“balancing” coalition – the US, the UK, and the USSR – dwarfed those of the Axis; yet the reversal of German and Japanese gains proved a difficult, costly, bloody, and time-consuming business, suggesting that strong challenges can be mounted by “weak” coalitions. We should learn something else from this tale: the US, like all the other key players in that war, was able to mobilize a substantial share of its economic capacity for war in roughly two and a half years; though economies have changed since then, the temporal distance from latent to real military capability may not be very long.<sup>9</sup>

How should we define unipolarity? According to Jervis, the consensus among many authors in this volume is “a system in which one state has significantly more capabilities than any other.”<sup>10</sup> This is not quite right; the introductory chapter suggests that the unipole should be in a class by itself.<sup>11</sup> Capabilities should be defined broadly: a great power, or pole, should excel in many elements of power: population, territory, natural resources, economic capacity, military might, and managerial competence.<sup>12</sup> But what constitutes “a class by itself?”<sup>13</sup> Wohlforth suggests that there should be no possibility of a counter-coalition, but Walt asks whether this is an arithmetical or political fact.<sup>14</sup> Does the unipole have to command more than 50 percent of the resources available to the principal states in the system, or does it merely need to be sufficiently capable that any opposing coalition would need to include so many independent actors, and operate so efficiently, that it would prove to be the most effective military alliance in modern

<sup>9</sup> Raymond W. Goldsmith, who was deeply involved in the US mobilization effort, concluded that under the conditions of the time, it would take a modern industrial power “not more than two years to convert industry fully from peace to war production even if only few preparations are made in advance.” See “The Power of Victory: Munitions Output in World War II,” *Military Affairs* 10, 1 (Spring 1946): 69–80, 78–79. [www.jstor.org/stable/1983105](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1983105) (accessed: March 22, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume.

<sup>11</sup> Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, Chapter 1, this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), define unipolarity as a system in which one state has a very large share of the power, and only it excels in all aspects of power (12–13). They suggest that it should take a very large and unwieldy coalition of the remaining actors to equal its power, even in principle (35–37).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen M. Walt, Chapter 4, this volume.



**Table 10.2** *Relative capabilities, 2008*

Country	GDP current (\$ billion)	% world	GDP PPP (\$ billion)	% GDP military	Population (million)
United States	14,204	23.5	14,204	4.3	304
China	4,326	7.0	7,903	1.96	1325
Russia	1,607	2.6	2,288	3.58	142
India	1,217	2.0	3,388	2.41	1,140
Japan	4,909	8.1	4,355	0.94	128
Eurozone	13,565	22.4	10,900	1.62	326
United Kingdom	2,646	4.3	2,176	2.47	61
World	60,587		69,698		6,692

*Source:* World Bank, World Development Indicators (accessed December 9, 2009).

history?<sup>15</sup> If the former, [Table 10.2](#) suggests that the world may not even be unipolar today. If the latter, then the world still seems comfortably unipolar, but major economic trends suggest a different future. I favor the latter definition. The world would thus cease being unipolar when coalitions of two powers can plausibly oppose the greatest power in the system. This still begs the question of how much power this coalition would actually need to assemble to be competitive. Given that the Soviet Union seldom had more than about half the GDP of the US, and was quite competitive, a balancing coalition would not need to equal the US on points, but matching the old Soviet ratio would likely prove inadequate. Given the difficulties of coalition management, an opposing coalition would have to contain two economically and militarily capable states, and the sum total of their relative economic capabilities would probably have to exceed 50 percent of that of the greatest power.<sup>16</sup> A coalition of two would still suffer from collective

<sup>15</sup> “When one state is far stronger than the others, it takes a larger coalition to balance it, and assembling such a coalition entails larger transaction costs and more daunting dilemmas of collective action.” Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> How much aggregate military power a coalition of two would need to get the attention of the unipole is difficult to estimate. It would have to be substantial, but literal parity is too high a standard. States build military power for particular contingencies, and states also have different comparative

action and coordination problems but these seem much more manageable than larger combinations. I hypothesize, but cannot prove, that such real and potential coalitions will be taken quite seriously by the greatest power in the system.

The description of the present structure of world power as “unipolar,” which emerged quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and which has gained wide currency, remains difficult to refute, even now. The US still enjoys a very comfortable margin of superiority in both extant military power, and the economic underpinnings that make those capabilities possible. Additionally, the US has the global diplomatic and military presence, and the diplomatic and military skills, necessary to manage and sustain a truly global foreign policy, if not always successfully. No other nation-state can do so at this time. And it is difficult for the moment to envision a plausible combination of nation-states that could truly stand against the US in a hot war (whatever that would look like under present conditions), or even sustain the costs of a “cold war.”

It seems likely that coalitions of two will begin to give the US pause within the next two decades, a problem it has not faced since the end of the Cold War.<sup>17</sup> This is mainly a result of the economic growth of China and India, and to a lesser extent the economic recovery of Russia and the growth of Brazil. Some might attribute the economic growth of these powers to their ability to exploit the global trading system that the US helped to create and helps to maintain. Hence some expect them simply to support the system. The larger part of their economic progress, however, probably arises from their embrace of “modernity,” their willingness to introduce some form of free markets, and their still underutilized demographic resources and geographic size, which provide them with enormous potential.

By 2025, the US National Intelligence Council sees a China with roughly 60 percent of US power potential, using a composite index of

advantages. During the 1950s, the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union did not by CIA estimates match US defense spending, and its military was not a mirror image of that of the United States. Between 1951 and 1964, estimated in dollar (1972) terms, the US allocated roughly 1,204 billion dollars for military purposes, to the Soviet Union's 1,061. Noel E. Firth and James H. Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending: A History of CIA Estimates, 1950–1990* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), Figure 5.7 Dollar Cost of US and Soviet Military Programs 1951–64: 113.

<sup>17</sup> 2025 *Global Trends Final Report*.

economic, military, demographic, and “innovation” indices. In terms of GDP alone, China is expected to pass the US in 2036.<sup>18</sup> In terms of share of global manufacturing, China may already have passed the US.<sup>19</sup> It is also the case, however, that China’s global share of high technology manufacturing industries on the whole remains much lower than that of the US, and that much of China’s manufacturing value added is to be found in the less sophisticated links of global supply chains. Nevertheless, China is improving its position, surpassing Japan for the number two slot in 2005.<sup>20</sup> China’s GDP at current dollar exchange rates probably passed that of Japan this year, and due to China’s foreign exchange operations its GDP is underweighted. Critics of the notion of China as a peer competitor are quick to point out that China will still face a comparatively low per capita GDP, which will limit what it can extract from its population. It should be remembered, however, that personal consumption in the Soviet Union was probably never more than about a third that of the US; states can choose between guns and butter.<sup>21</sup>

Given the range of US advantages, a recurrence of a bipolar competition in the next several decades is unlikely. It seems plausible, however, that the US will soon become concerned that China not find an ally among the other extant or emerging consequential powers: the EU, Japan, India, Russia, or Brazil.<sup>22</sup> Though some of these

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 7. The original source cited by the NIC is Goldman Sachs, Global Economics Paper No. 99, October 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Marsh, “US Unmoved by Imminent Loss of Industry Top Slot,” *Financial Times*, August 11, 2008, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> “Digest of Key Science and Engineering Indicators 2008,” from Appendix Tables 6-10 and 6-11, *Science and Engineering Indicators 2008*, National Science Foundation.

<sup>21</sup> “Memorandum For Dr. Milton Kovner, Deputy Director, Office of Soviet Union Affairs, Dept. of State, Briefing on the Soviet Economy,” CIA, March 7, 1975 ([www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov) accessed December 1, 2009): “Consumer Welfare. It has been the Soviet consumer who has paid the price for the high priority accorded by Soviet leaders to defense needs and providing for rapid industrial growth. His per capita consumption is only one-third that of the average US citizen” (5). See also US CIA, *Comparison*, p. viii, “Soviet per capita expenditures for consumer durables are less than 20 percent of the US level.”

<sup>22</sup> Goldman Sachs predicts that India’s GDP could equal that of the US only a decade after China’s, though per capita GDP there would also significantly lag that of the US. See Tushar Poddar and Eva Yi, “India’s Rising Growth Potential,” Goldman Sachs, Global Economics Paper No. 152, January 22,

potential alliance combinations may seem implausible, so have some that actually occurred in the past. Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union collaborated after World War One to rebuild their respective military capabilities; the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany collaborated in 1939–1940 to split up Poland; Communist China abandoned the Soviet Union and teamed up with the US during the Nixon administration because the Soviet Union seemed too strong. If China does find such an ally, we would expect to see the US attempt vigorously to alter its own alliance relationships, demanding larger and more meaningful material contributions from its most capable partners. At the same time, these partners may also have other alliance options. A strong incentive to compete for allies would be a mark of a multipolar system, even if the US were still the number one power by a significant margin.

### **The “self-abrading” nature of unipolarity: structural realist predictions**

The contributions in this book approach unipolarity from two different standpoints. Some stick closely to a structural argument. Anarchy and the distribution of power figure prominently in these analyses. They address the relationship between any unipole and its weaker counterparts. The specifics of US power and purpose are less important than the unipolar configuration of power. The other chapters focus more on the specifics of US power under present circumstances. Any unipole is tempted to organize international politics according to its own interests; these chapters focus on the specific interests and domestic makeup of the United States. What kind of hegemonic system has the US tried to build, and what kind of contradictions has this project produced?

Though some anticipated the demise of one or the other superpower during the Cold War, theorists did not anticipate the unipolar world. Scholars have had to figure it out as it unfolded. The US is the only unipole we know about, and as several of the authors in this volume have admitted, it is difficult in offering “predictions” to separate deductions from realist theory, from observations of what has actually

2007, 5. The document retains the earlier estimate that China could surpass the US by 2036.

occurred. Different schools of realism would offer different predictions and explanations.

“Offensive realists” should expect the single pole to try to take advantage of its moment of superiority to try to consolidate that moment: in an anarchical world, permanent top dog status provides as much security as one can reasonably expect, but this situation is so wonderful that the incentives to defend it are very strong. Jervis observes in an ironical circumlocution that it is far from clear that the unipole “should seek to maintain existing arrangements,” and then goes on briskly to explain why:<sup>23</sup> The characteristic error of unipolarity is “excessive expansion” due to the permissive structure and “human nature.” Power is best checked by counter-power, which is largely missing in a unipolar world, by definition. Interests tend to expand with power. In a classical dynamic, the pursuit of these new interests brings with it more threats to these interests, which in turn require more action to forestall. Finally, in the condition of anarchy, even states happy with the status quo worry about the future and will try to “defend” themselves from possible threats to the maintenance of their power advantage.<sup>24</sup>

“Defensive realists” would expect the unipole to lose its interest in international politics, and simply do less. For them power is only a means to the end of security, and what state could be more secure than the unipole? The structure of power offers no imminent threat, so why divert significant resources from consumption to foreign affairs, including war? This prediction understates the influence of anarchy – which gives the unipole both opportunity, and “motive” – the temptation to try to lock in its hard-won advantage. That said, there is an important insight here. Immediate threats tend to generate more energy and more discipline than do diffuse opportunities and future threats. Though the unipole will be sorely tempted to attempt many things, its efforts will probably be underresourced, materially and intellectually.<sup>25</sup>

How will others behave in this system? Because realists depict the international system as an anarchy in which states can rely only on themselves to secure their autonomy, they expect competition for power. The condition of anarchy encourages such behavior, and the distribution of power tells us a little something about how the

<sup>23</sup> Jervis, *Chapter 8*, this volume.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*    <sup>25</sup> Walt, *Chapter 4*, this volume.

competition will likely ensue. Power is the means to secure a state, but because it is so critical, it is also an end of everyday state policy. Power is of course distributed unequally, so some states simply cannot do much to secure themselves. But all states are incentivized to look to their own security. The more capable are drawn to compete for power, and emulate the successful security practices and habits of their peers. In particular, those states that can do so often “balance” against the greatest powers in the system. They seek allies (external balancing), and/or mobilize power internally – usually military power (internal balancing). The less capable seek shelter: they lower their profiles when they can, seeking to avoid great power competition. When forced, they will seek protection from great powers, and *in extremis* they may even bandwagon with the strongest and most aggressive.

Because the distribution of power is so unequal in a unipolar system, balancing is difficult and potentially dangerous work. Those theorists who have wrestled with the incentives of the unipolar structure, and those who have studied how the current unipolar system has worked, suggest that there will not be much balancing, or that it will be attenuated.<sup>26</sup> The US lead, especially in military power, is seen as too daunting to overcome. Internal balancing is not likely to pay off in the near term for plausible competitors. The distribution of economic power beyond the unipole, the material base for competition, is viewed as too fragmented to allow a manageable balancing coalition.<sup>27</sup> External balancing is therefore difficult. Thus, many expect the unipole to find little real opposition.<sup>28</sup>

That there are barriers to effective balancing, however, does not mean that the others will not try. The position of US dominance is uncomfortable. The incentives that inhere in the anarchical condition remain. A structural theory predicts that many other states will try to improve their positions relative to the unipole.<sup>29</sup> The natural activism of the unipole reminds them regularly of the uncomfortable aspects of their relative position, and prompts them to do something about it.

<sup>26</sup> S. G. Brooks and W. C. Wohlforth, “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” *International Security* 30, 1 (2005): 72–108.

<sup>27</sup> Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 45–48, essentially expect no balancing for a very long time, because the US lead is so great, in so many areas, that no state or coalition can plausibly match it, so they will not even try.

<sup>29</sup> Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume.

The distribution of power encourages them to be cautious, but not to do nothing. Those with conflicting interests will do what they can to improve their positions. They may not find strong allies, but they will find weak ones, and combine with them to generate what influence they can.<sup>30</sup> Their military power may not be entirely competitive with that of the unipole, but they will work to fix it up.<sup>31</sup> The unipole may be intimidating most of the time, but its omni-directional interests may divert its attention elsewhere, providing opportunities for gain.

Even allies, or to be more candid, willing security dependencies, of the unipole are likely to find their situation uncomfortable. The absence of a peer competitor allows the unipole a great deal of discretion.<sup>32</sup> It can act when and how it wants. It can tend to its clients' problems, or it can divert its attention elsewhere. Students of alliances often talk about the dilemma of abandonment or entrapment.<sup>33</sup> In any alliance either problem can emerge, but, where the alliance is founded on a common security threat, that threat can serve as a source of discipline, and hence provide some degree of predictability for all. The unipole's clients simply do not know what to expect, so they too are incentivized to buy insurance – to surreptitiously build capabilities and relationships that would allow them to look after themselves.<sup>34</sup> The unipole's hold over its allies may therefore be more attenuated than it appears. The unipole, by virtue of its great power, will also attract to it states or groups with their own orthogonal agendas, which the unipole might be induced to support. The unipole should hold the whip hand in these relationships because it is so much stronger, but its multiple interests and concerns may allow clever and patient clients to borrow this power for the odd enterprise. Arguably this occurred in Bosnia and in Kosovo. And, a succession of Israeli governments has managed to continue settlement projects in the West Bank, which the US opposes, without disrupting the flow of US military assistance.

### *The unipolar moment and the diffusion of power*

The temptations of the unipolar moment, and the costs of US activism are magnified by a phenomenon that some are calling “the diffusion

<sup>30</sup> Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume. This falls under the rubric of “soft balancing.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Most would call this “hard balancing.”

<sup>32</sup> Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume.

<sup>33</sup> Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume.

<sup>34</sup> Walt, *ibid.*, borrows from Chris Layne to call this “leash slipping.”

of power.”<sup>35</sup> This concept remains a bit airy but encompasses two trends, which appear to be real and meaningful. First, across much of the developing world central governments weakened, more or less as the Cold War ended. Pakistan is only the scariest example. Weakening central governments may find themselves at war with domestic political factions, or playing willing or unwilling host to violent non-state actors. Even before the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001, the great powers were uneasy about these weak or failing states. They loathed the human rights violations that are a hallmark of civil war. And they feared the negative externalities of refugee flows and criminal enterprises. September 11 added a concern that these poorly governed spaces would prove hospitable to terrorist organizations. Most great power military intervention since the end of the Cold War has been driven by the problem of weakened central governments, and the US has been at the forefront of several demanding projects including interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

There is also a particularly great concern for states that are capable enough to build advanced weapons, especially nuclear weapons, but which are nevertheless weak enough to risk collapse and the loss of control over said weapons. Pakistan is the present worry. The diffusion of power in this case thus creates a strange combination – major potential threats to the safety of the strong emanating from the weak. It is enormously tempting to the unipole to address this kind of threat preventively. More generally, nuclear proliferation to middle powers is proving a constant concern because even marginally capable states can give the US pause if they possess nuclear weapons. Thus a great deal of US foreign policy effort has been spent trying to reverse the North Korean nuclear weapons program, and suppress Iran’s efforts to master the technology that would permit it to build nuclear weapons. Charitably, the US invaded Iraq in part because of fears of a possible future nuclear capability.

These temptations to intervene, however, collide with the second aspect of the diffusion of power. Despite Western military-technological prowess, there seems to be a narrowing of the gap between the military capabilities of the great powers, and the middle and small states (and non-state groups) who choose to oppose them. One reason for this was the collapse of the Soviet Union and

<sup>35</sup> 2025 *Global Trends Final Report*: iv, ix, x, 1, 68, 70, 81.



Warsaw Pact, which permitted a vast outflow of infantry light and heavy weapons. More states are able to produce medium-quality military equipment than has previously been the case. Russia inherited the bulk of the USSR's arms production capabilities, and has become an energetic exporter. China is improving the quality of its domestic arms industry, and its products, and is also one of Russia's biggest customers. Finally, new producers have entered the market, with Iran perhaps the most noteworthy. This diffusion of military production capacity has the effect of making small states and non-state actors more independent of great power influence than they once were, and more able to inflict costs on great powers who try to push them around.

Military skill also seems to have diffused. The spread of literacy and the free flow of people, goods, and information associated with globalization may permit states and non-state groups that are willing to fight larger powers to share lessons and improve their overall military expertise. Moreover, across the developing world, weapons and expertise can be combined with significant numbers of motivated young men. The upshot is that great powers may have to pay a higher premium to combat the smaller ones than has been true in the past. For example, though comparison is tricky, it is striking that the US effort in Iraq has been about as time consuming and costly in dollar terms as its effort in Vietnam, and the adversary in Iraq did not have a superpower patron, or even a particularly good cross-border sanctuary.<sup>36</sup> The US did deploy many fewer people in uniform for the Iraq operation than it did in Vietnam, and suffered many fewer deaths. A comparison of overall casualties, however, awaits clearer information about the range and duration of less visible physical and psychological injuries that US forces may have suffered, but the less visible human costs appear to be significant.<sup>37</sup>

### *Summary*

Though it may be difficult to liberate ourselves from the evidence provided by the unipolar system that we have in fact observed, the

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Daggett, "CRS Report for Congress, Costs of Major U.S. Wars" (Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, July 24, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> "Suicides in Marines, Army Hit Record in '09," *USA Today*, December 11, 2009, 16.

following predictions seem fairly inferred from the structure of the system. The unipole will likely be active and undisciplined. Though it may not pour sufficient scarce resources into foreign adventures to truly sap its power, one nevertheless predicts a good bit of wasted effort. The combination of structural temptations with the “diffusion of power” worsens this process. At the same time, these efforts will produce a variety of countervailing actions that are not conducive to the maintenance of the unipole’s relative power advantage. They provide evidence to others of the risks posed by their inferior situations. Other states will do what they can to improve their internal capabilities, and will conspire to hinder the projects of the unipole. The unipole’s own allies will also prove sources of waste as they get into mischief that generates costs for the unipole. One cannot infer from these dynamics alone anything about the pace of a unipole’s “relative” decline. It does seem, however, that a structural perspective predicts a kind of “self-abrasion.” In our own time, this “self-abrasion” will likely interact with real changes in the relative economic capabilities of key actors. As others become more capable, they may become more active. If they become more active, US room for maneuver will diminish.

### **The self-abrading nature of US “liberal hegemony”**

The peculiar projects of the US unipole may tell us a bit more about the trajectory of the current unipolar system. Several chapters in this book provide insights. Essentially, the US cannot restrain itself from damaging the liberal institutions it has created, mainly because it is still more powerful than the other members of these institutions, and this produces temptations to cheat when the rules prove inconvenient. Finnemore reminds us that power structures, national or international, will try to legitimate themselves and institutionalize themselves.<sup>38</sup> They do what they can to convince those subject to their power to accept the concentration of power as a positive thing. The goal is to make the exercise of power more efficient, to elicit willing compliance from subjects. Those in power or with power must thus convince subjects that the concentration of power serves their interests in a general way. Concentrations of power will also endeavor to institutionalize their

<sup>38</sup> Martha Finnemore, [Chapter 3](#), this volume.

rule – to develop organizations, processes, and procedures that pursue the purposes of those in power, and that are themselves legitimate.

The sparest legitimated hegemony consistent with unipolarity would be based on the legitimating principle of order: Pax Romana, Britannica, or Americana. The unipole keeps international peace in exchange for the fealty of autonomous states. This peace is advantageous for most members of the system, despite its indignities. The unipole advances order as a positive value, organizes a sustained public information campaign around the notion of order, and from time to time intervenes to suppress miscreants and replace them with regimes that accept the value of the order that the unipole offers. The installation of political regimes that recognize the virtues of the order provides the basic institutionalization of the power concentration. The hegemon is also likely to be jealous of its prestige. Regular rituals of obeisance are a necessary concomitant to its legitimating strategy. Though Wohlforth may or may not be right that wars to establish relative status are more likely when states are roughly but asymmetrically comparable in their overall capabilities, if he is correct about status competition in general, it is likely that the unipole will make a fetish of its status as a tool to legitimate its rule.<sup>39</sup> Challenges to the unipole will be seen not only as conflicts over whatever specific interest is engaged, but as challenges to the very notion that the power relationship should be accepted. No particular political ideology is essential in this very spare notion of how a unipole might legitimate and attempt to lock in its hegemony. Most aspiring hegemonies go well beyond this pattern.

The US is a liberal democratic unipole, which is attempting to legitimate and “lock in” its status. Though there is disagreement about the definition of terms, I find it useful to view the US as attempting to build a sustainable “liberal hegemony,” and to do so on a highly fractious democratic domestic political base.<sup>40</sup> It is not a surprise that

<sup>39</sup> William C. Wohlforth, [Chapter 2](#), this volume. See for example Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, noting the opposition of the US to the European Union’s desultory efforts to create even a modest military intervention capability. The US would brook no opposition to the US dominated NATO alliance as the “big dog” in Europe.

<sup>40</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 215–256, develops this argument with reference to the post-Cold War world, though he does not use the term “liberal hegemony,” but rather “western order.” In subsequent writings he began to use the term “liberal hegemony.”

a liberal democracy would endeavor to build a system of institutions, and advance a set of ideas, that are congenial. The US advances free trade, a notion of what constitutes a legitimate state (democracy), and a set of participative international institutions with the trappings of democratic decision making to manage key issues through negotiation rather than pure diktat.

Finnemore suggests that the US, as an aspiring liberal hegemon, creates a lot of trouble for itself. The US uses liberal international institutions as a legitimating tool. These institutions are rule-based, and to fulfill their legitimating function must be seen to treat members equally. The unipole then becomes constrained by the rules that it helped to write, rules that “diminish the unipole’s discretion and by implication its power.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, like any large organization, liberal institutions will take on a life of their own and try to enhance their size and influence. A problem arises when the “implication” of diminished discretion and power for the unipole seems about to be realized in practice. Finnemore suggests that if the basic concentration of power in international politics is indeed unipolar, the capable state will be sorely tempted to violate its own rules at its convenience, i.e., to succumb to hypocrisy. Some of this is acceptable, and will not greatly damage the system that the unipole created. Too much will damage it, and she seems to predict that the unipole will pull back from seriously undermining its own creation. Finnemore concludes that the “strength of a unipolar system depends heavily, not just on the unipole’s material capabilities but also on the social system in which unipolarity is embedded.”<sup>42</sup> I do not believe that this is consistent with the more purely structural argument advanced above and it is not consistent with US practice during or after the Cold War. Instead, it seems more likely that the liberal unipole will be at war with the institutions it created whenever those institutions seem to undermine its power, and those institutions will be at war with the unipole, as soon as its significant relative power advantage begins to wane.

Moreover, the hurly burly of US domestic politics may be an additional source of energy and probably of hypocrisy. Snyder and colleagues suggest that “the vast resources available to the predominant power...can facilitate logrolls in which all objectives...are

<sup>41</sup> Finnemore, [Chapter 3](#), this volume.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

addressed simultaneously.”<sup>43</sup> It would be fortunate if such logrolls were consistently supportive of the liberal international order that the US advances, but this seems unlikely. For reasons too complex to discuss here, the political polarization depicted in their chapter has made a muscular foreign policy, in particular the development and employment of military power, the “test” of a party’s fitness for the presidency.<sup>44</sup> If Snyder *et al.* are correct, then US domestic politics will often lead to “hypocrisy” abroad, rather than consistency with liberal values and institutions.

Mastanduno offers a lengthy case study of a hegemon that cannot abide by its own rules, and which uses its raw power to wriggle out of the constraints. During the bipolar competition with the Soviet Union, the US developed international economic institutions to organize its coalition in the way it believed was conducive not only to peace and order, but to US economic interests. When, however, it was convenient for the US to violate these rules, as it was during the Vietnam War or during the Reagan administration, the US did so. It then forced many of the costs of its deviations onto its allies, who accepted them due to their dependence on US superior power for their basic national security.<sup>45</sup> As Finnemore would predict, the US after the Cold War pressed even harder for a more open international economic order for trade and investment. The subsequent Bush administration, like the Reagan and Johnson administrations before them, could not resist the temptation to exploit the system for their own purposes, generating huge global fiscal imbalances with their combination of high spending and low taxes, coupled with the low US propensity to save. These essays were written before the connection of these imbalances to the US real estate bubble became clear with the bursting of the bubble. It remains to be seen how the costs of these excesses will be distributed, but it appears for the moment that European and Japanese exporters are carrying some of the weight, since their currencies can appreciate against the dollar, and China prevents its own currency from doing so. Will this be acceptable to Europe and Japan because they continue to rely on the US for their security? Or will they adapt in ways that reduce US influence and power?

<sup>43</sup> Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, [Chapter 6](#), this volume.

<sup>44</sup> Szabo, “The Washington Bubble,” 371.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Mastanduno, [Chapter 5](#), this volume.

To the extent that the US has tried to legitimate its unipolar power position through the extension and strengthening of liberal international institutions, the project contains inherent contradictions. It is difficult for a power strong enough to create such institutions to live by their rules when they become inconvenient. Thus, some of the purposes of the project are undermined: the institutions cannot legitimate the unipole's hegemony and thus render it more efficient and affordable. Instead the institutions themselves become a source of conflict, and provide continuing evidence to their members of the importance of raw power differentials, which they will try to do something about.

### **Multipolarity, defense dominance, and the diffusion of power**

Theorists and historians know multipolarity better than they do the other two systems, but there are no active statesmen today with experience of such a system. The *relatively* equal distribution of capabilities in a multipolar world, with three or more consequential powers, produces one basic pattern of behavior: the arithmetic of coalitions influences matters great and small. The overall balance of capabilities, and the military balance in particular, is easily altered in a significant way depending on who sides with whom. Internal efforts cannot accomplish nearly as much change, at such a low cost, in such a short time. Thus states are slower to react to others' internal military developments, because allies can be had to redress the balance. States should lack confidence that significant military buildups can help them much, because others can combine against them. Autonomous military power does remain important, and states will look to their own military capabilities, but diminishing returns should set in sooner than they would in other structures of power. States that try to improve their power position, and those that try to stop them, will seek allies. Thus, diplomacy becomes a respected career again under multipolarity. Hans Morgenthau, a great admirer of multipolarity, was also a great admirer of diplomacy. Isolation is perhaps the most dangerous situation in multipolarity, so states will pay close and constant attention to the game of coalition-building. They will try to find and secure allies for themselves, and will eye warily the efforts of others to do the same. All will try to improve their own coalitions and erode those of others.

If indeed the distribution of capabilities among great powers is slowly evolving toward multipolarity, what behaviors might we predict? A problem quickly emerges. As we try to say something about real matters in a real world, other facts of the case begin to complicate our analysis – even if we stick largely to security matters. Offense–defense theory provides some hints about the future, which looks like it will strongly favor the defense.<sup>46</sup> Where defense has the advantage, the competition for power is ameliorated. Though it has proven difficult to code whether offense or defense has had the advantage historically, and therefore difficult to test the theory in a compelling manner, the emerging global reality probably favors the strategic defender quite strongly for both geographic and technological reasons. First, the US is buffered by oceans from much of the world’s traditional security competition and remains well endowed with the human and material resources to go it alone. Indeed many of the world’s consequential powers are buffered by geography from one another and even from the United States, despite its mastery of the global commons. On a global scale, geography favors the defense. Second, I believe, though I cannot prove, that among great powers, evolving conventional capabilities favor the defense. It seems plausible that among proximate technological and economic and social equals, the military information technology revolution – including surveillance and precision targeting – will make it harder to attack than to defend.<sup>47</sup> It should be more difficult to take ground than to hold it, and more challenging to cross oceans with men and materiel and land them on a hostile shore, than to prevent amphibious attack.<sup>48</sup> Finally, and of greatest importance, nuclear weapons also favor the strategic defense; nuclear weapons states are conquerable only at the risk of mutual suicide. All but two of the consequential powers possess significant nuclear forces, which makes them virtually impossible to conquer, and difficult to

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Michael Brown, *Offense, Defense, and War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Many students of recent military history might find this statement strange. New technologies have appeared to favor the offense, but noteworthy operations such as the 1991 and 2003 wars with Iraq have pitted a very strong US against very weak states, armed mainly with obsolescent weapons. We need to imagine what a clash of modern conventional arms among proximate equals would entail.

<sup>48</sup> My colleague Owen Cote calls this the “stopping power of beaches.”

coerce. Japan and Germany are excluded from the nuclear club, but could enter it quickly. These three factors, added to a somewhat more equitable distribution of economic potential, should tend to mute great power military competition.

Some competition for power is to be expected, however. The experience of the US as the “unipole” should be a cautionary one. An extremely secure state nevertheless reached out to expand its power and influence. Some combination of fears about the future, and temptation presented by power vacuums, elicited a great deal of US overseas behavior. We can expect national security establishments to worry about the future: so long as anarchy permits predation they will ensure against the possibility. Uncertainty about present and future power relationships will remain. In normal times states may distill only a fraction of their economic power into military power compared to what they could or would do under other conditions. None can truly know the others’ possible energy or efficiency in generating military power in the future. And states will prudently fear military technological breakthroughs: unfortunately the best way to protect oneself against such breakthroughs is to try to create them. States will seek some comfort margin in the military capabilities that matter most to them, which will in turn discomfit others. Some natural resources will seem scarce, and even if market-oriented states eschew direct control of foreign production, they will wish to have privileged influence over these producers, as we have seen in the case of energy production. States will continue to worry about the strategic value of key geographic features, locally and globally. All members of the system will likely therefore continue to compete to improve their positions and simultaneously undermine that of their brothers and sisters.

As noted above, a “diffusion of power” seems to be occurring in the world, and this will likely affect international politics as multipolarity emerges. We can expect that the great powers will continue to view the developing world as a source of security threats, meriting intervention. Not all great powers will agree on any given project, so some will view the “defensive” projects of others as having ulterior motives. Some states will have an incentive to hinder the efforts of their peers to pacify the ungoverned spaces. Their direct interest may be engaged, or the intervention may prove a tempting opportunity to “bleed” other great powers. Their capabilities to do so will improve, particularly given the growing military skill of the indigenous peoples they can assist. States



organizing interventions will therefore be very concerned about costs, and will seek allies to spread the costs around, and dissuade others from helping the locals.

What general patterns of great power behavior could emerge from the factors discussed above? First, the competition for power is likely to persist, though this is more a statement of general realist conviction than an inference from the multipolar structure of power. Second, because of "defense dominance," the pattern of competition will look much like an endless series of games played for small stakes. States will want more, but will not wish to court disaster. Third, and consequently, states will look for ways to "measure power" without war. The diplomacy of making and breaking coalitions, and counting allies, will present itself as an attractive, if complex alternative. Fourth, it will likely appear to the competitors that the safe way to improve one's relative position is to pursue policies that weaken others. Increasing others' costs when they undertake initiatives will seem wiser than undertaking one's own adventures. John Mearsheimer's "bait and bleed" strategies may become more common. Fifth, the diffusion of power will continue to seduce great power adventures. Yet, the capabilities of local actors, and the potential intervention, even if indirect, of other great powers, will raise the potential costs of those adventures. Therefore, these projects too will increase the importance of other powers. Diplomacy will be required to discourage opposition, encourage alliance, or at least elicit neutrality. Sixth, geography may matter more to the military forces that states buy. If economic potential is more equal, states may have to make choices about the kinds of military power they generate. Land powers will be land powers, and sea powers will be sea powers, and thus to tilt with each other they may require allies of the other type.

## **Conclusion**

The transition from bipolarity to unipolarity was marked by dramatic events. Perhaps the intense nature of the bipolar competition naturally led to a stark finish of one kind or another: a preventive war, or a national collapse. Unipolarity seems destined for a different kind of transition. The US has many attributes that contribute to its power advantage and its security, and which have made the world unipolar. It seems unlikely that all of these advantages would suddenly disappear.

Direct competition with the US will appear daunting for quite some time to come.

An incremental transition to multipolarity does seem likely, however. The costs of US efforts to make the world over in its image relative to the benefits could ultimately begin to tell. Temptations to intervene abroad will persist, but the direct costs will be significant. At least some other powers will find US energy disturbing, and will find ways to increase US costs, and better their own positions. The liberal international institutions that the US has sponsored will become arenas of conflict, as other consequential powers tire of US hypocrisy. As the profits of its activism diminish, the US may itself gradually be inclined to do less, especially given its problems at home. At the same time, uneven economic growth will alter the basic balance of capabilities among the principal powers. Though straight line extrapolation is unwise, barring a calamity China, India, and Brazil will grow quickly in the coming decades. The US capability advantage in economic power will diminish, and concomitantly its advantages in military power will likely narrow. As this occurs, the other principal powers will find themselves more able to tilt with the US, but also more dependent on themselves for their security and more inclined to reach out to one another, or to fear one another. A multipolar order may gradually creep up on us, rather than emerge with a crash.

## *Sell unipolarity? The future of an overvalued concept*

JEFFREY W. LEGRO

For at least the past thirty years, scholarship on international relations has been bewitched by a simple proposition: the polarity of the international system is a central cause of great power strategies and politics.<sup>1</sup> The number of “poles” (dominant countries) in the system is like an invisible fence that shapes states as if they were dogs with electronic collars or a Skinner box that conditions national “rats.” States can choose to ignore the fence or box, but if they do, they must pay the consequences. The polarity of the international system as defined by the number of great powers – involving more than two (multipolarity), two (bipolarity), or one (unipolarity) – is expected to mold states and international politics in different predictable ways. The central place of polarity in IR theory is such that it is commonly assumed that the appropriate way to study the world is to examine the impact of polarity first and then move on to other lesser factors to mop up any unexplained variance.<sup>2</sup>

For comments and helpful suggestions, I am grateful to Kyle Lascurettes, William Wohlforth, and participants at a CIPPS seminar at McGill University.

<sup>1</sup> The decisive point was the release of the masterpiece on polarity and the importance of systemic theorizing: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). There have of course been many other studies on polarity – some before Waltz and many after. See, for example, Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957); Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer, “Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability,” *World Politics* 16, 3 (1964): 390–406; Duncan Snidal, “The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory,” *International Organization* 39, 4 (Autumn 1985): 579–614; Randall Schweller, “Tripolarity and the Second World War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 1 (March 1993): 73–103; Edward Mansfield, “Concentration, Polarity, and the Distribution of Power,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 1 (March 1993): 105–128; Ted Hopf, “Polarity, the Offense–Defense Balance, and War,” *American Political Science Review* 85, 2 (June 1991), 475–493.

<sup>2</sup> This is the flavor of Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New

Such a view, however, is problematic. What seems increasingly clear is that the role of polarity has been overstated or misunderstood or both. This is the unavoidable conclusion that emerges from the penetrating chapters in this volume that probe America's current dominant status (unipolarity) with the question "does the distribution of capabilities matter for patterns of international politics?"<sup>3</sup> Despite the explicit claim that "unipolarity does have a profound impact on international politics"<sup>4</sup> what is surprising is how ambiguous and relatively limited that influence is across the chapters.

The causal impact of unipolarity has been overvalued for three fundamental reasons. The first is that the effects of unipolarity are often not measured relative to the influence of other causes that explain the same outcome. When the weight of other factors is considered, polarity seems to pale in comparison. Second, rather than being a structure that molds states, polarity often seems to be the product of state choice. Polarity may be more outcome than cause. Finally, while international structure does exist, it is constituted as much by ideational content as by material capabilities. Again polarity loses ground in significance.

The import is clear: sell polarity. Just like a bubbled asset, polarity attracted excessive enthusiasm in the market of IR concepts. It was not always like that. When Waltz wrote his seminal *Theory of International Politics* (1979), scholars were not paying enough attention to the way capabilities define international structure. But like the idea or hate it, polarity has held court over systemic theory discussions ever since. To be sure, there was a lag in polarity studies after the end of the Cold War as experts attempted to come to grips with the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. Moreover there was a wave of literature that was explicitly non-material and typically addressed the distribution of power as a defective alternative explanation, not a conjoint

York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) that features the primacy of external factors yet allows internal causes to "intervene." Individual contributions in this volume vary in this tendency. Classic realist monographs that feature systemic-level logic include Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major Power War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2000); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, strongly cautions against reductionism.

<sup>3</sup> John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William Wohlforth, [Chapter 1](#), this volume, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

cause.<sup>5</sup> Now, however, a number of insightful books have been written specifically on unipolarity.<sup>6</sup> There is in addition a broader literature that leans heavily on the importance of US primacy or its absence.<sup>7</sup>

What the essays in this volume suggest is that polarity retains importance (don't sell all unipolarity assets), but not as the kingmaker of causation (do reduce portfolio exposure). Instead the effects of polarity are often only apparent in conjunction with other factors. If we are to understand both great power strategies and international structure we need better conjunctural theories that explicitly model how different types of causes interact to produce outcomes. The chapters here offer a start on that effort. This chapter builds on that start by exploring one particular conjunction: how international politics is defined, not just by the structure of power, but also by the dominant ideas within nations and across the international society of nations. The point is not that either power or ideas is key but instead that the interaction and conjoint influence of power *and* ideas best explains outcomes.

<sup>5</sup> Some of this literature is reviewed in Ian Hurd, "Constructivism," in Duncan Snidal and Christian Reus-Smit, eds., *Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); T. V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited," *International Security* 31 (Winter 2006): 7–41; special issue on Unipolarity, *World Politics* 61, 1 (January 2009); William Zartman, ed., *Imbalance of Power: U.S. Hegemony and International Order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008); and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power and World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era*; and Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

What follows has two related parts. First I consider the chapters above to illustrate both the utility and limits of polarity in explaining international politics, especially in this unipolar age. Second, the chapter considers the way that ideas and polarity in conjunction shape international politics – both in terms of state purpose and the nature of international politics.

### Polarity as a cause

Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth usefully define polarity in terms of material capabilities (“military, economic, technological, and geographic”<sup>8</sup>) not influence. This distinction is necessary to examine whether the distribution of capabilities where one, two, or three or more great powers stand out from other countries (and hence are poles) actually converts into some sort of influence on international politics.

This conceptualization leaves out at least one dimension of capabilities that Waltz includes: organizational-institutional “competence.”<sup>9</sup> That factor, however, looks very close to the influence that we would want to investigate as following from raw power and thus threatens tautology. This is especially true because it is not material in the sense that the others are and it defies a priori measurement. Largely a reflection of strategy and decision making, competence looks dangerously close to counting stupidity and cleverness as “material.” John Ikenberry’s chapter illustrates there is utility in separating organizational strategy and capabilities – both can influence the nature of the system.

In the hands of accomplished scholars, polarity has been an esteemed concept in international relations since at least World War Two.<sup>10</sup> Walt’s 1979 opus set the modern-day gold standard: it had tremendous influence promoting the concept of international structure defined by the distribution of capabilities, specifically the number of dominant powers or “poles.” In recent years, scholars have paid special attention to the importance of unipolarity. For example, Brooks and Wohlforth’s recent book is a tour de force on how the systemic constraints on the

<sup>8</sup> Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, [Chapter 1](#), this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 113. Waltz also includes size of population as a determinant of polarity.

<sup>10</sup> See fn. 1 above.

United States in contemporary world politics have been overstated in the international relations literature.<sup>11</sup>

The essays in this volume, however, imply there are declining returns to a single-minded focus on polarity. Polarity faces three significant problems that put in question its elite status as a cause of international politics: it is ambiguous in its impact, endogenous to (rather than a fount of) the purposes of states, and incomplete as the source of systemic structure.

### Ambiguous

Some of the most wide-ranging examinations of the effects of unipolarity are found in this volume. They purposefully explore, not a specific outcome in international politics, but instead, a range of potential effects of unipolarity. They look for influence on the (1) unipole (its goals, provision of public goods, control over outcomes, domestic politics), (2) actions of other states (balancing, alliances, use of institutions), and (3) nature of the international system (the level of conflict, the durability of the power distribution). They find that unipolarity does indeed matter for international politics.

This is a noteworthy finding but has to be taken in context. Given that international relations is determined by many factors, any exercise that limits its focus to the impact of a single variable is going to find some effect. In light of the importance of polarity in the IR literature over the past thirty years, it should not be a shock to find that unipolarity matters in influencing some of these things.

What is more debatable is whether polarity has a “profound impact on international politics.”<sup>12</sup> This claim demands some sort of test of the magnitude of the impact of polarity relative to alternative explanations for the same outcomes. As Jervis notes, “structure influences but does not determine patterns of behavior.”<sup>13</sup> But how much does it influence?

In statistical terms we would want to know what accounts most for the observed variation in the dependent variable. In causal terms we would want to know which theorized mechanisms more accurately capture reality. These are tasks that clearly cannot be taken up in the

<sup>11</sup> See Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance* and the review articles on their book in *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, [Chapter 1](#), this volume, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, p. 256.

limited space of their chapters, so the authors do not engage in any explicit assessment of the effects of polarity relative to other factors. But what is surprising is that to the extent they do, factors other than polarity appear more consequential in shaping the different outcomes.

For Wohlforth, status concerns that pervade international politics are heightened or ameliorated depending on polarity. Different types of polarity unleash different levels of status competition that cause different levels of conflict. Unipolarity reduces status competition because the hierarchy of power is so clear, thus explaining the absence of great power military conflict and competition since 1991. Wohlforth emphasizes the way that relative capabilities shape status. By definition, however, the nature of status competition is, at least partly, exogenous to power (or we would not have to talk about status, but instead just power), so factors other than polarity may account for any reduced competition today. For example, status competition can depend on cultural understandings – as it did in ancient China – not just power. Wohlforth's analysis indicates polarity and status together shape great power behavior. Less clear is whether they have affected the likelihood of war. Status competition should have varied in the move from bipolarity to unipolarity after 1991, but great power war did not. This suggests something else (e.g., nuclear deterrence or norms of warfare) may be behind the absence of great power war both during and after the Cold War.<sup>14</sup>

For Martha Finnemore, the influence of unipolarity is limited by the “social structure” (i.e., the norms) of international politics. Based just on its privileged power, the unipole cannot necessarily get what it wants: it might be constrained by the norms of the international system that infuse institutions, dictate which actors and actions are legitimate, and mediate whether actors are hypocritical. For Finnemore the structure of power is not irrelevant, but power alone is too costly to exercise. States (not just unipoles) must use the social structure of the system to gain leverage over others. The argument makes sense, but is much less about the nature of polarity (it would be true under any distribution of power) than it is about how all actors use social

<sup>14</sup> Joseph M. Grieco, “Structural Realism and the Problem of Polarity and War,” in Felix Berenskoetter and Michael J. Williams, eds., *Power in World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 64–82, in a critique of Waltz's use of polarity concludes that “there do not appear to be solid scholarly grounds in support of the view that polarity systematically influences the likelihood of war or other forms of militarised conflicts” (68).



norms to gain influence – and how all can be stymied by those norms as well.

Stephen Walt explores how unipolarity affects alliance formation. He brings to this task his famous formulation on threats: alliances will depend on the threat the unipole presents and the reactions of others to the dominant state. The question is, to what degree does threat depend on unipolarity? For Walt the answer is ambiguous since threat is driven not just by capabilities, but most importantly by offensive capabilities and actor intentions.<sup>15</sup> We might presume that given the US's overwhelming capabilities and its far-flung geographical reach (witness two land wars fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, areas remote from the United States) they would swamp the other determinants of threat clearly marking the US as a danger against which other states should balance.

But no, in this case, Walt finds that benign US intentions, not capabilities, are doing the lion's share of the work. Walt points to the United States' liberal ideas and its historical legacy of global leadership since World War Two as key factors. The result is that there is little overt "hard" balancing against the United States, though some forms of discrete "soft" balancing are taking place that are intended to hedge against possible malevolent US intentions. But overall, much of alliance formation in current conditions is based on the United States "not trying to conquer large swaths of the world."<sup>16</sup> Intentions, not polarity, are the key.

Perhaps this is unique to unipolarity where a single dominant actor is bound to be central to world politics. However in Walt's view the same dynamic is clear in bipolarity: Europe sided with the United States in the Cold War despite the US's more significant power and armed occupation of Europe following World War Two. The Soviet Union's intentions overwhelmed the US advantage in capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Stephen M. Walt, [Chapter 4](#), this volume, p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> The Soviet Union's close geographic position also played a role, though the United States occupied Western Europe at the end of World War Two. See Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power," *International Security* 9, 4 (1985), 34–37 and the discussion in Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24 (Fall 1999), 36–38.

Uni-malevolence trumped bipolarity. Today uni-benevolence trumps unipolarity. In both cases, polarity gets swamped.

Michael Mastanduno's study of the international economy and US policy focuses on why the US will not get what it wants in the current unipolar system. It raises challenges for the notion of polarity in a different way by arguing that capabilities are often issue specific. "US dominance in the international security arena no longer translates into effective leverage in the international economic arena."<sup>18</sup> He claims that the world was actually more unipolar in economic terms during the Cold War than it has been since 1991. Today the sources of US leverage – the strength of the US dollar as a global reserve currency, the indispensability of the US market, and the dependence of others on (and the credibility of) the US security guarantee (since the Cold War ended) – is reduced. With waning relative economic power and more dependence on other actors, the United States can be expected to get less of what it wants and there will be more volatility in the international economy. In essence, Mastanduno sees US economic interdependence as more important than unipolarity.

Robert Jervis provides the most nuanced and perhaps elusive account of unipolarity's impact on peace, stability, public goods provision, and durability. His analysis shows most clearly there is not much to say about unipolarity's effects without relying heavily on other factors. There is very little that unipolarity or "structure" (by which he means the distribution of capabilities) can explain on its own. For example the claim that "security concerns are greatly reduced for the unipole and for others it protects"<sup>19</sup> is dependent on the notion that the United States is benign and that others are too. A unipolarity dominated by Nazi Germany would be different. Similarly, if another power were intent on war in the current unipolarity, the world would be very dangerous. For now, none are. But great power intent is not necessarily structural, and as seen below, may in fact determine structure.

Indeed from the structural capabilities perspective that Jervis uses as a launching pad, what is really difficult to understand is why states have not done more to secure themselves against America's power. After all, in an anarchic world where states must rely on themselves and there is no overarching authority to call for help, they should do

<sup>18</sup> Michael Mastanduno, [Chapter 5](#), this volume, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, p. 258.

anything possible to protect against the potential of an unpredictable hegemon exercising its power wantonly.<sup>20</sup> But that has not happened.

And from a structural perspective, we should expect the unipole to use its power for quite expansionist aims – what Jervis citing Waltz and others refers to as “the characteristic error of unipolarity.”<sup>21</sup> But the United States has not done so – or at least it has done so modestly given the nature of its advantages. To the extent it has expanded, the reasons for doing so may be more closely connected to domestic politics than polarity. Indeed Bloch-Elkon *et al.* make the case that any US expansion is as much a result of partisan politics as the international distribution of power.<sup>22</sup> Again polarity pales.

Unipolarity’s lack of determinism or independent causal weight requires an appeal to other factors to make sense of unipolarity’s effects. For example, besides the nature of the unipole and the intentions of others, Jervis invokes key aspects of “current circumstances” such as the security community among leading states, nuclear weapons, the widespread acceptance of liberal norms, and the danger of terrorism. Of these, nuclear weapons appear to dominate polarity. Jervis ponders “what would remain of a unipolar system in a proliferated world?” and seems to suggest not much. Here in a nutshell is the key dilemma for unipolarity and polarity in general: once we control for other factors, unipolarity’s role seems marginal.

The strong flavor of the chapters is not about the impact of unipolarity, but instead what makes the impact of the current asymmetrical distribution of power so limited. Factors such as status competition, nuclear weapons, legitimacy, threat, economic interdependence, and a variety of features unique to the current international environment seem to overwhelm polarity. At a minimum, in each case, it is a conjunction of unipolarity and other factors that together have an impact.

## Endogenous

The second issue for unipolarity is that far from being an objective structure that shapes state choice, it appears to be the *product* of state

<sup>20</sup> See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

<sup>21</sup> See Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, pp. 262–263.

<sup>22</sup> Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, [Chapter 6](#), this volume.

choice. If this is so, the priority of systemic theorizing is in doubt and the dangers of “reductionism” (i.e., explaining international politics by relying on unit level traits) are diminished.<sup>23</sup> If polarity is a choice, then there can be no systemic theorizing on the balance of power without some reference to the determinants of state choice. Rather than privileging structure in the study of world politics, this would suggest the need for more attention to the thinking and actions of great powers.

The notion that structure is caused by choice is apparent in several chapters. For Walt it appears in the intentions of the unipole; for Jervis it is values, and for Ikenberry it is organizational style. Such factors are attributes or strategies; they are not products of the asymmetry of material power. Of course, it may be that it is exactly because of the structure – i.e., unipolarity – that the preferences, values, and organizational style of the unipole do play such a huge role. Still such an argument raises a major puzzle: why has the United States resisted the main unipolar structural incentive that should supposedly guide it – i.e., excessive expansion?<sup>24</sup>

For example, since the end of the Cold War the United States has not done a whole lot to reshape the dominant international institutions that structure global politics and largely failed when it has tried to do so. There have of course been some regional pacts (e.g., NAFTA) and efforts based on old institutions (e.g., NATO enlargement, GATT/WTO). The George W. Bush administration did successfully create the Proliferation Security Initiative, but this modest venture was a partial exception that proves the rule. This underambition and underachievement, moreover, has come at a time when there seems to be demand for change given that many international institutions today appear outdated.<sup>25</sup> Scholars such as John Ikenberry, Stephen Brooks, and William Wohlforth and policy makers like Douglas Hurd (foreign secretary of Britain from 1989 to 1995) argue that the United States after 1991 had an ideal opportunity to “remake

<sup>23</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 60–67.

<sup>24</sup> Jervis, *Chapter 8*, this volume; Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25 (Summer 2000), 13.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Kishore Mahbubani, “The Impending Demise of the Postwar System,” *Survival* 47, 4 (2005): 7–18; G. John Ikenberry, “A Weaker World,” *Prospect* (November 2005): 30–33; Hanns Maull, “The Precarious State of International Order,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, 1 (2006): 68–77.

the world, update everything, the UN, everything.”<sup>26</sup> We are still waiting.

The US inclination to use its power after the end of the Cold War was fairly anemic.<sup>27</sup> It appeared that Richard Cheney as Secretary of Defense attempted to get the government started in a more ambitious direction in the defense planning guidance process that produced the “Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy” in 1993 at the end of the George H. W. Bush administration.<sup>28</sup> But in reality that was more an effort to fend off even greater defense budget reductions than it was evidence of growing US global ambition.<sup>29</sup> The Clinton administration struggled to find a grand strategy. And the George W. Bush administration came into office forswearing global military involvement, nation-building, and maintaining international order.<sup>30</sup>

Then came September 11, 2001 and things changed. Robert Jervis, as usual, puts his finger directly on what happened and its theoretical importance: “Had terrorism not intervened, we might be talking about decaying or potential unipolarity rather than real unipolarity, as

<sup>26</sup> Hurd quote is from Mary E. Sarotte, 1989: *The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4. See John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Reshaping the World Order: How Washington Should Reform International Institutions,” *Foreign Affairs* 88, 2 (March/April 2009): 49–63.

<sup>27</sup> For a longer discussion of US policy see Jeffrey W. Legro, “The Mix That Makes Unipolarity: Hegemonic Purpose and International Constraints,” *Review of International Affairs* (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992. See too “Excerpts from the leaked Defense Planning Guidance that *The New York Times* published on March 8, 1992,” National Security Archive, [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc03\\_extract\\_nytedit.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_extract_nytedit.pdf) (accessed November 18, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> It was mired in internal controversy and only issued at the last moment without higher level presidential promotion. See Eric Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *In Uncertain Times: American Strategy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> See Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America between the Wars* (New York: Public Affairs, 1980).

awkward a distinction as this is from the standpoint of structure.”<sup>31</sup> Or put differently, there was no actual unipolarity evident before 9/11 because the United States *chose* not to occupy that role. After 2001, the “Bush Doctrine” was a more expansive strategy closer to that expected from the structure of unipolarity. The Bush administration, however, also consciously abandoned that strategy in its second term from 2005 to 2009.<sup>32</sup> Rather than strategy being a product of polarity, polarity was a product of the choices of the United States.

This is not a phenomenon limited to the contemporary world. After World War One the United States emerged as the most powerful country in world affairs. But rather than grow its military to increase its dominance and embed its troops in the foreign lands it occupied in 1918, the United States cut its defense spending and called the troops home.<sup>33</sup> Rather than seize leadership of the global economy and order, US leaders refused to make commitments.<sup>34</sup> The United States, in effect chose not to create a unipolar world after the war.

Immediately after World War Two the United States was in an even stronger position of “potential” unipolarity as the world’s only nuclear power and producer of some 50 percent of the world’s economic output (today it is closer to 25 percent). Yet it did not use that power to overexpand. Instead it used that power to secure alliances and build international institutions to protect and nurture an international order compatible with its interests, as described in the chapter by John Ikenberry. That was a different choice than the non-entanglement following World War One and it was also very different than the more expansionist policy we might expect from such a powerful country – one even more dominant than after 1991.

In all these cases, after 1919, after 1945, and after 1991, what the United States did varied more significantly with the way it thought about the world and the strategies it preferred than any incentive

<sup>31</sup> Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, p. 270.

<sup>32</sup> Philip H. Gordon, “The End of the Bush Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, 4 (July/August 2006): 75–86.

<sup>33</sup> David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>34</sup> Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

or constraint of its asymmetrical power. Since those choices are not explained by the structure of international power, we require an exogenous theory of America's thinking and preferences.

The polarity of the system depends not only on the unipole, but also on the choices of lesser powers as well. They after all can also decide to deploy their resources in ways that can alter the basic system structure that is so often treated as the source of choices. Consider, for example, Randall Schweller's analysis of tripolarity in the interwar period. He contends that a key cause of the changes in national strategies in the 1930s was a shift in polarity in the international system from "multi" to "tripolarity" (with the United States, Russia, and Germany as the poles). This change might be seen as simply a product of the grinding gears of the constantly changing world political economy. This, however, was not the case for Nazi Germany. Instead tripolarity was largely the product of a purposeful and intense military buildup by one actor – Germany.<sup>35</sup> Polarity alone did not breed the aggression that started World War Two. Aggressive intentions were the more proximate cause – specifically, a culmination of German resentments from the World War One settlement. National choice caused systemic polarity; the rat conditioned the box, the dog controlled its silent fence.

Polarity today similarly depends on the thinking of at least two other actors: China and the European Union. Widely seen as a future pole, China could reach that status much quicker than expected by analyses that predict a lag of two-to-four decades, if it chose to do so. Its GNP is rapidly rising and even if its per capita income will not equal that of the United States for some time, its aggregate wealth is mounting rapidly. Today China is sitting on a mound of cash – over \$2 trillion – that if it were converted into military power could make it a much more significant challenger – at least in Asia. Kenneth Waltz suggested in 1993 that the international system was not unipolar despite the collapse of the USSR because Russia still had a secure second strike arsenal.<sup>36</sup> By these standards at least, China could arguably choose to

<sup>35</sup> Randall Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), esp. 26–29, 93–120.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, 2 (1993): 44–79.

be a pole today by focusing on a rapid nuclear buildup and the strengthening of its sea power in the littoral waters of the Pacific and South Pacific.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, if the European Union could establish its authority over its members and begin to plan like a unitary state, it too could become a peer competitor for the United States in a relatively short time.<sup>38</sup> While both outcomes are unlikely, they do indicate that the polarity of the system is made not just by the existing poles. Other countries, those that are potential poles, can also mold polarity by their choices.

To posit that analysts should start with structure defined as polarity to explain state choices and international outcomes when state choices present a clear and powerful cause of polarity is of course deeply problematic. At a minimum, this endogeneity requires some account of the national policies that are in many cases the beginning of the causal chain. If states make choices about polarity anticipating the structures those choices will cause, it would be misguided to place too much causal autonomy on structure (i.e., polarity) itself.

## Incomplete

A final problem in the study of unipolarity is a conception of structure limited to capabilities. This, however, ignores the ideas (i.e., norms, rules, and principles) that provide the rules of different international systems over time. The nature of international order – its durability, the level of conflict, the degree of interdependence – may indeed be affected by the distribution of capabilities. But they also depend on the norms and rules of any particular order – that can vary even as a particular type of polarity is the same. This suggests that we need to understand not only capabilities, but what John Ruggie called systemic “content.”<sup>39</sup>

Martha Finnemore addresses this dimension directly by emphasizing “social structure” – i.e., the norms that dominate the international

<sup>37</sup> For an argument that Asia is and will be bipolar see Robert Ross, “The Geography of the Peace: Great Power Stability in Twenty-First Century East Asia,” *International Security* 23, 4 (Spring 1999): 81–118.

<sup>38</sup> Kupchan, *The End of the American Era*.

<sup>39</sup> John G. Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36 (1982), 382.



systems such as “sovereignty, liberalism, self-determination, and border rigidity.”<sup>40</sup> Wohlforth notes that unipolar systems can differ according to different cultural understandings that affect status competition and conflict. As we have seen, some of these depend on the unipole, but as Robert Jervis points out, “whether others will comply also depends on nonstructural factors, especially the coincidence or discrepancy between the worlds they prefer and the one sought by the superpower.”<sup>41</sup> As Finnemore writes, “power alone tells us little about the kind of politics states will construct for themselves.”<sup>42</sup> But what does tell us the kind of politics and social structures states will construct for themselves?

Dominant powers appear to spend much time and effort attempting to provide the principles – if not the primary model for national development – in the international system. Michael Mastanduno recounts how the United States since World War Two has been intent on maintaining the liberal economic design of the system in the face of challenges from alternative models from developing economies in the “New International Economic Order” or from the state-directed development of Japan (or China today).<sup>43</sup> The Cold War was fueled as much by a competition to define the content of world politics as it was an exercise in insecurity based on comparable capabilities under bipolarity.

Great powers want to control the values and norms that characterize the international system because it makes exercising influence cheaper. If others are on board with the basic principles, then the unipole does not need to use as much muscle (or grease as many palms) to get its desired outcome.<sup>44</sup> When there are no feasible alternatives to the dominant set of norms and models, we can expect more integration and cooperation.<sup>45</sup> Indeed we might expect a strong and dominant set of systemic values to be a source of stability even as power varies.

<sup>40</sup> Martha Finnemore, [Chapter 3](#), this volume, p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, p. 257.

<sup>42</sup> Finnemore, [Chapter 3](#), this volume, p. 68.

<sup>43</sup> Mastanduno, [Chapter 5](#), this volume, pp. 156–158; on the rise of an authoritarian model, see Azar Gat, “The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, 4 (July/August 2007): 59–69.

<sup>44</sup> Finnemore, [Chapter 3](#), this volume, pp. 71–72; Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, p. 261.

<sup>45</sup> See Jervis, [Chapter 8](#), this volume, pp. 268–269.

This is in part what Ikenberry predicts in his chapter arguing that the US has become the “Grand Central Station” of the international system not just because of its power, but because its rule-based, open, and inclusive order breeds vested interests, economies of scale, and opportunities to thrive that raise barriers and reduce incentives to overthrow it. Coupled with a lower potential for great power war (thanks to nuclear deterrence and democratic peace), the US unipolar order could live on even as the US’s relative power dissipates.

Yet to suggest that the content of the international system (not just polarity) matters still begs the question of where content comes from and when it is likely to remain stable or change. The strong claim would be that the content of the system depends simply on the unipole and its power-molded preferences. But no one in these chapters makes that case. The puzzle of system content again points to the need for a more complex view of the causal role of polarity.

### **Conjunctural causation**

These three problems – the ambiguity, endogeneity, and incompleteness of unipolarity – are issues that trouble not only our understanding of the current international system, but polarity in general. Together they question the significant role polarity (and a view of international structure based on capabilities) has played in international relations theory since Waltz’s (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. If unipolarity is dwarfed by other causes in relative causal weight, if it is endogenous to actor choice, and if systemic structure itself is defined by ideas versus capabilities, then polarity’s privileged place as a cause of world politics is diminished. The common wisdom that Jervis puts succinctly – “we should still start our analysis with structure” – hardly seems compelling.<sup>46</sup>

This “primacy of polarity” view risks skewing our understanding of international politics by encouraging a positive finding of polarity influence and discouraging further investigation of other arguments that may provide superior explanations. Why continue to examine situations where polarity gives a seemingly coherent answer?<sup>47</sup> Similarly,

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>47</sup> i.e., omitted variable bias. See too Legro and Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” 52.

the presumption of an “additive” research practice that asks us to start with polarity and then move on to other factors is that the world is one where causes are independent and their effects can be summed. If the world, however, is one where certain factors are only influential in interaction with other factors, then an additive model would be misspecified and lead to faulty results.<sup>48</sup>

These issues strongly suggest that we need to look beyond standard polarity analysis by pursuing conjunctural analysis – where two or more factors interact in regular and conjoint ways to produce results.<sup>49</sup>

As a collective project that focuses on unipolarity’s effects, this book clearly risks ignoring the conjunction of causes. Individual chapters, however, are rich in considering, or suggesting the possibilities for, conjunctural causation. Wohlforth explores the intersection of polarity and the status-seeking genetic nature of humans; Finnemore, polarity and international social structure; Walt, polarity and intentions; Mastanduno, polarity and rise and decline; Jervis, polarity and “current circumstances”; Ikenberry, polarity and unipole order strategy; and Snyder *et al.*, polarity and domestic politics.<sup>50</sup> These chapters identify, but mostly do not probe, the dynamics of these conjunctural causes – i.e., how they lead to continuity and change in effects, and how exactly their interactive (not additive “unipolarity plus y”) logic produces impact.

To say that polarity has received too much prominence in the study of international relations is not to say it is irrelevant. Instead, it is to suggest that polarity’s impact is not as a causal variable that dominates international structure, but instead that it is a factor that works synthetically with other causes to shape outcomes. In what follows, a sketch of one particular conjuncture – i.e., between power and ideas – is explored.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Bear F. Braumoeller, “Causal Complexity and the Study of Politics,” *Political Analysis* 11, 3 (2003): 209–233. For a similar critique of a different literature, see Benjamin O. Fordham, “The Limits of Neoclassical Realism: Additive and Interactive Approaches to Explaining Foreign Policy Preferences,” in Lobell *et al.*, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, 251–279.

<sup>49</sup> Ragin, *Comparative Method*, 24–30.

<sup>50</sup> Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, [Chapter 6](#), this volume.

### *The interaction of polarity and ideas*

If the polarity of the system deserves less of an emphasis in the study of international politics, then the question is, what deserves more? One candidate is found in the ideas that motivate national strategies and that characterize international order.<sup>51</sup> The point is not that polarity has no impact and ideas are the main cause. Instead it is about how pragmatic rational actors (state officials and states themselves) are shaped both by power and dominant social ideas in making the politics that produce national strategies and systemic rules.

States and international orders require dominant ideas and rules to facilitate cooperation, coordination, and collective action. Actors at both levels compete to control the ideas that guide collective thinking. If these ideas were simply a product of who had power at any particular time, or what a particular individual actor thought, they would change when power changed or when new actors replaced old actors – and they would be meaningless. Yet US ideas about international commitments did not change when the United States became the top dog after World War One. German ideas about foreign policy became much more aggressive in the early 1930s even though Germany's potential relative power had not changed dramatically.

Collective ideas are resistant to change both within national and international societies because such notions are often inspired by past events that are tattooed on individual and societal memories, entrenched in practices and institutions, backed by partisans who benefit from them, and subject to collective action hurdles that deter change efforts. Typically it is difficult for individual actors to know if others desire change, and if they do, how much they will risk in acting on their preferences. Lacking such information, they cannot be sure that their own desire and efforts for change will have any effect. They must mount a case for why the old ideas are defunct, which can involve considerable effort; and because doing so threatens tradition, they invite

<sup>51</sup> For a fuller exposition of this argument that follows, see Legro, *Rethinking the World*. Other takes on the interaction of ideas and power are Henry R. Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Georg Sorensen, "The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR," *European Journal of International Relations* 14 (2008): 5–32. A different type of conjunctural argument can be found in Fordham, "The Limits of Neoclassical Realism."

social and political sanction. This is typically the source of findings that “history” or path dependence matter.

These societal ideas are however sometimes subject to change according to a “does it work?” pragmatic logic. When events do not meet the expectations of existing ideas and the results are undesirable, critics of existing ideas have opportunities to convince others to take action to challenge them. To realize change, critics must also agree on a new orthodoxy and its effectiveness. Reform efforts can founder on an absence of alternatives or too many alternatives or a perceived failure of new thinking.

Polarity and power clearly play a role in this synthesis. Relative power can negate or sustain the expectations generated by a state’s dominant ideas of appropriate action. Hitler was able to gain momentum and political support within Germany in part because his rapid buildup caught other countries unawares producing early victories that gave plausibility to his radical plans and weakened his domestic critics.<sup>52</sup> Relative power can make a particular type of international structure (one that combines polarity and rules) endure or collapse. Wohlforth explains that Gorbachev’s attempt to enshrine new thinking/mutual security as the dominant global model failed because the Soviet Union had no booty to back it.<sup>53</sup>

This view of state intentions and international structure is explicitly conjunctural. It features the way that ideas and power work together to shape incentives for actors and outcomes. Ideas define expectations which provide guidelines to assess outcomes. But the goalposts for action depend on preexisting ideas. The need for this type of conjunctural analysis is clear in looking at sources of the two key foundations of unipolar international politics: national strategies and international structure.

### *Polar intentions*

The nature of great power intentions shapes international structure in terms of both capabilities and content. Great powers can sometimes choose to become poles – or not. If state purpose were simply a product

<sup>52</sup> Legro, *Rethinking the World*, 109–110.

<sup>53</sup> William Wohlforth, [Chapter 2](#), this volume, pp. 64–65.

of the distribution of power, there would be no need to discuss what shapes purpose. But that is not the case.

The history of US foreign policy reflects the fact that US thinking about managing the international arena does not march in lock-step with its polarity. To be sure, increasing power can influence ambition.<sup>54</sup> Yet throughout history, even as its relative power was growing, the United States has been amazingly reticent to change its thinking about the international arena and it has usually not attempted to rewrite international rules. Indeed, it appears that the US approach to major power politics only changed significantly during World War Two. In those years, the United States discarded its longstanding desire to separate itself from the political-military entanglements of the international system and instead choose to integrate itself. The “Bush revolution” represented a potential second effort, but it was abandoned relatively quickly.

A conjunctural approach involving ideas and power is one way to explain this variation. Political leaders adopt broad ideas (strategies) to explain national action and justify their own choices, thus setting a baseline of social expectations of what should result. Domestic political supporters and opponents then use those baselines to assess – and support or critique – existing policies depending on events. Power shapes the ability of different policies to generate results. Ideas without power are ineffective. Power without ideas does not motivate and/or coordinate supporters and critics.

When events match the expectations leaders generate with desirable results there is little pressure for change – even if polarity indicates change is likely. For example, the end of the Cold War did not contradict the expectations of the existing US approach or bring unwanted results. The United States had adhered strictly to its postwar position of active commitments to international order and containment. And the outcome from that behavior – the end of the Cold War on US terms – was widely seen as a success. With no challenge to the US orthodoxy and no negative results for critics and reformers to use to

<sup>54</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) has explored how this took shape in nineteenth-century America when the United States, at least for a time, took on imperial ambition. The problem is he does not look at other periods like the interwar period when US relative power soared but it checked its ambition at the door.

rally fence sitters, it was difficult to reorient US strategy for the new era away from the old tried and true Cold War formula. Inertia and the defenders of tradition easily deflected a variety of task forces and commissions pushing for change in the United States in the 1990s.

The dynamics of the conjunctural approach help to account for both the effort at change following 9/11 and its failure. In contrast to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 9/11 attacks did contradict expectations that Cold War thinking could continue to provide for US security.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the ground had been prepared for a replacement strategy. A dedicated and energetic set of social activists – commonly referred to as “neoconservatives” – had developed and promulgated a coherent world view in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> These thinkers held influence and positions in the government in the Bush administration. Thus when the 9/11 attack unsettled the commitment to the old ideas, they had an approach ready to go that could replace it.

The problem was that effort achieved some successes but, mired in Iraq, resented by international opinion, and largely perceived as ineffective, it lost significant support. In the 2008 presidential election, both the Democratic and Republican candidates promised a retreat from the Bush agenda, and a return to the prior consensus.<sup>57</sup> Indeed the Bush administration itself, in 2005 and after, had already largely returned to a position that was more akin to its Cold War predecessors than the new doctrine initiated after 9/11.<sup>58</sup>

In sum, whether US ambition and its approach to international order changes or not, depends not just on its power, but on preexisting ideas, alternative concepts, the expectations they generate, and events. Polarity still matters – for example, superior capabilities allowed the United

<sup>55</sup> See the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), especially on the “failure of imagination.”

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004); Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> John McCain, “An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, 6 (November/December 2007): 19–34; Barack Obama, “Renewing America's Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, 4 (July/August 2007): 2–16.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Mike Allen and Romesh Ratnesar, “The End of Cowboy Diplomacy,” *Time*, July 9, 2006; and Gordon, “The End of the Bush Revolution.”

States leverage in shaping the content and competence of international order. But the limited power of even the hegemon to ensure success in a world of many challenges was evident in the reversal of the Bush revolution.

### *The content of polarity*

Just as individuals compete to establish the dominant ideas that guide nations, so too do states contest the content of international structure (Finnemore's "social structure"). The logic of what shapes that contest bears resemblance to the pragmatic politics that shape the strategies of states. Orders evolve based on power and perceived effectiveness. Principles and models gain dominance because they fulfill the expectations they offer with desirable results. Events that challenge those rules provide room for potential change in content.

International order is not simply the product of the strongest – others must be accommodated and won over as well.<sup>59</sup> A range of scholarship suggests there must be common interests or shared purpose between the hegemon and other important countries, or they must be persuaded/coerced into joining ranks to form some sort of international order.

This argument takes at least three different forms. The first comes from John Ruggie who argues that order requires congruence of social purpose among states. Power and purpose do not always move in the same direction. For example, the economic program of Holland's rivals in the seventeenth century did not match its own mercantilism. Furthermore there must be a fit between domestic social purpose and that of international regimes. Thus the interwar free market structure of global capitalism was not acceptable to states that turned to a government management model.<sup>60</sup>

Robert Gilpin points to the need for common interests for a "potential" hegemony to translate into "actual" order. The hegemon can "seldom coerce reluctant states to obey the rules... and must seek their co-operation. These other states co-operate with the hegemon

<sup>59</sup> International rules are likely shaped more by power than struggles within states where institutions often mediate the struggle to control the state.

<sup>60</sup> Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions and Change," 384.



because it is their own economic and security interests to do so.”<sup>61</sup> Thus the United States played the lead role in organizing the international system after World War Two, but it did so with the strong support of the allies – and to the extent order existed internationally, in tacit collaboration with the Soviet Union.

The third approach to hegemony comes from the Gramscian tradition that sees hegemony as mainly a project of domination where consensus trumps coercion. In this view hegemony is initially established as a result of a deal (historic bloc) that is cut between the strong and the weak (classes, states, etc.). This deal over time assumes a taken-for-granted status that facilitates order.<sup>62</sup>

In short, power alone is not enough to establish order; it also depends on the ideas/intentions/preferences and policies of other states in the international system. The ability to cut deals depends on accommodating these and persuading others that one has a workable set of policies and principles.

The fact that order – even in hegemonic unipolar situations – demands the cooperation and deal making of the dominant powers sets up the dynamics of pragmatic politics at the system level as well. States compete to demonstrate the efficacy of their models as the paradigms for structuring international order. At times particular models/states are able to gain hegemonic roles to which others adapt. The international society school has explicated the way that Europe’s rules spread and became the basis for today’s global rules.<sup>63</sup> The Cold War saw the United States undertake an extensive effort to spread its own values in the international system as John Ikenberry charts above.

And at least since the end of the Cold War (and for a good bit before that) the United States has continued to attempt to define order – albeit not in equal measure to its power. These US efforts have of course generated pushback at times – illustrating that there are

<sup>61</sup> Robert Gilpin, “The Rise of American Hegemony,” in Patrick Karl O’Brien and Armand Clesse, eds., *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846–1914 and the United States 1941–2001* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 165–182; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” *Millennium* 12 (1983): 162–175.

<sup>63</sup> Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

other constraints in the international system besides the distribution of power.<sup>64</sup>

At the international level, events that contradict the expectations generated by dominant actors and their ideas will nurture opportunities for critics of the dominant ideas to attempt to alter the content of structure.<sup>65</sup>

Certainly opponents of the US-supported principles of the international system – e.g., human rights, rule of law, liberal economic policies, etc. – have used US deviations from those principles as a tool to undermine American authority and the system itself. Martha Finnemore nicely shows how legitimacy and hypocrisy are used to constrain the United States when it violates existing rules and its own self-proclaimed principles.

Claims of efficacy matter as well. For example, the meltdown of the global economy in 2008–2009 produced many critiques of the US-led system. There were arguments made from different quarters that different national economic systems might provide better models (e.g., state directed capitalism) or international economic rules (i.e., more heavily regulated as in the EU). The stabilization of the global economy and the United States has for the time being stalled such critiques. But the dynamic is familiar – from Western models replacing local ones in Japan and other countries in Asia in the late nineteenth century, to the challenge fascist states made vis-à-vis democracies in the 1930s. States that produce desirable results and fulfill the expectations they generate will be in a good position to act as models for the content of international structure.

As Wohlforth points out, in this battle over whose rules will define the content of international structure, “the ability to persuade is linked to material capability.”<sup>66</sup> Yet it is also true that capabilities and claims and competence are assessed vis-à-vis particular ideas. Hence international structure is defined by ideas as well as power. And whether

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of these constraints, see Legro, “The Mix that Makes Unipolarity.”

<sup>65</sup> For an insightful account of the way some international systems become defined by transnational ideological conflict between states offering different domestic political orders – and how those clashes end when great powers that exemplify them fall behind and cannot deliver on their promises, see John M. Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510–2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Wohlforth, [Chapter 2](#), this volume, p. 64.

structure endures or changes depends on the interaction of capabilities and ideas that allow the dominant power(s) to retain legitimacy or those who oppose it (them) to gain momentum.

### **Polarity is dead, long live unipolarity**

If the above is right, perhaps the primacy of polarity in international relations theory has passed from the scene. Because of its ambiguous impact as an autonomous cause, because it appears to be as much a product of state choice as an arbiter of state choice, and because it incompletely characterizes the nature of international structure, polarity should be stripped of its advantaged causal position. That is what these chapters collectively suggest.

Yet polarity as a “normal variable” – along with others such as institutions, political structure, ideology, interdependence, etc. – endures. Polarity matters and deserves attention. Most important for understanding the future of world politics, we need to explain better how polarity works in conjunction with other factors to shape outcomes involving both the intentions of states and the content of international structure. The chapters in this book point to rich possibilities. What is needed is work to illuminate how the interaction of these different variables produces particular policies and structures. A causal portfolio dominated by polarity is a path to impoverished understanding; polarity in the mix with other factors promises dependable returns.

There are good reasons to believe that unipolarity as a description of world politics may be with us for a while. This is true both because the United States has a significant advantage in material capabilities that may wane but will not disappear in the next two decades and because other prominent countries have not yet displayed ambitious intentions that suggest they will make a run at polar status.<sup>67</sup> The answers to how much longer that situation can continue and with what impact will likely depend on the conjunction of power and ideas.

<sup>67</sup> See Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*; Jeffrey W. Legro, “What China Will Want,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, 3 (Sept. 2007): 515–534. China is the most likely current contender.

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