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# The Stability of a Unipolar World

William C. Wohlforth

The collapse of the Soviet Union produced the greatest change in world power relationships since World War II. With Moscow's headlong fall from superpower status, the bipolar structure that had shaped the security policies of the major powers for nearly half a century vanished, and the United States emerged as the sole surviving superpower. Commentators were quick to recognize that a new "unipolar moment" of unprecedented U.S. power had arrived.<sup>1</sup> In 1992 the Pentagon drafted a new grand strategy designed to preserve unipolarity by preventing the emergence of a global rival.<sup>2</sup> But the draft plan soon ran into controversy, as commentators at home and abroad argued that any effort to preserve unipolarity was quixotic and dangerous.<sup>3</sup> Officials quickly backed away from the idea and now eschew the language of primacy or predominance, speaking instead of the United States as a "leader" or the "indispensable nation."<sup>4</sup>

The rise and sudden demise of an official strategy for preserving primacy lends credence to the widespread belief that unipolarity is dangerous and unstable. While scholars frequently discuss unipolarity, their focus is always on its demise. For neorealists, unipolarity is the least stable of all structures because any great concentration of power threatens other states and causes them to take action to restore a balance.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars grant that a large

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1. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Winter 1990/1991), pp. 23–33.

2. Patrick Tyler, "The Lone Superpower Plan: Ammunition for Critics," *New York Times*, March 10, 1992, p. A12.

3. For the most thorough and theoretically grounded criticism of this strategy, see Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; and Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 86–124.

4. The phrase—commonly attributed to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—is also a favorite of President Bill Clinton's. For example, see the account of his speech announcing the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Alison Mitchell, "Clinton Urges NATO Expansion in 1999," *New York Times*, October 23, 1996, p. A20.

5. Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 915–916; Layne, "Unipolar Illusion"; and Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving

concentration of power works for peace, but they doubt that U.S. preeminence can endure.<sup>6</sup> Underlying both views is the belief that U.S. preponderance is fragile and easily negated by the actions of other states. As a result, most analysts argue that unipolarity is an “illusion,” a “moment” that “will not last long,” or is already “giving way to multipolarity.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some scholars question whether the system is unipolar at all, arguing instead that it is, in Samuel Huntington’s phrase, “uni-multipolar.”<sup>8</sup>

Although they disagree vigorously on virtually every other aspect of post-Cold War world politics, scholars of international relations increasingly share this conventional wisdom about unipolarity. Whether they think that the current structure is on the verge of shifting away from unipolarity or that it has already done so, scholars believe that it is prone to conflict as other states seek to create a counterpoise to the overweening power of the leading state. The assumption that unipolarity is unstable has framed the wide-ranging debate over the nature of post-Cold War world politics. Since 1991 one of the central questions in dispute has been how to explain continued cooperation and the absence of old-style balance-of-power politics despite major shifts in the distribution of power.<sup>9</sup>

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the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 44–98. Although I differ with Waltz on the stability of unipolarity, the title of this article and much of its contents reflect intellectual debts to his work on system structure and stability. See Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Summer 1964), pp. 881–901.

6. See Charles A. Kupchan, “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–79. Samuel P. Huntington maintained this position in Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 63–83, but he has since abandoned it. A more bullish assessment, although still more pessimistic than the analysis here, is Douglas Lemke, “Continuity of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 1996), pp. 203–236.

7. As Glenn H. Snyder puts it, the international system “appears to be unipolar, though incipiently multipolar.” Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 18. The quoted phrases in this sentence appear in Charles A. Kupchan, “Rethinking Europe,” *National Interest*, No. 56 (Summer 1999); Kupchan, “After Pax Americana,” p. 41; Layne, “Unipolar Illusion”; Mastanduno, “Preserving the Unipolar Moment”; and Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” p. 914. Although Charles Krauthammer coined the term “unipolar moment” in his article under that title, he argued that unipolarity had the potential to last a generation.

8. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (March/April 1999), p. 36. For similar views of the post-Cold War structure, see Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 5–33; and Josef Joffe, “Bismarck’ or ‘Britain’? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 94–117.

9. The assumption that realism predicts instability after the Cold War pervades the scholarly debate. See, for example, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace—An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993); and

In this article, I advance three propositions that undermine the emerging conventional wisdom that the distribution of power is unstable and conflict prone. First, the system is unambiguously unipolar. The United States enjoys a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries. Moreover, the United States is the first leading state in modern international history with decisive preponderance in *all* the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical.<sup>10</sup> To describe this unprecedented quantitative and qualitative concentration of power as an evanescent “moment” is profoundly mistaken.

Second, the current unipolarity is prone to peace. The raw power advantage of the United States means that an important source of conflict in previous systems is absent: hegemonic rivalry over leadership of the international system. No other major power is in a position to follow any policy that depends for its success on prevailing against the United States in a war or an extended rivalry. None is likely to take any step that might invite the focused enmity of the United States. At the same time, unipolarity minimizes security competition among the other great powers. As the system leader, the United States has

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David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For more varied perspectives on realism and unipolarity, see Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Explanations for stability despite the balance of power fall roughly into three categories: (1) liberal arguments, including democratization, economic interdependence, and international institutions. For examples, see Bruce M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); John R. Oneal and Bruce M. Russett, “The Classical Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950–1985,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 267–294; G. John Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the American Postwar Order,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 43–78. (2) Cultural and ideational arguments that highlight social learning. See John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1989); and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chap. 6. (3) Arguments that highlight systemic and material factors other than the balance of power, such as globalization, the offense-defense balance, or nuclear weapons. See Stephen G. Brooks, “The Globalization of Production and the Changing Benefits of Conquest,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (October 1999); and Stephen Van Evera, “Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War,” in Jones and Miller, *Cold War and After*.

10. I focus on material elements of power mainly because current scholarly debates place a premium on making clear distinctions between ideas and material forces. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; and Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999). Many nonmaterial elements of power also favor the United States and strengthen the argument for unipolarity’s stability. On “soft power,” see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

the means and motive to maintain key security institutions in order to ease local security conflicts and limit expensive competition among the other major powers. For their part, the second-tier states face incentives to bandwagon with the unipolar power as long as the expected costs of balancing remain prohibitive.

Third, the current unipolarity is not only peaceful but durable.<sup>11</sup> It is already a decade old, and if Washington plays its cards right, it may last as long as bipolarity. For many decades, no state is likely to be in a position to take on the United States in any of the underlying elements of power. And, as an offshore power separated by two oceans from all other major states, the United States can retain its advantages without risking a counterbalance. The current candidates for polar status (Japan, China, Germany, and Russia) are not so lucky. Efforts on their part to increase their power or ally with other dissatisfied states are likely to spark local counterbalances well before they can create a global equipoise to U.S. power.

The scholarly conventional wisdom holds that unipolarity is dynamically unstable and that any slight overstep by Washington will spark a dangerous backlash.<sup>12</sup> I find the opposite to be true: unipolarity is durable and peaceful, and the chief threat is U.S. failure to do enough.<sup>13</sup> Possessing an undisputed preponderance of power, the United States is freer than most states to disregard the international system and its incentives. But because the system is built around U.S. power, it creates demands for American engagement. The more efficiently Washington responds to these incentives and provides order, the more long-lived and peaceful the system. To be sure, policy choices are likely to affect the differential growth of power only at the margins. But given that

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11. I define "stability" as peacefulness and durability. Kenneth Waltz first conflated these two meanings of stability in "The Stability of a Bipolar World." He later eliminated the ambiguity by defining stability exclusively as durability in *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). I avoid ambiguity by treating peacefulness and durability separately. Durability subsumes another common understanding of stability: the idea of a self-reinforcing equilibrium. To say that an international system is durable implies that it can experience significant shifts in power relations without undergoing fundamental change. See Robert Jervis, *Systems Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), chap. 3.

12. Because overwhelming preponderance favors both peace and durability, stability is less sensitive to how the United States defines its interests than most scholars assume. In contrast, many realists hold that stability is strictly contingent upon Washington's nonthreatening or status quo stance in world affairs. See Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment." Similarly, Kupchan, "After Pax Americana," argues that the United States' "benign" character explains stability.

13. This was Krauthammer's original argument in "The Unipolar Moment." For a comprehensive review of the debate that reflects the standard scholarly skepticism toward the stability of unipolarity, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter 1996/97), pp. 5–54.

unipolarity is safer and cheaper than bipolarity or multipolarity, it pays to invest in its prolongation. In short, the intellectual thrust (if not the details) of the Pentagon's 1992 draft defense guidance plan was right.

I develop these propositions in three sections that establish my central argument: the current system is unipolar; the current unipolarity is peaceful; and it is durable. I then conclude the analysis by discussing its implications for scholarly debates on the stability of the post-Cold War order and U.S. grand strategy.

### *Lonely at the Top: The System Is Unipolar*

Unipolarity is a structure in which one state's capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced.<sup>14</sup> Once capabilities are so concentrated, a structure arises that is fundamentally distinct from either multipolarity (a structure comprising three or more especially powerful states) or bipolarity (a structure produced when two states are substantially more powerful than all others). At the same time, capabilities are not so concentrated as to produce a global empire. Unipolarity should not be confused with a multi- or bipolar system containing one especially strong polar state or with an imperial system containing only one major power.<sup>15</sup>

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14. This definition flows from the logic of neorealist balance-of-power theory, but it is consistent with classical balance-of-power thinking. See Layne, "Unipolar Illusion," p. 130 n. 2; Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, chap. 1; Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), pp. 22–36; Harrison Wagner, "What Was Bipolarity?" *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 77–106; and Emerson M.S. Niou, Peter C. Ordeshook, and Gregory F. Rose, *The Balance of Power: Stability in International Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 76.

15. Germany was clearly the strongest state in Europe in 1910, and the United States was generally thought to be the strongest state in the world in 1960, but neither system was unipolar. One of Waltz's most widely accepted insights was that the world was bipolar in the Cold War even though the two poles shared it with other major powers such as France, Britain, West Germany, Japan, and China. In the same vein, a system can be unipolar, with unique properties owing to the extreme concentration of capabilities in one state, and yet also contain other substantial powers. Cf. Huntington, "Lonely Superpower," who defines unipolarity as a system with only one great power. Throughout this article, I hew as closely as possible to the definitions of central terms in Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, as they have gained the widest currency. Although the distinction between bipolarity and multipolarity is one of the most basic in international relations theory, scholars do debate whether bipolar structures are more durable or peaceful than multipolar ones. For a concise discussion, see Jack S. Levy, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1 (1998), pp. 139–165. There are good reasons for analyzing tripolarity as a distinct structure. See Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Is the current structure unipolar? The crucial first step in answering this question is to compare the current distribution of power with its structural predecessors. The more the current concentration of power in the United States differs from past distributions, the less we should expect post-Cold War world politics to resemble that of earlier epochs. I select two cases that allow me to compare concentrations of power in both multipolar and bipolar settings: the Pax Britannica and the Cold War.<sup>16</sup> Within these two cases, I highlight two specific periods—1860–70 and 1945–55—because they reflect the greatest concentrations of power in the system leader, and so have the greatest potential to weaken the case for the extraordinary nature of the current unipolarity. I also include a second Cold War period in the mid-1980s to capture the distribution of power just before the dramatic changes of the 1990s.

#### QUANTITATIVE COMPARISON

To qualify as polar powers, states must score well on *all* the components of power: size of population and territory; resource endowment; economic capabilities; military strength; and “competence,” according to Kenneth Waltz.<sup>17</sup> Two states measured up in 1990. One is gone. No new pole has appeared:  $2 - 1 = 1$ . The system is unipolar.

The reality, however, is much more dramatic than this arithmetic implies. After all, the two superpowers were hardly equal. Writing in the late 1970s, Waltz himself questioned the Soviet Union’s ability to keep up with the United States.<sup>18</sup> The last time the scholarly community debated the relative power of the United States was the second half of the 1980s, when the United States was widely viewed as following Great Britain down the path of relative decline. Responding to that intellectual climate, several scholars undertook quantitative analyses of the U.S. position. In 1985 Bruce Russett compared the U.S. position of the early 1980s with that of the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. His conclusion: “The United States retains on all indicators a degree of dominance reached by the United Kingdom at no point” in the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Another useful comparison pursued by Layne, “Unipolar Illusion,” is the Hapsburg ascendancy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. I omit it for space reasons (the comparison to pre-Westphalian international politics is especially demanding) and because of limited data.

17. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 131.

18. Writing of the United States in the 1960s, Waltz notes, “Never in modern history has a great power enjoyed so wide an economic and technological lead over the only other great power in the race.” *Ibid.*, p. 201. Throughout he is more concerned about the United States’ *surplus* power and its associated temptations than about the rising power of any other states.

19. Bruce M. Russett, “The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony. Or, Is Mark Twain Really Dead?” *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring 1985), p. 211. See also Samuel P. Hunt-

In 1990 both Joseph Nye and Henry Nau published detailed studies of the U.S. position in world politics and the international political economy. Their conclusions mirrored Russett's: 1980s' America was a uniquely powerful hegemonic actor with a much more complete portfolio of capabilities than Britain ever had.<sup>20</sup>

In the years since those assessments were published, the United States' main geopolitical rival has collapsed into a regional power whose main threat to the international system is its own further disintegration, and its main economic rival has undergone a decade-long slump. The United States has maintained its military supremacy; added to its share of world product, manufactures, and high-technology production; increased its lead in productivity; and regained or strengthened its lead in many strategic industries.<sup>21</sup> Although recent events do remind us that the fortunes of states can change quickly in world politics even without war, the brute fact of the matter is that U.S. preeminence is unprecedented.

Table 1 shows how U.S. relative power in the late 1990s compares with that of Britain near its peak, as well as the United States itself during the Cold War. The United States' economic dominance is surpassed only by its own position at the dawn of the Cold War—when every other major power's economy was either exhausted or physically destroyed by the recent world war—and its military superiority dwarfs that of any leading state in modern international history. Even the Correlates of War (COW) composite index—which favors states with especially large populations and industrial economies—shows an improvement in the United States' relative position since the mid-1980s.<sup>22</sup>

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ington, "The U.S.: Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 1988/1989), pp. 76–96; and Susan Strange, "The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony," *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Autumn 1987), pp. 551–574.

20. Nye, *Bound to Lead*; and Henry R. Nau, *The Myth of America's Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

21. By the 1980s, U.S. productivity growth had fallen to 1 percent a year. Since 1992 the rate of increase has been as high as 3 percent a year. See Nicholas Valéry, "Innovation in Industry," *Economist*, February 20, 1999, p. 27. For comparisons that show the increased productivity gap in favor of the United States among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, see European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Transition Report 1997* (London: EBRD, 1997).

22. The COW index combines the following indicators with equal weights: total population, urban population, energy consumption, iron and steel production, military expenditures, and military personnel. As noted in Table 1, 1996 data were compiled by the author from different sources; COW methodology may lead to different results. I include the COW measure not because I think it is a good one but because it has a long history in the field. Quantitative scholars are increasingly critical of all such composite indexes. Gross domestic product (GDP) is becoming the favored indicator, a trend started by A.F.K. Organski in *World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1965): pp. 199–200, 211–215, and furthered by Organski and Jacek Kugler in *The War Ledger* (Chicago:



**Table 1. Comparing Hegemonies.****a. Gross Domestic Product as Percentage of "Hegemon"**

Year	United States	Britain	Russia	Japan	Austria	Germany	France	China
1870	108	100	90	n.a.	29	46	75	n.a.
1950	100	24	35	11	n.a.	15	15	n.a.
1985	100	17	39	38	n.a.	21	18	46
1997(PPP)	100	15	9	38	n.a.	22	16	53
1997 (exchange rate)	100	16	5	50	n.a.	25	17	10

**b. Military Expenditures as Percentage of "Hegemon"**

Year	United States	Britain	Russia	Japan	Austria	Germany	France	China
1872	68	100	120	n.a.	44	65	113	n.a.
1950	100	16	107	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	10	n.a.
1985	100	10	109	5	n.a.	8	8	10
1996	100	13	26	17	n.a.	14	17	13

**c. Power Capabilities (COW) as Percentage of "Hegemon"**

Year	United States	Britain	Russia	Japan	Austria	Germany	France	China
1872	50	100	50	n.a.	27	50	60	n.a.
1950	100	37	103	n.a.	n.a.	3	21	n.a.
1985	100	22	167	56	n.a.	28	22	156
1996	100	14	43	36	n.a.	21	18	118

SOURCES: GDP figures, 1870–1985, from Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995). GDP figures, 1997 (PPP [purchasing power parity]), from Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) *World Factbook, 1998* (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>). GDP figures, 1997 (exchange rate), from Economist Intelligence Unit, *World Outlook, 1998* (London: EIU, 1998). Military expenditures and COW, 1872–1985, from J. David Singer (University of Michigan) and Melvin Small (Wayne State University), "National Material Capabilities Data, 1816–1985" (computer file) (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research). Military Expenditures, 1997: International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1997/98* (London: IISS, 1998). COW, 1996, compiled from IISS, *Military Balance 1997/98*; American Iron and Steel Institute, *Annual Statistical Report, 1997* (Washington, D.C.: AISI, 1998); World Bank, *World Development Indicators, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1998); and United Nations, *UN Demographic Yearbook, 1996* (New York: United Nations, 1998).

NOTES: n.a.: Data not available or country not classed as a major power for given year. Germany = Federal Republic of Germany and Russia = Soviet Union in 1950 and 1985. a. Maddison's estimates are based on states' modern territories, tending to understate Austrian GDP in 1870. I added Maddison's estimates for Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. (In Russia's case, I added Finland; no data were available for Poland in 1870.) For comparison, see Paul Bairoch, "Europe's Gross National Product, 1800–1975," *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall 1976), pp. 273–340, whose estimates for 1860 give Austria 62 percent of Britain's GNP, and Russia 92 percent. According to the CIA, the PPP estimate for 1997 may overstate the size of China's economy by 25 percent. b. China's and Russia's military expenditures for 1996 are estimated using PPP ratios. c. 1996 index compiled by author using sources different from Singer and Small; it is representative of what such a composite index would yield but is not directly comparable to other COW figures.

Figure 1 presents the three measures of capabilities as a distribution among the great powers. It highlights the contrast between the extraordinary concentration of capabilities in the United States in the 1990s and the bipolar and multipolar distributions of the Cold War and the Pax Britannica. Never in modern international history has the leading state been so dominant economically and militarily.

In short, the standard measures that political scientists traditionally use as surrogates for capabilities suggest that the current system is unipolar.<sup>23</sup> But it takes only a glance at such measures to see that each is flawed in different ways. Economic output misses the salience for the balance of power of militarized states such as Prussia, pre-World War II Japan, Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union, and, in any case, is very hard to measure for some states and in some periods. Military expenditures might conceal gross inefficiencies and involve similar measurement problems. Composite indexes capture the conventional wisdom that states must score well on many underlying elements to qualify as great powers. But any composite index that seems to capture the sources of national power in one period tends to produce patently absurd results for others.

Disaggregating the COW index reveals that Britain's high score in 1870 is the result of its early industrialization (high levels of iron production and coal consumption), the Soviet Union's strong showing in the late Cold War is driven by its massive military and heavy-industrial economy, and China's numbers are inflated by its huge population, numerous armed forces, and giant steel industry.<sup>24</sup> A roughly comparable index (Table 2) shows a more complicated

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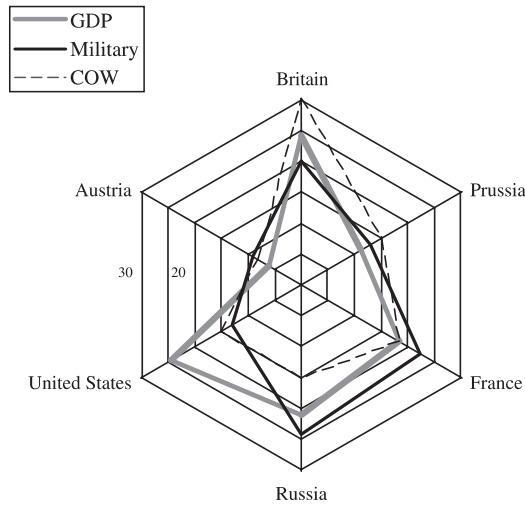
University of Chicago Press, 1980). Given its weighting of energy consumption, steel production, and military personnel, for example, the COW index had the Soviet Union surpassing U.S. power in 1971. Indeed, despite the fact that the Soviet Union produced, at best, one-third of U.S. GDP in the 1980s, it decisively surpassed the United States on *every* composite power indicator. See John R. Oneal, "Measuring the Material Base of the Contemporary East-West Balance of Power," *International Interactions*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 177–196.

23. The only major indicator of hegemonic status in which the United States has continued to decline is net foreign indebtedness, which surpassed \$1 trillion in 1996. For a strong argument on the importance of this indicator in governing the international political economy, see Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). There are other power indexes—many of which are linked to highly specific theories—that show continued U.S. decline. See George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); and Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994). By most other measures of naval power or industrial competitiveness, however, the U.S. position has improved in the 1990s.

24. According to the COW index, Britain's relative power peaked in 1860, with a 36 percent share. In that year, Britain consumed 50 percent more energy and produced 35 percent more iron than all the other great powers (including the United States) combined; its urban population was twice

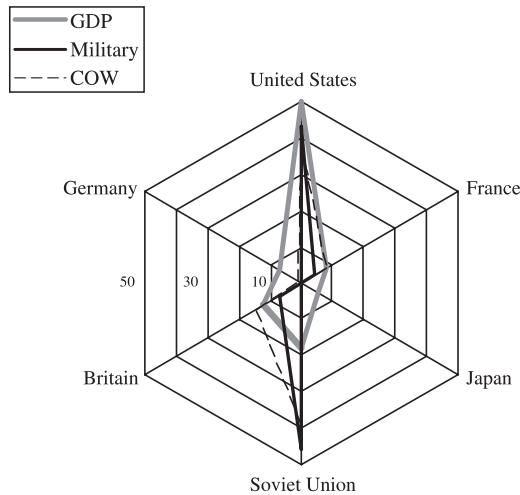
**Figure 1. Comparing Concentrations of Power: Distribution (percentage) of GDP, Military Outlays, and COW Index among the Major Powers: 1870–72, 1950, 1985, and 1996–97.**

**a. Pax Britannica, 1870–72**



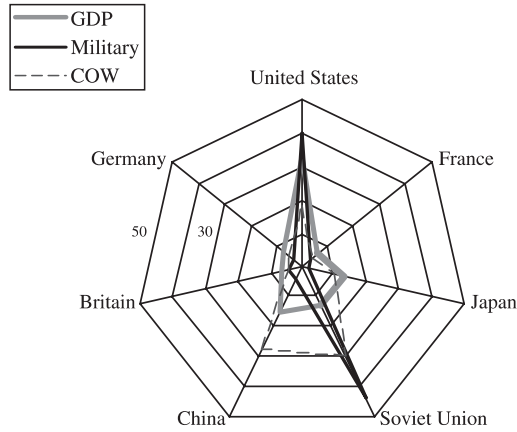
Country	GDP	Military	COW
Britain	24	20	30
Prussia	11	13	15
France	18	22	18
Russia	21	24	15
United States	24	13	15
Austria	6	9	8

**b. Early Bipolarity, 1950**



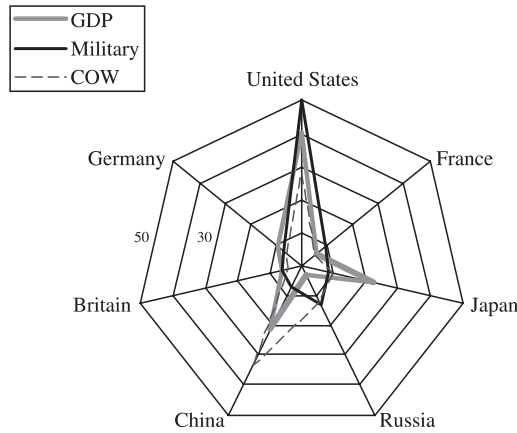
Country	GDP	Military	COW
United States	50	43	38
France	8	4	8
Japan	5	0	0
Soviet Union	18	46	39
Britain	12	7	14
Germany	7	0	1

**c. Late Bipolarity, 1985**



Country	GDP	Military	COW
United States	33	40	18
France	6	3	4
Japan	13	2	10
Soviet Union	13	44	30
China	15	4	28
Britain	6	4	4
Germany	7	3	5

**d. Unipolarity, 1996-97**



Country	GDP	Military	COW
United States	40	50	28
France	6	9	5
Japan	22	8	10
Russia	3	13	12
China	21	7	33
Britain	6	6	4
Germany	9	7	6

SOURCES: Compiled from data in Table 1.

NOTE: GDP for 1997 is based on PPP exchange rates.

Table 2. Disaggregated COW-Style Indicators for the Major Powers, 1995-97.

	Population (1996, percentage)	Per Capita GDP (1997, PPP)	Manufacturing Production (1995, percentage)	Commercial Energy Use (1996, percentage)	Military Expenditures (1996, percentage)	Military Personnel (1996, percentage)
United States	13	30.2	37	41	52	18
China	62	3.5	8	21	7	36
Japan	6	24.5	27	10	6	3
Germany	4	20.8	14	7	7	5
Russia	7	4.7	n.a.	12	13	30
Britain	3	21.2	6	5	6	3
France	3	22.7	7	5	9	5

SOURCES: Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook, 1998* (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>); International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1997/98* (London: IISS, 1998); World Bank, *World Development Indicators, 1999* (Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1999); and National Science Foundation, *Science and Technology Indicators, 1998* (<http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind98/start.htm>).

NOTE: n.a.: Data not available.

picture than that conveyed by simple comparisons of gross economic output or military expenditures. But even this comparison reveals that unlike Britain at its peak, the United States currently leads in every key indicator of power except population and military personnel.<sup>25</sup>

The specific problem with the COW index is its implicit assumption that the wellsprings of national power have not changed since the dawn of the industrial age. Updating such an index to take account of the post-industrial revolution in political economy and military affairs would inevitably be a subjective procedure. By most such “information-age” measures, however, the United States possesses decisive advantages (Table 3). The United States not only has the largest high-technology economy in the world by far, it also has the greatest concentration in high-technology manufacturing among the major powers.<sup>26</sup> Total U.S. expenditures on research and development (R&D) nearly equal the combined total of the rest of the Group of Seven richest countries (and the G-7 accounts for 90 percent of world spending on R&D). Numerous studies of U.S. technological leadership confirm the country’s dominant position in all the key “leading sectors” that are most likely to dominate the world economy into the twenty-first century.<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. combination of quantitative and qualitative material advantages is unprecedented, and it translates into a unique geopolitical position. Thanks to a decades-old policy of harnessing technology to the generation of military power, the U.S. comparative advantage in this area mirrors Britain’s naval

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as large as that of the next most urban power (France). This is the indicator Layne, “Unipolar Illusion,” uses to make his case for Britain’s status as a unipolar power. For more on measuring relative power, polarity, and concentration of capabilities over time, see J. David Singer and Paul F. Diehl, eds., *Measuring the Correlates of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

25. Table 2 substitutes per capita gross domestic product for urban population (which was supposed to capture modernization) and manufacturing production for steel production (which was supposed to capture industrial power).

26. OECD, *Science, Technology, and Industry: Scoreboard of Indicators 1997* (Paris: OECD, 1997). By one estimate, the United States accounted for 35.8 percent of total world spending on technology in 1997. Japan accounted for 17.6 percent, Germany 6.6 percent, Britain 5.7 percent, France 5.1 percent, and China 1.6 percent. Mark Landler, “When the Dragon Awakes . . . and Finds That It’s Not 1999 Anymore,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1999, p. C1.

27. These studies do forecast *future* challenges—as they have since the 1970s. The incentives of nearly all data-gathering agencies are to emphasize U.S. vulnerability, yet as good social scientists, the authors of these studies acknowledge the country’s decisive current advantages. See, for example, U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Technology Policy, *The New Innovators: Global Patenting Trends in Five Sectors* (Washington, D.C.: OTP, 1998). Similarly, according to Valéry, “Innovation in Industry,” p. 27, “By 1998, the Council on Competitiveness, an industry think tank in Washington set up to fathom the reasons for the country’s decline, concluded that America had not only regained its former strengths, but was now far ahead technologically in the five most crucial sectors of its economy.”

preeminence in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Washington's current brute share of great power capabilities—its aggregate potential compared with that of the next largest power or all other great powers combined—dwarfs Britain's share in its day. The United States is the only state with global power projection capabilities; it is probably capable, if challenged, of producing defensive land-power dominance in the key theaters; it retains the world's only truly blue-water navy; it dominates the air; it has retained a nuclear posture that may give it first-strike advantages against other nuclear powers; and it has continued to nurture decades-old investments in military logistics and command, control, communications, and intelligence. By devoting only 3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defense, it outspends all other great powers combined—and most of those great powers are its close allies. Its defense R&D expenditures are probably greater than those of the rest of the world combined (Table 3). None of the major powers is balancing; most have scaled back military expenditures faster than the United States has. One reason may be that democracy and globalization have changed the nature of world politics. Another possibility, however, is that any effort to compete directly with the United States is futile, so no one tries.

#### QUALITATIVE COMPARISON

Bringing historical detail to bear on the comparison of today's distribution of power to past systems only strengthens the initial conclusions that emerge from quantitative comparisons. Two major concentrations of power over the last two centuries show up on different quantitative measures of capabilities: the COW measure picks Britain in 1860–70 as an especially powerful actor, and the GDP measure singles out the post–World War II United States. These indicators miss two crucial factors that only historical research can reveal: the clarity of the balance as determined by the events that help decisionmakers define and measure power, and the comprehensiveness of the leader's overall power advantage in each period.<sup>28</sup> Together these factors help to produce a U.S. preponderance that is far less ambiguous, and therefore less subject to challenge, than that of previous leading states.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were much more effective tests of material power relationships than any of the systemic

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28. This is based on the neoclassical realist argument that power is important to decisionmakers but very hard to measure. See, for a general discussion, Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–172.

Table 3. Information-Age Indicators for the Major Powers, 1995-97.

	High-Technology Manufacturing (1995, percentage)	Total R&D Expenditures (1995, percentage)	Defense R&D Expenditures (1995-96, percentage)	Utility Invention Patents Granted in the United States (1997, thousands)	PCs per 10,000 People (1997)	Internet Hosts per 1,000 People (July 1998)	Scientists and Engineers in R&D per Million People (1985-95)
United States	41	53	80	61	407	976	3,732
Britain	6	6	7	2	242	201	2,417
Japan	30	22	2	23	202	107	5,677
France	5	8	8	n.a.	174	73	2,537
Germany	10	11	3	6.8	255	141	3,016
China	8	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	6	.16	537
Russia	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	32	9	4,358

SOURCES: World Bank, *World Development Indicators, 1999* (Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1999); National Science Foundation, *Science and Technology Indicators, 1998* (<http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind98/start.htm>); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Science, Technology, and Industry: Scoreboard of Indicators, 1997* (Paris: OECD, 1997); and Michael B. Albert, Phyllis Genter Yoshida, and Debra van Opstal, *The New Innovators: Global Patenting Trends in Five Sectors* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Technology Policy, September 1998).

NOTES: n.a.: Data not available. Russia's R&D as a percentage of GDP has fallen to below 0.75. According to Albert, Yoshida, and van Opstal, *The New Innovators*, utility invention patents granted in the United States to nationals of a given country is the best measure of national trends in industrial and technological innovation. Nationals of all European Union states combined were granted 16,400 such patents in 1997. Because the domain name and physical location of internet hosts do not always correlate, data on internet hosts should be considered approximate.



wars of the past two centuries.<sup>29</sup> One reason is simple arithmetic. The greater the number of players, the more difficult it is for any single war or event to clarify relations of power throughout the system. Even very large wars in multipolar systems do not provide unambiguous tests of the relative power of the states belonging to the victorious coalition. And wars often end before the complete defeat of major powers. The systemic wars of the past left several great states standing and ready to argue over their relative power. By contrast, bipolarity was built on two states, and one collapsed with more decisiveness than most wars can generate. The gap between the capabilities of the superpowers, on the one hand, and all other major powers, on the other hand, was already greater in the Cold War than any analogous gap in the history of the European states system. Given that the United States and the Soviet Union were so clearly in a class by themselves, the fall of one from superpower status leaves the other much more unambiguously “number one” than at any other time since 1815.

Moreover, the power gap in the United States’ favor is wider than any single measure can capture because the unipolar concentration of resources is *symmetrical*. Unlike previous system leaders, the United States has commanding leads in all the elements of material power: economic, military, technological, and geographical. All the naval and commercial powers that most scholars identify as the hegemonic leaders of the past lacked military (especially land-power) capabilities commensurate with their global influence. Asymmetrical power portfolios generate ambiguity. When the leading state excels in the production of economic and naval capabilities but not conventional land power, it may seem simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. Such asymmetrical power portfolios create resentment among second-tier states that are powerful militarily but lack the great prestige the leading state’s commercial and naval advantages bring. At the same time, they make the leader seem vulnerable to pressure from the one element of power in which it does not excel: military capabilities. The result is ambiguity about which state is more powerful, which is more secure, which is threatening which, and which might make a bid for hegemony.

Britain’s huge empire, globe-girdling navy, and vibrant economy left strong imprints on nineteenth-century world politics, but because its capabilities were

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29. The relationship between hierarchies of power revealed by systemic wars and the stability of international systems is explored in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). On wars as power tests, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

always skewed in favor of naval and commercial power, it never had the aggregate advantage implied by its early industrialization. Indeed, it was not even the international system's unambiguous leader until Russia's defeat in Crimea in 1856. The Napoleonic Wars yielded *three* potential hegemon: Britain, the decisive naval and financial power; Russia, the preeminent military power on the continent; and France, the state whose military prowess had called forth coalitions involving all the other great states. From 1815 to 1856, Britain had to share leadership of the system with Russia, while the power gap between these two empires and France remained perilously small.<sup>30</sup> Russia's defeat in Crimea punctured its aura of power and established Britain's uncontested primacy. But even after 1856, the gap between London and continental powerhouses such as France, Russia, and Prussia remained small because Britain never translated its early-industrial potential into continental-scale military capabilities. The Crimean victory that ushered in the era of British preeminence was based mainly on *French* land power.<sup>31</sup> And Britain's industrial advantage peaked before industrial capabilities came to be seen as the sine qua non of military power.<sup>32</sup>

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30. It goes without saying that the nineteenth-century international system was perceived as multipolar, although Russia and Britain were seen as being in a class by themselves. See R.W. Seton-Watson, *Britain in Europe, 1789–1914: A Survey of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937). To gain a sense of Russia's power in the period, it is enough to recall Czar Nicholas's dispatch of 400,000 troops to crush the 1848 revolt in Hungary—and his simultaneous offer to send another contingent across Europe to establish order in Paris should it be necessary. On Russia as Europe's hegemon, see M.S. Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, 1450–1919* (London: Longman, 1993); Adam Watson, "Russia in the European States System," in Watson and Hedley Bull, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). On Russia and Britain as (rivalrous) "cohegemons," see Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Gordon A. Craig, "The System of Alliances and the Balance of Power," in J.P.T. Bury, ed., *New Cambridge Modern History, Volume 10: The Zenith of European Power, 1830–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1960). The best, concise discussion of the nature and limitations of British power in this period is Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Macmillan, 1983), chap. 6.

31. For an excellent account of the British debate on the lessons of Crimea, see Olive Anderson, *A Liberal State at War: English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1967).

32. Thus the COW measure suffers from a hindsight bias that accords importance to industrial capabilities before their military significance was appreciated. Cf. William B. Moul, "Measuring the 'Balance of Power': A Look at Some Numbers," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April 1989), pp. 101–121. On the conservatism of nineteenth-century military assessments, see B.H. Liddell-Hart, "Armed Forces and the Art of War: Armies," in Bury, *New Cambridge Modern History*. On the slowly growing perceptions of industrialization and its implications for war, see William H. McNeil, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Dennis Showalter, *Railroads and Rifles: Soldiers, Technology, and the Unification of Germany* (Hamden, Conn.: Archer, 1975); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980); and Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*.

The Cold War power gap between the United States and the Soviet Union was much smaller. World War II yielded ambiguous lessons concerning the relative importance of U.S. sea, air, and economic capabilities versus the Soviet Union's proven conventional military superiority in Eurasia.<sup>33</sup> The conflict clearly showed that the United States possessed the greatest military potential in the world—if it could harness its massive economy to the production of military power and deploy that power to the theater in time. Despite its economic weaknesses, however, Stalin's empire retained precisely those advantages that Czar Nicholas I's had had: the ability to take and hold key Eurasian territory with land forces. The fact that Moscow's share of world power was already in Eurasia (and already in the form of an armed fighting force) was decisive in explaining the Cold War. It was chiefly because of its location (and its militarized nature) that the Soviet Union's economy was capable of generating bipolarity. At the dawn of the Cold War, when the United States' economy was as big as those of all other great powers combined, the balance of power was still seen as precarious.<sup>34</sup>

In both the Pax Britannica and the early Cold War, different measures show power to have been concentrated in the leading state to an unusual degree. Yet in both periods, the perceived power gaps were closer than the measures imply. Asymmetrical power portfolios and small power gaps are the norm in modern international history. They are absent from the distribution of power of the late 1990s. Previous postwar hegemonic moments therefore cannot compare with post-Cold War unipolarity. Given the dramatically different power distribution alone, we should expect world politics to work much differently now than in the past.

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33. I discuss these lessons in Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993). A much fuller analysis is available in recent historical works. For the U.S. side, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992). And for the view from Moscow, see Vladislav M. Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

34. As Marc Trachtenberg summarizes the view from Washington in 1948: "The defense of the West rested on a very narrow base. Even with the nuclear monopoly, American power only barely balanced Soviet power in central Europe." See Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, p. 91. Cf. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, who is more critical of U.S. officials' power assessments. Nevertheless, Leffler's narrative—and the massive documentary evidence it relies on—would not be possible had the Soviet potential to dominate Eurasia not been plausible.

### *Unipolarity Is Peaceful*

Unipolarity favors the absence of war among the great powers and comparatively low levels of competition for prestige or security for two reasons: the leading state's power advantage removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from world politics, and it reduces the salience and stakes of balance-of-power politics among the major states. This argument is based on two well-known realist theories: hegemonic theory and balance-of-power theory. Each is controversial, and the relationship between the two is complex.<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, however, the key point is that both theories predict that a unipolar system will be peaceful.

#### HOW TO THINK ABOUT UNIPOLARITY

Hegemonic theory has received short shrift in the debate over the nature of the post-Cold War international system.<sup>36</sup> This omission is unwarranted, for the theory has simple and profound implications for the peacefulness of the post-Cold War international order that are backed up by a formidable body of scholarship. The theory stipulates that especially powerful states ("hegemons") foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state for leadership. The clearer and larger the concentration of power in the leading state, the more peaceful the international order associated with it will be.

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35. For simplicity, I treat only Waltz's neorealist version of balance-of-power theory. By "hegemonic theory," I mean the theory of hegemonic war and change in Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, as well as power transition theory, which is sometimes applied to pairs of states other than hegemon and challenger. In addition to Organski, *World Politics*, and Organski and Kugler, *War Ledger*, see Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluation and Extension of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); and the chapters by George Modelski and William R. Thompson, Manus I. Midlarsky, and Jacek Kugler and A.F.K. Organski in Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (London: Unwin, 1989). Theories of the balance of power and hegemony are often thought to be competing. I maintained this position in *Elusive Balance*, chap. 1. In many instances, however, they are complementary. See Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies* (forthcoming). For an interesting synthesis with some points of contact with the analysis here, see William R. Thompson, "Dehio, Long Cycles, and the Geohistorical Context of Structural Transition," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (October 1992), pp. 127–152; and Rasler and Thompson, *Great Powers and Global Struggle*.

36. Exceptions include Lemke, "Continuity of History"; and Mark S. Sheetz, "Correspondence: Debating the Unipolar Moment," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 1997/1998), pp. 168–174.

The key is that conflict occurs only if the leader and the challenger disagree about their relative power. That is, the leader must think itself capable of defending the status quo at the same time that the number two state believes it has the power to challenge it. The set of perceptions and expectations necessary to produce such conflict is most likely under two circumstances: when the overall gap between the leader and the challenger is small and/or when the challenger overtakes the leader in *some* elements of national power but not others, and the two parties disagree over the relative importance of these elements. Hence both the overall size and the comprehensiveness of the leader's power advantage are crucial to peacefulness. If the system is unipolar, the great power hierarchy should be much more stable than any hierarchy lodged within a system of more than one pole. Because unipolarity is based on a historically unprecedented concentration of power in the United States, a potentially important source of great power conflict—hegemonic rivalry—will be missing.

Balance-of-power theory has been at the center of the debate, but absent so far is a clear distinction between peacefulness and durability. The theory predicts that any system comprised of states in anarchy will evince a tendency toward equilibrium. As Waltz puts it, "Unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others."<sup>37</sup> This central proposition lies behind the widespread belief that unipolarity will not be durable (a contention I address below). Less often noted is the fact that as long as the system remains unipolar, balance-of-power theory predicts peace. When balance-of-power theorists argue that the post-Cold War world is headed toward conflict, they are not claiming that unipolarity causes conflict. Rather, they are claiming that unipolarity leads quickly to bi- or multipolarity. It is not unipolarity's peacefulness but its durability that is in dispute.

Waltz argued that bipolarity is less war prone than multipolarity because it reduces uncertainty. By the same logic, unipolarity is the least war prone of all structures.<sup>38</sup> For as long as unipolarity obtains, there is little uncertainty re-

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37. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," p. 915.

38. The connection between uncertainty, the number of principal players, and war proneness has been questioned. The key to most recent criticisms of neorealist arguments concerning stability is that the distribution of capabilities alone is insufficient to explain the war proneness of international systems. Ancillary assumptions concerning risk attitudes or preferences for the status quo are necessary. See Levy, "The Causes of War"; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Neorealism's Logic and Evidence: When Is a Theory Falsified?" paper prepared for the Fiftieth Annual Conference of the International Studies Association, Washington, D.C., February 1999; and Robert Powell, "Stability and the Distribution of Power," *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (January 1996), pp. 239–267, and

garding alliance choices or the calculation of power. The only options available to second-tier states are to bandwagon with the polar power (either explicitly or implicitly) or, at least, to take no action that could incur its focused enmity. As long as their security policies are oriented around the power and preferences of the sole pole, second-tier states are less likely to engage in conflict-prone rivalries for security or prestige. Once the sole pole takes sides, there can be little doubt about which party will prevail. Moreover, the unipolar leader has the capability to be far more interventionist than earlier system leaders. Exploiting the other states' security dependence as well as its unilateral power advantages, the sole pole can maintain a system of alliances that keeps second-tier states out of trouble.<sup>39</sup>

Until the underlying distribution of power changes, second-tier states face structural incentives similar to those of lesser states in a region dominated by one power, such as North America. The low incidence of wars in those systems is consistent with the expectations of standard, balance-of-power thinking. Otto von Bismarck earned a reputation for strategic genius by creating and managing a complex alliance system that staved off war while working disproportionately to his advantage in a multipolar setting. It does not take a Bismarck to run a Bismarckian alliance system under unipolarity. No one credits the United States with strategic genius for managing security dilemmas among American states. Such an alliance system is a structurally favored and hence less remarkable and more durable outcome in a unipolar system.

In sum, both hegemonic theory and balance-of-power theory specify thresholds at which great concentrations of power support a peaceful structure. Balance-of-power theory tells us that smaller is better.<sup>40</sup> Therefore one pole is best, and security competition among the great powers should be minimal. Hegemonic theory tells us that a clear preponderance in favor of a leading state with a comprehensive power portfolio should eliminate rivalry for primacy. Overall, then, unipolarity generates comparatively few incentives for security or prestige competition among the great powers.

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sources cited therein. These analyses are right that no distribution of power rules out war if some states are great risk takers or have extreme clashes of interest. The greater the preponderance of power, however, the more extreme the values of other variables must be to produce war, because preponderance reduces the uncertainty of assessing the balance of power.

39. The sole pole's power advantages matter only to the degree that it is engaged, and it is most likely to be engaged in politics among the other major powers. The argument applies with less force to potential security competition between regional powers, or between a second-tier state and a lesser power with which the system leader lacks close ties.

40. Three may be worse than four, however. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 9; and Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*.

THE MISSING SYSTEMIC SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Unipolarity does not imply the end of all conflict or that Washington can have its way on all issues all the time. It simply means the absence of two big problems that bedeviled the statesmen of past epochs: hegemonic rivalry and balance-of-power politics among the major powers. It is only by forgetting them that scholars and pundits are able to portray the current period as dangerous and threatening.

To appreciate the sources of conflict that unipolarity avoids, consider the two periods already discussed in which leading states scored very highly on aggregate measures of power: the Pax Britannica and the Cold War. Because those concentrations of power were not unipolar, both periods witnessed security competition and hegemonic rivalry. The Crimean War is a case in point. The war unfolded in a system in which two states shared leadership and *three* states were plausibly capable of bidding for hegemony.<sup>41</sup> Partly as a result, neither the statesmen of the time nor historians over the last century and a half have been able to settle the debate over the origins of the conflict. The problem is that even those who agree that the war arose from a threat to the European balance of power cannot agree on whether the threat emanated from France, Russia, or Britain.<sup>42</sup> Determining which state really did threaten the equilibrium—or indeed whether any of them did—is less important than the fact that the power gap among them was small enough to make all three threats seem plausible at the time and in retrospect. No such uncertainty—and hence no such conflict—is remotely possible in a unipolar system.

Even during the height of its influence after 1856, Britain was never a major land power and could not perform the conflict-dampening role that a unipolar state can play. Thus it would be inaccurate to ascribe the two, long nineteenth-century periods of peace to British power. From 1815 to 1853, London exercised influence in the context of the Concert of Europe, which was based on a Russo-British cohegemony. But because each of these competitive “bookend

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41. See Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, Paul W. Schroeder, *Austria, Britain, and the Crimean War: The Destruction of the European Concert* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992); and William E. Echard, *Napoleon III and the Concert of Europe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), chaps. 1–2.

42. Cf. David M. Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War* (London: Longman, 1994); Norman Rich, *Why the Crimean War? A Cautionary Tale* (London: University Press of America, 1985); Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Struggle* (New York: Knopf, 1962), chap. 4; David Wetzel, *The Crimean War: A Diplomatic History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and A.J.P. Taylor's account in Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

empires” was in possession of a different mix of power resources whose ultimate superiority had not been tested, great power cooperation was always vulnerable to hegemonic rivalry—a problem that helped destroy the concert in the Crimean War. With Britain in “splendid isolation” after 1856, Prussia violently refashioned the balance of power in Europe without having to concern itself greatly about London’s preferences. After 1871 Bismarck’s diplomacy, backed up by Germany’s formidable power, played the crucial role in staving off violent competition for power or security on the continent. Owing to differences in the system structure alone, the long periods of peace in the nineteenth century are much more remarkable achievements of statesmanship than a similarly lengthy peace would be under unipolarity.

Similar sources of conflict emerged in the Cold War. The most recent and exhaustively researched accounts of Cold War diplomacy reveal in detail what the numerical indicators only hint at: the complex interplay between U.S. overall economic superiority, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union’s massive conventional military capabilities, on the other.<sup>43</sup> This asymmetrical distribution of power meant that the gap between the two top states could be seen as lopsided or perilously close depending on one’s vantage. The fact that the United States was preeminent only in nonmilitary elements of power was a critical factor underlying the Cold War competition for power and security. To produce a military balance, Washington set about creating a preponderance of other capabilities, which constituted a latent threat to Moscow’s war planners and a major constraint on its diplomatic strategy. Hence both Moscow and Washington could simultaneously see their rivalry as a consequence of the other’s drive for hegemony—sustaining a historical debate that shows every sign of being as inconclusive as that over the origins of the Crimean War. Again, no such ambiguity, and no such conflict, is likely in a unipolar system.

Both hegemonic rivalry and security competition among great powers are unlikely under unipolarity. Because the current leading state is by far the world’s most formidable military power, the chances of leadership conflict are more remote than at any time over the last two centuries. Unlike past international systems, efforts by any second-tier state to enhance its relative position can be managed in a unipolar system without raising the specter of a power transition and a struggle for primacy. And because the major powers face

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43. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*; and Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*.



incentives to shape their policies with a view toward the power and preferences of the system leader, the likelihood of security competition among them is lower than in previous systems.

### *Unipolarity Is Durable*

Unipolarity rests on two pillars. I have already established the first: the sheer size and comprehensiveness of the power gap separating the United States from other states. This massive power gap implies that any countervailing change must be strong and sustained to produce structural effects. The second pillar—geography—is just as important. In addition to all the other advantages the United States possesses, we must also consider its four truest allies: Canada, Mexico, the Atlantic, and the Pacific. Location matters. The fact that Soviet power happened to be situated in the heart of Eurasia was a key condition of bipolarity. Similarly, the U.S. position as an offshore power determines the nature and likely longevity of unipolarity. Just as the raw numbers could not capture the real dynamics of bipolarity, power indexes alone cannot capture the importance of the fact that the United States is in North America while all the other potential poles are in or around Eurasia. The balance of power between the sole pole and the second-tier states is not the only one that matters, and it may not even be the most important one for many states. Local balances of power may loom larger in the calculations of other states than the background unipolar structure. Efforts to produce a counterbalance globally will generate powerful countervailing action locally. As a result, the threshold concentration of power necessary to sustain unipolarity is lower than most scholars assume.

Because they fail to appreciate the sheer size and comprehensiveness of the power gap and the advantages conveyed by geography, many scholars expect bi- or multipolarity to reappear quickly. They propose three ways in which unipolarity will end: counterbalancing by other states, regional integration, or the differential growth in power. None of these is likely to generate structural change in the policy-relevant future.<sup>44</sup>

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44. Here I depart from Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–162, for whom a stable system is one with no “consequential variation” in the number of poles (e.g., changes between multi-, tri-, bi-, or unipolarity). In the European states system, multipolarity obtained for three centuries. While the multipolar structure itself was long lived, however, the identity of its members (the leading states in the system) changed with much greater frequency—a matter of no small consequence for the governments concerned. By this measure (change in the identity, as opposed to the number, of the states that define the structure), bipolarity had a typical life span. See Bueno de Mesquita, “Neorealism’s Logic and Evidence.” I expect that the unipolar era will be of comparable duration.

ALLIANCES ARE NOT STRUCTURAL

Many scholars portray unipolarity as precarious by ignoring all the impediments to balancing in the real world. If balancing were the frictionless, costless activity assumed in some balance-of-power theories, then the unipolar power would need more than 50 percent of the capabilities in the great power system to stave off a counterpoise. Even though the United States meets this threshold today, in a hypothetical world of frictionless balancing its edge might be eroded quickly.<sup>45</sup> But such expectations miss the fact that alliance politics always impose costs, and that the impediments to balancing are especially great in the unipolar system that emerged in the wake of the Cold War.

Alliances are not structural. Because alliances are far less effective than states in producing and deploying power internationally, most scholars follow Waltz in making a distinction between the distribution of capabilities among states and the alliances states may form.<sup>46</sup> A unipolar system is one in which a counterbalance is impossible. When a counterbalance becomes possible, the system is not unipolar. The point at which this structural shift can happen is determined in part by how efficiently alliances can aggregate the power of individual states. Alliances aggregate power only to the extent that they are reliably binding and permit the merging of armed forces, defense industries, R&D infrastructures, and strategic decisionmaking. A glance at international history shows how difficult it is to coordinate counterhegemonic alliances. States are tempted to free ride, pass the buck, or bandwagon in search of favors from the aspiring hegemon. States have to worry about being abandoned by alliance partners when the chips are down or being dragged into conflicts of others' making.<sup>47</sup> The aspiring hegemon, meanwhile, has only to make sure its domestic house is in order. In short, a single state gets more bang for the buck than several states in an alliance. To the extent that alliances are inefficient at pooling power, the sole pole obtains greater power per unit of aggregate capabilities than any alliance that might take shape against it. Right away, the odds are skewed in favor of the unipolar power.

The key, however, is that the countercoalitions of the past—on which most of our empirical knowledge of alliance politics is based—formed against cen-

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45. I do not deny the utility of making simplifying assumptions when speculating about the balance of power. For one such analysis, see Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 456–473.

46. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Snyder, *Alliance Politics*.

47. See Snyder, *Alliance Politics*; and Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 1990), pp. 137–168.

trally located land powers (France, Germany, and the Soviet Union) that constituted relatively unambiguous security threats to their neighbors. Coordinating a counterbalance against an *offshore* state that has *already* achieved unipolar status will be much more difficult.<sup>48</sup> Even a declining offshore unipolar state will have unusually wide opportunities to play divide and rule. Any second-tier state seeking to counterbalance has to contend with the existing pro-U.S. bandwagon. If things go poorly, the aspiring counterbalancer will have to confront not just the capabilities of the unipolar state, but also those of its other great power allies. All of the aspiring poles face a problem the United States does not: great power neighbors that could become crucial U.S. allies the moment an unambiguous challenge to Washington's preeminence emerges. In addition, in each region there are smaller "pivotal states" that make natural U.S. allies against an aspiring regional power.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the United States' first move in any counterbalancing game of this sort could be to try to promote such pivotal states to great power status, as it did with China against the Soviet Union in the latter days of the Cold War.

#### NEW REGIONAL UNIPOLARITIES: A GAME NOT WORTH THE CANDLE

To bring an end to unipolarity, it is not enough for regional powers to coordinate policies in traditional alliances. They must translate their aggregate economic potential into the concrete capabilities necessary to be a pole: a defense industry and power projection capabilities that can play in the same league as those of the United States. Thus all scenarios for the rapid return of multipolarity involve regional unification or the emergence of strong regional unipolarities.<sup>50</sup> For the European, Central Eurasian, or East Asian poles to measure up to the United States in the near future, each region's resources need to fall under the *de facto* control of one state or decisionmaking authority. In the near term, either true unification in Europe and Central Eurasia (the European Union [EU] becomes a *de facto* state, or Russia recreates an empire) or unipolar dominance in each region by Germany, Russia, and China or Japan, respectively, is a necessary condition of bi- or multipolarity.

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48. The key here is that from the standpoint of balance-of-power theory, we are dealing with a structural *fait accompli*. Of the two powers that made up the bipolar order, one collapsed, leaving the other at the center of a unipolar system. A situation has arisen in which the theory's central tendency cannot operate. Many readers will perceive this state of affairs as a testimony to the weakness of balance-of-power theory. I agree. The weaker the theory, the longer our initial expectations of unipolarity's longevity.

49. On "pivotal states," see Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy, *The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

50. Kupchan, "Pax Americana," advocates just such a system.

The problem with these scenarios is that regional balancing dynamics are likely to kick in against the local great power much more reliably than the global counterbalance works against the United States. Given the neighborhoods they live in, an aspiring Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or German pole would face more effective counterbalancing than the United States itself.

If the EU were a state, the world would be bipolar. To create a balance of power globally, Europe would have to suspend the balance of power locally. Which balance matters more to Europeans is not a question that will be resolved quickly. A world with a European pole would be one in which the French and the British had merged their conventional and nuclear capabilities and do not mind if the Germans control them. The EU may move in this direction, but in the absence of a major shock the movement will be very slow and ambiguous. Global leadership requires coherent and quick decisionmaking in response to crises. Even on international monetary matters, Europe will lack this capability for some time.<sup>51</sup> Creating the institutional and political requisites for a single European foreign and security policy and defense industry goes to the heart of state sovereignty and thus is a much more challenging task for the much longer term.<sup>52</sup>

The reemergence of a Central Eurasian pole is more remote. There, the problem is not only that the key regional powers are primed to balance against a rising Russia but that Russia continues to decline. States do not rise as fast as Russia fell. For Russia to regain the capability for polar status is a project of a generation, if all goes well. For an Asian pole to emerge quickly, Japan and China would need to merge their capabilities. As in the case of Europe and Central Eurasia, a great deal has to happen in world politics before either Tokyo or Beijing is willing to submit to the unipolar leadership of the other.

Thus the quick routes to multipolarity are blocked. If states value their independence and security, most will prefer the current structure to a multipolarity based on regional unipolarities. Eventually, some great powers will have the capability to counter the United States alone or in traditional great power

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51. See Kathleen R. McNamara, "European Monetary Union and International Economic Cooperation," a report on a workshop organized by the International Finance Section, Princeton University, April 3, 1998. Cf. Kupchan, "Rethinking Europe," who contends: "Assuming the European Union succeeds in deepening its level of integration and adding new members, it will soon have influence on matters of finance and trade equal to America's. A more balanced strategic relationship is likely to follow." Many Europeans see a contradiction between widening and deepening the EU. 52. This is why many Americans support an EU "security identity." If all goes well, Europe will become a more useful and outward-looking partner while posing virtually no chance of becoming a geopolitical competitor. See, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Strategy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), chap. 3.

alliances that exact a smaller price in security or autonomy than unipolarity does. Even allowing for the differential growth in power to the United States' disadvantage, however, for several decades it is likely to remain more costly for second-tier states to form counterbalancing alliances than it is for the unipolar power to sustain a system of alliances that reinforces its own dominance.

#### THE DIFFUSION OF POWER

In the final analysis, alliances cannot change the system's structure. Only the uneven growth of power (or, in the case of the EU, the creation of a new state) will bring the unipolar era to an end. Europe will take many decades to become a *de facto* state—if it ever does. Unless and until that happens, the fate of unipolarity depends on the relative rates of growth and innovation of the main powers.

I have established that the gap in favor of the United States is unprecedented and that the threshold level of capabilities it needs to sustain unipolarity is much less than the 50 percent that analysts often assume. Social science lacks a theory that can predict the rate of the rise and fall of great powers. It is possible that the United States will decline suddenly and dramatically while some other great power rises. If rates of growth tend to converge as economies approach U.S. levels of per capita GDP, then the speed at which other rich states can close the gap will be limited. Germany may be out of the running entirely.<sup>53</sup> Japan may take a decade to regain the relative position it occupied in 1990. After that, if all goes well, sustained higher growth could place it in polar position in another decade or two.<sup>54</sup> This leaves China as the focus of current expectations for the demise of unipolarity. The fact that the two main contenders to polar status are close Asian neighbors and face tight regional constraints further reinforces unipolarity. The threshold at which Japan or

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53. See Max Otte, *A Rising Middle Power? German Foreign Policy in Transformation, 1988–1998* (New York: St. Martin's, forthcoming), chap. 3.

54. Assessments of Japan's future growth in the late 1990s are probably as overly pessimistic as those of the 1980s were overly optimistic. According to Peter Hartcher, "Can Japan Recover?" *National Interest*, No. 54 (Winter 1998/1999), p. 33, "Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) estimates that even if the country manages to emerge from recession, its maximum potential growth rate until the year 2010 is a pathetic 1.8 percent, and a miserable 0.8 percent thereafter. And that is one of the more optimistic estimates." If, in contrast to these assumptions, the Japanese economy recovers in 2000 and grows at a robust annual average rate of 5 percent, while the U.S. economy grows at 2 percent, Japan's economy would surpass the United States' around 2025 (2033 using PPP estimates of the size of the two economies in 1997).

China will possess the capabilities to face the other *and* the United States is very high. Until then, they are better off in a unipolar order.

As a poor country, China has a much greater chance of maintaining sustained high growth rates. With its large population making for large gross economic output, projections based on extrapolating 8 percent yearly growth in GDP have China passing the United States early in the twenty-first century.<sup>55</sup> But these numbers must be used with care. After all, China's huge population probably gave it a larger economy than Britain in the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> The current belief in a looming power transition between the United States and China resembles pre-World War I beliefs about rising Russian power. It assumes that population and rapid growth compensate for technological backwardness. China's economic and military modernization has a much longer road to travel than its gross economic output suggests.<sup>57</sup> And managing the political and social challenges presented by rapid growth in an overpopulated country governed by an authoritarian regime is a formidable task. By any measure, the political challenges that lie athwart Beijing's path to polar status are much more substantial than those that may block Washington's efforts to maintain its position. Three decades is probably a better bet than one.

Thus far I have kept the analysis focused squarely on the distribution of material capabilities. Widening the view only slightly to consider key legacies of the Cold War strengthens the case for the robustness of unipolarity. The United States was the leading state in the Cold War, so the status quo already reflects its preferences. Washington thus faces only weak incentives to expand, and the preponderance of power in its control buttresses rather than contradicts the status quo. This reduces the incentives of others to counterbalance the United States and reinforces stability.<sup>58</sup> Another important Cold War legacy

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55. These calculations are naturally heavily dependent on initial conditions. Assuming the Chinese economy grows at 8 percent a year while the U.S. economy grows at a 2 percent rate, China would surpass the United States in about 2013, extrapolating from 1997 PPP exchange-rate estimates of the two economies' relative size; 2020 if the PPP estimate is deflated as suggested by Central Intelligence Agency economists; and 2040 if market exchange rates are used. On measuring China's economic output, see Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820-1992* (Paris: OECD, 1995), appendix C.

56. *Ibid.*, Table C-16e.

57. A balanced appraisal is Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 1997/98), pp. 36-73.

58. A preponderance of power makes other states less likely to oppose the United States, but it could also tempt Washington to demand more of others. Because an overwhelming preponderance of power fosters stability, the clash of interests would have to be extreme to produce a counterbalance. In other words, the United States would have to work very hard to push all the other great powers and many regional ones into an opposing alliance. The point is important in theory

is that two prime contenders for polar status—Japan and Germany (or Europe)—are close U.S. allies with deeply embedded security dependence on the United States. This legacy of dependence reduces the speed with which these states can foster the institutions and capabilities of superpower status. Meanwhile, the United States inherits from the Cold War a global military structure that deeply penetrates many allied and friendly states, and encompasses a massive and complex physical presence around the world. These initial advantages raise the barriers to competition far higher than the raw measures suggest. Finally, the Cold War and its end appear to many observers to be lessons against the possibility of successful balancing via increased internal mobilization for war. The prospect that domestic mobilization efforts can extract U.S.-scale military power from a comparatively small or undeveloped economy seems less plausible now than it did three decades ago.

THE BALANCE OF POWER IS NOT WHAT STATES MAKE OF IT

For some analysts, multipolarity seems just around the corner because intellectuals and politicians in some other states want it to be. Samuel Huntington notes that “political and intellectual leaders in most countries strongly resist the prospect of a unipolar world and favor the emergence of true multipolarity.”<sup>59</sup> No article on contemporary world affairs is complete without obligatory citations from diplomats and scholars complaining of U.S. arrogance. The problem is that policymakers (and scholars) cannot always have the balance of power they want. If they could, neither bipolarity nor unipolarity would have occurred in the first place. Washington, Moscow, London, and Paris wanted a swift return to multipolarity after World War II. And policymakers in all four capitals appeared to prefer bipolarity to unipolarity in 1990–91. Like its structural predecessor, unipolarity might persist despite policymakers’ wishes.

Other scholars base their pessimism about unipolarity’s longevity less on preferences than on behavior. Kenneth Waltz claims that “to all but the myopic,

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but moot in practice. Because the post-Cold War world is already so much a reflection of U.S. interests, Washington is less tempted than another state might be to make additional claims as its relative power increases. The result is a preponderance of power backing up the status quo, a condition theorists of many stripes view as an augury of peace and stability. For different perspectives, see E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1951); Organski, *World Politics*; Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Powell, “Stability and the Distribution of Power”; and Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?” *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 225–258. 59. Huntington, “Lonely Superpower,” p. 42.

[multipolarity] can already be seen on the horizon. . . . Some of the weaker states in the system will . . . act to restore a balance and thus move the system back to bi- or multipolarity. China and Japan are doing so now."<sup>60</sup> This argument is vulnerable to Waltz's own insistence that a system's structure cannot be defined solely by the behavior of its units. Theory of course cannot predict state action. Whether some states try to enhance their power or form a counterbalancing alliance is up to them. But theory is supposed to help predict the outcome of such action. And if the system is unipolar, counterbalancing will fail. As the underlying distribution of power changes, the probability increases that some states will conclude that internal or external counterbalancing is possible. But there is no evidence that this has occurred in the 1990s. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that states are only now coming to terms with unipolarity.

Most of the counterbalancing that has occurred since 1991 has been rhetorical. Notably absent is any willingness on the part of the other great powers to accept any significant political or economic costs in countering U.S. power. Most of the world's powers are busy trying to climb aboard the American bandwagon even as they curtail their military outlays. Military spending by all the other great powers is either declining or holding steady in real terms. While Washington prepares for increased defense outlays, current planning in Europe, Japan, and China does not suggest real increases in the offing, and Russia's spending will inevitably decline further.<sup>61</sup> This response on the part of the other major powers is understandable, because the raw distribution of power leaves them with no realistic hope of counterbalancing the United States, while U.S.-managed security systems in Europe and Asia moderate the demand for more military capabilities.

The advent of unipolarity does not mean the end of all politics among great powers. Elites will not stop resenting overweening U.S. capabilities. Second-tier great powers will not suddenly stop caring about their standing vis-à-vis other states. Rising states presently outside the great power club will seek the prerequisites of membership. We should expect evidence of states' efforts to explore the new structure and determine their place in it. Most of the action since 1991 has concerned membership in the second tier of great powers. Some seek formal entry in the second tier via nuclear tests or a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Existing members fear a devaluation of

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60. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," pp. 915–916.

61. International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1998/99* (London: IISS, 1999).



their status and resist new aspirants. All of this requires careful management. But it affects neither the underlying structure nor the basic great power hierarchy.

The fact that some important states have more room to maneuver now than they did under bipolarity does not mean that unipolarity is already giving way to some new form of multipolarity.<sup>62</sup> The end of the bipolar order has decreased the security interdependence of regions and increased the latitude of some regional powers. But polarity does not refer to the existence of merely regional powers. When the world was bipolar, Washington and Moscow had to think strategically whenever they contemplated taking action anywhere within the system. Today there is no other power whose reaction greatly influences U.S. action across multiple theaters. China's reaction, for example, may matter in East Asia, but not for U.S. policy in the Middle East, Africa, or Europe. However, *all* major regional powers do share one item on their political agenda: how to deal with U.S. power. Until these states are capable of producing a counterpoise to the United States, the system is unipolar.

The key is that regional and second-tier competition should not be confused with balancing to restructure the system toward multipolarity. If the analysis so far is right, any existing second-tier state that tries such balancing should quickly learn the errors of its ways. This is indeed the fate that befell the two powers that tried (hesitantly, to be sure) to counterbalance: Russia and China. Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov's restless "multipolar diplomacy" had run out of steam well before Russia's financial collapse. And Russia's catastrophic decline also derailed China's efforts at creating some kind of counterpoise to the United States. As Avery Goldstein shows, the costs of Beijing's "multipolar diplomacy" dramatically outweighed the benefits. Russia was weak and getting weaker, while the United States held the economic and security cards. Even fairly careful Chinese moves produced indications of a strong local counterbalancing reaction before they showed any promise of increased autonomy vis-à-vis Washington. As a result, the Chinese rethought their approach

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62. The enhanced autonomy of many regions compared to the bipolar order has given rise to an important new research agenda. See Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); and David A. Lake and Patrick N. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). This evidence of new regional security dynamics leads many to view the current structure as a hybrid of unipolarity and multipolarity. See Huntington, "Lonely Superpower"; and Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry."

in 1996 and made a concerted effort to be a “responsible partner” of the Americans.<sup>63</sup>

Neither the Beijing-Moscow “strategic partnership” nor the “European troika” of Russia, Germany, and France entailed any costly commitments or serious risks of confrontation with Washington. For many states, the optimal policy is ambiguity: to work closely with the United States on the issues most important to Washington while talking about creating a counterpoise. Such policies generate a paper trail suggesting strong dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led world order and a legacy of actual behavior that amounts to bandwagoning. These states are seeking the best bargains for themselves given the distribution of power. That process necessitates a degree of politicking that may remind people faintly of the power politics of bygone eras. But until the distribution of power changes substantially, this bargaining will resemble real-politik in form but not content.

### *Conclusion: Challenges for Scholarship and Strategy*

The distribution of material capabilities at the end of the twentieth century is unprecedented. However we view this venerable explanatory variable, the current concentration of power in the United States is something new in the world. Even if world politics works by the old rules—even if democracy, new forms of interdependence, and international institutions do not matter—we should not expect a return of balance-of-power politics à la multipolarity for the simple reason that we are living in the modern world’s first unipolar system. And unipolarity is not a “moment.” It is a deeply embedded material condition of world politics that has the potential to last for many decades.

If unipolarity is so robust, why do so many writers hasten to declare its demise? The answer may lie in the common human tendency to conflate power *trends* with existing relationships. The rush to proclaim the return of multipolarity in the 1960s and 1970s, to pronounce the United States’ decline in the 1980s, to herald the rise of Japan or China as superpowers in the 1980s and 1990s, and finally to bid unipolarity adieu after the Cold War are all examples. In each case, analysts changed reference points to minimize U.S. power. In the

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63. Avery Goldstein, “Structural Realism and China’s Foreign Policy: A Good Part of the Story,” paper prepared for the annual conference of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Massachusetts, September 3–6, 1998.

bipolarity debate, the reference point became the extremely tight alliance of the 1950s, so any disagreement between the United States and Europe was seen as a harbinger of multipolarity. In the 1980s, "hegemony" was defined as "the U.S. position circa 1946," so the recovery of Europe and Japan appeared as fatal threats to the United States' position. Many analysts have come to define unipolarity as an imperial system such as Rome where there is only one great power and all other states are satrapies or dependencies. As a result, each act of defiance of Washington's preferences on any issue comes to be seen as the return of a multipolar world.

One explanation for this tendency to shift reference points is that in each case the extent of U.S. power was inconvenient for the scholarly debate of the day. Scholars schooled in nineteenth-century balance-of-power politics were intellectually primed for their return in the 1960s. In the 1980s, continued cooperation between the United States and its allies was a more interesting puzzle if the era of U.S. hegemony was over. In the 1990s, unipolarity is doubly inconvenient for scholars of international relations. For neorealists, unipolarity contradicts the central tendency of their theory. Its longevity is a testament to the theory's indeterminacy. For liberals and constructivists, the absence of balance-of-power politics among the great powers is a much more interesting and tractable puzzle if the world is multipolar. The debate would be far easier if all realist theories predicted instability and conflict and their competitors predicted the opposite.

Today's distribution of power is unprecedented, however, and power-centric theories naturally expect politics among nations to be different than in past systems. In contrast to the past, the existing distribution of capabilities generates incentives for cooperation. The absence of hegemonic rivalry, security competition, and balancing is not necessarily the result of ideational or institutional change. This is not to assert that realism provides the best explanation for the absence of security and prestige competition. Rather, the conclusion is that it offers an explanation that may compete with or complement those of other theoretical traditions. As a result, evaluating the merits of contending theories for understanding the international politics of unipolarity presents greater empirical challenges than many scholars have acknowledged.

Because the baseline expectations of all power-centric theories are novel, so are their implications for grand strategy. Scholars' main message to policymakers has been to prepare for multipolarity. Certainly, we should think about how to manage the transition to a new structure. Yet time and energy are limited. Constant preparation for the return of multipolarity means not gearing up

intellectually and materially for unipolarity. Given that unipolarity is prone to peace and the probability that it will last several more decades at least, we should focus on it and get it right.

The first step is to stop calling this the “post–Cold War world.” Unipolarity is nearing its tenth birthday. Our experience with this international system matches what the statesmen and scholars of 1825, 1928, and 1955 had. The key to this system is the centrality of the United States. The nineteenth century was not a “Pax Britannica.” From 1815 to 1853, it was a Pax Britannica et Russica; from 1853 to 1871, it was not a pax of any kind; and from 1871 to 1914, it was a Pax Britannica et Germanica. Similarly, the Cold War was not a Pax Americana, but a Pax Americana et Sovietica. Now the ambiguity is gone. One power is lonely at the top. Calling the current period the true Pax Americana may offend some, but it reflects reality and focuses attention on the stakes involved in U.S. grand strategy.

Second, doing too little is a greater danger than doing too much. Critics note that the United States is far more interventionist than any previous system leader. But given the distribution of power, the U.S. impulse toward interventionism is understandable. In many cases, U.S. involvement has been demand driven, as one would expect in a system with one clear leader. Rhetoric aside, U.S. engagement seems to most other elites to be necessary for the proper functioning of the system. In each region, cobbled-together security arrangements that require an American role seem preferable to the available alternatives. The more efficiently the United States performs this role, the more durable the system. If, on the other hand, the United States fails to translate its potential into the capabilities necessary to provide order, then great power struggles for power and security will reappear sooner. Local powers will then face incentives to provide security, sparking local counterbalancing and security competition. As the world becomes more dangerous, more second-tier states will enhance their military capabilities. In time, the result could be an earlier structural shift to bi- or multipolarity and a quicker reemergence of conflict over the leadership of the international system.

Third, we should not exaggerate the costs. The clearer the underlying distribution of power is, the less likely it is that states will need to test it in arms races or crises. Because the current concentration of power in the United States is unprecedentedly clear and comprehensive, states are likely to share the expectation that counterbalancing would be a costly and probably doomed venture. As a result, they face incentives to keep their military budgets under control until they observe fundamental changes in the capability of the United

States to fulfill its role. The whole system can thus be run at comparatively low costs to both the sole pole and the other major powers. Unipolarity can be made to seem expensive and dangerous if it is equated with a global empire demanding U.S. involvement in all issues everywhere. In reality, unipolarity is a distribution of capabilities among the world's great powers. It does not solve all the world's problems. Rather, it minimizes two major problems—security and prestige competition—that confronted the great powers of the past. Maintaining unipolarity does not require limitless commitments. It involves managing the central security regimes in Europe and Asia, and maintaining the expectation on the part of other states that any geopolitical challenge to the United States is futile. As long as that is the expectation, states will likely refrain from trying, and the system can be maintained at little extra cost.

The main criticism of the Pax Americana, however, is not that Washington is too interventionist. A state cannot be blamed for responding to systemic incentives. The problem is U.S. reluctance to *pay up*. Constrained by a domestic welfare role and consumer culture that the weaker British hegemon never faced, Washington tends to shrink from accepting the financial, military, and especially the domestic political burdens of sole pole status. At the same time, it cannot escape the demand for involvement. The result is cruise missile hegemony, the search for polar status on the cheap, and a grand global broker of deals for which others pay. The United States has responded to structural incentives by assuming the role of global security manager and “indispensable nation” in all matters of importance. But too often the solutions Washington engineers are weakened by American reluctance to take any domestic political risks.

The problem is that structural pressures on the United States are weak. Powerful states may not respond to the international environment because their power makes them immune to its threat. The smaller the number of actors, the greater the potential impact of internal processes on international politics. The sole pole is strong and secure enough that paying up-front costs for system maintenance is hard to sell to a parsimonious public. As Kenneth Waltz argued, “Strong states . . . can afford not to learn.”<sup>64</sup> If that was true of the great powers in multi- or bipolar systems, it is even truer of today's unipolar power. The implication is that instead of dwelling on the dangers of overinvolvement and the need to prepare for an impending multipolarity,

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64. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 195.

scholars and policymakers should do more to advertise the attractions of unipolarity.

Despite scholars' expectations, it was not the rise of Europe, Japan, and China that ended bipolarity. The monodimensional nature of the Soviet Union's power and the brittleness of its domestic institutions turned out to be the main threats to bipolar stability. Similarly, a uniting Europe or a rising Japan or China may not become the chief engines of structural change in the early twenty-first century. If the analysis here is right, then the live-for-today nature of U.S. domestic institutions may be the chief threat to unipolar stability. In short, the current world order is characterized not by a looming U.S. threat that is driving other powers toward multipolar counterbalancing, but by a material structure that presupposes and demands U.S. preponderance coupled with policies and rhetoric that deny its existence or refuse to face its modest costs.