



## Cambridge Review of International Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccam20>

### Introduction: World out of balance

Brendan Simms<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Cambridge

Available online: 26 Jul 2011

---

## Introduction: World out of balance

Brendan Simms  
*University of Cambridge*

The story of Sherlock Holmes's 'dog that didn't bark in the night' has long fascinated readers of detective stories and international relations experts. 'Realists', in particular, have long wondered why the undoubted 'hegemony' of the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union, did not lead to a 'balancing' coalition of powers against her. This was a development which was much-predicted throughout the 1990s. It appeared possible during the Kosovo crisis at the end of the decade, when both Moscow and Beijing were outraged at NATO intervention against a sovereign state without a UN Security Council resolution, and there was extensive talk of a Sino-Russian alliance to contain Washington. Early in the new decade, during the controversy over the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, there was even talk of some sort of Franco-German led West European balancing coalition. None of these moves ever amounted to much: no formal agreement was reached between China and Russia, while the European *fronde* of 2003 produced nothing more than the widely-derided 'chocolate summit' between the French, Germans and a few associates immediately after the fall of Baghdad. This is all the more surprising from the realist point of view, as the European Union, China and other powers or power centres could collectively muster enough economic power to balance the United States without difficulty.

In their by now classic book *World out of balance* (2008) the American scholars Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth explain this phenomenon. They argue that the United States is now (still) so powerful that 'counter-balancing is and will long remain prohibitively costly for the other major powers'. Not only are they unable to confront the United States, but they do not wish to. Partly this is because they wish to spare themselves the necessary military expenditure—European defence spending has actually dropped since the end of the Cold War. Partly this is because, like China, they do not wish to provoke counter-measures themselves before they are 'ready'. Moreover, the feared 'reputational' costs of US unilateralism in Iraq have not materialized: states continue to work together with Washington where it suits them, or when they are obliged to. One way or the other, Brooks and Wohlforth argue, the United States is in a good position to maintain its unipolar position for some time, and indeed 'to push hard an even unilaterally for revisions to the international system without sparking counter-balancing, risking the erosion of its ability to cooperate within international institutions, jeopardising the gains of globalization, or undermining the overall legitimacy of its role' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 217). The language alone shows that the authors, rather like Prince Tancredi, inhabit a profitable niche on the

extreme right of the scholarly centre-left, and it is hardly surprising that their robustness has earned them (apparently unjust) accusations of serving as cheerleaders for the younger George Bush.

Their remarkable argument has been treated with the respect it deserves by the authors assembled in this special edition of *CRIA*. They advance important qualifications and additional points, however. Erik Voeten points out that the end of bi-polarity has removed not only restraints from the United States, but also from other powers, not always to Washington's advantage. Saddam Hussein, for example, would never have felt emboldened to make his land grab in Kuwait—which was not directed specifically against the United States—under the old Cold War system. Simon Bromley insists on the continuing 'diffusion away of economic power away from the United States', and wonders what use military 'primacy' is in these circumstances. Christopher Layne goes even further to argue that thanks to what Paul Kennedy called 'overstretch', the unipolar era is already passing. Pointing to the economic crisis since 2008, which largely unfolded after Brooks and Wohlforth went to press, he predicts threats to the dollar as a reserve currency, and steep reductions in US defence expenditure. Charles Kupchan is sceptical whether rising powers will allow the 'universalizing' of US norms in the 'twilight hours' of its might, and questions whether American domestic politics will continue to bear the cost of primacy. Finally, Randall Schweller wisely cautions to be careful with predictions and to remember that 'all good things come to an end' (but is that not that a prediction, too).

All these are valid points. One might add that there have been recent signs of the decline not only of US economic power, but also of its military deterrence. The outgoing Bush administration experienced this in August 2008, when Russians invaded Georgia in a move which would have been unthinkable five years earlier. More recently, Barack Obama has seen this with the new assertiveness of North Korea, which not only sank a South Korean destroyer a few months ago but also launched an unprovoked artillery bombardment on its neighbour last week. All this said, however, it is worth remembering that predictions of US decline made 20 years ago, made on the basis of another budget deficit, failed to foresee the fall of the Berlin Wall and a subsequent 20-year stretch of American hegemony. In that sense it is salutary to be reminded by Brooks and Wohlforth—and their discussants—that predictions of US decline, rather like reports of Mark Twain's death, might be greatly exaggerated.

## Unipolar politics as usual

Erik Voeten  
*Georgetown University*

**Abstract** *This short comment seeks to clarify what unipolar politics as usual is, and how it differs from politics as usual under alternative systemic conditions, especially bipolarity. This is an assessment 'from within', accepting Brooks and Wohlforth's description of unipolar politics as well as their central premises that America's lonely superpower status faces no immediate threat and that there is little evidence that powerful states are actively seeking to overthrow the current unipolar system. I suggest that a comparative assessment of how alternative distributions of power create different incentive structures for states yields different conclusions and policy prescriptions than those advanced by Brooks and Wohlforth. Most notably, Brooks and Wohlforth do not fully appreciate how the 'unipolar politics as usual' that they describe provides states with few incentives to cooperate with their policy prescription that the US reshape the world's institutional architecture.*

### Introduction

The United States has unprecedented material preponderance over any other state or likely combination of states. Yet, international relations (IR) theorists caution that the international environment imposes considerable constraints on the US ability to use said material advantage. In their path-breaking book, Brooks and Wohlforth forcefully argue that these systemic constraints are not nearly as impressive as IR scholars make them out to be. There is little evidence of either hard or soft balancing while economic interdependence, legitimacy and international institutions offer at best modest sources of restraint. If there are any constraints on US power, they stem from non-systemic sources such as insurgency, terrorism, oil dependency and domestic politics, not from the condition of unipolarity.

Can systemic arguments be salvaged from this tour-de-force demolition? Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 67) imply as much when they argue that most of the examples analysts put forth as evidence for systemic constraints are in fact examples of 'unipolar politics as usual'. This suggests that the normal conduct of unipolar politics is somehow different from bipolar or multipolar politics. Yet, they do not develop this comparison. Brooks and Wohlforth, like much of the literature, focus their inquiry on whether states are motivated by a desire to change the distribution of capabilities either because a unipolar distribution of power necessitates balancing (the realist claim) or because alleged legitimacy or reputational deficits lead states to take actions that undermine US dominance. Yet, systemic factors may also matter because different distributions of capabilities

offer different incentives and opportunities to both the powerful and the less powerful, regardless of whether states are motivated by a desire to affect the current distribution of capabilities.

This short comment seeks to clarify what unipolar politics as usual is and how it differs from politics as usual under alternative systemic conditions, especially bipolarity. This is an assessment 'from within', accepting Brooks and Wohlforth's central premises that America's lonely superpower status faces no immediate threat and that there is little evidence that powerful states are actively seeking to overthrow the current unipolar system. I also resist the temptation to resurrect the liberal and constructivist arguments that Brooks and Wohlforth criticize. I argue that Brooks and Wohlforth do not fully appreciate how their own description of unipolar politics leaves not just the United States but also other states much freer to pursue their short-term objectives than the condition of bipolarity did. This creates opportunities and incentives to build up capacities or resist the United States even if this behaviour is not necessarily motivated by a desire to affect the distribution of power. This has important implications for Brooks and Wohlforth's main policy prescription that the United States reshape the world's institutional architecture. Under unipolar politics as usual there are no systemic reasons for states to go along with plans to cement the US power advantage into a new institutional order.

### **Does unipolarity matter? And does it impose constraints?**

Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 67) rightly claim that the 'balancing metaphor encourages analysts to interpret any behavior that complicates US foreign policy as an effort to check US power'. Consequentially, they examine the actions of states that seemingly frustrate US foreign policy against a counterfactual: what would these states have done in the absence of a balancing impulse? This is a sound empirical strategy to evaluate whether there is evidence of balancing behaviour in the unipolar era (which is, to be fair, their goal). It is, however, not a good way to evaluate whether and how polarity affects state behaviour. Answering that question requires consideration of a different counterfactual: would states have behaved differently under a different distribution of capabilities? Unipolarity with a counterbalancing coalition may well be more difficult for the United States than unipolarity without counterbalancing. Yet, this does not mean that it is easier or harder for the United States to get what it wants under unipolarity than under some alternative distribution of capabilities. The most obvious base for comparison is the bipolar system from which the world emerged only recently, although alternative (hypothetical) bases for comparison could also be useful.

Properly performing such a counterfactual analysis is a task of enormous proportions that I cannot do justice to in this forum.<sup>1</sup> A good start is to create some theoretical expectations about the types of behaviours one would expect to observe under different systemic configurations. To Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 68–69),

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, I am going to ignore the obvious problem that the United States may want different things depending on the distribution of capabilities. This is an issue with any assessment of the causal effect of polarity on outcomes.

unipolar politics is essentially politics as usual: states are trying to satisfy economic and regional security interests, they are seeking to get the best possible deal in bargaining situations, and they are responding to domestic political incentives. The implication is that in a unipolar system states can simply go about their business while presumably they cannot do so in a bipolar or multipolar system. Under bi- or multipolarity, states have to evaluate not just whether an action is in their short-term national interests but also how their preferred course of action affects the overall balance of power. In a 'world out of balance' states have no opportunity to affect the global balance of power so it should be of no concern to them.

The logic of this argument suggests that under unipolarity, the absence of systemic constraints applies not just to the United States but also to the rest of the world. Even if states rarely take major foreign policy initiatives that actively seek to undermine the United States, they also lack systemic reasons to side with the United States if doing so is not in their short-term interests. The absence of systemic constraints for other states may well complicate life for the United States. When pointing to the looming danger of communist world domination is no longer a credible option, the United States has to find new existential threats that create common interests (for example, terrorism), offer policy choices that are attractive *sui generis*, or rely on costly coercive methods to get states to do what it wants. It would be silly to argue that offering attractive policy options and using coercive methods are not important under bipolarity. They clearly are and the history of the Cold War provides ample documentation for this. What is missing under unipolarity is some of the glue<sup>2</sup> that bipolar competition provided to alliances and coalitions.

For example, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 84–85) are right when they argue that German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder intensified his opposition to the Iraq war in the summer of 2002 for domestic political reasons. What is less clear is whether these incentives would not have been counterbalanced at least somewhat if Germany were allied with the United States against a great power that was perceived to threaten Germany's existence. Schröder was afforded the luxury of not having to think about how his actions would impact a bipolar power struggle. Brooks and Wohlforth point to the vocal domestic opposition over the deployment of Pershing II missiles in West Germany in the early 1980s to argue that analysts overstate the glue that the Cold War provided. Yet with contested elections on the horizon, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl decided to support the US position even though a vast majority of Germans and a majority of Kohl's supporters favoured postponement of the deployment (Painton et al 1983). It is at least plausible that although Schröder was not motivated by a balancing rationale, the different incentive structure of unipolarity led him to act in a way that was less favourable to the United States than his actions might have been under an alternative distribution of power. That is, while the international system imposed at least some constraints on Kohl's abilities to pursue his short-term interests (re-election), it did not similarly constrain Schröder.

---

<sup>2</sup>I do not mean to say here that there is no glue that encourages cooperation under unipolarity (for example, ideology, shared values), just that the particular source of glue provided by bipolar competition has dissipated.

Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 80–83) may also be correct that that concerns about balancing US power played little role in motivating the European Union's (EU) to increase its defence cooperation. Yet, the changed incentive structure of unipolarity almost surely did provide an impetus for collective defence efforts. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 81) approvingly cite Charles Kupchan (2002, 152) who argues that the Europeans were motivated by the 'prospect of an America that is losing interest in being the guarantor of European security'. This perception is surely fuelled by the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. Moreover, the Europeans became increasingly convinced that they could not necessarily count on the United States to deal with their short-term security concerns (such as Kosovo). In making the decisions to enhance their own capabilities, concerns about a divided command structure were much less prevalent than they would have been under bipolarity, when signs of a divided (and thus weak) coalition carried much greater potential consequences.

It is not clear that the development of these capabilities provides an immediate constraint on US power. In the short term, the EU's enhanced defence capabilities are entirely compatible with the US military alliance and do not impose a constraint. Yet, once a capability is created it is there and it could be used for purposes that the United States is less than enthusiastic about. More directly, it reduces the dependency of the Europeans on the United States and thereby US leverage over its European allies.

Similarly, Brooks and Wohlforth may well be right that China is primarily interested in growing economically and protecting its regional security interests rather than balancing US power on a global scale. Yet, it again pays to ponder whether China would have been able to pursue these courses of action under the conditions of bipolarity? The demise of the Soviet Union and the attractiveness of communism as an alternative spurred China to adopt economic reforms. China's export-oriented economy has depended entirely on access to world markets. China acquired this through bilateral deals and especially by becoming a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the creation of which was very much linked to post-Cold War dynamics. The apparent (relative) absence of concerns about the long-term impact of facilitating China's growth surely did not hurt when trying to convince US Congress and others that China should indeed be granted preferential access to world markets. Conversely, the impossibility of challenging the United States on the security front (either alone or with allies) may well have spurred Chinese decision makers to focus on economic development.

Again, this development may not directly impose immediate constraints on the United States, at least outside of East Asia. Indeed, the United States has benefited greatly from China's economic development. China's interests are now so intertwined with those of the United States that the Chinese government is currently propping up the US economy such that US consumers will resume buying their products and will not start demanding protectionism. Moreover, it is not clear that the enormous debt the United States has to China provides China much geopolitical leverage (Drezner 2009) or that the projections will materialize that China's gross domestic product (GDP) will outsize US GDP within 15 years. Yet, China has the world's largest population and is one of the world's wealthier nations (although not in per capita terms). History suggests that nations that have both these properties will at some point assert their influence (Gilpin 1981).

At the very least, despite its lonely superpower status the United States does not have much leverage to get China to change its policies.

These examples are merely illustrative and their implications should not be exaggerated. For example, non-aligned states had ample opportunities during the Cold War period to play off the two superpowers and thus pursue their short-term interests. Moreover, even under unipolarity regional power balances are often on the minds of actors when they evaluate alternative courses of action. Finally, it is not necessarily clear that it is necessarily a bad thing for the United States if other states feel relatively unconstrained by the international system. Under the constraints of the bipolar Cold War, Germany may have been more likely to cooperate with US security initiatives but the prospect for Poland agreeing to supply troops in support of a US initiated military action would have been rather bleak. I doubt that it is feasible to make an aggregate assessment of whether the constraints are greater or smaller under unipolarity than bipolarity or multipolarity. The important point here is that in the world Brooks and Wohlforth describe balancing is not an important motivation for states but neither is bandwagoning. States and leaders are simply trying to maximize their short-term interests. I argue in the following section that this has important implications for the policy prescriptions Brooks and Wohlforth offer regarding the creation of a new institutional architecture.

### **Coalition formation and institutional innovation**

In their book and in a subsequent *Foreign Affairs* article, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 2009) argue that the United States is in an unprecedented position to remake the world's institutions to reflect its preferences. This prescription follows from their conclusions that the US advantage in capabilities is both unparalleled and unchecked. Yet, they do not sufficiently answer the question why other states have incentives to go along with proposals to institutionalize the US power advantage? Advantages in relative capabilities do not automatically make other states do what you want them to do.

First, absolute power matters. A crucial difference between the end of World War II and the Cold War is that neither the US allies nor most defeated countries are in a position of desperate dependence. The United States may well be disproportionately powerful but European states have sufficient resources to support or even to create institutions they like, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). After the Asian financial crisis, Asian countries sought to reduce their dependence on the US dominated IMF by creating the Chiang Mai Initiative, aided by the large reserves held by many Asian states. Sure, other states often look for US leadership but if this leadership does not come or is not appreciated many states find ways to manage on their own.

Second, as argued above, the systemic conditions are permissive for conflicts over institutional design. Even if divisions between the Europeans and the United States over international institutions are commonly perceived as frictions in the transatlantic alliance, the consequences of such frictions are much less severe under unipolarity than under bipolarity.

Third, Brooks and Wohlforth cannot base their argument on the same kind of trade-off between restraint and institutional design that liberal institutionalists

such as Ikenberry (2001) rely on. Liberal institutionalists argue that a superpower agrees to constrain potential (ab)uses of its asymmetric power by binding itself to institutions in exchange for an institutional configuration that reflects its long-term interests. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that institutions impose no meaningful constraints on US power. So, a desire to check US power cannot be an incentive for other states to go along with US plans to reshape the international institutional order to its liking, unless we assume that the leaders of other states are delusional.

Under unipolar politics as usual, then, the United States has to offer institutional reforms that everyone likes or persuade/coerce/pay off others to accept institutional reforms they do not like. The first type of reform is fine but can happen under any distribution of capabilities. Unipolarity may help under the familiar argument that it may be easier to solve the collective action problem if the sole superpower is willing to take on the lion share of the burden, allowing other states to free-ride. This may have helped in the creation of the WTO, which is really the only major global institutional reform that has taken place since the end of the Cold War.

Persuasion too is independent of the distribution of capabilities, unless one believes that sitting on top somehow makes one more persuasive, an assertion for which there is little recent evidence.<sup>3</sup> One may argue that in a world out of balance, the United States has unique opportunities to coerce others and offer side-payments. This is partially true. However, while under 'unipolar politics as usual' coercion and side-payments are good tools to use institutions to achieve short-term goals, they are less conducive to the long-term and broad-based institutional reform that Brooks and Wohlforth advocate.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) can serve as a useful example of this point. While scholars such as Michael Glennon (2003) have argued that unipolarity has killed the UNSC, the evidence suggests the opposite. The UN had little or no say in the major Cold War interventions, such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US military action in Vietnam, nor in smaller interventions, such as the US military actions in Grenada and Panama. Between 1977 and the start of the Gulf War, the UNSC adopted only two resolutions under Chapter VII; resolutions that are binding upon all UN member states and that are used to authorize sanctions as well as uses of force by UN troops, regional organizations, or individual member states (Voeten 2005). By contrast, between 1990 and 2004, the Council approved 304 Chapter VII resolutions; many of which had meaningful consequences.

So, the UNSC became more active without meaningful institutional reform and despite the antiquated nature of the UNSC's decision-making structure. Elsewhere I have argued that unipolarity was responsible for this reversal in activity (Voeten 2001). During the Cold War, the UNSC could only be used for operations that maintained a status quo, for example by creating a buffer between warring forces. After the Cold War, the United States was often able to use the UNSC in order to move the status quo in its preferred direction, such as in the Haiti intervention, Bosnia, and many resolutions on Iraq. The United States used its asymmetric power to credibly communicate outside options (unilateral or

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, the United States has become increasingly isolated in the UN General Assembly (Voeten 2004).

NATO interventions) that others did not have and/or to offer side-payments such as World Bank loans. This type of coalition building obviously failed partially in the 1999 Kosovo intervention and almost fully on the 2003 Iraq intervention, perhaps because it had become harder to pay off crucial actors that were weak in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War or because the diplomatic execution left something to be desired. Yet, this type of strategic coalition building has been successfully applied with some regularity during the post-Cold War period. In the UN General Assembly, which mostly has symbolic resolutions, the US almost never gets its way (Voeten 2004). In the UNSC, where heavy-handed tactics are more common, the United States has for the most part been quite successful.

While the United States has thus been reasonably successful in throwing around its weight to achieve its short-term goals in international institutions, this strategy has not led to much institutional reform that solves long term issues. It is one thing to pay off China or Russia in order to persuade them not to exercise their veto when the United States wants to invade Haiti. It is quite another thing to buy off these countries to institutionalize US interests on a new global security regime or on nuclear proliferation (one of the core issues that Brooks and Wohlforth address). The outside options are not always clear in institutional design<sup>4</sup> and it is more generally unclear why states have an incentive to go along with a great plan in which the US institutionalizes its power advantages, at least not if, as Brooks and Wohlforth argue, this institutionalization does not constrain US power. If 'unipolar politics as usual' is all about states pursuing their short-term interests and unipolar institutional politics follows very much the same pattern.

## **Conclusions**

This note has sought to stay within the main premises laid out by Brooks and Wohlforth. As such I have resisted temptations to argue with their claims that US dominance is unthreatened, even by the current financial crisis or the rise of China, or to try and resurrect liberal or constructivist theoretical treatments. I have also stuck to systemic arguments. Brooks and Wohlforth appear to realize full well that the United States is perfectly capable of causing its own demise (as were past hegemonies). The choice to do so reflects my admiration for the accomplishments of *World out of balance* at both a theoretical and an empirical level.

The main argument that I advanced here is that Brooks and Wohlforth do not fully appreciate how their own description of unipolar politics leaves not just the United States but also other states much freer to pursue their short-term objectives than the condition of bipolarity did. This creates opportunities and incentives to build up capacities or resist the United States even if this behaviour is not necessarily motivated by a desire to affect the distribution of power. Moreover, if unipolar politics is characterized by states pursuing their short-term self-interests, then coalitions under unipolarity need to be constructed on an issue-by-issue

---

<sup>4</sup>There may be some examples where this may work. For example, it is not unreasonable to presume that the prospect of being relieved from the threat of bilateral section 301 sanctions led some countries to prefer the multilateral WTO to bilateral trade interactions with the United States. Yet, this involves a liberal trade-off where the United States agrees to constrain itself in exchange for institutionalizing its preferences.

basis. There are few reasons for states to be enthusiastic about US plans to cement their preferences into a new institutional order. It is important to appreciate that having more capabilities than another state does not immediately confer leverage. Even if the United States sits on top, it remains very expensive to coerce China to change its currency policy or Germany to alter its Iraq policy. These points do not undermine many of the core claims that Brooks and Wohlforth make, such as that the reputational cost of acting unilaterally may not be nearly as large as many international relations scholars have claimed. They do, however, challenge their key policy prescription that given that US power is both uniquely dominant and unchecked; the United States also has a unique opportunity to reshape the world's institutional architecture to its liking. This conclusion misses the point that other states are also in a unique position to simply say no.

### Notes on contributor

**Erik Voeten** is the Peter F Krogh Associate Professor of geopolitics and justice in world affairs at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and Department of Government.

### References

- Brooks, Stephen and William Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Brooks, Stephen and William Wohlforth (2009) 'Reshaping the world order: how Washington should reform international institutions', *Foreign Affairs*, 88:2, 49–63
- Drezner, Daniel (2009) 'Bad debts: China's inflated financial power in great power politics', *International Security*, 34:2, 7–45
- Gilpin, Robert (1981) *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Glennon, Michael J (2003) 'Why the Security Council failed', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June
- Ikenberry, John G (2001) *After victory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Kupchan, Charles (2002) *The end of an American era: US foreign policy and the geopolitics of the twenty-first century* (New York: Knopf)
- Painton, Frederick, Roland Flamini, Gary Lee and John Moody (1983) 'West Germany: Kohl wins his gamble', *Time*, 14 March
- Voeten, Erik (2001) 'Outside options and the logic of Security Council action', *The American Political Science Review*, 95:4, 845–858
- Voeten, Erik (2004) 'Resisting the lonely superpower: responses of states in the UN to US dominance', *The Journal of Politics*, 66:3, 729–754
- Voeten, Erik (2005) 'The political origins of the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council', *International Organization*, 59:3, 527–557

## The limits to balancing

Simon Bromley  
*Open University*

**Abstract** *This article explores the major contribution of Brooks and Wohlforth's World out of balance to debate about the role of American primacy and power in contemporary international affairs. It argues that these authors make a major contribution to our understanding of the present international order but that some key questions about the effectiveness of US primacy remain unaddressed and require different questions and considerations to be debated.*

### Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of communism as an alternative model of the basic features of socio-economic organization have left international relations (IR) theory in general, and realism in particular, in something of a quandary. Many realists—from Mearsheimer to Waltz—have argued that international politics will continue to be shaped by the balance of power. Others, sundry institutionalists and latterly constructivists, have argued that interdependence, institutions and norms have evolved and solidified to an extent that a post-balance of power world—in effect, a world beyond anarchy—beckons as security logics are transformed and as power diffuses to a variety of non-state actors. Still others, Marxists for the most part, argue that rivalry and conflict persist but that these are now more obviously products of the imperialist dynamics of contemporary capitalism.

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth do not discuss radical and Marxist theories of inter-capitalist rivalry but they do take issue with realist premonitions of an imminent return to great power rivalries of the form of balancing against US unipolarity. And what makes their contribution particularly valuable is that they do so without embracing very much of the alternative institutionalist and constructivist conventional wisdom. Indeed, they find much of this literature equally wanting.

Nevertheless, Brooks and Wohlforth accept the challenge posed by the fact of unipolarity—more or less incontestable on their count—and the seeming inability of American power to reshape the international order to Washington's liking. Starting from the idea that 'what really changed after 2003 were estimates of the political utility of America's primacy' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 2), Brooks and Wohlforth then pose four key questions:

Does the United States face the imminent prospect of having its power checked by a balancing coalition of other great powers? As it has become increasingly exposed to

the international economy, has the United States become more vulnerable to other actors' attempts to influence its security policies? Is the United States tightly bound by the need to maintain a good general reputation for cooperation in international institutions? Does the United States need to adhere to existing rules to sustain legitimacy and thus maintain today's institutional order?

In an analytical and empirical *tour de force*, Brooks and Wohlforth answer these questions and along the way find much of the existing IR literature on these questions wanting. Brooks and Wohlforth bring a clarity and precision to these questions and the debates that have addressed them that is most impressive and their adjudications and conclusions should set the terms of future enquiries in these matters. That said, there is much that their analysis does not address. In what follows, I will first briefly outline my grounds for agreement with a large amount of what Brooks and Wohlforth have to say about the four questions posed above. I will then present some reflection on what they leave out and some potential limitations of their analysis.

### **Why the world is 'out of balance'**

On the first question—that is, can US primacy be checked by a coalition of other great powers?—Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the world is unipolar both in the sense that one 'state is preponderant in all relevant categories of capability' and in the narrower sense that there is 'only one state capable of organizing major politico-military action anywhere in the system' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 13). This is surely right for the foreseeable future and Brooks and Wohlforth are, in my view, correct to conclude that 'the counterbalancing constraint is inoperative and will remain so until the distribution of capabilities changes fundamentally' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 35). Of the potential other great powers, the European Union (EU) has the technological and economic capabilities to rival US military power but these remain merely potential in the absence of substantive and serious political union—and there is simply no sign of that. China's challenge, if that is what it will become, is still a generation hence or more. And what Stephen Walt, and following him the present author, have analysed as 'soft balancing' can just as well be interpreted as bargaining for advantage rather than balancing *per se*.

The second question—has the United States become more vulnerable to economic statecraft by others to check its security policies—is equally easily answered in the negative. The United States has become much more interdependent with the international economy but this is strongly asymmetrical and others have much more to lose than the United States, unless the others are able to coordinate their actions. Brooks and Wohlforth have little difficulty showing that this is unlikely and the United States has little to fear in these respects. But it is worth noting that this question is framed quite narrowly. It does not address whether the United States needs the cooperation of others for wider matters of international economic governance. This is something we will need to return to.

Brooks and Wohlforth's third question—does the United States have to worry about its reputation?—is the subject of a careful and searching discussion which makes two key points. First, a breach of reputation might not matter overly if the costs of retaliation are high and in general these costs are indeed significant. And secondly, reputations are plural and multiple, not singular, and damage to a

reputation in one area does not necessarily carry over into that in another. To put the point in somewhat different language to that preferred by Brooks and Wohlforth, whatever identities states might have they do not have characters in the ways that natural persons might and so a reputation for inconstancy in one domain is quite consistent with good standing in another.

Finally, Brooks and Wohlforth address the question of legitimacy. Here they make an important distinction between two views about the constraint of legitimacy in which it is either structural or strongly conditional. A structural legitimacy constraint is one based on the idea that the deepest norms and institutions of the international system include equilibrium in the sense of 'the institutions of the balance of power and multilateralism' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 178). If this is so, then 'unipolarity is structurally illegitimate'; a unipole is simply *de jure* presumptively illegitimate. A strongly conditional view of the legitimacy constraint, which Brooks and Wohlforth argue is more common in the literature,<sup>1</sup> is that the United States cannot use its power against settled norms without losing legitimacy and therefore the ability to enlist the agency of others in issues of mutual concern. Against both of these views, they argue that there is rule-breaking without significant legitimacy costs and there is also, more importantly, the use of go-it-alone power to revise or create new rules and norms. Power does not translate into legitimacy but it can be used to reshape it.

In my view, Brooks and Wohlforth's review and adjudication of these questions and debates is by some measure the best we have. There are restrictions on US security policy but 'they are not the systemic phenomena featured in international relations theory' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 208). Brooks and Wohlforth list the following: nuclear proliferation; insurgency; imperial overstretch; terrorism; and oil dependency—all features which, they maintain, might restrict US security policy but which are not the object of much attention in international relations theory. This is correct, and it is a shocking indictment of much contemporary international relations theory, but it does not quite address the issue with which *World out of balance* began, which was estimates of 'the political utility of America's primacy' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 2, emphasis added).

### What price unipolarity?

The issue here is that Brooks and Wohlforth have so structured their argument around the four questions noted above and their forensic investigation of these that they have neglected to ask what the political utility of America's primacy might be. This need not be a criticism of their work but it is, surely, the key question for policymakers and, if it seeks to be relevant to analysis and public understanding, for international relations theory.

To take Brooks and Wohlforth's first two questions, one does not have to believe US power will be checked by a coalition of other great powers or that others can use economic statecraft to thwart its security aims to see that unless the major centres of economic power can coordinate their activities a wide range of

---

<sup>1</sup> Though the former structural view is common in much public opinion, especially in Europe.

problems—including some of those listed by Brooks and Wohlforth above—will not be solved to the best interests of the United States or anyone else. Each of the major centres of power—what Paul Collier has recently referred to as the G5 (the United States, the EU, China, India and Japan)—has a veto power over projects to coordinate international economic governance. Thinking through the political utility of American primacy in that context is a key research agenda.

And looking at their third and fourth questions, how far will US primacy resolve intractable political questions about what institutions and with what legitimacy can address key security questions involving the United States, Russia, China and a whole host of middle tier powers—from Afghanistan and Pakistan, through Iran and the Middle East, to East and North Africa? To say that the United States has a freedom of institutional manoeuvre and an ability to use its power to re-set norms of legitimacy that are second to none is but the first step to analysing these kinds of issues.

Bringing all four sets of considerations together, we can say that Brooks and Wohlforth have analysed and answered the important questions they pose brilliantly and they have cleared much of the ground for the broader question—that is, what is the political utility of American primacy? But that question is still to be answered. And the central question here—or so I maintained in my own work and continue to hold—is that of the continuing general diffusion of economic power away from the United States and the yawning gap between military and economic considerations. This was and is the true Achilles heel of American power. Even the neo-conservatives realized that talk of unipolarity was only a partial description of the configurations of international politics. Clearly, the United States will not face a global competitor any time soon—loose talk about multipolarity from China, Russia and even France and Germany was at best a wish that the United States would exercise its prerogatives in accordance with the *status quo* pieties of the UN Security Council. Yet, the position of the United States—in the Asia-Pacific, North Atlantic and Western hemisphere—depends on the legitimacy created by institutionalizing shared interests such that none of these regions seeks to act independently, let alone counter to US priorities.

The current economic crisis may not have been ‘made in America’ but the central role of disruptions to US financial markets does make it much harder for the United States to claim economic leadership. And, while the ability of the United States to lead the international economy out of previous crises may have been exaggerated, there can be little doubt that, if there is to be continued cooperative effort to resolve the present difficulties, then the United States will have to accommodate more to the economic power of both the European and Asian poles of the world. The *economic* unipolar moment that the United States enjoyed vis-à-vis its capitalist allies after 1945 and which some—captured by the hubris of the ‘new economy’—thought had returned in the 1990s has given way to multipolarity; and the international economy is undergoing a fundamental rebalancing in power and momentum towards emerging Asia, a region in which US power is not institutionalized to the degree it is in the transatlantic arena. No other economy is going to overtake, even rival, the US economy in terms of innovation and levels of productivity for the foreseeable future—the United States is not facing the predicament of Britain in the late nineteenth century (being overtaken by Germany and America)—but economic multipolarity is now a permanent condition.

The Bush doctrine—broadly, that a unilateral assertion of American power (coercive and where necessary military power) could reshape international politics such that others would follow the US lead—has failed. Indeed, outside the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq it was never really applied and it was certainly abandoned across the board in the second term of the Bush administration. Since the dissolution of communism and the end of the Cold War there has not been a single axis of strategic and ideological competition around which the United States can mobilize an alliance, and the attempt to mobilize and brigade the rest of the world around the Manichaeon divisions of the ‘war on terror’ have been a transparent failure and have done not a little to erode the legitimacy of US international political leadership.

Can the United States re-set the norms and institutions of multilateralism in ways that are more consistent with and accommodate to its unipolarity? Brooks and Wohlforth suggest this might indeed be possible—perhaps. But it takes more than one for multilateralism to work and it is as yet far from clear how far the relevant parties such as the EU, European NATO, China, India, Brazil, the G20 and so on are able or indeed willing to accommodate a form of multilateralism that the United States can live with. If, for example, multilateralism is perceived in Washington as a means of exercising vetoes over US priorities, then the Europeans and others may find that the Bush administration’s apparent unilateralism was not so aberrant after all. Equally, how far can US domestic politics really sign-up to a new multilateralism that would have to be negotiated from a position where the go-it-alone economic power of the kind present in 1945 is long gone?

I am not sure that Brooks and Wohlforth would deny any of this but I am also not convinced that dispatching the four questions about unipolarity gives us a grip on the range of new threats—fractures in the governance of the international economy; the dangers of nuclear proliferation; the potential access of non-state activities to weapons of mass destruction; the existence of weak and failing states across a broad swathe of strategically important and resource-rich territory from North Africa through the Middle East to Central Asia and beyond; the challenges posed by rising regional powers such as China and India; the troubled identity and orientation of what Brzezinski has called the ‘pivot’ states such as Turkey, Ukraine and Iran; and the transnational and global consequences of potential ecological and demographic crises—that can be addressed only collectively, if they can be addressed at all.

## Conclusion

So, where does this leave us? One question which neither Books and Wohlforth nor my own work directly addresses is what theoretical frameworks would allow us better to answer the questions we all agree are not adequately dealt with in much of the current literature. I think we all agree that the explanatory resources of realism are limited, if only because *pro tem* its central mechanism—the balance of power among great powers—does not operate, and that mainstream IR alternatives—institutionalist and constructivist—are also wanting. My own work has drawn eclectically and loosely on a range of perspectives that recognize the centrality of power in conditions of anarchy while seeking to take equally seriously the particular character of interdependence—however asymmetrical

and uneven—within contemporary capitalism. Bringing these considerations together must be a key research ambition for all future attempts to reckon the prospects for American power. It is the signal achievement and merit of *World out of balance* to have surveyed the field and come to judgement on one side—that of mainstream international relations—of this necessary debate.

#### **Notes on contributor**

**Simon Bromley** is Dean and Director of Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University. He is the author of *American Power and the Prospects for International Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2008).

#### **Reference**

Brooks, Stephen G and Wohlforth, William C (2008) *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

## Why unipolarity doesn't matter (much)

Charles L Glaser  
*The George Washington University*

**Abstract** *This article first argues that states have not balanced against US unipolar power because the potential balancers do not view the United States as a major threat, because they believe it has benign security-seeking motives, at least with regard to other major powers. This explanation runs counter to the Brooks–Wohlforth argument, which holds that states are not balancing because the magnitude of the United States' power advantage makes balancing essentially infeasible. The second part of the paper challenges the conventional wisdom on the benefits of unipolarity, arguing that the benefits the United States derives from unipolarity are generally overrated. More specifically, US security need not be significantly reduced by growth in China's economy that supports a return to bipolarity.*

### Introduction

Understanding the implications of unipolarity has generated growing interest over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> The reasons are obvious. The United States has been the unipolar power since the end of the Cold War, providing what is widely viewed as an enviable position from which to direct its foreign policy. Renewed debate is beginning about how long US unipolarity will last. Contrary to some early predictions that US unipolarity would be short lived, it has remained essentially unchallenged for a couple of decades.<sup>2</sup> Now there is rising concern that China's continuing economic growth will soon enable it to eclipse America's power dominance. But there remains a strong case that America's overall power advantage will last for at least a few more decades.<sup>3</sup> US material preponderance is simply so large that no other major power comes close to matching the United States across the range of the key determinants of power, which are usually envisioned as including population, territory, economic capacity, military forces and political competence.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the series of articles in the special issue (2009) of *World Politics*, 62:1.

<sup>2</sup> Arguing persuasively that predictions of early decline were ill founded was Wohlforth (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent statement see Joffe (2009).

<sup>4</sup> This is a standard list of components of power; see Waltz (1979, 131). Although not central to points that I address in the text, I would take issue with including military forces/capabilities. A country that had the potential to build forces that were much larger than any other country's, but chose not to, would still be the unipolar power. Military forces are endogenous to structure and, therefore, should not be used to define it.

In their ambitious book, *World out of balance* (2008), Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth provide a thorough exploration of the implications of unipolarity, focusing on how other states will react to US power. They argue that the US unipolar advantage is now so great that it prevents other states from counterbalancing; according to their analysis, US unipolarity essentially eliminates the external constraints on the US ability to exercise its power. As a result, unipolarity provides the United States with tremendous leeway to pursue its international interests. In their words, 'counterbalancing is and will long remain prohibitively costly for the other major powers' and 'the variables that drive balance-of-power theory itself are now configured so as to render the balancing constraint so improbable as to render it inoperative' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 23, 27). Brooks and Wohlforth contend that the lack of current balancing against the United States reflects the logic of their central argument. Regarding the policy implications, they conclude that due to the lack of counterbalancing, 'there is no reason to expect that for the next two decades external constraints will meaningfully impede U.S. efforts to revise the international system' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 17–18).

This article addresses two questions about unipolarity. First, is counterbalancing in fact prevented by the current distribution of power? Second, and much broader, is unipolarity really so wonderful? More specifically, how valuable is unipolarity to the United States? For example, would the United States be much worse off in a bipolar world in which China's economic growth made it the second pole? Contrary to what I believe is the conventional wisdom, I argue that unipolarity is much overrated.<sup>5</sup>

### **Is counterbalancing essentially impossible?**

The realist core of the Brooks and Wohlforth argument is that counterbalancing is now beyond the means of the other major powers. US power is now so great that it has crossed a threshold beyond which other states simply cannot respond effectively. Consequently, they are not even trying to counterbalance US power.

US power is certainly impressive. According to their figures from 2006, the United States possessed 46 per cent of major-power gross domestic product (GDP). Roughly matching US GDP would therefore require most of the other major powers to join together. Further, as Brooks and Wohlforth argue, there are significant barriers to external balancing (that is, alliance formation), including collective action problems, in which states hope to free ride on others' investments in military capabilities.

Nevertheless, the lack of counterbalancing is not best explained by America's large advantage in power. Instead, the key reason states are not energetically balancing against the United States is because they do not believe that the United States poses a large threat to their vital interests. Other states' beliefs about US motives explain why. Although the United States has both tremendous raw power and military forces that are far larger and more capable than any other country's, the belief that the United States is likely a primarily security-seeking state that is uninterested in conquering or coercing major powers makes it relatively

---

<sup>5</sup>The title of my article may exaggerate the extent of this judgement, but I could not resist the parallel to Jervis' (1979/1980) influential article on nuclear strategy.

unthreatening. Consequently, states do not see a large need to balance against the United States<sup>6</sup> and, therefore, are unwilling to make the massive investments that effective systemic counterbalancing would require.

This argument is supported by the existence of a potential balancer that is not balancing—the European Union (EU) has a combined GDP that is larger than America's and its population is sufficiently large and its technological capabilities sufficiently advanced to enable it to compete. Brooks and Wohlforth correctly note that European defence spending has dropped relative to US defence spending since the end of the Cold War and identify barriers to effective EU balancing, including its inability to act decisively on military and foreign policy (2008, 23, 31–32).<sup>7</sup> However, this tells us relatively little because the EU does not today face a serious threat to its security from the United States. As Robert Art (2004, 180) argues, Europe has not balanced against the United States 'because the United States does not represent a direct threat to Europe. The United States is, after all, Europe's ally and protector'.

If this were to change, with Europeans coming to believe that the United States was an enemy determined to coerce Europe on questions of vital interest, Europe would almost certainly act quite differently. Countries would likely increase their defence spending and the pressures created by insecurity would likely lead to improved coordination of the acquisition of military forces and of strategic planning for their use. My point is not that all of sudden the problems of free riding and short time horizons would be overcome, but rather the more limited observation that a hostile unipolar power would fuel significant changes in European defence policies.

It is possible that the EU would fail to achieve the necessary political–military integration and resource extraction—recent research has highlighted states that have under-balanced (Schweller 2008). But even in this event, we would expect to see very different European politics and policies—states recognizing the large threat posed by the United States, and influential leaders trying to increase defence spending and expressing much greater determination to coordinate and integrate European defence policies—even if they do not succeed. These expectations are consistent with recent research that finds crippling flaws in balance-of-power theory—arguing that systemic outcomes have been consistently inconsistent with the theory—but also finding that 'States did engage in internal and external balancing to try to oppose the rise of almost every hegemon. But in almost all cases behavior predicted by the theory of collective goods and new institutional theory undermined the effectiveness of balancing' (Wohlforth et al 2007, 176, 178).

In addition, it is important to note that Europe is not the only region whose overall potential could be at least as large as America's. Northeast Asia already has this potential and it will increase as China's economy continues to grow. But again political relations are key. Although China is not confident of benign US motives, especially regarding Taiwan, and therefore has invested somewhat to offset US capabilities,<sup>8</sup> it does not see US goals requiring it

---

<sup>6</sup> On the basic logic of this argument see Walt (1987).

<sup>7</sup> For analysis of EU policy, see Posen (2006).

<sup>8</sup> On China's increased ability to undermine US capabilities for defending Taiwan, see Christensen (2001). Although slow to modernize its nuclear force, China has also begun to improve its strategic nuclear forces.

to launch a full-scale military build-up.<sup>9</sup> Japan and South Korea are US allies; they are worried about a possible threat from China, but not from the United States.

Moreover, a second consideration suggests that the lack of global balancing is not best explained by states' lack of capability: opposing alliances would not need to match US power or forces to gain valuable deterrent and defence capabilities. Even if nuclear weapons did not exist, distance and oceans would provide alliances defending a far away continent with significant military advantages. This defence advantage significantly raises the power threshold that the United States would have to cross to make counterbalancing futile. Nuclear weapons raise this threshold even further. And on the flipside, US power is less threatening because its military potential—that is, its potential to perform specific military missions—is not entirely commensurate with its power, but is instead reduced by these same defensive advantages.

In short, we have little reason to believe that if the major powers of Europe or Asia believed the United States posed a serious threat to their vital security interests that their military and alliance policies would resemble their current policies. Moreover, these states would see effective balancing as more feasible than is suggested by simply looking at power due to the advantages of defence.

### **How valuable is unipolarity anyway?**

The conventional wisdom seems to be that unipolarity is quite valuable.<sup>10</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) are explicit in arguing that it will enable the United States to change the international system in ways that much better serve US national security interests. Many other arguments imply the value of unipolarity by focusing on the importance of the United States retaining it, but do not spell out its benefits. This is understandable, as the value of being the system's most powerful state may seem self-evident. Certainly, there are few if any advocates of speeding the return to bipolarity.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, close inspection demonstrates that the value of unipolarity is generally overrated. In fact, being the unipolar power is not always very valuable. More specifically, US security need not be significantly reduced by Chinese economic growth that supports a return to bipolarity.

Although a full analysis is beyond the scope of this short article, the following sections provide categories for comparing unipolarity and bipolarity, and provide a first-cut at this analysis. I begin by comparing the implications of US unipolarity for major-power war, then turn to terrorism and non-proliferation.

---

<sup>9</sup>In addition, China has exercised restraint because it has been sensitive to the importance of not appearing provocative as its power increases; see Goldstein (2005).

<sup>10</sup>See, however, Finnemore (2009), who provides a constructivist analysis that emphasizes the limits the unipolar power faces.

<sup>11</sup>There are, however, arguments that point to dangers that accompany unipolarity: see Monteiro (2009), who argues that nuclear proliferation is more likely under unipolarity, which then creates incentives for preventive war. More common are arguments about unipolar overreach, which I discuss briefly in the text below.

*Major power war*

Polarity is defined relative to the power of other states and its most direct implications concern its implications for war between major powers and, closely related, their alliance behaviour.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, there has been extensive debate over whether war is more likely in bipolar systems or multipolar systems.<sup>13</sup>

To assess the impact of unipolarity on US security I consider two different, albeit somewhat related, types of threats to US security—to its homeland and to its allies—and compare unipolarity to bipolarity. This analysis requires us to posit a counterfactual in which instead of unipolarity the United States is a pole in a bipolar or multipolar system. For simplicity, I will assume bipolarity. To make a strong case for the benefits of unipolarity, I project that China becomes the second pole. Imagining the EU as the second pole is both a less challenging test and a less likely case: less challenging due to the lack of security concerns and geopolitical conflicts between the United States and the EU; less likely because the EU does not face a foreseeable security threat that would press it into the further integration required for it to qualify as a pole.

*Territorial security.* The United States' most basic security requirement is protecting its homeland from invasion and damage, and remaining free from coercion that could reflect its vulnerability to these threats. Unipolarity might initially appear to increase territorial security, because the unipole would be able to build military forces that far exceed those of any other power.

Under a range of conditions, however, this perspective exaggerates the value of unipolarity, because a country's ability to defend depends on more than simply its power. A key variable here is the offence–defence balance, which captures the difficulty of attacking relative to defending. More precisely, the offence–defence balance is the ratio of the cost of forces an attacker requires to take territory to the cost of the forces the defender has deployed (Glaser and Kaufmann 1998). When defence has a large advantage, a state can defend and/or deter for far less than it would cost its adversary to attack. Consequently, defence advantage tends to balance out differences in power.

The offence–defence balance between the United States and China heavily favours defence. As noted above for the case of Europe, this reflects the combined effects of distance and oceans, and nuclear weapons. Attacking across great distances and water is much more expensive than defending one's home territory; and, attempting to deny the United States an effective nuclear retaliatory capability would cost China orders of magnitude more than the cost to the United States to maintain one.

This large defence advantage greatly reduces the security value of unipolarity. It means that the United States would be able confidently to meet its requirements of deterrence for protecting its homeland in a bipolar world. Unipolarity adds little or nothing to this ability. In fact, the United States would be able to meet its requirements of deterrence even if it were the weaker major power facing a unipolar power.

---

<sup>12</sup> On the lack of clarity in the ways the term bipolarity is used, see Wagner (1993); for related confusion over how the term balance-of-power is used, see Nexon (2009).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Waltz (1979, chapter 8), Deutsch and Singer (1964) and John J Mearsheimer (2001, chapter 9).

*Extended deterrence and grand strategy.* The above analysis of the United States' ability to protect its homeland provides only a partial analysis of the value of unipolarity. Meeting US security requirements may require not only this ability, but also the ability to defend US allies. Whether it does depends on conclusions about US grand strategy. As Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 16) argue, unipolarity is compatible with a wide spectrum of US grand strategies, ranging from neo-isolation to primacy.

Neo-isolationists have presented a powerful argument that US security is best achieved by cutting alliance commitments to Europe and Asia. Defence advantages insulate the United States from even large-scale conflicts in these regions, and make them unlikely to occur in the first place; the best way for the United States to stay out of such conflicts if they do occur is simply to stay out of conflicted regions.<sup>14</sup> Given this grand strategy, US security depends only on defending its homeland, which as sketched above is relatively easy.

In contrast, even given the large advantage of defence, selective engagement strategies call for the United States to contribute to maintaining peace in Europe and Asia, and to do this by maintaining key alliances in these regions (Art 2003). Can the United States provide this extended deterrence much more effectively as the unipolar power than it would be able to as a pole in US–China bipolarity? Maybe surprisingly, the answer is no, except under what are likely to be rare conditions. Again, defence advantage reduces the value of a power advantage for protecting key US allies. China would find invading Japan to be difficult because a few hundred miles of water separate the two countries. In the bipolar world we are imagining, however, China could have many times Japan's GDP, possibly leaving Japan unable to defend itself, or at least lacking confidence in its ability. The US extended deterrent could largely fill this gap: under bipolarity, US conventional capabilities in the Pacific could remain quite substantial; and its nuclear commitment would make the risks of invading Japan extremely large. Questions about the effectiveness of the US extended deterrence would not focus on US capabilities—which would remain capable of inflicting catastrophic nuclear damage—but instead on the credibility of US commitments to escalate to nuclear use. The forward deployment of US forces would play a central role in communicating the extent of the US commitment, greatly increasing the probability of full US involvement if China attacked Japan. The parallel to the United States' extended deterrence for Western Europe during the bipolar Cold War, and its doctrine of flexible response, is clear. The effectiveness of this US deterrent was debated throughout the Cold War; the stronger arguments held that even a small probability of massive nuclear damage provided the United States with excellent prospects for deterring a Soviet attack.<sup>15</sup>

A second key variable influencing the adequacy of the US extended deterrent is US information about China's motives and goals, which should be significantly influenced by China's actual motives.<sup>16</sup> US requirements for deterring China will

---

<sup>14</sup> For a clear statement of these arguments see Gholz et al (1977); for a comparison of the key grand strategic alternatives, see Posen and Ross (1996/1997).

<sup>15</sup> On the debate over the effectiveness of extending nuclear deterrence, see Jervis (1984) and Glaser (1990).

<sup>16</sup> For a rational theory that includes this variable, as well as the material variables already discussed, see Glaser (2010).

depend on the probability that China is an expansionist/greedy state and how expansionist it is. Even if facing a very greedy China the United States would be able to meet its requirements for defending the US homeland with high confidence. However, extending deterrence to Japan and South Korea could become more difficult than I suggested in the previous paragraph. A highly expansionist China would be more willing to probe the US commitment and to run large risks in a major conflict. Possibly the most worrisome scenario posits a China willing to fight a large conventional war, gambling that the United States would be unwilling to escalate to nuclear use because China could retaliate against both the United States and its allies. This scenario requires an exceptionally greedy China because the risks entailed would clearly be enormous. The argument that extended deterrence can be highly effective in a world of mutual assured destruction (MAD) capabilities is based upon the enormity of the risks of escalation, even when its probability is small. If however we posit a sufficiently greedy China, then it is possible that US credibility would be too low for deterrence to succeed, or at least that the United States would lack confidence in the adequacy of its deterrent. Such a highly expansionist China would parallel the Soviet Union that American hardliners believed the United States faced during the Cold War. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 16) note that such a dangerous adversary is quite unlikely, arguing that 'plausible arguments for the utility of widespread conquest in an age of nuclear weapons and low economic benefits of holding territory are hard to imagine'. I agree that such an extremely expansionist and risk-taking China is exceedingly unlikely.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the parallel with hardline Cold War arguments suggests that some analysts could worry that once China gains power comparable to US power it would be this difficult to deter.

In short, it is only in this case—a very greedy, revisionist China—that US unipolarity would have significant value for deterrence of major power war. Extended deterrence would hinge heavily on the effectiveness of the alliance's conventional forces; the US power advantage would enable it to make relatively larger investments in conventional forces, which could contribute to deterrence of a Chinese conventional attack. However, in the far more likely cases, unipolarity would not be much safer than bipolarity.

#### *Regional stability, counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism*

The preceding analysis addresses what we might consider the standard issues raised by questions of polarity—the quality and nature of relations between poles and other major powers. These are the questions that structural theories have typically been designed to address and for which they have the most direct leverage. The fact that we even need to consider other security concerns is an indication that unipolarity has lost some of its importance.

In the world the United States currently faces, the key threats to its security may not come from major powers, but instead from regional instability that could disrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, the proliferation of nuclear weapons

---

<sup>17</sup> China's motives could change as its power matched or exceeded US power, so current evaluations of China's motives may not be a good guide to the future; this said, for useful current assessments, see Johnston (2003) and Fravel (2007/2008).

to smaller powers and terrorism. An assessment of the benefits of unipolarity therefore needs to consider its implications for these potential threats.

*Control of the military commons.* Although unipolarity is not required to protect the US homeland and its key allies (except under extreme and unlikely circumstances), unipolarity plays a more important role in enabling the United States to maintain the military capabilities required to support a more activist grand strategy—one that adds a variety of lesser and/or more controversial interests to the vital interests that lie at the centre of neo-isolationist grand strategies and narrow versions of selective engagement grand strategies. The US ability to project power to distant regions of the globe is facilitated by what Posen (2003) terms ‘command of the commons’—command of the sea, air and space. Command of the commons enables the United States to protect forces that are transiting to distant regions, and to maintain superior reconnaissance, communication and targeting capabilities. It also enables the United States to deny these capabilities to other states. Command of the commons played an important role in enabling the United States to wage war quickly in distant regions in which it had not forward deployed large forces, including the 1991 Gulf War, the 2001 operation in Afghanistan and the 2003 Iraq War (Posen 2003, 8–9).

Maintaining confidence in its ability to command the commons will require the United States to retain its unipolar position. According to Posen (2003, 19), ‘In the very long term, if a country comes to rival the United States in economic and technological capability, it will be difficult to prevent a challenge, though it may be possible to out-compete the challenger’.

The value of maintaining command of the commons, and therefore of the unipolarity that is required to confidently support it, depends on conclusions about grand strategy: it will have little to no value for neo-isolationism; moderate to little value for selective engagement, depending partly on how expansive the scope of the selective interests in question; and large value for a grand strategy of primacy.

The one qualification to this assessment concerns the US ability to protect the production, sale and flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. All of the grand strategies identify this as a vital interest. Consequently, to the extent that maintaining control of the commons contributes significantly to this set of US capabilities, unipolarity does provide significant security value. We should also note, however, that the United States was able to achieve these objectives during the bipolarity of the Cold War. A full military and political net assessment is therefore required to separate out the extent of unipolarity’s contribution.<sup>18</sup>

The value of both command of the commons and unipolarity will also depend on the US political relations with the other pole in the projected bipolarity. If the other pole does not strongly object to the US regional intervention, then its ability to disrupt US military operations becomes far less important. There is a natural inclination to envision future bipolarity as closing resembling the US–Soviet bipolarity of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet

---

<sup>18</sup>There is another possible exception that I do not have space to address in this short article—the importance of controlling the sea lanes of communication from the Persian Gulf to Northeast Asia, and across the Pacific. Both the United States and China have potentially vital interests in controlling them and the extent of the US ability to do this could depend on unipolarity.

Union competed for influence around the globe, which led both countries to see threats in the other's use of force virtually anywhere, which in turn created the possibility of direct or indirect superpower opposition. Under the logic of this Cold War bipolarity, Soviet power constrained the United States' freedom of action. The first Gulf War (1991) is frequently identified as an example of the leeway that the end of the Soviet Union created for US foreign policy.

But bipolarity need not be so constraining because political relations are not determined entirely by the distribution of power. If the EU emerged as a pole, its interests would likely be sufficiently in line with America's that it would not oppose US intervention in distant theatres. This is not to say that the United States would enjoy full endorsement and support, but instead the more limited claim that US freedom of action would not be greatly reduced. The implications of bipolarity involving China are less clear, but we should not simply assume that China would oppose, and therefore severely constrain, most US interventions. As I argue below, when considering counter-proliferation and preventive war, China might not oppose at least some of the key goals of a more activist US grand strategy. In contrast, if US relations with the other pole are politically strained and militarily competitive, then the loss of unipolarity is more likely to result in constraints across a range of military missions.

*Nuclear proliferation.* There is an ongoing debate about whether nuclear proliferation poses a large danger to the United States, which I am not going to engage here (Sagan and Waltz 2003; Kapur 2007). If we assume that proliferation by at least certain countries does reduce US security, then we need to consider whether unipolarity helps the United States to prevent this proliferation. Unipolarity might contribute significantly to the most direct military means—preventive war, which can require the ability to launch massive air strikes or, even more demanding, to invade a country and impose a new regime. But even this is far from clear. Fighting a successful preventive war does not require the United States to be the unipolar power. Whether the United States could invade Iraq (putting aside that it did not have a nuclear program) or destroy Iran's nuclear facilities does not depend, at least directly, on the United States being far more powerful than all other major powers. Rather, the United States' ability depends on how its capabilities compare to the proliferating state's capabilities.

Therefore, the question becomes whether under bipolarity the other polar power would oppose these preventive wars, making them too risky for the United States to launch. As I noted above, the key issue here is the quality of political relations between the poles and extent of their geopolitical competition. For example, China might prefer that Iran not acquire nuclear weapons, in which case it might not try to pose a major barrier to a US preventive war, especially if the United States did not plan to invade and occupy Iran.

A second set of possibilities for preventing proliferation focuses on international cooperation and regimes designed to stop states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Does unipolarity increase the prospects for improving these types of cooperative non-proliferation efforts? A standard argument is that a unipolar or hegemonic state increases the prospects for broad cooperation. This kind of state has the potential to lead, reflecting its power and also possibly its legitimacy. For example, Brooks and Wohlforth (2009) argue that the United States should use its unipolar position to take the lead in redesigning the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), establishing a new ban on most states' rights to

produce fissile material. In a similar vein, the Proliferation Security Initiative is sometimes described as a product of the United States effectively wielding its unipolar position.

These arguments, however, are too quick to assert that unipolar leadership is essential for this type of cooperation. If the regime is providing a public good, then unipolarity does not necessarily increase the prospects for cooperation. A relatively small number of states can be as likely to find that cooperation is sufficiently in their interests to overcome the temptation to free ride and to take responsibility for creating a broad regime, which other states will then also join (Snidal 1985). We should not forget that the NPT was created during the bipolar Cold War.

A possible rejoinder is that instead of using its power advantage to support and generate cooperation, the unipole can use its advantages in military capabilities to threaten states and coerce them into participating in the regime. Although this might be an option in certain situations characterized by highly asymmetric power, the logic does not fit the current case of US unipolarity. The risks of a major power war are too high for the United States to threaten the use of force to coerce major powers to accept and support these revised regimes. The United States' inability to get Russia and China to support harsh economic sanctions against Iran provides a current example of the unipole's inability to form coalitions of the unwilling.

More generally, although analysts frequently point to the international influence that unipolarity supposedly provides, if the United States cannot credibly threaten to use large-scale force against major powers, then the military dimension of unipolarity provides far less influence than is generally assumed. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 209) argue that unipolarity enables the United States to revise the international system in ways that will increase US security, including 'using US hegemony to reshape international institutions'. But there is a puzzle here: if the United States is not going to achieve these revisions by threatening the use of force to compel other major powers, what are the mechanisms for system change that rely on the United States' military advantages?

*Terrorism.* Similar considerations are raised by the possibility that the United States will need to launch large-scale military interventions to protect itself from terrorism, as it now is in Afghanistan. Paralleling the analysis of proliferation, there is debate over how large a threat terrorism poses to the United States and, in addition, whether intervention can be effective (Mueller 2009). Assuming that intervention is required to protect US security, we need to ask whether the United States would be much more constrained in a bipolar world than in a unipolar one. Again, the extent to which the poles' interests align will be key. The extent of opposition will depend on the poles' political relations—if relations are relatively good, geopolitical competition will be relatively mild; interventions will pose a smaller threat and therefore generate less opposition. In addition, interventions that require occupation are likely to generate greater opposition from the other pole than are more surgical counter-terrorism attacks, because they bring the opportunity for territorial control.

Analysis of the prospects for cooperative regimes to support counter-terrorism also parallel the arguments applied to proliferation and are even more obvious. For example, the sharing of intelligence can be the key to successful counter-terrorism efforts. There is no clear reason, however, why this type of cooperative

effort requires the unipole's guidance, subsidy or coercion. The cooperation is not costly (although delicate issues about sources and secrecy may arise) and is clearly in the interest of all states that face a common terrorist threat.

*The unipole's expanding goals*

A still different type of argument holds that unipolar powers tend to adopt expanded interests and associated goals that unipolarity then enables them to achieve. To the extent that these goals are actually in the unipole's true interest, unipolarity is good for the unipole. In broad terms, this argument follows the claim that states' interests and goals grow with their power.<sup>19</sup>

These expanded goals can be attributed to three different types of factors.<sup>20</sup> The first is a permissive structure, which allows the state to pursue more ambitious goals. The state's interests do not change, but its increased ability to pursue them results in a redefinition of its goals. A state could have goals that were previously unachievable at acceptable cost; by lowering the costs, unipolarity places these goals within reach, enabling the state to make itself better off. A unipole's desire for a higher degree of security can be an example of this type of expanded goal, reflecting the means that it can wield. Second, the state can acquire new interests, which are generated by the unipole's greater territorial and institutional reach. For example, a state that controls more territory may face new threats and, as a result, conclude that it needs to control still more territory, acquire still more power, and/or restructure international institutions to further protect its interests. Third, the unipole's goals can be influenced by what is commonly described as human nature and by psychology. A unipolar state will be inclined to lose track of how secure it is and consequently pursue inappropriate policies that are designed to increase its security but turn out to be too costly and/or to have a high probability of backfiring. One variant of this type of argument expects unipolar powers to conclude that they need to spread their type of governance or political ideology to be secure. These dangers can be reinforced by a tendency for a unipolar power to see its new interests, which are optional, as necessary ones.

The first two types of expanded interests and goals can make the unipole better off. The question here is whether the interests the United States might find within its reach due to its unipolar position are very valuable. With respect to security, the answer is 'no'. For the reasons summarized above, the United States can be very secure in bipolarity, and unipolarity is important only in an extreme and unlikely case. Other US goals, for example, spreading democracy and free markets, do not depend on unipolarity, at least not its military dimension. Instead, whether these liberal systems spread will depend most heavily on their own effectiveness.

Regarding the down side, there does not appear to be an overwhelming reason that the United States cannot avoid the dangers of unipolar overreach. The Bush

---

<sup>19</sup> This argument is frequently associated with realism. However, it does not match well with structural realism, which takes states' fundamental goals as exogenous and separate from the international situation states face, including their power. It can be compatible with classical/neoclassical realism, depending on how the theory's understanding of states' interests is formulated.

<sup>20</sup> See Jervis (2009) for a review of many of these arguments.

administration certainly proved itself vulnerable to these dangers and the United States is continuing to pay for its flawed judgments. Arguably, strands of overreach can be traced back to the Clinton administration's emphasis on democratic enlargement, although the means that it chose were much more in line with US interests.<sup>21</sup> And the Obama administration's decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan may well be an example of striving for too much security. Nevertheless, none of the basic arguments about unipolarity explain why these errors are unavoidable. The overreach claim is more an observation about the past than a well-supported prediction about the future. We do not have strong reasons for concluding that the United States will be unable to benefit from analyses of its grand strategy options, learning to both appreciate how very secure it is and at the same time to respect the limits of its power.

In sum, then, under current conditions, unipolarity does little to enable the United States to increase its security. Given the limited benefits of unipolarity and the not insignificant dangers of unipolar overreach, the United States will have to choose its policies wisely if it is going to be better off in a unipolar world than a bipolar one.

### Notes on contributor

**Charles L Glaser** is professor in the Elliott School of International Affairs and the Department of Political Science at the George Washington University and is the director of the Elliott School's Institute for Security and Conflict Studies. He is the author most recently of *Rational Theory of International Politics* (Princeton 2010).

### References

- Art, Robert J (2003) *A grand strategy for America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Art, Robert J (2004) 'Europe hedges its security bets' in TV Paul, James J Wirtz and Michael Fortmann (eds) *Balance of power: theory and practice in the 21st century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 179–213
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2009) 'Reshaping the world order', *Foreign Affairs*, 88:2, 49–63
- Chollet, Derek and James Goldgeier (2008) *America between the wars: from 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs)
- Christensen, Thomas C (2001) 'Posing problems without catching up: China's rise and challenges for U.S. security policy', *International Security*, 25:4, 5–40
- Deutsch, Karl W and J David Singer (1964) 'Multipolar systems and international stability', *World Politics*, 16:3, 390–406
- Finnemore, Martha (2009) 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity', *World Politics*, 61:1, 58–85
- Fravel, M Taylor (2007/2008) 'Power shifts and escalation', *International Security*, 32:3, 44–83
- Gholz, Eugene, Daryl G Press and Harvey M Sapolsky (1977) 'Come home America: the strategy of restraint in the face of temptation', *International Security*, 21:4, 5–48
- Glaser, Charles L (1990) *Analyzing strategic nuclear policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

---

<sup>21</sup> On the development of this focus, see Chollet and Goldgeier (2008).

- Glaser, Charles L (2010) *Rational theory of international politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Glaser, Charles L and Chaim Kaufmann (1998) 'What is the offence-defence balance and can we measure it?', *International Security*, 22:4, 44–82
- Goldstein, Avery (2005) *Rising to the challenge: China's grand strategy and international security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)
- Jervis, Robert (1979/1980) 'Why nuclear superiority doesn't matter', *Political Science Quarterly*, 94:4, 617–633
- Jervis, Robert (1984) *The illogic of American nuclear strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Jervis, Robert (2009) 'Unipolarity: a structural perspective', *World Politics*, 61:1, 197–200
- Joffe, Josef (2009) 'The default power', *Foreign Affairs*, 88:5, 21–35
- Johnston, Alastair Iain (2003) 'Is China a status quo power', *International Security*, 27:4, 5–56
- Kapur, S Paul (2007) *Dangerous deterrent: nuclear weapons proliferation and conflict in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)
- Mearsheimer, John J (2001) *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: Norton)
- Monteiro, Nuno (2009) 'Unrest assured: why unipolarity is not peace', (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago)
- Mueller, John (2009) 'How dangerous are the Taliban?', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 April
- Nexon, Daniel H (2009) 'The balance of power in the balance', *World Politics*, 61:2, 330–359
- Posen, Barry R (2003) 'Command of the commons: the military foundation of U.S. hegemony', *International Security*, 28:1, 5–46
- Posen, Barry R (2006) 'European Union security and defence policy: response to unipolarity', *Security Studies*, 15:2, 149–186
- Posen, Barry R and Andrew L Ross (1996/1997) 'Competing visions for U.S. grand strategy', *International Security*, 21:3, 5–53
- Sagan, Scott D and Kenneth N Waltz (2003) *The spread of nuclear weapons: a debate renewed* (New York: Norton)
- Schweller, Randall L (2008) *Unanswered threats: political constraints on the balance of power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Snidal, Duncan (1985) 'The limits of hegemonic stability theory', *International Organization*, 39:4, 579–614
- Wagner, R Harrison (1993) 'What is bipolarity', *International Organization*, 47:1, 77–106
- Walt, Stephen M (1987) *Origins of alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Waltz, Kenneth N (1979) *Theory of international politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley)
- Wohlforth, William C (1999) 'The stability of a unipolar world', *International Security*, 24:1, 5–41
- Wohlforth, William C et al (2007) 'Testing balance-of-power theory in world history', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:2, 155–185

## The unipolar exit: beyond the *Pax Americana*

Christopher Layne  
Texas A & M University

**Abstract** *In this article I show that the unipolar era already is drawing to a close. Three main drivers explain the impending end of the Pax Americana. First, the rise of new great powers—especially China—is transforming the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity. Second, the United States is becoming the poster child for strategic over-extension, or as Paul Kennedy dubbed it, imperial overstretch. Third, the United States' relative economic power is declining, and mounting US fiscal problems and the dollar's increasingly problematic role as the international financial system's reserve currency are undermining US hegemony. After examining how these trends undermine the argument for 'unipolar stability', I conclude by arguing that over the next two decades the Pax Americana's end presages dramatic changes in international politics.*

### Introduction

The Soviet Union's 1991 collapse led quickly to the proclamation of America's 'unipolar moment'—an opportunity for the United States to use its unchallenged global pre-eminence to shape the international order by buttressing and extending the *Pax Americana* that prevailed in the non-Soviet world from 1945 until the Soviet Union's demise (Krauthammer 1990). The Cold War's end meant that unipolarity objectively described the distribution of power in international politics. At the same time, preserving the United States' hegemonic role in a unipolar world has been the overriding grand strategic objective of every post-Cold War administration from George H Bush's to Barack Obama's.<sup>1</sup>

During the past two decades the issues of unipolarity and hegemony have preoccupied American security studies scholars, foreign policy analysts and policymakers. Two related questions have been the primary focus of debate: how

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, the George HW Bush administration's draft *Defense Planning Guidance* for fiscal years 1994–1999 stated that the United States 'must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role' (quoted in Tyler 1992). The Clinton administration described the United States as 'the world's preeminent power' (White House 1995). The George W Bush administration stated that the aim of US grand strategy is to prevent any other power from 'surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States' (White House 2002, emphasis added). Unsurprisingly, given that its key foreign policy positions are staffed by veterans of the Bill Clinton administration, the early signs are that the Obama administration is equally wedded to preserving US hegemony. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said during her confirmation hearings, the Obama administration's overriding foreign policy aim will be to 'strengthen America's position of global leadership' (Dombey 2009).

long can unipolarity last, and is the maintenance of hegemony a wise grand strategy for the United States?

Although these questions have been contested, the debate—until very recently—has been pretty much one sided. To be sure a minority of scholars in the field of security studies—especially balance-of-power realists—have warned that unipolarity would backfire against the United States (Layne 2006a; 2006b; 1993; Waltz 1993). These scholars noted that the history of the modern state system (circa 1500 to present) has been a characterized by repeated bids for hegemony that were defeated by the counterbalancing efforts of other great powers (Dehio 1963). Nevertheless, the (still) predominant view is that American primacy is an exception to the seemingly ironclad rule that failure is the fate of hegemons. Indeed, *American* international relations scholars of all stripes, and policymakers, have been endlessly creative in finding arguments to support the claim that US primacy will last far into the future.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Brooks' and William Wohlforth's 2008 book *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* is perhaps the most forceful defence of unipolar stability and the durability of American hegemony.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I challenge Brooks and Wohlforth. I show that the unipolar era already is visibly drawing to a close. Three main drivers explain the impending end of the *Pax Americana*. First, the rise of new great powers—especially China—is transforming the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity. Second, the United States is becoming the poster child for strategic over-extension, or as Paul Kennedy (1987) dubbed it, imperial overstretch. Third, the United States' relative economic power is declining. In particular, mounting US fiscal problems and the dollar's increasingly problematic role as the international financial system's reserve currency are undermining US hegemony. To comprehend why the *Pax Americana* is ending we need to understand the linkages among these trends, and how each has feedback effects on the others. After examining how these trends undermine the Brooks and Wohlforth argument for unipolar stability and the durability of US hegemony, I conclude by arguing that over the next two decades the *Pax Americana's* end presages dramatic changes in international politics—the outlines of which already are visible.

---

<sup>2</sup>For example, both Liberal international relations theorists and balance of threat realists assert that the United States has been—and can continue to be—a successful hegemon because its primacy is 'benevolent'. Moreover, it is said, the (purported) attractiveness of its political and economic institutions, and its culture—US 'soft power'—draws other states into Washington's orbit. Other states, they say, will acquiesce in US hegemony if the United States displays self-restraint by exercising its predominance multilaterally through international institutions. For these arguments, see Ikenberry (1998–1999); Nye (2002); Nye (1990), Walt (2005).

<sup>3</sup>Unipolar stability realists advance two basic arguments to support their contention that American hegemony will be a fact of international political life for a long time to come (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Brooks and Wohlforth 2002; Wohlforth 2002; Wohlforth 1999). First, the United States' lead over its nearest rivals in the key metrics of hard power (military capabilities and economic prowess) is so huge that would-be rivals cannot—and know they cannot—overtake the United States. Moreover, because of this wide disparity in capabilities, rising powers that might be tempted to challenge the United States will refrain from doing so because they fear that a powerful America will use its military capabilities to nip geopolitical challenges in the bud. Second, other states will not contest American pre-eminence because they receive important security and economic benefits from US hegemony.

## The end of the unipolar moment

### *Emerging great powers*

There is increasing evidence that unipolar stability realists were wrong about the permanence of US primacy, and that the balance-of-power realists were correct in predicting that unipolarity would stimulate the emergence of new great powers that would act as counterweights to American hegemony. To be sure, forecasts made by some balance-of-power realists that unipolarity would give way quickly to multipolarity after the Soviet Union's fall proved to be wrong.<sup>4</sup> However, if balance-of-power realists were off somewhat on the timing, their key insight was correct: the over-concentration of power in US hands after the Cold War would spur the emergence of a multipolar international system in which American hegemony would be counter-balanced.<sup>5</sup>

The ascent of new great powers is the strongest evidence of incipient multipolarity, and the two most important indicators of whether new great powers are rising are relative growth rates and shares of world gross domestic product (GDP) (Kennedy 1987; Gilpin 1981). The evidence that the international system is rapidly becoming multipolar—and that, perforce, America's relative power is declining—is now difficult to deny. We are now witnessing a seismic shift in global economic power from the Euro-Atlantic world to Asia (Emmott 2008; Kyngge 2006; Mahbubani 2008; National Intelligence Council 2008; Zakaria 2008). This shift is important geopolitically because it is propelling the rise of India, and, especially, China (Lampton 2008; Ross and Feng 2008; Gill 2007; Goldstein 2005). Indeed, China's rise is 'Exhibit A' with respect to the end of unipolarity.

Unsurprisingly, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 40–45) are sceptical about China's rise, and they dismiss the idea that China could become a viable counterweight to a hegemonic US within any meaningful time frame. Theirs is a static analysis, however, that misses a crucial point: although the United States still has an impressive lead in the categories they measure, the trend lines favour China, which already has overtaken the United States as the world's leading manufacturer—a crown the United States held for more than a century (Dyer 2009; Marsh 2008).<sup>6</sup> Some time in 2010 China will surpass Japan as the second largest economy in the world (Wong 2010). More important, leading experts believe China is also on track to overtake the United States in GDP in the next ten to 20 years—and perhaps much sooner. In 2003 Goldman Sachs predicted that China would pass the United States in GDP by 2041 but in 2008 it revised the time

---

<sup>4</sup>They were wrong for three reasons. First, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's downfall there were no other states capable of stepping-up and becoming great powers. Second, they failed to appreciate fully the double-edged nature of US hegemony: other states feared American primacy but they also received security and economic benefits from it. Third, they failed to realize it would be more difficult to balance against an extant hegemon than against a rising one (see Layne 2006b).

<sup>5</sup>With respect to timing, it now is apparent that Layne's prediction (1993; 2006b) that the world would be multipolar by 2010 seems pretty much on target. In contrast, Wohlforth (1999) appears to have missed badly in his prediction that US hegemony would last at least until 2030.

<sup>6</sup>These include defence spending, defence spending as a percentage of total great power defence expenditures, defence research and development spending, defence spending as a percentage of GDP, GDP, GDP per capita and GDP as a percentage of great power GDP (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 27–35).

frame to 2028 (Wilson and Purushothaman 2003; O'Neill 2008). And, in early 2009, the Economist Intelligence Unit predicted that China's GDP would surpass the United States' in 2021 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2009). In January 2010 PricewaterhouseCoopers projected that China's GDP would surpass the United States' in 2020 (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010). Empirically, then, there are indications that the unipolar era effectively is over, and that the coming decades could witness a power transition (Kugler and Lemke 1996; Organski 1968; Organski and Kugler 1980; Thompson 2009).

To be sure, it is not certain that these projections will prove correct. China's great power emergence could be derailed by domestic political instability, failure to sustain its high rate of GDP growth, ethnic tensions, environmental degradation, or adverse demographic trends (Ignatius 2010; Kynge 2006; Shirk 2007). Moreover, aspiring to great power status does not guarantee that a state will achieve it. Mobilizing and converting economic and social resources into military power and diplomatic influence is not easy, and states often are plagued by what David Baldwin (1979) called the 'paradox of unrealized power'. Here, the issue of state capacity—the effectiveness of its administrative and political machinery, and quality of its leaders—comes to the forefront. Nevertheless, although there are a number of speed-bumps that could derail its great power ascent, the safest bet is that China will continue on its present trajectory (Rachman 2010). In this case, if it behaves similarly to other rising great powers a vastly wealthier and more militarily powerful China almost certainly will seek to become the regional hegemon in East Asia, and a major player in global geopolitics.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, China has advanced toward these goals in the past decade with breath-taking rapidity. At the same time, China's rise has been facilitated by a wise strategy. It built its economic power base by keeping a low profile geopolitically, avoiding—until recently—direct conflict with the United States, and adopting a strategic discourse of 'peaceful rise' while simultaneously talking-down its increasing power by telling the world that China is still a developing country.<sup>8</sup> As China becomes stronger and more confident of its great power, we can expect it

---

<sup>7</sup> For the offensive realist argument that rising great powers seek hegemony in their geographical region, see Mearsheimer (2001). For application of offensive realist theory to explain the United States' great power emergence and quest for regional hegemony, see Zakaria (1998). For the argument that a rising China will follow a great power trajectory similar to the United States, see Layne (2009b; 2008); Mearsheimer (2006).

<sup>8</sup> During the unipolar era of unchallenged US dominance the smart strategy for China was to bandwagon with the United States and integrate itself into the structures of the *Pax Americana* in the short and medium term in order both to spur its economic growth, and to reassure the United States that its rise is unthreatening. But a rising China is bound to convert its economic gains into the military capabilities that will enable it to contest American preponderance. As McGill University political scientist Mark Brawley (2004, 83) puts it: 'Since economic ties can deliver benefits to both parties, the weaker power might hope to survive in the short-run by allying with the hegemonic power, but add to its current economic base as well. If current economic gains can be converted to military power in the future, the bandwagoning state might improve its power potential so that it could reassert its autonomy at some point in the future'. In other words, states like China and Russia are following the timeless strategy of potential great powers that start from a position of relative weakness, but expect to be relatively strong in the future: lying low in the weeds, and waiting for the opportune moment—when the trends in the relative distribution of power are more favourable—to balance openly against the United States.

to be more assertive. Indeed, there are signs that this already is happening. China's rise will cause difficulties for a United States that already is over-taxed strategically.

*US imperial overstretch*

Today, the United States is saddled with the responsibility for maintaining in stability in Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf—commitments that are the legacy of the Cold War. In the last 20 years, the United States has taken on additional responsibilities in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. These strategic obligations require the United States to maintain large, capable—and expensive—military forces. Yet, strategic experts increasingly realize that America's current force structure is insufficient to meet all of the United States' far-flung security commitments.

This was evidenced in August 2008 when Russia and Georgia went to war. Many US leaders—including Republican presidential nominee John McCain—wanted the United States to come to Georgia's aid. Quite apart from the dubious wisdom of such a policy, even if it had been the smart thing to do America's hands were tied. Because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States simply did not have the forces needed to defend Georgia. Similarly, there is a good deal of evidence that the George W Bush administration wanted to use the military option to squelch the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea but was prevented from doing so because the bulk of the US military was committed to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is now clear that as currently structured, the American military is too small to meet the demands of those two wars alone—much less any other obligations the United States may have.

Even before the current financial and economic crisis, however, many experts were raising concerns about the economic costs of America's hegemonic military posture. For example, the Nobel Prize winning Columbia University economist Joseph Stiglitz and his co-author Linda Bilmes have estimated that the direct and indirect costs of the Iraq War will exceed \$3 trillion (Stiglitz and Bilmes 2008). No similar estimate has been made for the Afghanistan conflict, but given the Obama administration's decision to ramp-up the US effort there, it is bound to be substantial.<sup>9</sup> In coming years, the weakening of the US economy and the nation's ballooning budget deficits are going to make it increasingly difficult to sustain the level of military commitments that US hegemony requires. Simply put, the United States is imperially overstretched: its strategic commitments exceed the resources available to support them.

In coming years economic and fiscal constraints also could have a more subtle effect on US primacy. As a hegemon, the United States is very much like a corporation enjoying a monopoly in the marketplace. Monopolists and hegemons have one thing in common: they do not like competition, and both seek to erect

---

<sup>9</sup> A key component of the Obama strategy in Afghanistan is expanding Afghan security forces. As the *Economist* points out, however: 'Afghanistan cannot afford the army it has, let alone a bigger one. Expanding Afghan will cost donor countries several billion dollars a year indefinitely' (Economist 2009, 26). In addition to the costs of expanding Afghan security forces, the United States must also bear the large costs associated with its nation-building enterprise there.

formidable entry barriers that discourage the emergence of rivals. For the United States, its military dominance plays the role of entry barrier. US superiority at all levels of warfare is supposed to prevent the emergence of great power challengers to its hegemony. To maintain this preponderant power in the future, the American military will have to be expanded in size, because it is too small to meet present—and likely future—commitments.<sup>10</sup>

No one can say for certain how long large numbers of US forces will be deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it is safe to say that substantial numbers of troops will be there for a long time. At the same time, in addition to the waging the so-called global counter-insurgency against Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups (and the concomitant requirements of homeland defence), the United States faces possible future conflicts with North Korea, Iran, China, and Russia. For reasons discussed in the next section, in this emerging strategic environment the cost of maintaining the hard power capabilities—both quantitative and qualitative—needed to sustain American hegemony, and of fighting the kinds of wars that hegemons invariably fight to affirm their dominance, will become ever-more onerous.

If the United States is unable to sustain its military dominance, the entry barrier that heretofore has kept new great powers from emerging and challenging American hegemony will begin to crumble, and rising powers will conclude that they can leap over the previously insurmountable barrier to great power status. Indeed, when that inflection point is reached, the strategic calculus for aspiring great powers changes, because the costs of great power emergence and counterbalancing decrease, and the payoffs for doing so increase.<sup>11</sup> Here, there is an important feedback loop at work: internal constraints on America's hegemonic power trigger an external shift in the international distribution of power, which, in turn, exacerbates the effects of US fiscal and strategic overstretch. This is the geopolitical reality which the United States likely will confront in the next two decades.

There is also another dimension to US strategic over-extension that is overlooked. Most US foreign policy analysts—including Brooks and Wohlforth—believe that the United States will remain the dominant power in the twenty-first century—notwithstanding the emergence of China, India, and Russia—because none of these emerging powers will be able to mount a strategic challenge to America's global interests comparable to that posed (purportedly) by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the case of China, at least, this claim is debatable. However, even if none of the emerging powers proves capable of challenging

---

<sup>10</sup>See Mazetti (2005), Shanker (2005a) and Tyson (2005). In 2005, the Defense Department concluded that because of US troop shortfalls, it will need allied military support to undertake future military interventions, and subsequent occupations. The Terms of Reference for the Pentagon's 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review stated that current security challenges 'are such that the United States cannot succeed by addressing them alone', quoted in Shanker (2005b). The efficacy of relying on allies to make up for US troop shortages is problematic. One of the clear lessons of Iraq is that if American allies disagree with US policy, they will withhold military support. In Afghanistan, the NATO allies have been similarly reluctant to commit significant forces to combat operations.

<sup>11</sup>As Gilpin (1981, 95) observes, 'The critical significance of the differential growth of power among states is that it alters the cost of changing the international system and therefore the incentives for changing the international system.'

the United States globally, America's military hegemony nevertheless will be imperilled. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain was not knocked off its lofty geopolitical perch because a single great power rose to challenge its worldwide interests. Rather, Britain's decline was caused by the simultaneous emergence of several powerful states (Germany, the United States, Japan, Russia) that were able to compete with it in the various regions of the world where the British had key strategic interests (Europe, East Asia, Central Asia, North America). As the two World Wars demonstrated, with its economic base shrinking Britain could not generate enough military power to defend its far-flung interests from simultaneous challenges by multiple emerging powers (Barnett 1972; Friedberg 1988; Kennedy 1983; Lowe and Dockerill 1972). A similar process is likely to bring about the end of US military hegemony in the early twenty-first century.

*US relative economic decline: fiscal crisis and the dollar's future*

Notwithstanding the claims of scholars like Brooks and Wohlforth, an increasing number of analysts believe that the United States, in fact, already is in relative decline (Ferguson and Kotlikoff 2003; Layne 2006c; Pape 2009; Rachman 2010). To be fair, Brooks and Wohlforth completed their manuscript before the full dimensions of the current economic and financial crisis were apparent. However, the 'Great Recession' (as the historian Niall Ferguson has dubbed it) is, in an important sense, only the tip of the iceberg. It has accelerated—but did not cause—America's relative decline and China's rise.

As far as the United States is concerned, well before the meltdown, long-term fundamental weaknesses in the American economy had been accumulating for more than three decades that presaged the waning of US economic supremacy. The meltdown's real significance is that it has both unmasked, and speeded-up, the impact of these deep-seated problems: staggering trade imbalances; a burgeoning national debt; run-away budget deficits; out-of-control expenditure on entitlements programmes; and the progressive de-industrialization of the US economy. In the 1980s, these problems were acutely diagnosed by a number of so-called declinist writers—notably David Calleo (1982), Paul Kennedy (1987), Robert Gilpin (1987), Samuel Huntington (1987), and James Chace (1981)—who predicted that over time these structural economic ills would erode the economic foundations of America's global pre-eminence. The debate about these predictions was cut short, however, when, in short order, the Soviet Union collapsed, Japan's economic bubble burst, and the United States experienced an apparent economic revival during the Clinton administration. Now, however, the day of reckoning that was predicted nearly two decades ago is fast approaching. In other words, the 'declinists' were right after all.

All but overlooked in the current debate about how the United States can dig-out of the current fiscal and economic quagmire is the ironic probability that all that a 'recovery' will accomplish is to put the United States back in the same economically untenable position that it was in before the meltdown began: still dependent on foreign (especially Chinese) capital inflows; still running staggering trade deficits; and saddled with crushing federal government expenditures and private and public sector indebtedness (Bergsten 2009). There will be one difference, however: the long-term economic picture for the United States will be

even worse than it was before the meltdown both because of the spectre of runaway inflation looming just over the horizon, and the dollar's increasingly shaky hold on its status as the global economy's reserve currency—both of which are tied to the debt bomb that hangs like the sword of Damocles over the United States' economic future.

Optimists, of course, contend that once the United States recovers, fears of a fiscal crisis will fade. After all, they say, the United States faced a larger debt-to-GDP ratio after World War II, and yet embarked on a sustained era of growth. The post-war era, however, was a golden age of US industrial and financial dominance, trade surpluses, and sustained high growth rates. Those days are gone, however. Forever. The United States today lives in a world that is far different from the immediate post-World War II era. Thus, many economists believe that even in the best case, the United States will emerge from the current crisis with serious handicaps. Chief among these are the increase in the money supply (caused by the massive amount of dollars the Federal Reserve and Treasury have pumped into circulation in the hope of reviving the economy), and the \$1 trillion plus budget deficits that the Brookings Institution and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) project the United States will run for at least a decade (CBO 2009; Gale and Auerbach 2009). When the projected deficits are bundled with the persistent US current account deficit, the entitlements overhang (the unfunded future liabilities of Medicare and Social Security), and the cost of two ongoing wars, the result is a ticking debt bomb that threatens the United States' long-term fiscal stability (Bergsten 2009; Glantz 2009; Stiglitz and Bilmes 2008). As the CBO says, 'Even if the recovery occurs as projected and the stimulus bill is allowed to expire, the country will face the highest debt/GDP ratio in 50 years and an increasingly urgent and unsustainable and urgent fiscal problem' (CBO 2009). An exclamation point to this prognosis was added in early 2010 when the CBO warned that by 2020 the federal debt-to-GDP ratio could approach 100 per cent (Calmes 2010a; 2010b; CBO 2010; Sanger 2010). Remarkably, proponents of the current *Pax Americana* foreign policy paradigm believe the debt bomb and the resultant looming fiscal crisis have no implications for America's strategy of global dominance and worldwide military presence.

If the CBO and (and other analysts) are correct, over the next decade the swelling US deficits could imperil the dollar. This is important because, for the foreseeable future, the United States will depend on capital inflows from abroad both to finance its deficit spending and private consumption, and to maintain the dollar's position as the international economic system's reserve currency. The dollar's reserve currency role underwrites America's geopolitical pre-eminence, and if it loses that status US hegemony literally will be unaffordable.<sup>12</sup> As a leading

---

<sup>12</sup>The dollar's reserve currency status has, in effect, been a 'credit card' that has permitted the United States to live beyond its means by borrowing money from foreigners to pay for its military dominance, its costly domestic programmes (including entitlements), and excessive private consumption. Without the use of the credit card provided by the dollar's reserve currency status, the United States would have to pay for its extravagant external and internal ambitions by raising taxes and interest rates—or, alternatively, tightening its belt and reducing its military and domestic expenditures. In other words, the United States would have to learn to live within its means. And that would entail forgoing its geopolitical primacy.

expert on international economic affairs observed just before the meltdown began, the dollar's vulnerability 'presents potentially significant and underappreciated restraints upon contemporary American political and military predominance' (Kirshner 2008, 418).

Concerns about the dollar's long-term health predated the current financial and economic crisis (Bergsten 2009; Helleiner 2008, 370–371; Kirshner 2008, 419–421). The meltdown has amplified doubts about the dollar's future in two key respects. First, the other big players in the international economy now are either military rivals (China) or ambiguous 'allies' (Europe) that have their own ambitions and no longer require US protection from the now-vanished Soviet threat. Second, the dollar faces an uncertain future because of concerns that its value will diminish over time. Indeed, China, which has vast holdings of American dollars (more than \$2 trillion) is worried that America's fiscal incontinence will leave Beijing holding the bag with huge amounts of depreciated dollars. China's doubts about the dollar's future are reflected in its recent calls to for creating a new reserve currency to replace the dollar, and in reports that during his November 2009 trip to Beijing, senior Chinese officials lectured President Obama on their concerns about US budget deficits (Layne 2009a; Pomfret 2010b; Wines 2010).<sup>13</sup>

In coming years the United States will be under increasing pressure to defend the dollar by preventing runaway inflation. This will require some combination of budget cuts, tax increases, and interest-rate hikes.<sup>14</sup> Because exclusive reliance on the last two options could choke-off renewed growth, there is likely to be strong pressure to slash the federal budget in order to hold-down taxes and interest rates. It will be almost impossible to make meaningful cuts in federal spending without deep reductions in defence expenditures because discretionary non-defence—that is, domestic—spending accounts for only about 20 per cent of annual federal outlays (Economic Research Service 2008). In coming years, therefore, the United States probably will face difficult trade-offs between 'guns or butter'. With US defence spending currently at high absolute levels, domestic political pressure to make steep cuts in defence spending is likely to increase. As the Cornell international political economist Jonathan Kirshner (2008, 431) puts it, the absolute size of US defence expenditures 'are more likely to be decisive in the future when

---

<sup>13</sup> American budget and trade deficits have not been a serious problem heretofore, because US creditors have believed that the United States is able to repay its debts. There are signs that this confidence gradually may be eroding. For example, in March 2010 Moody's indicated that over the next decade linked concerns about the United States' sovereign debt and the risk of future inflation could result in the downgrading of the credit rating of US government bonds (Jolly and Rampell 2010). Even before the current crisis, key central banks were signalling their lack of long-term confidence in the dollar's soundness by diversifying their currency holdings. If, whether for economic, or, conceivably, *geopolitical*, reasons others are no longer willing to finance American indebtedness, Washington's choices will be stark: significant dollar devaluation to increase US exports (which will cause inflation, and lower living standards), or raising interest rates sharply to attract foreign capital inflows (which will shrink domestic investment and worsen America's long-term economic problems). Moreover, given the de-industrialization of the US economy over the past three decades, it is questionable whether, even with a dramatically depreciated dollar, the United States could export enough to make a major dent in its foreign debt (Gilpin 1987, 332).

<sup>14</sup> On the dollar's future and the potential geopolitical consequences, see Helleiner and Kirshner (2009).

the US is under pressure to make real choices about taxes and spending in the future. When borrowing becomes more difficult, and adjustment more difficult to postpone, choices must be made between raising taxes, cutting non-defence spending, and cutting defence spending'. If this analysis is correct, the United States, in the not too-distant future, may be compelled to retract some—or even all—of its overseas military commitments. In this regard, the Obama administration's fall 2009 internal debate about whether to increase troop levels in Afghanistan offered a preview of coming attractions. During these deliberations, some officials argued that the United States needed to limit its commitment in Afghanistan because the cost of the US war effort there has serious budgetary implications (Drew 2009; Guha and Fitfield 2009).

Of course, the United States can—for a while—sustain its global military commitments by raising taxes and interest rates, and cutting back on domestic spending. Over time, however, such a policy would be self-defeating. The perverse result would be to prolong US military dominance in the short-term while inflicting long-term damage to the economy—which is, after all, the very foundation of US military power. In other words, by choosing to invest in hegemony rather than in economic revival, the United States actually would be shooting itself in the foot strategically and would accelerate both the pace and magnitude of its decline. One thing is increasingly evident however: financially and strategically the United States is increasingly over-extended.

### **Conclusion: after the *Pax Americana***

The current international order is based on the economic and security structures that the United States created after World War II and reflected America's hegemonic position in the international system. US decline has profound implications for the future of international politics. Hegemonic stability theory holds that an open international economic system requires a single hegemonic power that performs critical military and economic tasks (Gilpin 1981; 1975; Kindelberger 1973; Posen 2003).<sup>15</sup> Militarily, the hegemon is responsible for stabilizing key regions and for guarding the global commons. Economically, the hegemon provides public goods by opening its domestic market to other states, supplying liquidity for the global economy, and providing a reserve currency.

It is an open question how much longer the United States will be able to continue to act as a hegemonic stabilizer because the looming fiscal crisis is almost certain to compel Washington to retrench strategically during the next decade. Economically, it already is apparent that the United States no longer is a hegemon. Hegemons are supposed to solve international economic crises, not cause them. Hegemons are supposed to be the lender of last resort, not the borrower of first resort. Hegemons are supposed to lead the world economy out of crisis and back to prosperity—not have their own economies rescued by others. That the United States no longer fulfils these metrics of economic hegemony became evident at the April 2009 Group of 20 meeting in London, when President Barack Obama acknowledged the United States was incapable of leading the international

---

<sup>15</sup> It has been argued that a hegemonic United States essentially functions as a world government (see Mandelbaum 2005).

economy out the present economic slump.<sup>16</sup> President Obama reiterated this point during his November 2009 trip to Asia. Consequently, the world increasingly is looking to China (and India and other emerging market states) to be the locomotives of global recovery.

Curiously, Brooks and Wohlforth (and other analysts, notably Fareed Zakaria) believe that notwithstanding US relative decline, the *Pax Americana* can be maintained (Zakaria 2008). Specifically, they believe that international institutions can help perpetuate US dominance. By strengthening these institutions, they say, the United States can 'lock in' the hegemonic order that it built after World War II and thereby ensure that it persists after unipolarity ends (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Ikenberry 2001; Keohane 1984). Brooks and Wohlforth also assert that unipolarity affords the United States a 20 year window of opportunity to recast the international system in ways that will bolster the legitimacy of its power and advance its security interests (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 216–218).

There are four reasons why this 'institutional lock-in' argument is wrong. First, America's liberal preferences—which underpin the US commitment to multilateralism and international institutions—have been dealt a telling blow by the Great Depression. Institutions have failed to produce a coordinated response to the financial and economic crisis. Moreover, through the actions of national governments, the state has been brought back in to economic policy, and states have responded to the crisis by adopting nationalistic and neo-mercantilist policies rather than by pursuing international cooperation. Second, because of the perception that its hard power is declining, and the hit its soft power has taken because of the meltdown, there is a real question about whether the United States retains the credibility and legitimacy to take the lead in institutional reform. As *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf (2008) says, "The collapse of the western financial system, while China's flourishes, marks a humiliating end to the "unipolar moment." As western policy makers struggle, their credibility lies broken. Who still trusts the teachers?" Third, rather than locking themselves into the ebbing *Pax Americana*, rising powers such as China need to wait only a decade or so to reshape the international system themselves and construct a new order that will reflect their interests, norms, and values (Jacques 2009). Finally—and most important—the institutional lock-in argument misses a fundamental point: the entire fabric of world order that the United States established after 1945—the *Pax Americana*—rested on the foundation of US military and economic preponderance. Remove the foundation and the structure crumbles. The decline of American power means the end of US dominance in world politics and the beginning of the transition to a new constellation of world power. Without the 'hard' power (military and economic) upon which it was built, the *Pax Americana* is doomed to wither in the early twenty-first century.

Oddly, notwithstanding their professed belief in unipolar stability and enduring US hegemony, Brooks and Wohlforth actually concede that the unipolar

---

<sup>16</sup> As President Barack Obama said, 'If there is going to be renewed growth it can't just be the United States as the engine, everybody is going to have to pick up the pace.' He also observed that 'in some ways the world has become accustomed to the United States being a voracious consumer market and the engine that drives a lot of economic growth worldwide. And I think that in the wake of this crisis, even as we're doing stimulus, we have to take into account our own deficits' (quoted in Sanger and Landler 2009).

era is ending. As they concede, American primacy is not likely to last more than 20 years, which is really not very long at all (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 17, 218). This is hardly a persuasive case for US pre-eminence. Moreover, it is a tacit admission that contrary to what they assert, other states actually are (and have been for some time) counter-balancing the United States. After all, great powers do not spring up suddenly over night—there is no switch that can be flipped that instantly transforms the distribution of power in the international system. Rather, the process of great power emergence unfolds over time, especially in a unipolar world (Layne 1993; 2006b).

The end of America's unipolar moment will cause major changes in international politics. Under the *Pax Americana* the world has enjoyed a long era of great power peace and international prosperity. This holiday from history, however, is coming to an end and international politics is headed back to the future. With the end of American primacy, the *real* post-American world will enter an era of de-globalization, rising nationalism and neo-mercantilism, geopolitical instability, and great power competition.

When historians look to pinpoint the end of US hegemony, they likely will point to two moments. The first is the period between August and December 2008. The Beijing Olympics (which was staged deliberately to be China's great power coming-out party) and the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 heralded the impending return of multipolarity. The economic and financial meltdown in fall 2008 underscored the reality of America's relative economic decline and the beginning of the end of the post-1945 liberal era of international politics. The second pivotal moment was President Obama's November 2009 trip to China, which provided both substantive and symbolic evidence of US decline and the dramatic shift in the relative power relationship between the United States and China. As the *Financial Times* observed, 'Coming at a moment when Chinese prestige is growing and the US is facing enormous difficulties, Mr. Obama's trip has symbolised the advent of a more multi-polar world where US leadership has to co-exist with several rising powers, most notably China' (Dyer and Luce 2009).<sup>17</sup> In the wake of Obama's trip, China has taken an assertive stance toward the United States on a number of crucial issues on the bilateral agenda. This is further evidence that China's perceptions of the balance of power have shifted (Bennhold 2010; Pomfret 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; Shambaugh 2010; Wines 2010).<sup>18</sup> The lesson of the events between August 2008 and November 2009 is simple: history and multipolarity are staging a come-back. During the next decade or two, the world figures to become a much more turbulent—and dangerous—place

---

<sup>17</sup> On Obama's visit to China, see Cooper (2009), Cooper et al (2009), Higgins and Kornblut (2009) and Wines and LaFraniere (2009).

<sup>18</sup> As Wohlforth himself has argued, diplomacy and grand strategy are driven by policymakers' perceptions of the balance of power rather than the actual distribution of power. See, Wohlforth (1993; 1987). The growing belief that the world has become (or rapidly is becoming) multipolar has profound implications for international politics because states do act on their perceptions, and China clearly sees itself on the upswing and the US in decline. See, *Economist* (2009). Speaking to the annual Lone Star National Security Forum (San Antonio, Texas, 4 April 2009), Yang Jiemian—president of the prestigious Shanghai Institute for International Affairs (and brother of China's foreign minister)—said that the era of multipolarization has begun; China is an emerging *global* power; and Beijing will have a major voice in shaping the emerging international order.

geopolitically than it was during the era of American primacy. Adjusting to this new reality—coming to grips with its own decline and the unfolding multipolar moment—will be the United States' central grand strategic preoccupation during the next ten to 15 years.

### Notes on contributor

**Christopher Layne** is Professor and Robert M Gates Chair in National Security in the George HW Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A & M University. He is the author of *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2006), and, with Bradley A Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge 2006). He is a consultant to the National Intelligence Council and a member of its study group on Strategic Reactions to American Pre-eminence.

### References

- Baldwin, David (1979) 'Power analysis and world politics: new trends vs. old tendencies', *World Politics*, 31:2, 161–194
- Barnett, Correlli (1972) *The collapse of British power* (New York: William Morrow)
- Bennhold, Katrin (2010) 'As China rises, conflict with West rises too', *New York Times*, 27 January
- Bergsten, C Fred (2009) 'The dollar and the deficits', *Foreign Affairs*, 88:6, 20–38
- Brawley, Mark R (2004) 'The political economy of balance of power theory' in TV Paul, James J Wirtz and Michael Fortmann (eds) *Balance of power: theory and practice in the 21st century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 76–102
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2002) 'American primacy in perspective', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:4, 20–33
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Calleo, David P (1982) *The imperious economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)
- Calmes, Jackie (2010a) 'Party gridlock in Washington feeds fear of a debt crisis', *New York Times*, 17 February
- Calmes, Jackie (2010b) 'In \$3.8 trillion budget, Obama pivots to trim future deficits', *New York Times*, 2 February
- Chace, James (1981) *Solvency, the price of survival: an essay on American foreign policy* (New York: Random House)
- Cooper, Helene (2009) 'China holds firm on major issues in Obama's visit', *New York Times*, 18 November
- Cooper, Helene, Michael Wines and David Sanger (2009) 'China's role as lender alters Obama visit', *New York Times*, 15 November
- Congressional Budget Office (CBO) (March 2009) *A preliminary analysis of the president's budget and an update of the CBO's budget and economic outlook* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office)
- Dehio, Ludwig (1963) *The precarious balance: the politics of power in Europe, 1494–1945* (London: Chatto & Windus)
- Dombey, Daniel (2009) 'Clinton aims for pragmatic diplomacy', *Financial Times*, 14 January
- Drew, Christopher (2009) 'High costs weigh on troop debate for Afghan war', *New York Times*, 15 November
- Dyer, Geoff (2009) 'China moves up economic league table', *Financial Times*, 15 January
- Dyer, Geoff and Edward Luce (2009) 'Obama calls for stronger renminbi', *Financial Times*, 18 November
- Economic Research Service (2008) 'International macroeconomics data set', US Department of Agriculture, 22 December <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/Macroeconomics>>
- Economist (2009a) 'Briefing: China and the West', 21 March

- Economist (2009b) 'And the soldier home from the hill', 18 July
- Economist Intelligence Unit (2009) 'All country data set', 20 April, <<http://store.eiu.com/products.html>>, accessed 7 March 2011
- Emmott, Bill (2008) *Rivals: how the power struggle between China, India, and Japan will shape our next decade* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt)
- Ferguson, Niall and Laurence J Kotlikoff (2003) 'Going critical: American power and the consequences of fiscal overstretch', *National Interest*, 73, 22–32
- Friedberg, Aaron L (1988) *Weary titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Gale, William G and Alan J Auerbach (2009) *The economic crisis and the fiscal crisis: 2009 and beyond* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution)
- Glanz, James (2009) 'The economic cost of war', *New York Times*, 1 March
- Gill, Bates (2007) *Rising star: China's new security diplomacy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press)
- Gilpin, Robert (1975) *U.S. power and the multinational corporation: the political economy of foreign direct investment* (New York: Basic Books)
- Gilpin, Robert (1981) *War and change in international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Gilpin, Robert (1987) *The political economy of international relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Goldstein, Avery (2005) *Rising to the challenge: China's grand strategy and international security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)
- Guha, Krishna and Anna Fitfield (2009) 'Obama faces domestic battle on war costs', *Financial Times*, 2 December
- Helleiner, Eric (2008) 'Political determinants of international currencies: what future for the U.S. dollar?', *Review of International Political Economy*, 15:3, 354–378
- Helleiner, Eric and Jonathan Kirshner (eds) (2009) *The future of the dollar* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)
- Higgins, Andrew and Anne Kornblut (2009) 'In Obama's China trip, a stark contrast with the past', *Washington Post*, 18 November
- Huntington, Samuel P (1987) 'Coping with the Lippmann gap', *Foreign Affairs*, 66:3, 453–477
- Ignatius, David (2010) 'The trouble with China's economic bubble', *Washington Post*, 11 March
- Ikenberry, G John (1998–1999) 'Institutions, strategic restraint, and the persistence of American postwar order', *International Security*, 23:3, 43–78
- Ikenberry, G John (2001) *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of international order after major wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Jacques, Martin (2009) *When China rules the world: the rise of the middle kingdom and the end of the western world* (London: Allen Lane)
- Jolly, David and Catherine Rampell (2010) 'Moody's says U.S. debt could test triple-A rating', *New York Times*, 15 March
- Kennedy, Paul (1987) *The rise and fall of the great powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House)
- Kennedy, Paul (1983) *The rise and fall of British naval mastery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Keohane, Robert (1984) *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Kindelberger, Charles P (1973) *The world in depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press)
- Kirshner, Jonathan (2008) 'Dollar primacy and American power: what's at stake?', *Review of International Political Economy*, 15:3, 418–438
- Krauthammer, Charles (1990) 'The unipolar moment', *Foreign Affairs—America and the World* 1990, 70, 25–33
- Kugler, Jacek and Douglas Lemke (eds) (1996) *Parity and war: evaluations and extensions of the war ledger* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press)
- Kynge, James (2006) *China shakes the world: a titan's rise and troubled future – and the challenge for America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin)

- Lampton, David M (2008) *The three faces of Chinese power: might, money, and minds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press)
- Layne, Christopher (1993) 'The peace of illusions: why new great powers will rise', *International Security*, 17:4, 5–51
- Layne, Christopher (2006a) *The peace of illusions: American grand strategy from 1940 to the present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)
- Layne, Christopher (2006b) 'The unipolar illusion revisited', *International Security*, 31:2, 7–41
- Layne, Christopher (2006c) 'Impotent power: re-examining the nature of America's hegemonic power', *National Interest*, 85, 41–47
- Layne, Christopher (2008) 'China's challenge to U.S. hegemony', *Current History*, 107, 13–18
- Layne, Christopher (2009a) 'The waning of U.S. hegemony – myth or reality?', *International Security*, 34:1, 147–172
- Layne, Christopher (2009b) 'The influence of theory on grand strategy: the U.S. and a rising China' in Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison and Patrick James (eds) *Rethinking realism in international relations: between tradition and innovation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), 103–135
- Lowe, Cedric J and Michael L Dockrill (1972) *British foreign policy, 1902–1914, vol I, The mirage of power* (London: Routledge)
- Mahbubani, Kishore (2008) *The new Asian hemisphere: the irresistible shift of global power to the east* (New York: PublicAffairs)
- Mandelbaum, Michael (2005) *The case for goliath: how America acts as the world's government in the 21st century* (New York: PublicAffairs)
- Marsh, Peter (2008) 'China reverting to form as the world's workshop', *Financial Times*, 11 August
- Mazetti, Mark (2005) 'Military at risk, Pentagon warned', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May
- Mearsheimer, John (2001) *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: W W Norton)
- Mearsheimer, John (2006) 'China's unpeaceful rise', *Current History*, 160, 160–162
- National Intelligence Council (2008) *Global trends 2025: a world transformed* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office)
- Nye Jr, Joseph S (1990) *Bound to lead: the changing nature of American power* (New York: Basic Books)
- Nye Jr, Joseph S (2002) *The paradox of American power: why the world's only superpower can't go it alone* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- O'Neill, Jim [Head of Global Economic Research, Goldman Sachs] (2008) 'Video interview', February, <<http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/index.html>>, accessed 7 March 2011
- Organski, Abramo FK (1968) *World politics* (New York: Knopf)
- Organski, Abramo FK and Jacek Kugler (1980) *The war ledger* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press)
- Pape, Robert A (2009) 'Empire falls', *National Interest*, 99, 21–34
- Pomfret, John (2010a) 'Newly powerful China defies Western nations with remarks, policies', *Washington Post*, 15 March
- Pomfret, John (2010b) 'China's leader blames U.S. for bilateral tensions, rejects call to adjust currency', *Washington Post*, 14 March
- Pomfret, John (2010c) 'China's strident tone raises concerns among Western governments, analysts', *Washington Post*, 31 January
- Posen, Barry (2003) 'Command of the commons: the military foundation of U.S. hegemony', *International Security*, 28:1, 5–46
- PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *Convergence, catch-up, and overtaking: how the balance of world economic power is shifting*, January
- Rachman, Geideon (2010) 'Bubble or not, China's rise is real', *Financial Times*, 15 March
- Ross, Robert and Zhu Feng (eds) (2008) *China's ascent: power, security, and the future of international politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)
- Sanger, David (2010) 'Deficits may alter U.S. politics and global power', *New York Times*, 2 February
- Sanger, David and Mark Landler (2009) 'In Europe, Obama faces calls for rules on finances', *New York Times*, 1 April

- Shambaugh, David (2010) 'The Chinese tiger shows its claws', *Financial Times*, 17 February
- Shanker, Thom (2005a) 'Pentagon says Iraq effort limits ability to fight other conflicts', *New York Times*, 3 May
- Shanker, Thom (2005b) 'Pentagon invites allies for first time to secret talks aimed at sharing burdens', *New York Times*, 19 March
- Shirk, Susan L (2007) *China: fragile superpower—how China's internal politics could derail its peaceful rise* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Stiglitz, Joseph and Linda Bilmes (2008) *The three trillion dollar war: the true cost of the Iraq conflict* (New York: WW Norton)
- Thompson, William R (ed) (2009) *Systemic transformations: past, present, and future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Tyler, Patrick E (1992) 'U.S. strategy plan calls for insuring no rivals develop', *New York Times*, 8 March
- Tyson, Ann S (2005) 'Two years later, Iraq war drains military', *Washington Post*, 19 March
- Walt, Stephan M (2005) *Taming American power: the global response to U.S. primacy* (New York: WW Norton)
- Waltz, Kenneth (1993) 'The emerging structure of international politics', *International Security*, 18:2, 44–79
- White House (1995) *A national security strategy of engagement and enlargement* (Washington, DC: The White House)
- White House (2002) *The national security strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House)
- Wilson, Dominic and Roopa Purushothaman (2003) 'Dreaming with BRICs: the path to 2050', Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper, No. 99 (New York: Goldman Sachs)
- Wines, Michael (2010) 'Chinese leader defends currency and policies', *New York Times*, 14 March
- Wines, Michael and Sharon LaFraniere (2010) 'During visit, Obama skirts Chinese political sensitivities', *New York Times*, 18 November
- Wohlforth, William C (1987) 'The perception of power: Russia in the pre-1914 balance', *World Politics*, 39:3, 353–381
- Wohlforth, William C (1993) *The elusive balance: power and perceptions during the cold war* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Wohlforth, William C (1999) 'The stability of a unipolar world', *International Security*, 24:1, 5–41
- Wohlforth, William C (2002) 'U.S. strategy in a unipolar world' in G John Ikenberry (ed) *America unrivaled: the future of the balance of power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 98–120
- Wolf, Martin (2008) 'Seeds of its own destruction', *Financial Times*, 8 March
- Wong, Edward (2010) 'China on path to become second largest economy', *New York Times*, 21 January
- Zakaria, Fareed (1998) *From wealth to power: the unusual origins of America's world role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Zakaria, Fareed (2008) *The post-American world* (New York: WW Norton)

## The false promise of unipolarity: constraints on the exercise of American power

Charles A Kupchan

*Georgetown University and the Council on Foreign Relations*

**Abstract** *In World out of balance, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth make a valuable contribution to ongoing debate about the systemic effects of unipolarity and the durability of US primacy. They are correct that unipolarity engenders systemic stability because the power gap between the United States and potential rivals forestalls military balancing. However, Brooks and Wohlforth underweight other means through which major states are resisting US power and they fail to appreciate that the systemic characteristics of unipolarity may change in relatively short order.*

### Introduction

In *World out of balance*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth make a valuable contribution to ongoing debate about the systemic effects of unipolarity and the durability of US primacy. Indeed, they offer the most comprehensive examination of the subject to date. They carefully document the scope of current power asymmetries and study the behavioural characteristics of unipolar systems. They also assess the constraints on the exercise of US power associated with balancing, global economic interdependence, reputation for multilateral cooperation, and international legitimacy.

One of most significant contributions of the book is to clarify the logic of unipolarity's systemic effects. Brooks and Wohlforth demonstrate that the current disparity in material power is unique by historical standards, and that national power is 'concentrated in the United States to a degree never before experienced in the history of the modern system of states and thus never contemplated by balance-of-power theorists' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 27–28). As a consequence of the stark power differential between the United States and all other major powers, balancing against the unipole is not taking place; America has passed the threshold beyond which 'systemic constraints on the leading state's security policy become largely inoperative' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 208).

Brooks and Wohlforth are correct that unipolarity engenders systemic stability. There is no competition for primacy within today's international system because the United States is too far ahead of potential rivals; it wins by default. Some scholars attribute the current systemic stability to the presence of nuclear weapons or the fact that the great powers are all satisfied states (Mandelbaum 1998; Kaysen 1990). But even if these variables contribute to the absence of great-power war, they do not explain the absence of competition for primacy and status. Rather, the

infeasibility and expense of offsetting the preponderant power of the United States provide the most compelling explanation of systemic stability. Other states are not balancing against the United States because they do not have the material resources to do so; the power differential is simply too large.<sup>1</sup>

This core insight and its elaboration make *World out of balance* a work of fundamental importance. Nonetheless, whereas Brooks and Wohlforth provide a definitive account of unipolarity's effects, they are less convincing when they turn to unipolarity's durability. They are correct that explicit military balancing against US power is unlikely to occur until the gap closes between the United States and potential competitors. However, Brooks and Wohlforth underweight other means through which major states are resisting US power. They also fail to appreciate that systemic characteristics may change in relatively short order. This essay focuses on the potential for four main variables to have a fundamental impact on the workings of the international system even under conditions of US predominance: practice and its effect on system dynamics; the impact of soft balancing; change in order-producing norms; and the politics of foreign policy in the United States.

### Practice and system dynamics

The polarity of any regional or global system is a function of the distribution of material power among the main states in that system. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 27–59) provide compelling evidence that the current scope of US primacy means that today's international system is unipolar. But even if the international system is in material terms unipolar, the characteristics of that system are to some extent determined by political choice—the practice and conduct of foreign policy. The systemic characteristics that Brooks and Wohlforth attribute to unipolarity operate only if the key players in the system behave as if they reside in a unipolar system. For now, the United States and other major states view the international landscape as unipolar and behave as such, meaning that *World out of balance* accurately depicts the characteristics of the current international system.

Practice can, however, shape the behavioural attributes of different polarities (Adler 2008; Pouliot 2010). The distribution of material resources of course matters, but so do the choices that major states make about how to manage the distribution of power. Structure heavily influences, but does not determine, the conduct of policy.

Consider the operation of the Concert of Europe, which emerged after the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. In material terms, Europe was effectively bipolar; Britain was the dominant naval power and Russia the dominant land power, putting them well ahead of Prussia, Austria, and a defeated France. Nonetheless, the Concert operated as a multipolar grouping of relatively equal powers; practice was more important than the distribution of power in shaping systemic dynamics. Britain and Russia exercised strategic restraint and deliberately elevated the geopolitical weight of Prussia, Austria, and France. Britain focused on maintaining naval superiority and consolidating overseas empire, engaging on

---

<sup>1</sup> For a similar assessment of the benign systemic effects of unipolarity, see Kupchan (1998).

the continent only as needed to help preserve consensus among Concert members (Albrecht-Carrié 1968; Ikenberry 2001; Cronin 1999). Strategic choice, not the immutable consequences of the distribution of power, determined systemic characteristics.

A similar logic applies to the polarity of the Western Hemisphere during the late nineteenth century. Britain and the United States were effectively bipolar competitors, with the British challenging the United States for regional hegemony by maintaining naval mastery in the western Atlantic and imperial garrisons in Canada and other territories. But the competition associated with bipolarity abated at the end of the century as a result of mutual accommodation and the onset of Anglo-American rapprochement (Campbell 1960; Campbell 1957; Gelber 1938). By the early 1900s, Britain had withdrawn its ground troops from Canada and ceded to the United States naval mastery in the western Atlantic. The Admiralty no longer included the US battlefleet in its calculation of naval requirements under the two-power standard (Friedberg 1989, 174). Growing US power, rather than causing increased competition as predicted by the dictates of balancing logic, led to reconciliation and the end of over a century of Anglo-American antagonism. The pacifying effects of cooperative diplomacy overrode the intensification of rivalry that should have, according to the logic of Brooks and Wohlforth, accompanied America's challenge to British hegemony.

Changes in practice could have a similarly profound impact on the characteristics of the current international system. Consider possible alterations to the prevailing security order in East Asia. China appears to be gradually working to establish itself as the arbiter of a new regional order, supplanting the hub-spoke, US-centric arrangement built by Washington after World War II. Over the course of the next decade, even as America's global naval primacy remains unchallenged, China through the modernization of its fleet and the development of anti-ship weaponry may be able to offset US superiority in its regional waters. Meanwhile, the US–Japan Alliance has been in flux. After it took office in 2009, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) sought to distance itself from strategic dependence on the United States and to construct a more autonomous relationship with China. It also sought to revise plans for the relocation of US forces based on Okinawa—against the wishes of Washington. Even though the DPJ suffered a rapid decline in its popularity and proceeded to back away from its efforts to recast Tokyo's relationship with Washington, the episode made clear the potential for a significant realignment in Northeast Asia. If the United States were to lose its position as the strategic hub of the region, its leverage in the western Pacific would decline markedly. The global order would still be unipolar, but a key strategic theatre would no longer operate by the rules of unipolarity. Just as British hegemony in the western Atlantic evaporated over the course of a decade, so too could a combination of China's naval expansion and strategic realignment undercut US primacy in East Asia.

Although unlikely, it may also be the case that the Lisbon Treaty proves to be a turning point for Europe. A strengthened presidency of the European Council, a newly empowered foreign policy czar, and the development of a European diplomatic service may enable the EU both to assume more responsibility for European security and to pursue a more assertive foreign policy beyond its own neighbourhood. The institutional changes that occurred in the United States during the late 1800s provide an illuminating analogy. Over the course of

America's gradual rise during the second half of the nineteenth century, the 1890s proved to be a crucial decade. The centralization of political authority at the federal level and the consolidation of the 'imperial presidency' cleared the way for America's emergence as a global power (Zakaria 1998). Within a few short years, Washington built a world-class battlefleet, expelled Spain from Cuba, and extended its imperial reach into the western Pacific, altering the global balance of power.

To be sure, even as the authority of EU institutions in Brussels increases, the process of centralization will occur much more slowly than in the American case. Moreover, Europe's nation-states will for the foreseeable future protect important aspects of sovereignty, preventing the development of a collective security policy. But the rapid pace with which the United States translated economic power into naval power—a move made possible in part by the strengthening of the federal branch—makes clear that changes in policies and institutions can alter polarity with greater speed than Brooks and Wohlforth acknowledge. If Europe does aggregate its will and resources—or if Beijing capitalizes on its growing defence capability to declare an equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine for Northeast Asia—the geopolitical stasis of unipolarity will prove far more fleeting than they claim. Practice can both alter the characteristics of a unipolar world and determine how long unipolarity endures.

### **The geopolitical consequence of soft balancing**

Brooks and Wohlforth are correct that, at least for now, other powers are not balancing against the United States by seeking to build offsetting defence capabilities or pursuing diplomatic strategies aimed at forming countervailing alliances. Other scholars have pointed out, however, that states are engaging in 'soft balancing' against the United States. As Brooks and Wohlforth describe the concept, 'the dynamics of countervailing power are still present, but often operate at a lower, less comprehensive level than in the typical conception of balancing (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 60; Paul 2005; Pape 2005). Diplomatic manoeuvring and alignments that constrain Washington, the formation of institutional groupings that exclude the United States, elite appeals to popular anti-American sentiment—these are all examples of soft balancing.

Brooks and Wohlforth dismiss these milder constraints on the exercise of US power, arguing that they constitute bargaining, not balancing. They caution against 'equating balancing with international relations writ large', an intellectual move that they argue makes the concept 'a mundane rather than noteworthy development in international politics' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 96). But Brooks and Wohlforth err in conflating mundane with inconsequential. The essential test of the constraining potential of soft balancing is not its frequency or prevalence, but its geopolitical consequence. If soft balancing ultimately has a direct effect on matters of peace and war, then it should hardly be dismissed as 'mundane' bargaining.

Consider the efforts by Germany, France, and Russia to block the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 94) depict the transatlantic rift as simply a matter of 'policy differences, longer-term bargaining incentives, European regional dynamics, and long-standing domestic political incentives'.

But that analysis is entirely inconsistent with assertions from the anti-war coalition that one of their main objectives was to check and constrain American power. Even before Washington launched the invasion of Iraq, the French foreign minister called for Europeans to resist a United States that acted 'unilaterally, without consulting others, making decisions based on its own view of the world and its own interests' (Daley 2002; Kupchan 2002). Such concerns intensified in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq, with President Jacques Chirac of France demonstrating 'keen interest in putting constraints on the unilateral use of American power' (Tyler 2003).

The consequences of such opposition went well beyond the exchange of acrimonious barbs across the Atlantic. Had European countries not blocked UN approval of the invasion—and instead contributed to the effort—the occupation might have been more successful, saving tens of thousands of lives. From this perspective, the transatlantic confrontation over Iraq was anything but mundane bargaining. Of course, France, Germany, and Russia did not form an alliance against the United States and engage in military balancing. But such behaviour is far too high a bar for determining the geopolitical consequence of their behaviour.

It is similarly difficult to view the recent trajectory of Russian foreign policy toward the United States as nothing more than business as usual. On the contrary, a weak Russia has been using the tools at its disposal to push back against what Moscow has perceived as repeated US encroachment on the sovereign rights of other nations and on Russia's legitimate security interests. In 2007, Russian president Vladimir Putin summed up his thinking on unipolarity: 'It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within'. Looking ahead, Putin continued, 'There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centres of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity' (Putin 2007).

From Moscow's standpoint, the enlargement of NATO has been all about altering the Eurasian balance of power. Accordingly, Russia has sought to form countervailing groupings, including the Shanghai Cooperation Council and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia's invasion of Georgia in the summer of 2008 was at least in part an effort to counterbalance the inroads the United States had made in the Caucasus. Indeed, the war represents a clear episode of 'hard' balancing; Russia invaded a US ally in order to re-establish Moscow's influence in the region. Similarly, Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was meant to strengthen its foothold in the region—as well as to constitute a payback for the West's recognition of Kosovo. Russia has also balanced against the United States in central and southwest Asia, seeking to control US access to bases in the region and to gain leverage in multilateral negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. Moscow's decision to help Iran commence the operation of its Bushehr nuclear reactor in the summer of 2010 was a case in point. To be sure, Russia has not been working to reconstitute the Warsaw Pact. But it has been working—successfully—to constrain US power.

Admittedly, Russian actions have not added up to a serious challenge to US preponderance. But the Georgia war took many lives and risked creating a new geopolitical divide across Europe. Indeed, the countries of Central Europe reacted by pressing NATO to return to its traditional focus on collective defence against a

Russian threat. Should Iran succeed in acquiring nuclear weapons in part due to Russian resistance to US diplomacy or military action, it will be very difficult indeed to maintain that Moscow's policy represents 'a mundane rather than noteworthy development in international politics'. Russia's actions may be mostly 'soft', but they certainly constitute balancing and have a direct and consequential impact upon the geopolitical landscape in Eurasia.

### **Change in order-producing norms**

In the second half of their book, Brooks and Wohlforth address whether there are consequential normative constraints on the exercise of US power. In particular, they assess whether the United States effectively suffers a loss of leverage when it develops a reputation for non-compliance with institutional commitments or compromises its international legitimacy by pursuing policies inconsistent with prevailing norms and rules. They conclude that 'the reputational constraint ... is inoperative with respect to US security policy' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 170), and that 'the constraint of legitimacy is weakly conditional' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 206). In other words, reputation and legitimacy matter only at the margins, if at all.

These are contestable claims and on an intuitive level surely at odds with the Bush administration's troubled diplomatic record. As Brooks and Wohlforth seem to admit (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 201), Turkey's refusal to allow the United States to open a northern front during the Iraq invasion was at least in part a function of Ankara's assessment that the war lacked legitimacy. So too did most Arab countries see the war as a bout of US imperialism—not as a just war launched in pursuit of the collective good—limiting their willingness to lend a helping hand once the occupation began to stumble. In March 2003, the Arab League passed a resolution declaring the invasion to be a 'violation of the United Nations Charter' and a 'threat to world peace' (BBC News 2003). The resources and greater legitimacy that would have accompanied widespread Arab participation in the stabilization of Iraq may well have produced a less violent outcome.

These examples aside, Brooks and Wohlforth also fail to address another important pathway through which norms and rules constrain the exercise of US power. They focus exclusively on the costs to the United States of its own failure to comply with the institutions and rules that Washington took the lead in crafting after the close of World War II. But in the aftermath of the global financial crisis that began in 2008 and amid the ongoing ascent of China, India, Brazil, and other rising states, change in ordering norms may well be driven by the preferences and policies of emerging powers, not by those of the United States. Moreover, the impressive economic performance and political staying power of regimes that practice non-democratic brands of capitalism—such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—call into question the durability of the normative order erected during America's watch. Well before emerging powers catch up with America's material resources, they will be challenging the normative commitment to open markets and liberal democracy that has defined the Western order.

The substantive gap between the norms of the Western order and those that inform the domestic and foreign policies of rising powers has not gone unnoticed

(Kupchan and Mount 2009). Nonetheless, many scholars have offered an illusory response: that the United States and its democratic allies should dedicate the twilight hours of their primacy to universalizing Western norms. According to G John Ikenberry (2008, 37, 25), 'the United States' global position may be weakening, but the international system the United States leads can remain the dominant order of the twenty-first century'. The West should 'sink the roots of this order as deeply as possible' to ensure that the world continues to play by its rules even as its material preponderance wanes. Such confidence in the universality of the Western order is, however, based on wishful thinking about the likely trajectory of ascending powers, which throughout history have sought to adjust the prevailing order in ways that advantage their own interests. Presuming that rising states will readily embrace Western norms is not only unrealistic, but also dangerous, promising to alienate emerging powers that will be pivotal to global stability in the years ahead (Gat 2007).

Brooks and Wohlforth do not address this issue—presumably because they believe that US preponderance is so durable that they need not concern themselves with the normative orientations of rising powers. But facts on the ground suggest otherwise. China is, as of 2010, the world's second largest economy, holds massive amounts of US debt, and is strengthening its economic and strategic presence in many quarters of the globe; the G-8 has given way to the G-20; the prime minister of democratic India has called for 'new global "rules of the game"' and the 'reform and revitalization' of international institutions (Mahbubane 2008, 235); the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have increased the voting weight of developing countries; and the United Nations Security Council is coming under growing pressure to enlarge the voices of emerging powers. All of these developments come at the expense of the influence and normative preferences of the United States and its Western allies.

By the numbers, Brooks and Wohlforth are correct that unipolarity persists. But rising powers are already challenging the pecking order and guiding norms of the international system. If the next international system is to be characterized by norm-governed order rather than competitive anarchy, the West will have to make room for the competing visions of rising powers. A new order will have to be based on great-power consensus and toleration of political diversity rather than the normative hegemony of the West.

### **The politics of foreign policy in the United States**

A final chink in the armour of Brooks and Wohlforth concerns their disregard of domestic politics in the United States. As realists, the authors consider unproblematic potential variation in the choices that Americans may make about how to deploy their preponderant power; the United States is the unipole, and will act accordingly. But just as political choice and practice in China, Russia, or Europe can alter the characteristics of unipolarity, so too can political choice in the United States. With the collapse of America's political centre and the erosion of bipartisanship on matters of foreign policy, US statecraft may prove far more unpredictable and unsteady than during the decades since World War II (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007a). Brooks and Wohlforth do to some extent address the issue of domestic stewardship when they examine whether the Iraq War and

US unilateralism constrained US power due to reputational concerns and the loss of legitimacy. The excesses of the Bush administration's brand of unilateralism, they contend, cost the United States little in terms of its influence abroad. With its surfeit of power, the United States could afford to make mistakes.

The challenge in this decade, however, may be not too much US power and resolve, but an unsteady America that grows weary of the burdens of unipolarity. Brooks and Wohlforth assume that the United States will as a matter of course continue to deploy its preponderant power on a global basis; the unipole will automatically defend unipolarity. But in the aftermath of the draining wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic duress and ballooning deficits associated with the global financial crisis, the United States may lose some of its enthusiasm for serving as the global guardian of last resort. Democrats and Republicans are divided on issues ranging from the war in Afghanistan to climate change to arms control. If a political compromise is to be struck, it may well entail fashioning a more modest and less costly strategy of retrenchment (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007b). At a minimum, US grand strategy may swing between stark alternatives depending upon which party is in power. In broad terms, the Republicans favour the use of force and shun institutionalized multilateralism. Meanwhile, the Democrats favour multilateralism and engagement rather than the exercise of force. Even if unipolarity persists, its international effects may be overridden by the unpredictable choices Americans may make about when and how to deploy their national power.

## Conclusion

In *World out of balance*, Brooks and Wohlforth make a defining contribution to debate about the durability of a unipolar world and the characteristics of today's international system. Their view represents an important alternative to the more intuitive reaction to America's current economic and geopolitical troubles—one that foretells a relatively rapid waning of US primacy. Despite their compelling and comprehensive analysis, however, unipolarity will prove far more fragile than Brooks and Wohlforth maintain. Intuition has it right: the comfortable stability of unipolarity will begin to give way to the uncertain fluidity of multipolarity as this decade unfolds.

## Notes on contributor

**Charles A Kupchan** is a professor of international affairs at Georgetown University and Whitney Shepardson Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He is the author of *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace*.

## References

- Adler, Emanuel (2008) 'The spread of security communities: communities of practice, self-restraint, and NATO's post-Cold War transformation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:2, 195–230
- Albrecht-Carrié, René (1968) *The concert of Europe* (New York: Walker)

- BBC News (2003) 'Arab states line up behind Iraq', 25 March, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2882851.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2882851.stm)>, accessed 9 March 2011
- Brooks, Stephen and William Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Campbell, AE (1960) *Great Britain and the United States, 1895–1903* (London: Longman's)
- Campbell, Charles S (1957) *Anglo-American understanding, 1898–1903* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press)
- Cronin, Bruce (1999) *Community under anarchy: transnational identity and the evolution of cooperation* (New York: Columbia University Press)
- Daley, Suzanne (2002) 'French foreign minister calls U.S. policy "simplistic"', *New York Times*, 7 February
- Friedberg, Aaron (1989) *The weary titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Gat, Azar (2007) 'The return of authoritarian great powers', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4, 59–69
- Gelber, Lionel M (1938) *The rise of Anglo-American friendship: a study in world politics, 1898–1906* (London: Oxford University Press)
- Ikenberry, G John (2001) *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Ikenberry, G John (2008) 'The rise of China and the future of the West', *Foreign Affairs*, 87:1, 23–37
- Kaysen, Carl (1990) 'Is war obsolete? A review essay', *International Security*, 14:4, 42–64
- Kupchan, Charles (1998) 'After Pax Americana: benign power, regional integration, and the sources of a stable multipolarity', *International Security*, 23:2, 40–79
- Kupchan, Charles (2002) *The end of the American era: US foreign policy and the geopolitics of the twenty-first century* (New York: Knopf)
- Kupchan, Charles and Adam Mount (2009) 'The autonomy rule', *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, 12, 8–21
- Kupchan, Charles and Peter Trubowitz (2007a) 'Dead center: the decline of liberal internationalism in the United States', *International Security*, 32:2, 7–44
- Kupchan, Charles and Peter Trubowitz (2007b) 'Grand strategy for a divided America', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4, 71–83
- Mahbubane, Kishore (2008) *The new Asian hemisphere: the irresistible shift of global power to East Asia* (New York: Public Affairs)
- Mandelbaum, Michael (1998) 'Is major war obsolete?', *Survival*, 40:4, 20–38
- Pape, Robert (2005) 'Soft balancing against the United States', *International Security*, 30:1, 7–45
- Paul, TV (2005) 'Soft balancing in the age of US primacy', *International Security*, 30:1, 46–71
- Pouliot, Vincent (2010) *International security in practice: the politics of NATO–Russia diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press)
- Putin, Vladimir (2007) 'Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy', <[http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/28802/ipriadoc\\_doc/8DAFEC3F-AD9C-4AB9-9974-113B27E73892/en/1230\\_Putin\\_Munich.pdf](http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/28802/ipriadoc_doc/8DAFEC3F-AD9C-4AB9-9974-113B27E73892/en/1230_Putin_Munich.pdf)>, accessed 9 March 2011
- Tyler, Patrick (2003) 'As Cold War link itself grows cold, Europe seems to lose value for Bush', *New York Times*, 11 February
- Zakaria, Fareed (1998) *From wealth to power: the unusual origins of America's world role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

## The future is uncertain and the end is always near

Randall L Schweller  
Ohio State University

**Abstract** *The standard view of contemporary unipolar politics is that systemic constraints impede the translation of American power capabilities into influence over security outcomes, rendering the United States (US) much less capable than its material capabilities imply. Challenging this logic, William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks argue that systemic constraints under unipolarity are largely inoperative with respect to the security policies of the unipolar power. Indeed, the US is uniquely positioned in today's world to convert its enormous capability advantages into influence and usable power. While *World out of balance* is a masterpiece of logical and rigorous argumentation, Brooks and Wohlforth, in their exclusive focus on the hegemon and its policies, do not attempt to offer a general theory of unipolarity. Thus, they do not consider the possibility that unipolarity does not constrain any actors or the issue of system change. This essay advances two routes out of unipolarity: (1) a 'delegitimation' phase followed by regular balancing behavior and (2) a sudden and dramatic shift from unipolarity to multipolarity brought on by an unforeseen US collapse.*

### Introduction

The United States (US) became the most powerful country in the world in the early decades of the 20th century. In the past twenty years, this dominance has grown to the point where the US is stronger than any likely combination of nations, a structural-systemic condition known as 'unipolarity'. Such unrivalled power is unparalleled in modern history. In their majestic new book, *World out of balance*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2008) examine the unique properties of this international system, which they argue has been poorly understood because of its unprecedented nature as it relates to constraints on US security policy. They make a simple but bold claim: systemic constraints under unipolarity are largely inoperative with respect to the security policies of the unipole or hegemon, in this case, the US.

Let me say at the outset that this is an extraordinary book, truly breathtaking in its scope, theoretical elegance and analytical rigour. It accomplishes what few works in the field have achieved: it takes on an array of top-shelf theories, clarifies their logic, gathers evidence that directly bears on the validity of their arguments, and judiciously weighs the evidence to see if their claims hold any water. Moreover, the central thesis could be placed on a bumper sticker. Given the ambitiousness of the project and the scope of the analysis, there is much food for thought here and the insights gained are worth all the chewing. The following are my thoughts and reflections about the larger

meaning of the work. Some readers will quite rightly accuse me of being unfair at points because my criticisms are mostly of the type that suggest, 'You should have written the book I wanted you to write.' I plead guilty as charged.

### **What is a systemic constraint?**

Central to their thesis is a conceptualization of systemic constraints that seems to imply both freedom of action and costs attached to policy options: 'A systemic constraint is a property of the international system that restricts freedom of action by forbidding, or raising the costs of, certain kinds of actions, or compelling other kinds of actions' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 3–4). With systemic constraints so defined, they conclude, 'our assessment is that as the concentration of power in a state increases beyond a certain threshold, systemic constraints on its security policy become generally inoperative' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 4). If Brooks and Wohlforth are correct, then two things must be true: a unipole can choose virtually any security policy (the system does not forbid the unipole from embarking on any course of action) and, regardless of what action it chooses, the unipole will not suffer significant costs stemming from systemic constraints. Accordingly, current 'U.S. foreign policy is a realm of choice, rather than necessity' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 19). Here, I think they mistakenly conflate freedom of action or policy autonomy with costs and constraints. Let me explain.

The system rarely if ever forbids specific courses of action, especially among the great powers. Waltz himself says that great powers 'are free to do any fool thing they care to, but they are likely to be rewarded for behavior that is responsive to structural pressures and punished for behavior that is not' (Waltz 1997, 915). In other words, great powers always enjoy a large amount of freedom of action but they cannot escape system constraints: when they conform their policies to systemic realities they do well; and when they do not do so they fare poorly. For Waltz, the concept of systemic constraints boils down to a performance-based selection mechanism—one that never prohibits or chooses particular behaviours but rather rewards and punishes states for their choices and demonstrated ability to compete with the system's most successful actors (Waltz 1979).

Consider the case of Nazi Germany. It was, for all intents and purposes, a landlocked, late-developing great power that had lost the last major-power war, was identified by the victors as the aggressor and was operating within a multipolar system. If ever systemic constraints prohibited reckless foreign and military policies, this should have been the case. Yet, the system did not prevent Hitler from setting Germany on a ruthless course of reckless expansion. He was able to do this because Germany met little resistance from the other great powers—Britain, France, the US and the Soviet Union—which, like Germany, were operating under extreme systemic constraints that should have compelled them to balance against the security threats posed by Germany and its allies.<sup>1</sup> After all, the collective security system had demonstrably failed in response to

---

<sup>1</sup> Neorealists presume states to be minimally interested in self-preservation; as a result, they respond to adverse shifts in the balance of power. Thus, any perturbation in the balance of power should generate reactions that return the system to balance. This is the type of behaviour that intense systemic constraints are supposed to compel.

Japan's actions in the Far East, Italy's aggression in North Africa, and Germany's rearmament, remilitarization of the Rhineland and takeover of Austria. The house was clearly on fire, the alarm had been tripped and the system consistently malfunctioned. These realities, however, did not compel the threatened great powers to undertake prudent balancing strategies. Instead, France and Britain preferred wishful thinking and appeasement to confrontation, the US was unarmed and unwilling to fight another European war, and Stalin had just decapitated the Red Army. Consequently, Germany remained unbalanced and, in this sense, unconstrained as late as 1941, when it attacked Soviet Russia and the US finally entered the war.

Whereas the interwar great powers retained their freedom of action, they could not escape the costs imposed by the system for their defiance of its logic—and this is why these two dimensions of systemic constraints offered by Brooks and Wohlforth must be kept separate. In the end, the system pushed back. Germany suffered not only huge losses in blood and treasure but also its political autonomy and territorial integrity. Likewise, France, Britain, the US and the Soviet Union suffered enormous costs fighting a war that, had they taken proper precautions, could have been avoided or fought much more cheaply. While this case did not emerge under a unipolar system, it makes the point that constraints should not be equated with freedom of action but rather with the costs and benefits attached to policy choices.

States with lots of freedom of action are not free from systemic constraints; they cannot escape the costs that the international system imposes on unwise policies. If a unipolar power could escape such costs—if its policies were essentially costless—then it would be meaningless to speak of wise or unwise policy choices: all policies would be equally good and bad, for there would be no yardstick to evaluate policy options. This is not to suggest that Nazi Germany and the US today are comparable cases; surely they are not. Brooks and Wohlforth are correct to say that the US has unprecedented freedom of action and, given its unprecedented dominance, incurs fewer costs for unwise foreign policies than have past great powers. I think that they overstate their case, however, when they say that systemic constraints are *largely inoperative* with respect to US security policies—a point to which I will return later.

### **Does unipolarity constrain any actors?**

The book's basic argument is that, under unipolarity, the relative power advantage of the lone pole is too great to be counterbalanced, and therefore the US is relatively immune from traditional balance-of-power constraints. The unprecedented quantitative and qualitative material advantages held by the US mean that any effort to compete directly with it is futile, so no one tries. Beyond the futility of balancing, Brooks and Wohlforth outline several reasons for the missing balance. First, the logic of collective action undercuts the formation of balances of power because states prefer to ride free on the balancing efforts of others (they tend to pass the 'balancing' buck, so to speak). Second, balance-of-power politics, like all politics, is local. States are more concerned about their neighbours and shifts in the regional balance than they are about the global balance of power. Finally, the geography of the current system favours its

durability. The US is separated from the other major powers by two oceans, while all its peer competitors find themselves tightly embedded within regional subsystems. Thus, US capabilities appear less threatening and salient than those held by geographically proximate major powers, who are much more likely to have aspirations and gripes regarding each other than regarding the distant unipolar power.

Brooks and Wohlforth emphasize the relative absence of systemic constraints on the dominant power under unipolarity. By comparison, they seem much less interested in unipolarity's effects on the rest of the world. The more general question is: Does unipolarity exert meaningful structural constraints on any state? Brooks and Wohlforth would no doubt answer, 'Of course unipolarity constrains other powers and in significant ways.' After all, no state can balance the unipolar power. Under bipolarity, in contrast, the Soviet Union could balance the US all by itself as well as threaten to take over the world or a large portion of it. There is no debating this important point. But if systemic constraint means 'restrict[ing] freedom of action by forbidding, or raising the costs of, certain kinds of actions, or compelling other kinds of actions' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 4), then Russia is, in many ways, less constrained by the international system today than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War; and its behaviour is less predictable as a consequence. Consider its alliance behaviour. Under the bipolar structure, the Soviet Union was an implacable foe of the US, and it could not align with it or its allies. Today, Russia can bandwagon with the US or balance against it with any other major power of its choosing. There is nothing about the structure of unipolarity, for instance, that rules out a Russo-EU coalition or a Sino-Russian alliance or both.

Along these lines, Brooks and Wohlforth suggest another meaning for systemic constraints: an inability to convert capabilities into power and influence over others. This can be seen in their discussion of the conventional wisdom about unipolarity, which they strongly oppose.

The conventional wisdom is that ... systemic constraints impede the translation of U.S. power capabilities into influence over security outcomes, rendering the United States much less capable than its material capabilities imply. Put more generally, existing theoretical arguments sum up to the contention that once a state is at or near the top of the international heap, it confronts more and stronger properties of the international system that greatly diminish the marginal utility of additional capabilities for pursuing its security objectives. (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 4)

Given the context of this passage, which follows their definition of systemic constraints, I assume that Brooks and Wohlforth are claiming that systemic constraints can be observed not only by the freedom and costs of certain kinds of actions but also by some measure of a state's capability-to-power conversion ratio. Their point is that, despite the chorus of scholars who claim otherwise, a unipolar power, such as the US, can convert its enormous capability advantages into influence and usable power; that is, its power and influence are commensurate with its relative capabilities.

Leaving that claim aside for the moment, the ability to convert capabilities into influence over others strikes me as more of a structural effect than a measure of systemic constraint. In the case of unipolarity, it is a perverse structural effect because the US as the lone pole has less influence, in my opinion, than it did when

it shared the stage with a peer competitor under bipolarity. The demise of the common Soviet threat has diminished US bargaining power vis-à-vis its major Cold War allies. Under unipolarity, weak powers have less need for a polar-power patron than they did when international politics was governed by the structural logic of balance of power. Leadership requires followers. The strange fate of a unipolar power is that it is expected to lead, but doing so makes it all the more difficult for it to attract and keep followers. On the one hand, if the unipole acts boldly and unilaterally, it risks being perceived as a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and the rest of the world will band together to balance against it. While Brooks and Wohlforth claim that this cannot happen under unipolarity, a combination of China and any other great power will produce a global balance of sorts. If, on the other hand, the hegemon acts indecisively and in ways that materially harm the rest of the world (here, the recent global economic downturn as a result of US bank deregulation and export of toxic assets comes to mind), it risks being perceived as a clumsy elephant, whose leadership will be unneeded and unwanted. Nobody wants to follow a dangerous or incompetent leader. What is noteworthy about unipolarity is that lesser powers have fewer compelling reasons to do so than in the past.

Freedom of action is not the same as influence, authority and the ability to get others to do things they otherwise would not do. To be sure, the US is considerably more autonomous, self-reliant and secure today than it was in the past. In these respects, unipolarity truly represents a golden age for the US. This claim, however, does not invalidate the argument that it also has less power and influence over others than it exerted during the Cold War. Unipolarity illustrates the problematic and sometimes non-linear relationship between relative capabilities and usable power and influence. Because 'having the means to power is not the same as being powerful' (Lukes 2005, 478), bigger is not always better in international politics.

### **Balancing as revisionist behaviour under unipolarity**

The book's main thesis—that the US is virtually immune from systemic constraints—begs the question: How, then, does unipolarity end? Brooks and Wohlforth do not consider this question. It is an important one, however, and it points to a flaw in the book, namely, they do not offer a general theory about the properties of unipolarity and how they affect not just the US but everyone else. Let me, therefore, briefly point out a unique and overlooked characteristic of unipolarity that constrains the behaviour of a rising power and also suggests how unipolarity might end.

In their discussion of constructivism, Brooks and Wohlforth focus on US legitimacy to rule. They concede that this is an important consideration, though not a strong constraint on US security policies. In their discussion of legitimacy, they, like everyone else, ignore a crucial obstacle to balancing behaviour—one that could be used to connect their discussion of traditional realist balancing with their concern about legitimacy as a possible systemic constraint. Under unipolarity and only unipolarity, balancing is the policy of revision and not the status quo. This ideational hurdle along with the huge power disparity inherent in unipolarity have been the main obstacles to balancing behaviour. Any state or coalition seeking to restore a balance is, by definition, revisionist in an essential way: it seeks to overthrow the established order of unbalanced power and replace it with a balance-

of-power system. The goal is a change *of* system, not a change *within* the system, and so it will alter the very structure of international politics from unipolarity to bipolarity or multipolarity. Because balancing under unipolarity is revisionist, any state intent on restoring system equilibrium will be labelled an aggressor.

What this implies is that, for balancing to occur under unipolarity, it has to be preceded by a delegitimation phase (see Schweller 2010; Schweller and Pu 2009). Delegitimation is similar to what others have called 'soft balancing', but it is more encompassing. It includes not just practices of resistance, which impose costs on the hegemon short of balancing against it, but also a discourse of resistance, that is, criticism of the existing order and a blueprint for a new order. States must first come to see US hegemony as so incompetent and dangerous that its rule must be overturned. Otherwise, the risks and high costs of attempting to restore a global balance will be prohibitive. Thus, unipolarity requires both delegitimation and deconcentration to move in lockstep with each other, occurring simultaneously as one phase. Delegitimation provides the prerequisite reasons (embodied in a discourse and practice of resistance) for internal and external balancing practices; whereas deconcentration, by dispersing power more evenly throughout the system, lowers the barriers to both the discourse and actual practice of resistance to hegemonic rule. In other words, delegitimation affects the will to pursue costly balancing strategies, while deconcentration affects the ability to do so.

What is being undermined and then challenged is the legitimacy of the hegemon's right to rule and its established order—the system's institutions, governance structures, and principles that guide, among other things, the use of force. The question is: Why would states want to delegitimize the existing order? The standard story (see Gilpin 1981) is that the law of unequal growth among states disrupts system equilibrium by creating a disjuncture between actual power and prestige (the reputation for power). Another reason why states might want to modify or overturn an existing hegemonic order is that it does not work to benefit them anymore. The genius of Pax Americana is that the US has understood the maxim, 'Do good for others in order to do well for yourself' (Joffe 1997, 27). As long as the US provided necessary public goods to the rest of the world, resentment about its privileged position remained in a dormant state.

The latest cascading stock market crash and economic downturn seems to be bringing underlying resentment of US hegemony, especially its macroeconomic policies, to the surface. The crisis is, in the eyes of many, the result of US incompetence (viz deregulation and the lack of transparency caused the spread of its 'toxic assets' to the rest of the world) and of an inherently unfair playing field that permits reckless US monetary expansion (in the past two years, the US dollar has depreciated against every other major currency except the Chinese yuan). As such, the recent economic meltdown may portend not only the beginning of the end of US unipolarity but also momentous global political change. Just as the Great Depression ushered in fascism, Stalinism and, of course, World War II, the current Great Recession is of sufficient magnitude that we might expect deep and far-reaching political repercussions.

One of these political repercussions may be to strengthen a trend that already exists: the rise of authoritarian capitalism (see Gat 2007). The West's old Cold War rivals, China and Russia, are now authoritarian-capitalist great powers. Such great powers have been absent since the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945, but they seem poised to make a comeback—a big comeback. Russia and China are much

larger in terms of population, territory and resources than imperial and Nazi Germany and imperial Japan ever were or could have hoped to become. The return of authoritarian-capitalist great powers suggests a recreation of the non-democratic Second World that directly confronted the First World and competed with it in the Third World. But there is a fundamental difference this time around. Whereas the old Second World operated outside the global capitalist system, the new Second World is now fully integrated within the global economy with its members participating on their own terms, just as their non-democratic-capitalist predecessors did prior to 1945.

This development raises two important questions. Will Beijing, Moscow and their future followers be antagonistic toward the democratic-capitalist countries, raising the spectre of a new Cold War? And will the current global economic turndown, which is subjecting many recently democratized countries to increasing social and economic pressures, undermine liberal institutions, weakening the hegemonic grip of liberal democracy and increasing the appeal of authoritarian capitalism? Either of these two possibilities would delegitimize the current global order, and thereby encourage real balancing against the US.

Alternatively, unipolarity might end not by others deliberately balancing against the unipole, which Brooks and Wohlforth claim cannot happen, but rather by the US falling back to earth. Despite the fact that the US is the lone superpower with unrivalled command of air, sea and space, the America-in-decline debate of the 1980s and early 1990s has re-emerged with a vengeance. Among the ranks of the new 'declinists', Robert Pape (2009) forcefully argues that the US is in unprecedented decline, having lost 30 per cent of its relative economic power since 2000. To be sure, the macro-statistical picture of the US is a bleak one. Its savings rate is zero, its currency is sliding to new depths, it runs huge current-account, trade and budget deficits, its medium income is flat, its entitlement commitments are unsustainable and its once unrivalled capital markets are now struggling to compete with Hong Kong and London for companies and countries. Recently, the staggering costs of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars combined with the financial bailout and stimulus packages in response to the sub-prime mortgage and financial credit crises have battered the US economy, opening the door for peer competitors to make substantial relative gains. The current bear market ranks among the worst in history, with the Dow and S&P down almost 50 per cent from their 2007 peaks.

The major cause of US troubles, both in the short and long term, is debt: the US is borrowing massively to finance current consumption. The US continues to run unprecedented trade deficits with its only burgeoning peer competitor, China, which, based on current trajectories, is predicted to surpass the US as the world's leading economic power by 2040. As of July 2009, the US owed China over US\$800 billion, meaning that every person in the 'rich' US has, in effect, borrowed about US\$3000 from the 'poor' People's Republic of China over the past decade.

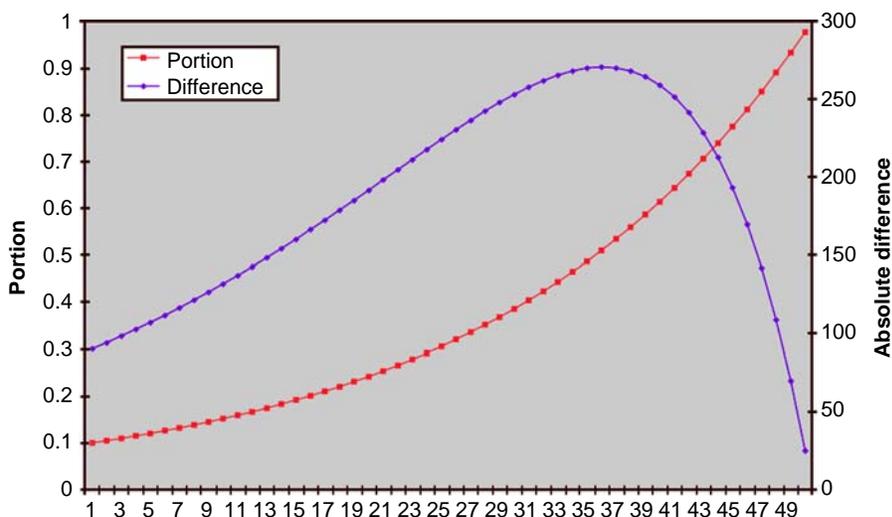
The current economic crisis has exposed the highly leveraged nature of the US economy. When it ends, it is extremely unlikely that we will see a return to the pre-crisis practices that, while obviously unsound, produced consistently high rates of economic growth over the past several decades. This raises several important questions. To what extent was US growth over the past twenty years the result of an essentially phoney economy—one driven, first, by the stock market 'dot com' bubble, and then by the housing bubble and easy credit, which facilitated the

accumulation of absurd levels of consumer debt through unlimited access to credit cards and home equity loans? It is not easy to see how the US can maintain its economic edge with a deleveraged domestic economy. And if the US cannot continue to borrow massively abroad to finance its current consumption and military spending, what will spur new global economic growth? If the answer is that China and the other emerging economies will replace the US as the engines of global growth, how long can unipolarity last?

### Why we won't see it coming until it's too late

As late as the 1890s, the British were saying that 'history is something unpleasant that happens to other people' (Zakaria 2008, 168). A little over a decade later, Britain was in steep decline, having been surpassed by both Germany and the United States in terms of economic and potential military power. Unanticipated power transitions of this kind are driven by wildly uneven rates of growth among the great powers. Figure 1 graphically demonstrates the sudden and dramatic nature of a power transition that emerges from the straightforward mathematics of differential growth rates. Looking at the graph, one easily understands how the British could have been completely blindsided by their precipitous downfall.

Suppose State A has 100 units of power and grows at five per cent per year, while State B has ten units of power and grows at ten per cent per year. During years 1–36, A's absolute advantage in power capabilities will expand even as B's capabilities as a percentage of A's increase. This is because A starts out with a much larger economy than B. Thus, A can grow at half the rate of B and still, year after year, significantly increase its absolute advantage over the rising challenger. By year 37, however, a tipping effect appears as a result of the differential growth



**Figure 1.** The difference between relative and absolute indicators of power: B's power as a portion of A vs. the absolute difference between A and B's power. *Source:* Johnston, Alastair I and Sheena Chestnut (2009) 'Is China rising?' in Eva Paus, Penelope Prime and Jon Western (eds) *Global giant: is China changing the rules of the game?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

rates between the two states. Once the size of B's economy begins to catch up with that of A, then B swiftly and dramatically overtakes A (Johnston and Chestnut 2009, 242–243). Indeed, A sinks like a stone relative to B. Those in A might be excused for thinking as late as year 34 that history would never happen to them. Yet, from the vantage point of, say, year 47, it would be hard to understand how the end of hegemony was completely unexpected little more than a decade earlier. The more general point is that complex systems often succumb to precipitous and unexpected changes, and so the process of decline may not be a gradual and predictable one. The US economy, which sustains its military and political power, may simply collapse (see Ferguson 2010). Thus, for declining hegemons, 'the future is uncertain and the end is always near', as Jim Morrison of the Doors (1970) sang many years ago.

## Conclusion

None of this is to suggest that *World out of balance* is anything less than a masterwork of logical and rigorous argumentation backed by copious and judiciously presented evidence. It is to suggest, however, that all good things come to an end. This is especially true in the realm of politics, where bad policies can swiftly thwart certain destiny and awaken those under the mistaken belief that history does not apply to them. In the end, states, like firms, must remain solvent over the long term. Their commitments and liabilities must not far exceed their assets. When commitments expand and resources contract, there comes a point at which the government is going to have a cheque returned marked 'insufficient funds'. The most obvious way that a balance of power will emerge is by the US recklessly frittering away both its relative power advantage and its will to exercise that power. The crucial task for US foreign policy, as Brooks and Wohlforth wisely acknowledge, is to strike a healthy balance between hegemonic abdication and hegemonic absolutism.

## Notes on contributor

**Randall L Schweller** (PhD, Columbia) is Professor of Political Science at Ohio State University. He is also an editorial board member of *International Security*, *Security Studies* and the *Studies in Asian Security* series published by Stanford University Press. He is a former John M Olin Post-Doctoral Fellow in National Security at the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

## References

- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press)
- Ferguson, Niall (2010) 'Complexity and collapse: empires on the edge of chaos', *Foreign Affairs*, 89:2, 18–32
- Gat, Azar (2007) 'The return of authoritarian great powers', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4, 59–69
- Gilpin, Robert (1981) *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press)
- Joffe, Josef (1997) 'How America does it', *Foreign Affairs*, 76:5, 13–27

- Johnston, Alastair I and Sheena Chestnut (2009) 'Is China rising?' in Eva Paus, Penelope Prime and Jon Western (eds) *Global giant: is China changing the rules of the game?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Lukes, Stephen (2005) 'Power and the battle for hearts and minds', *Millennium*, 33:3, 477–493
- Morrison, Jim and The Doors (1970) 'Roadhouse blues', *Morrison Hotel* (Elektra/Warner Brothers)
- Pape, Robert A (2009) 'Empire falls', *National Interest*, 99, 21–34
- Schweller, Randall L (2010) 'Entropy and the trajectory of world politics: why polarity has become less meaningful', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1, 145–163
- Schweller, Randall L and Xiaoyu Pu (2009) 'Domination and delegitimation: eroding unipolarity and China's vision for international order', paper presented at the conference on 'Assessing China's rise: power and influence in the 21st century', Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, 27–28 February
- Waltz, Kenneth N (1979) *Theory of international politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley)
- Waltz, Kenneth N (1997) 'Evaluating theories', *American Political Science Review*, 91:4, 913–917
- Zakaria, Fareed (2008) *The post-American world* (New York: WW Norton)

## The mix that makes unipolarity: hegemonic purpose and international constraints

Jeffrey W Legro  
*University of Virginia*

**Abstract** *The nature of a global arena dominated by one great power remains a critical subject for understanding international relations. Brooks and Wohlforth's recent book makes an important contribution by arguing that unipolarity poses few constraints to the hegemon and that the United States today should pursue a policy of primacy. The puzzle is that the United States has mostly resisted a primacy policy since becoming the sole superpower, and when it has done so, has often been less successful than the promise of its power advantage. Explaining this puzzle requires building on 'the no constraint' approach to develop a positive theory based on hegemonic purpose, a reformulated notion of constraints, and how purpose and constraints interact to shape outcomes. This reformulation suggests that any American strategy that looks like 'primacy' is unlikely to succeed.*

### Introduction

On 25 December 1991 the Soviet Union, one-half of the two-superpower 'bipolar order that had structured global politics since the end of World War II, vanished. We have now lived under unipolarity for 18 years and scholars are still pondering what that distribution of power means for international politics.<sup>1</sup> Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth's *World out of balance* makes a crucial contribution to this literature with a laser-like analysis of the systemic constraints (or lack thereof) of unipolarity. Yet to understand how hegemons react and unipolarity works we must move beyond the structure of power to consider the causes of hegemonic strategy—and how strategy and constraints mix to mould international order.

Brooks and Wohlforth assert that the US today has unprecedented power, that there are relatively few systemic constraints on global primacy, and that rather than clipping its talons, the American eagle should take wing and remake the international system, lo these many years after 9/11. They advocate a strategy of 'primacy' and reject alternative strategies such as engagement and off-shore balancing. This is a big argument, a delight to read, sure to provoke, carefully

---

<sup>1</sup>During the Cold War, theorists spent much time illuminating the importance of bipolarity and since then have made sporadic attempts to elaborate the logic of the new power distribution. On polarity, see Deutsch and Singer (1964), Rosecrance (1966), Waltz (1964) and Kaplan (1957). Since 1991 see Layne (1993), Waltz (1993), Mastanduno (1997), Kapstein and Mastanduno (1999), Ikenberry (2002), Paul et al (2004), Jervis (2005), Layne (2006), Zartman (2008), Ikenberry et al (2011).

constructed, and filled with insights. It will have a central place in the contemporary political debate about US 'decline' and how the United States should manage its foreign relations in the age of Obama and after (Calleo 2008; Krauthammer 2009).

Their analysis, however, raises two key questions: if there are few systemic constraints and international activism would serve US interests, why has the US hegemon done so little to revise international institutions since 1991? And when it has tried to do so, why has it achieved so little success?

Brooks and Wohlforth cannot adequately respond to these puzzles because they offer mainly a negative claim—that a hegemon will not be subject to constraints. Their argument lacks an explicit positive argument that can tell us what we can expect from the unipole and unipolarity (beyond the important point that it will be peaceful)—and why that is so. Developing and demonstrating a positive theory is beyond the scope of this essay. What is possible, however, (thanks to Brooks and Wohlforth's careful analysis) is to identify the three necessary foundations of a positive account of unipolarity: unipolar purpose, systemic constraints, and the interaction between purpose and constraints.

The first is that the character of unipolarity depends on the purpose of the unipole. What the unipole wants and is likely to do in a world it has more of a free will to shape will affect that world. Unipole purpose is influenced, but not determined, by the distribution of power. The lopsided distribution of power under unipolarity may open the door to expansive hegemonic aims, but does not push a state through it. States can avoid such ambitions. In this respect, and reversing Waltzian style reasoning, we may get as much leverage in understanding international politics by studying an actor than by studying the systemic social-political structure: *unit* level traits of the top actor in unipolarity can define the *system*.

The second is that even under unipolarity, significant systemic constraints exist that constrain the unipole from deciding the fate of international politics on its own. Despite their 'no constraint' thesis, Brooks and Wohlforth acknowledge some of these constraints piecemeal. To others they tend to give short shrift. But when all the constraints are considered *in toto*, the unipole, whatever its purpose, is checked by the system.

The third is that we must understand purpose and constraints not just as alternatives or as sub-vectors that can be added together to capture the whole picture. Unipolarity is a product of the interaction of the hegemon's purpose and the web of international ties that constrain it. This view points scholarship towards how exactly the interaction between a powerful agent and the global structures in which it exists shape outcomes.

Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, American purpose and systemic constraints have interacted in particular ways that help explain both why the United States has not adopted the expansive aims nor had the foreign policy success that might be expected from its power advantage. The interaction between purpose and constraints can also help clarify why the strategy of primacy that Brooks and Wohlforth advocate, if it is to succeed, may not look that different from the engagement strategy they critique.

What follows describes the puzzle of US inaction under unipolarity, explores why the USA's purpose has not been as ambitious as expected, illuminates the systemic constraints that exist even under unipolarity, and outlines how purpose

and constraints interact to shape the nature of contemporary unipolarity. This is not a full blown account; the more modest aim is to sketch one useful direction towards a positive theory of unipolarity. I illustrate the plausibility of this logic with examples from the history of US foreign policy.

### **Unipolarity: the puzzle of US under-activity and ineffectiveness**

Brooks and Wohlforth set out to show that 'systemic constraints' ('a property of the system that restricts freedom of action' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 4)) do not impede the translation of US power (capabilities) into influence in international relations. Among the potential limits they dismiss include the balance of power, economic interdependence, and international institutions and norms.

Their claim strikes at core arguments by some of the central theories and scholars who believe they have already unveiled the logic of the international system. Brooks and Wohlforth's finding that states are not balancing against US power or intentions is a significant blow to major strains of realism associated with the likes of Waltz (1979), Mearsheimer (2001) and Walt (1987). Their assertion that interdependence really does not hobble the hegemon works against major studies by Rosecrance (1986), Russett and Oneal (2001) and Keohane and Nye (1977). Their conclusion on the irrelevance of reputation strikes at neoliberal institutionalism as presented by Keohane (1983), Martin (1992) and Ikenberry (2000). Finally their argument on legitimacy is at least a partial refutation of constructivist arguments (Finnemore 1996; Reus-Smit 2004; Hurd 2007), and parts of the international law literature (Franck 1990).

In the interwar period, or what EH Carr called the 'Twenty Years Crisis', there was little hope of the United States remaking the international system given the shifting and dispersed distribution of power among major countries. Today, Brooks and Wohlforth contend that the unipolar power structure offers a '20 year opportunity' for the United States to achieve that difficult goal.

Brooks and Wohlforth put together a convincing case on the vast superiority of American capabilities after 1991. Indeed, relative US power has outpaced almost all historical comparisons. The United States today spends more on defence than all other powers combined; it does so while allocating only a small part of its gross national product (GNP) to defence ( $\approx 4$  per cent); it has the largest share of world GNP at  $\approx 27$  per cent (China is the next closest at  $\approx 9$  per cent), and it is the world's leading technological power. 'The depth, scale, and projected longevity of the US lead in each critical dimension of power are noteworthy. But what truly distinguishes the current distribution of capabilities is American dominance in all of them simultaneously' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 34–35).

Given this power, however, US efforts to remake the system have either seemed timid or ineffectual. It is commonly asserted that as a state gains relative power so will its ambition—and its success in getting what it wants (Gilpin 1981; Butterfield 1966; Zakaria 1992; Mearsheimer 2001). US power has certainly grown, but it appears that US aspiration and foreign policy success have not kept pace.

To be sure, after the end of the Cold War, there was some evidence of the US desire to exercise its new power. At the close of the Bush presidency in January 1993, the then-Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney issued 'Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy' as the new Clinton administration was

taking office. This document built on a Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) process that had been going on since the winter of 1989–1990, parts of which were leaked to the press in 1992–1993. The leaked parts of the document offered a strategy aimed at maintaining US global dominance including ‘precluding the emergence of any future global competitor’ and ‘preventing the domination of key regions by a hostile power’ (Tyler 1992). The final document hedged on controversial language in earlier drafts, but it retained the core thesis that US power should be maintained and used to discourage/prevent the rise of regional challengers to the United States.

While this plan might be taken as sign of new US ambitions, what is interesting is how it stirred, not strategic consensus, but controversy and resistance. Indeed its genesis was due more to eroding (rather than rising) American international ambition. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Richard Cheney started the DPG with the aim of putting a floor on the inevitable efforts to cut defence spending that were expected to follow the USSR’s demise. The final report was not publicly backed by higher officials, was long mired in bureaucratic fighting and process and was only released in a last minute, last gasp effort. The aim was to spur the country to greater ambition when it otherwise showed little. It was not an expression of actual rising imperial sentiment.

The Clinton administration, we might have imagined, saw US power in action in the first Iraq war and realized the potent tools it had at hand to mould the world. But it appears the Clinton team spent much of its time not sharpening ambition, but searching for a measured and pithy strategy that might replace ‘containment’ and give it direction in the world. Generally the administration was seen as lacking strategic purpose and merely responding defensively to events and crises that presented themselves (Brands 2008; Chollet and Goldgeier 1980). This was hardly a portrait of a strategic unipole.

It is true that during the Clinton administration, the United States was increasingly perceived as a ‘hyperpower’ using its massive capabilities in ways that did not show sufficient appreciation for the views of other countries (Chollet and Goldgeier 1980, 176, 226–233, 287). Indeed US unilateralism was more apparent in the second Clinton term including episodes such as rejecting the Land Mines Convention, refusing to pay UN dues, failing to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, not waiting for UN Security Council approval before bombing Iraq in 1998, and bombing Serbia in the spring of 1999 without UN approval.

In the first year of George W Bush’s presidency, perceptions of American unilateralism increased even more due to a string of early decisions and rhetoric on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court (ICC), and then the invasion of Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Yet Bush also initially eschewed any expansive aims. His would be a status quo ‘realist’ administration that would not get mired in nation-building and other tasks associated with an expanded American international role (Chollet and Goldgeier 1980, 280–312).

9/11 induced the first significant show of US ambition, an aggressive effort captured in parts of the National Security Strategy of 2002 and other speeches that

---

<sup>2</sup> President Clinton signed the ICC treaty but thought the final version was flawed and also opposed ratifying it. See Houston Chronicle, ‘Bad treaty: Senate approval would leave U.S. open to false charges’, 6 January 2001, A34, <[http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=2001\\_3271883](http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=2001_3271883)>, accessed 3 August 2009.

pointed to a transformation in the US approach to international norms, practices and institutions. This approach was a triptych emphasizing unilateral action (as a rule not exception), the preventive use of force (vs reactive containment type uses) and an expanded geographical reach (that is, outside the western hemisphere) for intervening overtly (not covertly) in the domestic affairs of other countries—including forcible regime change. None of the three parts was new; each had precedents in earlier eras (Leffler 2003; Gaddis 2004; Legro 2009). Yet cumulatively, especially as declared national strategy (not just tools used in unusual situations), the effect was a transformation in US thinking about how to relate to the world.<sup>3</sup>

This vision was ambitious, but of course, it did not stick. In the face of opposition abroad and limited results, the thrust of the 'Bush doctrine' was largely reversed after 2005 as the United States returned to the more typical pattern of post-World War II American internationalism (Allen and Ratnesar 2006; Gordon 2006; Lynch and Singh 2008).

This record seems straightforward: the United States has only undertaken limited efforts to reshape the dominant international institutions that structure global politics and largely failed when it has tried to do so. The main initiatives have either been regional pacts (for example, NAFTA) or been based on old institutions (for example, NATO, GATT/the World Trade Organization (WTO)). The Bush administration did successfully create the Proliferation Security Initiative, but this was a partial exception that proves the rule.

The US record of diffidence and underachievement, moreover, has come at a time when there seems to be demand for change. International institutions today appear dysfunctional (Mahbubani 2005; Ikenberry 2005; Maull 2006). Scholars such as John Ikenberry and policymakers like Douglas Hurd (UK foreign secretary from 1989 to 1995) have argued that the United States had an ideal opportunity to 'remake the world, update everything, the UN, everything' after the end of the Cold War (Sarotte 2009, 4). But of course this did not happen.

Brooks and Wohlforth's answer to this shortfall puts the blame on the George W Bush administration. It was inept. Instead of pursuing systemic activism based on military force, it should have pursued a policy that aimed at the global economy or international standards that define legitimacy. Moreover, Bush did it with a misguided diplomacy that paid too little attention to the ways power can be used to leverage legitimacy and the rules of the global economy. Instead, the Bush team disavowed itself of the need to reshape institutions and focused too narrowly on justifying policies to the American public.

They may indeed be right about the Bush-43 era but 'bad policy' is a residual category for their argument—it is not part of either their main negative argument or even the opaque positive argument. It also does not address the puzzle of limited US ambition for the ten years before 9/11.

In short, we lack an explanation for the record of unipolarity after 9/11. There is a need to build on their account to depict how unipolarity works. To understand

---

<sup>3</sup> Compared with the US approach during the Cold War, the original Bush doctrine appeared as a distinct change towards revisionism—hence the title in John Lewis Gaddis, (2002) 'A grand strategy of transformation', *Foreign Policy*, November–December, 50.

US efforts to engineer the international system (and their absence) requires us to look at what drives US purpose (what it seeks and how it seeks it), at the constraints of the international system that can contain that ambition, and most importantly, at how purpose and constraints interact to shape one another.

### **The determinants of US purpose**

Brooks and Wohlforth argue that constraints under unipolarity 'are inoperative'; that an opportunity exists for the United States in world politics that should be pursued. They are clear they do not explain US thinking or choice—why the United States has not seized the apparent opportunity. Yet a logic of unipolarity requires an account of the unipole's purpose—which cannot be deduced from polarity. If purpose were simply a product of the distribution of power, there would be no need to discuss what shapes it—it would follow from power and geography. States would seek 'more' when they were able and 'less' when they were not. This, for example, is largely the view of John Mearsheimer (2001) who sees 'the stopping power of water' as the main barrier to US efforts at global hegemony. Kenneth Waltz (1993, 13) suggests the likely pathology of the great power in unipolarity is 'overextension'.

Yet as scholars widely recognize, factors other than power/geography do shape purpose and in ways that defy the expectation that the United States will necessarily expand its international ambition under unipolarity. Some argue that state goals are a result of intentions not power (Schweller 2006). Scholars who study power transitions have observed that 'national satisfaction with the status quo' is as important as actual power shifts (Organski and Kugler 1980; Lemke 2002). And theorists of hegemonic stability theory note that the nature of order depends on the purpose of the hegemon (Gilpin 1987). In all of these literatures, what the hegemon wants is viewed as distinct from, and not reducible to, power.

The history of US foreign policy reflects the fact that US thinking about managing the international arena does not march in lock step with its relative power. To be sure, increasing power can influence ambition.<sup>4</sup> Yet even as its relative power was growing, the United States has been amazingly reticent to change its thinking about the international arena. After World War I, for example, the United States became the dominant world power, but it largely refused any commitments in the global arena. Indeed, it appears that the US approach to major power politics only changed significantly during World War II. In those years, the United States discarded its longstanding desire to separate itself from great power political–military entanglements in the European devised international system and instead choose to integrate itself. Theory and history, therefore, suggest that we cannot understand and predict what states will do simply based on the distribution of power. We also need to know what states want and how they think about appropriate action. Typically national purpose—which shows up in foreign policy ideas or strategies—is relatively constant, but sometimes it does change

---

<sup>4</sup> Zakaria (1998) has explored how this took shape in nineteenth-century America when the United States, at least for a time, took on imperial ambition. The problem is he does not look at other periods like the interwar period when US relative power soared but its international ambition did not.

significantly. One approach to understanding this continuity and change is to examine how leaders justify policies and defend their consequences. Countries react to external constraints and opportunities (including polarity) through the lens of their existing dominant ideas and strategic concepts. Political leaders use strategies to explain national action and justify national choices, thus setting a baseline of social expectations of what should result. Domestic political supporters and opponents then use that baseline to assess—and support or critique—existing policies and their consequences. One way to understand change and continuity in US purpose is to examine the intersection of these expectations and results (Legro 2005).

When events match the expectations leaders generate with desirable results there is little pressure for change—even if systemic circumstances indicate change may be desirable. For example, the end of the Cold War confirmed the wisdom of containment style strategy and US involvement in world politics and institutions. And the outcome from that behaviour—the end of the Cold War on US terms—was widely seen as a success. With no challenge to the US orthodoxy and no negative results for critics and reform-minded strategists to use to persuade others, there was no stirring America's transformational tendencies—despite the fact that international circumstances and challenges were clearly different. The defenders of the Cold War mindset and the inertia of the system easily deflected the whining and shin kicks of change advocates. A series of sound-thinking commissions on terrorism and other new threats in the 1990s that recommended change were virtually ignored by the mass media and marginalized in Washington (Hess and Kalb 2003).

When events contradict these expectations *and* the consequences are starkly undesirable, change is more likely. Such situations give new leverage to critics, allowing them to rally support to their side while supporters of the current orthodoxy are put on the defensive. This was the case with the US 'no entanglement' philosophy during the interwar period. The more the United States tried to remain neutral in the 1930s, the worse the situation got for the United States, and the more leverage critics (including President Franklin Roosevelt) had to undermine the existing creed. The invasion of France, Barbarossa, and finally Pearl Harbor allowed Roosevelt to fully voice the critique: US non-entanglement was a 'terrible lesson' and a mistake, an argument that prepared the ground for the post war shift to global commitments previously eschewed.

Even when opponents are able to delegitimize dominant ideas, change is not automatic. Individuals may agree that the old view has to go but may not be able to agree on what should be the new orthodoxy. When there are no developed alternatives or when there are many equally strong alternatives, the result could be a return to the old thinking due to default in the first case and deadlock among factions in the second. One of the reasons for the US retreat after its activism in World War I is that there was a stand-off between two types of internationalists—the geopolitical unilateralists such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) and the institutionalists such as Woodrow Wilson. Their deadlock helped sink not only the League of Nations treaty but other types of commitments such as separate French security guarantee. No-entanglement re-emerged as the dominant US mindset—symbolized in Harding's victory in the 1920 election with the promise of a 'return to normalcy' (Legro 2005).

Likewise, the sustainability of a new orthodoxy (when a prominent replacement does exist) over a longer period often depends on some demonstration of its efficacy. Ideas that endure usually do so because they appear to generate desirable results. When those notions do not, revanchists find fertile ground to argue for a return to the old ideas.

These dynamics, after all, provide a plausible account of both the effort for a more expansionist US policy after 9/11 (that better fits Brooks and Wohlforth's prediction) and its failure (which does not). The 9/11 attacks did contradict the expectations that Cold War thinking could continue to provide for US security (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004). Moreover, the ground had been prepared for a replacement strategy. A dedicated and energetic set of foreign policy activists had developed and promulgated a coherent worldview in the 1990s (Mann 2004; Halper and Clarke 2005). These thinkers held influence and positions in the government in the Bush administration. Thus when the 9/11 attack unsettled the commitment to the old ideas, they had an approach ready to go that could replace it.

The approach achieved some successes but, mired in Iraq, resented by international opinion, and largely perceived as ineffective, it lost significant support. In the 2008 presidential election, both the Democratic and Republican candidates promised a retreat from the Bush agenda, and a return to the prior consensus (McCain 2007; Obama 2007). Indeed the Bush administration itself, in 2005 and after, had already largely returned to a position that was more akin to its predecessors than the new doctrine initiated after 9/11 (Allen and Ratnesar 2006; Gordon 2006).

In sum, whether US ambition and its approach to international order changes or not, depends not just on the distribution of power (unipolarity or not), but on the hegemon's pre-existing ideas, alternative concepts, and results.

### **Systemic constraints under unipolarity: not gone**

We cannot, however, understand unipolarity through a sole focus on unipolar purpose. This is because even under unipolarity when one country has immense power and greater ability to shape the system, there are global conditions that limit the desirability and efficacy of unipole effort.

Brooks and Wohlforth contend that this is not the case: a hegemon in a unipolar world will *not* be subject to significant systemic constraints. Well, that is their explicit argument, but they qualify it in a piecemeal way and when the pieces are put together with others they do not consider, the picture may be a different one. Their analysis fingers three constraints and there are at least three others that escape their reach.<sup>5</sup>

The first constraint involves the potential that other countries will oppose the hegemon under unipolarity. Brooks and Wohlforth suggest this need not happen. They do an excellent job debunking the notion that balancing is constraining the United States today. Yet they also acknowledge that balancing is possible if states view their security as sufficiently challenged. At the extreme, if the United States

---

<sup>5</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth do mention five potential constraints in the future: nuclear weapons proliferation, insurgency, imperial overstretch, terrorism and oil dependency.

tried to 'run the table' with a strategy of global aggression and domination, Brooks and Wohlforth do expect balancing. Thus the lack of balancing depends on a perception that the United States is not likely to attempt domination. For example, the United States, with a reputation for geopolitical restraint (even if diminished in recent years), provokes less reaction than would a Napoleonic France or Fascist Germany with the same power advantages. Balancing, therefore, can occur under some circumstances (for example, different perceptions of hegemonic intent) even in unipolarity.

Second, states will also constrain the United States if they have important opposing interests not related to security. Brooks and Wohlforth count this as part of their argument as long as it does not involve the security concerns central to balancing theory. Thus if other countries resist the United States due to economic interests, regional security concerns, disagreements over non-security issues, or domestic policy issues, this would not be security balancing or evidence against their thesis.

In this view, the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not about offsetting the United States, but is instead about arms sales and fighting terrorism in their region. Likewise, Russia's ties to Tehran have commercial and regional security roots. And opposition to the Iraq War in places like Germany and Turkey is seen as a product of 'long term domestic political dynamics' rather than a reaction to the concentration of US power.

Brooks and Wohlforth's argument is not that other countries will not constrain the unipole; it is that they will not do so simply because of the unipole's extraordinary power. Yet it is clear that international order is dependent not just on unipolarity but also on the distribution of interests. Variations in international order, given a constant power distribution, may still occur if there are splits in purpose between the hegemon and significant, if lesser, countries. Rifts between the United States and Europe over such issues as UN reform, the WTO, and the Middle East have hampered global governance and US aims in those areas (Abdelal and Segal 2007). The structure of interests among major countries is a constraint on US actions. Strategies, security or otherwise, that do not attend to those interests will suffer.

Third, Brooks and Wohlforth's analysis of legitimacy adds further caveats to their argument. As with the other systemic constraints, they find that the need for legitimacy does not provide a strong check on US policy. They do however conclude that legitimacy is a 'weakly conditional' constraint. They insightfully explore how dominant powers have many tools to shape strategically what constitutes legitimacy and paper over the instances where they prefer to ignore the rules. But ultimately hegemons 'want and need rules and the legitimation that they bring' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 207). Those rules for that very reason must have some integrity. Hegemons, it might be said, can shape the rules of order, but not always exactly as they please, and sometimes at significant cost. The United States did not want to alter existing practices on landmines but due to the Ottawa Treaty aimed at banning their use, it has had to spend much money looking for military alternatives not to mention the international and domestic political costs of resisting such a law (Finnemore 2009; Landler 2010).

A fourth systemic constraint that deserves more weight involves transaction and sunk costs that reduce incentives to change and or create

new institutions.<sup>6</sup> One of the reasons the United States has not attempted a redesign of international architecture may indeed be the heavy costs involved. For example, NATO endures not because it is optimal to deal with the new threats beyond Europe, but instead because it already exists and is too expensive to reinvent. Other institutions that fit this vein include the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the United Nations. These institutions may not allow the United States to get everything it wants but it would be even more costly to create new institutions. Relative transactions (or sunk) costs contain Goliath.

The fifth systemic constraint is timing. It is easier for the top dog of international politics to work its will in the international arena at some times versus others. For example, it is often argued that major crises or wars present opportunities for systemic transformation with little pushback (Krasner 1976; Ikenberry 2000; Olson 1982; Higgs 1987; Goldstone 1991; Khong 1992). Thus the Concert of Europe came out of the Napoleonic Wars, the League of Nations from World War I, the United Nations from World War II, and so on. Such times involve conditions that facilitate change including, not only an altered balance of power, but also war or economic weariness, the desire to avoid prior problems, and the emergence of new domestic coalitions and policy ideas. The general point is that the hegemon will be more or less likely to receive pushback on its efforts to redo the international system depending on whether extraordinary events act as an icebreaker on political inertia. Timing has arguably not been favourable to unipolar revisionism with the possible exception of post 9/11—an opportunity neutralized by the perceived failure of the Bush doctrine. Absent such conditions, inertia tends to dominate and a hegemon that recognizes this knows that changing the rules of the game will be more difficult.

The sixth constraint involves domestic politics. Brooks and Wohlforth do note that domestic resistance, not systemic constraints, might limit resources to pursue activism. Their thesis, however, is about the lack of *systemic* constraints. What deserves more attention, however, is the way that systemic factors in world politics might inspire US *domestic* opposition to primacy. It seems that systemic effects—perhaps other states opposing the United States, a loss of trading privileges, or anti-American sentiment, arguably does mould US domestic resistance to global projects.

For example, perhaps part of the reason for the turn of domestic opinion against the policy activism of the 'Bush doctrine' related to the decline in US international standing. The American public may view US international standing as a type of performance criteria for presidents and administrations. There is some evidence that US presidential approval ratings are influenced by satisfaction rankings of the United States' global position (Task Force on US Standing in World Affairs 2009, 20–23). Standing functions as a proxy for presidential performance and hence can be a constraint. Americans thought less of President Bush and his agenda because the reaction abroad was so negative. Indeed, there have been reports that Vice President Cheney believed Bush became too sensitive to public opinion in the second term (Gellman 2009).

---

<sup>6</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth focus on reputation in discussing institutionalism. However, an important strand in institutionalist thinking concerns transactions costs, focal points and increasing returns.

The cumulative effect of these six constraints—reputation for restraint, interests, legitimacy, sunk costs, timing, and domestic externalities—seem to add up to something more significant than merely an asterisk to the thesis that systemic constraints are not binding. It appears that even under unipolarity, the international system can limit the dominant power. Goliath may not be bound, but the hurdles faced may discourage or channel action in ways that cannot be understood without taking them into account.

### **The mix and the future of US foreign policy**

The two sections above have made the case that both hegemonic purpose and systemic constraints are necessary for understanding unipolarity.

Polarity, or the distribution of power, even under the very clear dictates of a world with one dominant power, is insufficient to tell us how that system will operate. We also need to know what it is that dominant power seeks. And what that dominant power seeks is also insufficient, because state purpose, even when backed by dominant power does not translate directly into international order. It is still checked by systemic constraints—fear of domination by others that can under some conditions lead to aggressive efforts to check dominant power expansion, the balance of interests, the need for legitimacy, sunk costs, timing, and domestic feedback—most of which have little to do with traditional notions of power balancing.

There is a third component to unipolarity: the ‘mix’, that is, how purpose and constraints conjointly shape outcomes. The point is not that they are independent causes of unipolar action (though that may be the case). Nor can we understand the system by simply adding unipolar purpose and constraints to get a ‘total sum’ impact. Instead, it is that the two interact overtime in two simultaneous causal vectors: first, where purpose affects constraints and second, constraints affect purpose; both together shape outcomes.

Purpose in a unipolar world can shape constraints. For example, balancing (a systemic constraint) may depend not just on unipolarity but on the purpose or reputation of the dominant power. A hegemon that is domination-minded or not trusted is likely to encounter balancing behaviour short of running the table because others will fear that it may indeed attempt aggression in the future. A hegemon that is trusted or seen as benevolent is less likely to encounter balancing.<sup>7</sup> Today a United States that (via primacy) seeks revision of the international system could provoke more significant offsetting reactions because of the impact of such aims on how others perceive the United States and react to it. Were the United States to declare a permanent presence in Iraq or Afghanistan it would receive much less support both within those countries and from others (for example, Great Britain and France) and more resistance from neutrals (Russia and China).

Systemic factors can play a distinct role in shaping national conceptions of purpose. Negative consequences, or the fact that the balloon of expectations from an old or new strategy was punctured, is not just a product of the internal properties of the state such as ideas or bad strategy. Systemic constraints also exist

---

<sup>7</sup> US reputation—its standing in the world—matters for the logic of unipolarity (Task Force on US Standing in World Affairs 2009).

that can produce undesired results that can undermine purpose. Such constraints include relative power, opposing interests of other countries, or perhaps the domestic political fallout of others choices. For example, it is easy to imagine a withdrawal of British or European support for US actions leading to a drop in US domestic support for them. Constraints reinforce or push back against the expectations for results generated by national purpose potentially undermining and changing it. In the interwar period, external constraints (fascist aggression and rising power) chipped away at the efficacy of the USA's dominant non-entanglement mentality opening the way to the internationalist US aims that emerged during and after World War II.

This conjunction is relevant not only for considering the past but also for the future of US foreign policy. Brooks and Wohlforth make a rigorous case for why the United States, even after the recent economic crisis, is well positioned to take the lead in reinvigorating international rules and institutions.

An overly aggressive American purpose to redo international order, however, may provoke the very international constraints that seem to be lacking which could then diminish an administration's domestic support. George W Bush's effort may have failed because it was poorly implemented as Brooks and Wohlforth argue. Yet it is unclear if any policy that stirred concerns about imperialistic US intentions, did not take into account the interests of other key players, did not respect most core international rules and norms, could not justify why new versus existing institutions are needed, was not wisely timed, and did not heed the domestic consequences of international developments could have succeeded.

Indeed in practice, the programme Brooks and Wohlforth embrace would seem to include significant consultation, cooperation, multilateralism and heeding the interests of others (not rolling over them) even at the short term expense of some US interests in order to get deals done (Brooks and Wohlforth 2009). This strategy will probably look as much like engagement as primacy—a necessity given the significant residual constraints that exist even in a unipolar system.

And of course there remains one more challenge for any plan that requires the United States to remake international institutions: it must somehow explain how public support within the United States can be generated for such unusual ambition given that such shifts have been rare in US history. National purpose in interaction with international constraints will define the future of the American dominated international system.

Unipolarity exists and it matters. Brooks and Wohlforth have made that case persuasively and usefully identified the nature and limits of systemic constraints in such a power distribution. A theory of unipolarity, however, also requires a conception of hegemonic purpose, and most important, how purpose and constraints interact. The focus here on the way that external events are filtered through purpose formulation is one possible direction for illuminating the nature of unipolarity.

#### **Notes on contributor**

**Jeffrey W Legro** is Randolph P Compton Professor at the University of Virginia.

## References

- Abdelal, Rawi and Adam Segal (2007) 'Has globalization passed its peak?', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:1, 103–114
- Allen, Mike and Romesh Ratnesar (2006) 'The end of cowboy diplomacy', *Time*, 9 July, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1211578,00.html>>, accessed 9 April 2009
- Brands, Hal (2008) *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's search for purpose in the post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky)
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2009) 'Reshaping the world order: how Washington should reform international institutions', *Foreign Affairs*, 88:2, 49–63
- Butterfield, Herbert (1966) 'The balance of power' in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds) *Diplomatic investigations* (London: George Allen and Unwin), 132–148
- Calleo, David (2008) 'The tyranny of false vision: America's unipolar fantasy', *Survival*, 50:5, 61–78
- Chollet, Derek and James Goldgeier (1980) *America between the wars* (New York: Public Affairs)
- Deutsch, Karl W and JD Singer (1964) 'Multipolar power systems and international stability', *World Politics*, 16, 390–406
- Finnemore, Martha (1996) *National interests in international society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Finnemore, Martha (2009) 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity', *World Politics*, 61:1, 58–85
- Franck, Thomas M (1990) *The power of legitimacy among nations* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Gaddis, John Lewis (2004) *Surprise, security, and the American experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press)
- Gellman, Barton (2009) 'Cheney uncloaks his frustration with Bush: "statute of limitations has expired" on many secrets, former vice president says', *Washington Post*, 13 August, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/12/AR2009081203306.html>>, accessed 14 November 2009
- Gilpin, Robert (1981) *War and change in world politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Gilpin, Robert (1987) *The political economy of international relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Goldstone, Jack A (1991) *Revolution and rebellion in the early modern world* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Gordon, Philip H (2006) 'The end of the Bush revolution', *Foreign Affairs*, 85:4, 75–86
- Halper, Stefan and Jonathan Clarke (2005) *America alone: the neo-conservatives and the global order* (New York: Cambridge University Press)
- Hess, Stephen and Marvin Kalb (eds) (2003) *The media and the war on terrorism* (Washington, DC: Brookings University Press)
- Higgs, Robert (1987) *Crisis and leviathan: critical episodes in the growth of American government* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Hurd, Ian (2007) *After anarchy: legitimacy and power at the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Ikenberry, G John (2000) *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Ikenberry, G John (ed) (2002) *America unrivaled: the future of the balance of power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Ikenberry, G John (2005) 'A weaker world', *Prospect*, November, 30–33
- Ikenberry, G John, Michael Mastanduno and William Wohlforth (eds) (2011) *Unipolarity and international relations theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press)
- Jervis, Robert (2005) *American foreign policy in a new era* (New York: Routledge)

- Kaplan, Morton (1957) *Systems and process in international politics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons)
- Kapstein, Ethan and Michael Mastanduno (eds) (1999) *Unipolar politics: realism and state strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press)
- Keohane, Robert O (1983) *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Keohane, Robert O and Joseph Nye (1977) *Power and interdependence: world politics in transition* (Boston: Little, Brown)
- Khong, Yuen Foong (1992) *Analogies at war: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Krasner, Stephen D (1976) 'State power and the structure of international trade', *World Politics*, 28:3, 317–347
- Krauthammer, Charles (2009) 'Decline is a choice: the new liberalism and the end of American ascendancy', *Weekly Standard*, 15:5, <<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/056lfnpr.asp>>, accessed 23 November 2009
- Landler, Mark (2010) 'White House is being pressed to reverse course and join land mine ban', *New York Times*, 7 May, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/08/world/americas/08mine.html>>, accessed 26 May 2010
- Layne, Christopher (1993) 'The unipolar illusion: why new powers will rise', *International Security*, 17:4, 5–51
- Layne, Christopher (2006) 'The unipolar illusion revisited: the coming end of the United States "unipolar moment"', *International Security*, 31:2, 7–41
- Leffler, Melvyn (2003) '9/11 and the past and future of the US foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 79:5, 1045–1063
- Legro, Jeffrey W (2005) *Rethinking the world: great power strategies and international order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Legro, Jeffrey W (2009) 'A "return to normalcy"?: The future of America's internationalism' in Daniel Drezner (ed) *Avoiding trivia: the role of strategic planning in American foreign policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press), 52–68
- Lemke, Douglas (2002) *Regions of war and peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Lynch, Timothy J and Robert S Singh (2008) *After Bush: the case for continuity in American foreign policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press)
- Mahbubani, Kishore (2005) 'The impending demise of the postwar system', *Survival*, 47:4, 7–18
- Mann, James (2004) *Rise of the Vulcans: the history of Bush's war cabinet* (London: Penguin Books)
- Martin, Lisa (1992) *Coercive cooperation: explaining multilateral economic sanctions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Mastanduno, Michael (1997) 'Preserving the unipolar moment: realist theories and US grand strategy after the Cold War', *International Security*, 21:4, 49–88
- Maull, Hanns (2006) 'The precarious state of international order', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 13:1, 68–77
- McCain, John (2007) 'An enduring peace built on freedom', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:6, 19–34
- Mearsheimer, John J (2001) *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: Norton)
- National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (2004) *The 9/11 commission report* (New York: WW Norton & Company)
- Obama, Barack (2007) 'Renewing America's leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4, 2–16
- Olson, Mancur (1982) *The rise and decline of nations* (New Haven: Yale University Press)
- Organski, AFK and Jacek Kugler (1980) *The war ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)
- Paul, TV, James J Wirtz and Michael Fortmann (2004) *Balance of power: theory and practice in the 21st century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)
- Reus-Smit, Chris (2004) *American power and world order* (Cambridge: Polity Press)
- Rosecrance, Richard N (1966) 'Bipolarity, multipolarity, and the future', *Conflict Resolution*, 10:3, 314–327
- Rosecrance, Richard N (1986) *The rise of the trading state* (New York: BasicBooks)

- Russett, Bruce and John Oneal (2001) *Triangulating peace: democracy, interdependence, and international organizations* (New York: Norton)
- Sarotte, Mary E (2009) *1989: the struggle to create post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Schweller, Randall (2006) *Unanswered threats: political constraints on the balance of power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Task Force on US Standing in World Affairs (2009) *US standing in the world: causes, consequences, and the future* (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association), <[http://www.apsanet.org/media/PDFs/APSA\\_TF\\_USStanding\\_Long\\_Report.pdf](http://www.apsanet.org/media/PDFs/APSA_TF_USStanding_Long_Report.pdf)>, accessed 23 November 2009
- Tyler, Patrick (1992) 'US strategy plan calls for insuring no rivals develop', *The New York Times*, 8 March, A1
- Walt, Stephen (1987) *The origins of alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)
- Waltz, Kenneth N (1964) 'The stability of a bipolar world', *Daedalus*, 93: 881–909
- Waltz, Kenneth N (1979) *Theory of international politics* (Baltimore: Addison-Wesley Publisher)
- Waltz, Kenneth N (1993) 'The emerging structure of international politics', *International Security*, 18:2, 44–79
- Zakaria, Fareed (1992) 'Realism and domestic politics: a review essay', *International Security*, 17:1, 177–198
- Zakaria, Fareed (1998) *From wealth to power: the unusual origins of America's world role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Zartman, I William (2009) *Imbalance of power: US hegemony and international order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers)

## Assessing the balance

Stephen G Brooks and William C Wohlforth  
*Dartmouth College*

**Abstract** *Save for the single issue of balance of power theory's relevance to the current system, where we and some of our critics are in real disagreement (and they are wrong), every aspect of this symposium has been highly productive. Our critics do not directly dispute the proposition that a rapid end of a single superpower world is extremely unlikely. They generally endorsed our core finding that the systemic constraints featured in IR scholarship are largely inoperative with respect to a United States that remains the sole superpower. These essays are consequently devoted mainly to discussing the implications of our findings and the future research agenda. In particular, they developed serious challenges to the idea of US led institutional revisionism, generated new ideas about both systemic and non-systemic constraints, and suggested potentially powerful theories about constraints on other states besides the United States.*

### Introduction

We welcome this exchange, but readers might be excused for thinking that it has been overtaken by events. Isn't multipolarity just around the corner, as Christopher Layne seems to argue? Is not America in decline, 'this time, for real,' as Gideon Rachman (2011) proclaimed?

*World out of balance* should not—and, frankly, can not fairly—be read as claiming that history has stopped and power relations have frozen. America's relative capabilities have declined in recent years, but, as most of the contributors to this exchange recognize, its lead in overall capabilities is so substantial that the world will remain 'out of balance' for some time to come. It remains imperative for international relations (IR) scholars to get American primacy right, something we showed they had failed to do. That was our main point. Most of our critics agree.

The world remains out of balance because comprehensive, aggregate capabilities—the kind of capabilities powers need to create and sustain global orders—remain concentrated in the United States to a historically unprecedented degree not anticipated by IR theory. Scholars from Morgenthau to Gilpin and Waltz (and Charles Glaser in this symposium) have long recognized that what matters when thinking about these questions is a state's share of aggregated power capabilities: raw economic heft, technological prowess, military and naval power, innovation, organizational—institutional competence, size and location, the lot. As seductive as it is to single out one index—so much easier to measure!—it is misleading because each element interacts with others to support a state's capacity to act on the international stage.

If you read carefully the heralds of multipolarity, you will notice a near myopic focus on aggregate gross domestic product (GDP). Yet by that measure, India would have surpassed Britain in the mid-nineteenth century—obviously not a good measure of their relative capabilities. Forecasting precisely when China’s aggregate GDP will surpass America’s is a highly uncertain game. But what we can be certain of is that matching US aggregate GDP will not make China America’s peer in overall capabilities.

As scholars who have studied power assessment and forecasts over the years, we are well aware that neither economists nor political scientists nor country experts possess crystal balls that tell them when one state’s overall capacity will cross a certain threshold. *World out of balance* certainly does not pretend to perform such magic. The book is about how the world works when the scales of power are out of balance. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that the myriad social, economic, technological, and institutional factors that underlie China’s power will all line up favourably so as to propel it *and* that the similarly complex set of factors underlying US power will all conspire against it. We cannot rule out the possibility that, in addition, Beijing will make all the right decisions and Washington all the wrong ones. Nor can we rule out the possibility that the other major states in Asia and globally will seek to facilitate China’s rise and hasten America’s decline. And were that concatenation to occur, yes, we might see a very consequential shift in aggregate power relations in a comparatively short time. Although many things are possible, in social science we work with probabilities; and the balance of what we know about economic growth, technological change, diplomatic relationships, institutional and political stability and adaptability, all suggest that a rapid end of a single superpower world is extremely unlikely.

The forgoing contributions actually do not directly dispute this. One reason it sometimes seems otherwise is the many meanings analysts attach to the term ‘unipolarity’, which for some even seems to be a synonym for global empire or hegemony (for example, Huntington 1999; and Mearsheimer 2001a). When unipolarity comes to be defined as the United States’ ability to defend Georgia from Russia, as Layne comes close to doing, we know the term’s usefulness is in trouble. In *World out of balance* we went to great pains to define and operationalize this term in ways consistent with its origins in polarity theory (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 11–13). It is not about influence or outcomes—for example, whether the United States can defend this or that former imperial province of Moscow—but about whether the system ‘contains one state whose share of capabilities places it in a class by itself compared to all other states’ (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 13). Barry Buzan (2004) most aptly describes the current system as a ‘1 + X world’, with 1 superpower and X number of great powers.<sup>1</sup> Although we use the more conventional terminology of unipolarity, ‘our analysis does not hinge on the particular term used to describe the current system’ (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 12). Our book was about how a world with one superpower operates; and while China is rising, no one contributing to this symposium (with the possible exception of Layne) thinks it is or will soon be a superpower.

---

<sup>1</sup>In Buzan’s judgement, ‘There is only one superpower, and there are no other plausible candidates on the horizon for that status for at least a couple of decades’ (2004, 65).

It follows that our analysis is, and will in all likelihood long remain, relevant to understanding international politics. At the outset of our book, we noted that:

The purpose of this book is to undertake a systematic evaluation of the external constraints that scholars have highlighted and thereby gain a better understanding of the United States' global role. This entails answering four questions: Does the United States face the imminent prospect of having its power checked by a balancing coalition of other great powers? As it has become increasingly exposed to the international economy, has the United States become more vulnerable to other actors' attempts to influence its security policies? Is the United States tightly bound by the need to maintain a good general reputation for cooperation in international institutions? Does the United States need to adhere to existing rules to sustain legitimacy and thus maintain today's institutional order? (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 3)

Our answer to each of these questions was no. To a greater degree than a casual reader might note, our critics agree (the notable exception is that Layne, Glaser, Randall Schweller, and Charles Kupchan all strongly contest our analysis of balancing dynamics). Hence much of their essays are devoted to discussing the implications of our findings. Let us therefore start with the end of the book, with the foreign policy and research implications of our analysis. Once we have discussed those matters, we will turn to the core issue on which we and our critics are in real disagreement.

### Foreign policy implications

Although our book focused on international relations theory, our analysis does have three notable policy implications: that the absence of tight systemic constraints matters for US foreign policy; that the United States has a greater realm of choice than most analysts recognized; and that fewer obstacles stand in the way of a US effort to reform international institutions than scholars appreciated. How do these claims fare in light of the foregoing criticisms?

#### *The absence tight systemic constraints matters*

Charles Glaser usefully asks, 'how valuable is unipolarity anyway?' His answer—'not much'—captures the mood of many critics. So many events are not going America's way, from the financial crisis to the seemingly intractable counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan. But to assess the implications of our analysis, one needs to go beyond today's headlines. It takes a bit of mental effort to realize that, as challenging as the world may seem, it would be a whole lot more challenging if the United States had to tackle all these problems while also confronting tight systemic constraints.

When the United States seeks to translate its power capabilities into favourable foreign policy outcomes, the international system does not push back against it the way it did against leading powers in the past, and the way it still does against other powers today. As they ponder potential security policies, US decision-makers do not confront the prospect that other great powers will construct a counter-balance through alliances or internal efforts. They need not fear escalating

'soft balancing' measures on the part of other powers that would rein the United States in and eventually morph into conventional hard balancing. They do not need to worry that other states are in a strong position to use America's links to the global economy strategically to force it to toe their line. They do not need to be apprehensive that failure to cooperate in a given international institution might spoil their government's general reputation for cooperation and thus deny it all the benefits it gets from the institutional order. And they need not worry that if they break some international rule or norm America's overall legitimacy will necessarily be strongly reduced and its leadership role will come crashing down.

In different combinations, various of these four constraints powerfully shaped the security policies of great powers in the bi- and multipolar systems of the past, and many continue to shape the policies of other powers in the unipolar one of today. Systemic IR theory, developed by hundreds of scholars over five decades, is not a naked emperor. These theories are often powerful tools for explaining the contours of state behaviour. They just do not apply to the contemporary United States. One way to escape the pervasive 'presentism' of debates about US foreign policy and get a sense of the importance of these constraints is to perform two mental tasks that American IR scholars often seem reluctant to undertake: think historically and think cross-nationally.

Our book provides short case studies of previous leading powers with international positions roughly comparable to the United States' today, except that they were in multi- and bipolar international systems: Britain at its nineteenth-century peak and the United States in the latter Cold War. These cases remind readers what it is like to run a great power's foreign policy in the face of systemic constraints like counter-balancing. The peak Cold War years found the United States devoting some 7–12 per cent of GDP to the military. Increases in US military capabilities were predictably and reliably countered—one way or another—by a Soviet superpower with the means and the motive to check America. During the latter Cold War, US policymakers considering any major undertaking in most of the world's regions had to reckon the probability that the Soviet Union's formidable military machine might lend its weight to the other side of the scale. Today, by contrast, the US spends 4.5 per cent of GDP on defence and increased capabilities are not counter-balanced (the combined share of the other major powers' GDP devoted to defence has shrunk since the 1990s). Does this mean the United States can do whatever it wants? No. But when the United States contemplates an action—for example, the recent surge in Afghanistan—it does not have to consider what will happen if other major powers put their military power at the disposal of US adversaries.

The world is clearly a different place for the United States due to the permissive systemic environment. And the flip side of the lack of tight systemic constraints on the United States is their presence for other powers. The system constrains other powers from counter-balancing and contending for global leadership, for example, as most major powers have done in the past and at least two—Russia and China—would likely do now if the international system's structure did not render it prohibitively costly. And that is not the only constraint that affects others. Because most other powers lack the material capacity to help redefine rules and provide public goods, international rules and norms constrain them far more than Washington. Moreover, the global economy constrains smaller

powers far more than the United States. While other powers are constrained by America's outsized role in the global economy from using economic statecraft (for example, sanctions) against the United States, Washington uses them with impunity against others (albeit not always effectively).

That is what the book says. In a way, Schweller helps make this clear when he seeks to reckon US power as the ability to get others to *do* something they otherwise would not have done. Schweller is certainly right that the United States often lacks power of this kind: for example, it can not get the Chinese to help much regarding Iran, it has been unsuccessful in getting North Korea to relinquish its nuclear weapons, and it struggles to get the Pakistanis to combat Al Qaeda and the Taliban more effectively. Our response is that we also need to keep in mind another way of conceptualizing power: power is also the ability to get others to *not* do something they otherwise would have done. Unipolarity conveys a lot of such 'blocking power' on the United States, but we almost never see it. Just because this kind of power cannot be seen does not mean that it is unimportant.

*Unipolarity gives the United States a wider menu of choice*

The claim that the United States operates within a wider realm of choice regarding foreign policy than leading powers in past systems seems fairly straightforward. Yet the contributors to this symposium react to our analysis in extremely varied ways. Schweller argues that 'if Brooks and Wohlforth are correct, then ... a unipole can choose virtually any security policy'. Charles Kupchan, by contrast, argues that we see no real choice for the United States other than to follow the status quo: 'the United States will as a matter of course continue to deploy its preponderant power on a global basis; the unipole will automatically defend unipolarity'. Layne sees things very differently: finding our analysis wanting, he argues that the United States suffers from imperial overstretch and that this will likely force the United States to change radically from the foreign policy status quo and 'retract some—or even all—of its overseas military commitments'. Finally, Jeffrey Legro and Glaser weigh in with a yet another response. Glaser reads our analysis as showing that 'unipolarity is compatible with a wide spectrum of US grand strategies'. For his part, Legro stresses that our analysis does 'not explain US thinking or choice ... because [Brooks and Wohlforth] mainly offer a negative claim ... Their argument lacks an explicit positive argument that can tell us what we can expect from the unipole and unipolarity ... The lopsided distribution of power may open up the door to expansive hegemonic aims, but it does not push a state through it.'

Legro and Glaser got it right: *World out of balance* is about constraints. In our view, the nature of systemic constraints today is important because it gives the United States a wider menu of choice in its foreign policy. Contra Kupchan, it is only if the system is tightly constraining (as the conventional wisdom among scholars had suggested was the case regarding the United States) that it would push towards the conclusion that only one foreign policy—or a very narrow of range foreign policies—is appropriate. We stressed that when the system is not constraining in this manner, more room for choice exists (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 5–19). Contra Schweller, our claim is relative: because the United States does not face the systemic constraints identified in IR theory, it has a *greater* realm of

choice in its foreign policy than many analysts had assumed.<sup>2</sup> Schweller does not consider a point we stressed at length in the concluding chapter of our book: there are many other potential constraints that are relevant besides the four systemic ones from IR theory that we examined.

Layne usefully brings up the issue of imperial overstretch, a point now often discussed among the punditocracy. He is certainly right that US military is stretched thin in two wars, and its government budget is awash in red ink. He is right that this will constrain Washington. But he is wrong to see that constraint as somehow being necessitated by the structural position of unipolarity. Neither the US invasion of Iraq, nor its 'nation-building' effort in Afghanistan, nor indeed its ballooning deficit are necessitated by its structural position as the lone superpower. These constraints emerge mainly from wars of choice, domestic entitlements, decisions regarding taxes, and the financial crisis and great recession of 2008–2010. All serious matters, to be sure, but not the kind of 'imperial overstretch' Paul Kennedy (1987) famously analysed in his 1987 bestseller. In all those cases, overstretch emerged from commitments to contain or pursue great power counter-balancing or hegemonic rivalry. These states had to frame policy in the shadow of a potential major war with peer rival great powers, which meant that devoting a large share of their GDP to defence and extracting more resources from their societies for security policy could be plausibly be seen as an existential necessity. Solving the problem of imperial overstretch through retrenchment was extremely hard for such powers, for decision-makers had plausible reasons to fear that cutting back on various commitments risked geopolitical catastrophe. As we argued, however, unipolarity spares the United States that kind of trade-off. Because its international position does not hinge on the specific policies that got it into its current military and fiscal constraints, it has much greater potential to extract itself from 'overstretch' with its position intact than did the historical leading states examined by Kennedy, Gilpin (1981) and others. Will this be easy to do? No. It is simply easier than it would be if the United States faced the kind of strategic situations confronted by the overstretched powers analysed by Gilpin and Kennedy.

One way to see this is to look at the balance of power realists' own analysis. To their credit, Layne and many fellow realists—notably John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt—opposed the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Reading their writings in the lead-up to the invasion, two salient facts emerge (see Mearsheimer and Walt 2002; 2003; Baylis and Smith 2008; and Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy 2002). First, balance of power theory is not part of their reasoning for counselling the United States against the invasion. They predicted that an invasion would have high costs, but counter-balancing by other great powers was not among them. And they proved to be right. The costs of invading Iraq turned out to be high because of the challenges intrinsic to nation building and counter-insurgency, not because of systemic constraints identified in balance of power realism. Second, their main argument was precisely that the invasion was not necessary for the United States' security and global position. They urged

---

<sup>2</sup> As we noted, 'inoperative systemic constraints mean that, *much more than scholars generally believe*, U.S. foreign policy is in a realm of choice, rather than necessity' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 19, emphasis added). Schweller only includes the last portion of this sentence in his article.

Washington to adopt other policies—containment and deterrence—that would serve US interests at a much lower cost. At no point did they suggest that invading Iraq was a necessary condition of maintaining the US position of global primacy.<sup>3</sup>

Bad choices can lead to bad outcomes. The United States chose major military undertakings in two tough countries even as it sharply cut taxes, expanded domestic entitlements, and made some regrettable decisions about its financial system. The consequences of these choices are serious but their origins are not systemic. After all, balanced power is no guarantee against bad choices—think of the Vietnam War, the Savings and Loan debacle of the 1980s, and the very fiscal crises that sparked Kennedy's and Gilpin's concerns in the first place. Having a peer competitor not only did not induce prudence in Washington, it clearly fed into a whole series of costly and dangerous interventions in the third world. Invading Iraq was a choice the Bush administration made—a poor choice, to be sure—but not a requirement of the United States' position.

Ultimately, Glaser rightly stresses that 'the overreach claim is more of an observation about the past than a well-supported prediction about the future ... None of the basic arguments about unipolarity explain why [poor choices] are unavoidable'. America may well exhaust itself, but because it does not face tight systemic constraints the margin of error is actually much greater: it will require a longer series of bad choices to reach true overstretch than if the external environment did powerfully constrain the United States.

#### *Unipolarity reduces barriers to 'systemic activism'*

The analytical core of our book is agnostic about what the United States should do. As Glaser correctly notes, our analysis of systemic constraints is ultimately compatible with the full spectrum of grand strategic options 'ranging from neo-isolationism to primacy'. Although we do not advocate a grand strategy of primacy as it is conventionally understood in the literature, we do conclude the book by stressing a key foreign policy implication of our analysis: that the United States is in a favourable position to pursue a policy we called 'systemic activism'—altering the institutions that govern the international system. We focused on this policy option since it was the one for which the permissive systemic environment appeared to be most relevant. In our judgement, the main operative constraints on this policy option were, in fact, systemic and thus their absence facilitated it: pushing hard to revise institutions or create new ones would not elicit counterbalancing or soft balancing, or be subject to the constraints associated with reputation, interdependence, or legitimacy. We argued that the 'mistaken belief in the salience of systemic constraints has generally led analysts to overestimate the costs of a concerted effort to revise the international system to better advance US security interests' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 208).

Our critics generally accept our core claim about the lack of systemic constraints on a United States led effort to reform international institutions, but they are sceptical of that policy option for a host of other reasons. The criticisms attracted by this part of our book, along with our associated article in *Foreign*

---

<sup>3</sup>The same applies to Afghanistan; see Mearsheimer (2001b) and Posen (2001/2002).

*Affairs* (Brooks and Wohlforth 2009), do clarify an important point: to say that scholars exaggerated the barriers to systemic activism is not to deliver a precise cost–benefit analysis of such a policy. To the degree that we implied otherwise, we are guilty of exactly what we skewered others for doing: we went beyond what our analysis could sustain. But in a larger sense these criticisms make our point about the shortcomings of existing IR scholarship. For the reasons our critics express scepticism about systemic activism all lie outside IR research and so remain matters of speculation. To know whether their scepticism is warranted requires pursuing the new research agenda we hoped *World out of balance* would help propel.

### **Research implications of a *World out of balance***

Though a call for further research is a cliché of academic writing, that is the inescapable conclusion that emerges from this symposium. To be sure, useful, relevant research continues to emerge on key questions regarding unipolarity ranging from US domestic politics, to alliance formation, legitimacy and international rules, the global economy, and US grand strategy.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, many of the key questions raised by our critics still can be answered only with speculation until we know more about how unipolar politics operates in two key areas: constraints on secondary states and bargaining over institutional reform.

#### *Systemic constraints and choices: theorizing unipolar politics as usual*

*World out of balance* established that the permissive systemic environment gives the United States a wider menu of choice. We thus agree entirely with Legro's argument that 'the character of unipolarity depends on the purpose of the unipole. What the unipole wants and is likely to do in a world it has more of a free will to shape will affect that world'. Explaining US choices in a permissive systemic environment is thus an important area for inquiry. Kupchan's call for further research on how partisanship influences US decisions and Legro's plea for more investigation of the significance of domestic ideas and strategic concepts are thus welcome. Yet Schweller and Voeten helpfully put on the table the argument that this is only half the equation. They contend that enhanced freedom of choice in a unipolar system is a two-way street: it applies not just to the United States, but also to secondary states, and in ways that hamstring the exercise of American power.

Voeten and Schweller both argue that other states are less constrained under unipolarity than bipolarity. Liberated from the need to toe Washington's line in

---

<sup>4</sup>On domestic politics, see, for example, Snyder et al (2009); Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007); and Parent and Bafumi (2008). On alliances, see, for example, Kreps (2008); Walt (2009); Craig (2009); Press-Barnathan (2006); Weitsmnn (2004); and Hansen (2001). On legitimacy, see, for example, Finnemore (2009); Voeten (2005); Schweller and Pu (forthcoming); Clark (2005, forthcoming). On the global economy, see, for example, Mastanduno (2009); Bromley (2008); and Norrloff (2010). On grand strategy, see, for example, Mearsheimer (2011); Miller (2010); Layne (2009); Posen (2007); Legro and Leffler (2008); and Kreps (2011). Ikenberry et al (2009) discuss additional relevant research questions.

order to secure themselves against the Soviet Union, secondary states may be freed to pursue their interests in unipolarity in ways that may be costly to the United States. The argument appears to work best for US European allies: Voeten's comparison between Kohl's actions in the Euromissile crisis and Schröder's policy regarding Iraq is telling. It seems less compelling for China, which shifted from close Soviet ally, to hostile neutrality to US ally, all during the bipolar structure of the Cold War. Indeed, the key decisions that opened China up to the global economy and began its rapid rise occurred a decade before the Soviet Union's demise. And, as Voeten recognizes, this argument does not apply strongly to countries that did not face unambiguous threats from the Soviet Union. Today, moreover, a great many states in every region from Central America and Africa to Central Europe, the Middle East and North, East and South Asia clearly still face strong incentives to stay close to Washington. While the shift from bi- to unipolarity may have weakened the United States' leadership capacity over some states, ultimately neither Schweller nor Voeten provide reasons for thinking this applies to all or even most states. Indeed, America's alliance system of more than 60 countries accounts for some 80 per cent of global military spending (Economist 2011, 34).

A grand net assessment of secondary states' constraints in the different polar structures may not be possible, but we agree with both Schweller and Voeten that better theories of unipolar politics are needed. While stressing that asymmetric capabilities are important in bargaining, we agree with Voeten that 'advantages in relative capabilities do not automatically make others states do what you want them to do'. IR theory provides much less leverage on current bargaining dynamics than scholars used to think. In particular, despite scholars' best efforts to update them, balance of power and balance of threat theories do not provide a valid model for explaining bargaining between the unipole and other states. It strikes us as unlikely that a similarly systemic model will be developed that does provide an overarching framework for contemporary interactions. But, as Bromley, Voeten and Schweller make clear, progress on modelling unipolar politics requires more analytical effort to unpack the system's implications for states other than the United States than we were able to provide in *World out of balance*.

#### *Unipolarity and institutional reform*

Given the massive scholarly resources devoted to the study of international institutions, one would think that every possible question had been thoroughly investigated. Yet responses to our argument about the potential for systemic activism expose major gaps. As Erik Voeten (2001) observed, institutionalist scholars in the United States generally lost interest in the interaction between power and institutions, perhaps because of challenges of modelling this interaction mathematically. In addition, just as balance of power theorists never considered addressing the question of their theory's implication for a unipolar system, a scenario in which a hegemonic state creates a ramified set of institutions and then later decides it might want to change them did not figure in institutionalist research. Our critics raise three core issues that are particularly relevant for understanding how much potential the United States actually has for pursuing a policy of systemic activism.

'Lock in' vs near-term gains of cooperation. Voeten and Layne critique our call for systemic activism on the grounds that it is impractical: they both argue forcefully that other states have no incentive to cooperate with any efforts by the United States to revise or create international institutions. Voeten maintains 'there are no systemic reasons for states to go along with plans to cement the US power advantage into a new institutional order'. If we are right that institutions do not strongly constrain the United States, he argues, then less capable states get no benefit in exchange for agreeing to an institutional bargain that locks in their weaker positions. Layne stresses the related point that if other states expect their relative capabilities to rise, they will never agree to deals that lock in disadvantageous status today.

Both critiques focus exclusively on only one incentive for the United States pursuing institutional reform: 'locking in' a favourable power position. They assume that lock-in effects are strong, that policymakers believe them to be strong, and that this belief will be at the forefront as they ponder changes to the institutional order. Having scoured the literature, we have been unable to find research-based reasons to think these assumptions are true. Lock in, of course, is a well known argument, featuring prominently in the work of John Ikenberry (2001), as well as many others, and it is based in large swaths of social science theory. But we do not know how strong it is in international relations compared to other institutional effects.

Our book and associated *Foreign Affairs* article (Brooks and Wohlforth 2009) emphasized a different impetus for institutional reform: to tackle global problems, such as nuclear proliferation, which the current institutional structure is not well equipped to address. As Robert Keohane (1984) and others established, a powerful leading state may see a need for fostering global cooperation to manage issues that inherently require inter-state cooperation. If the United States sees such cooperation as in its interest, it can benefit from altering institutions even if lock in is not in play. Of course, Bromley is right that 'it takes more than one for multilateralism to work' and other states may not agree with the leader's assessment of the need for cooperation or its strategy for dealing with the global problem in question; but if they do share its assessment that the problem must be addressed, they may resign themselves to adopting the leader's preferred institutional approach with the knowledge that no progress can be made if the most powerful state in the system opts out.

When assessing other states' incentives to cooperate with US-led reform efforts, two other factors also need to be considered. First, the United States has a greater share of material resources that it can use not just to coerce states to follow it, but also to offer tangible benefits to garner their cooperation. Second, due to its structural position the United States may not need to actively coerce or offer benefits to states to bring them on board; other states that are dependent upon US military protection or US market access, or both, may bend a little, or perhaps a lot, from their ideal position without the United States having to offer or threaten anything.<sup>5</sup>

The question is, how will states assess these immediate and near-term benefits and inducements in light of less certain potential future lock in effects? Lock in, as articulated in the works of Ikenberry and others, is a subtle process, working over

---

<sup>5</sup> A paper documenting this dynamic is von Hlatky (2011).

long periods of time in which institutional rules are internalized and path dependency kicks in. Will decision-makers assess this as a palpable threat? And note that the issue for a country like China is not, to put it a bit crudely 'cooperate with the United States now, when it is the sole superpower, or wait until later, when my country is the sole superpower.' Not even Chris Layne expects the United States to be replaced by a new single superpower. Rather, bi- or multipolarity is the expectation. So the issue for potential cooperators is 'cooperate with the United States now, when it is the sole superpower, or wait until later, when no single power will be in a leadership position and my country will have to bargain with a group of peers, including the United States.' In sum, Voeten and Layne's objections are preliminary, but point helpfully to a fascinating and policy relevant research agenda.

*New constraints on institutional change?* Jeff Legro asks an important question: why, if we are right about the greater ability to pursue institutional reform under unipolarity, has Washington not done more of it, and why have its efforts not met with more success? His thoughtful answer is to point to a series of constraints that, he infers, may be in play. Yet the puzzle may not be quite as probative as Legro thinks. After all, the Clinton years saw a lot of successful systemic activism on economic matters, which is where that administration thought the real action was, and under Bush the relevant barrier to institutional reform was clearly internal reluctance not external constraints. When it did try, moreover, even the Bush team met with some success on the Proliferation Security Initiative, terrorist financing, and other matters. In addition, Legro only focuses on formal institutions, not informal ones. Yet when one examines issues like the use of drone strikes and the safety of nuclear materials, one detects a sustained effort by the Obama administration to move norms and customary law in directions Washington views as desirable.

Legro may well be right that the United States has been intimidated by the scale of the task, but the jury is still out as to whether this is due to the system's potential to push back. Out of the list of potential constraints Legro identifies, one of them—balancing—is irrelevant to institutional reform, several are interesting and worthy of more research but non-systemic (for example, specific interests of specific actors in a given issue area, domestic politics, timing), and one our book stressed is weakly conditional (legitimacy). That leaves transaction and sunk costs as a potentially important systemic constraint about which we know too little. Interestingly, these same mechanisms are often said to benefit the hegemon by locking in favoured practices. If they also hamstring the hegemon in later periods, this is an interesting new twist to the theory that calls for more theoretical development and empirical evaluation.<sup>6</sup>

Only more research can determine whether any of these constraints actually caused the United States to be less reformist than it otherwise would have been. After all, as in the Bush case, US officials might not share scholars' estimates of the benefits of institutionalization. They may not believe that the current order is as out of synch with new security challenges as we asserted. They may believe—as have the leaders of many of history's past top dogs—that the ever changing

---

<sup>6</sup>See also Finnemore (2009), who makes a similar argument about the constraining effect of legitimating a unipole's role through institutionalization.

interests of a major power are best served by the ambiguity and loopholes that abound in the current order. To the degree that these factors figure in explaining US decision-making, the *prima facie* case for the importance of Legro's list of constraints is impugned. Either way, a fruitful new line of research and theorizing emerges. And regardless of what this research finds, Legro's analysis is ultimately a useful reminder that although it may be easier for a hegemon to alter institutions in unipolarity than in other systems, it is hardly easy.

*Expected power shifts and international cooperation.* Constraints on US systemic activism and the trade-off other states may confront between 'lock in' fears and the near term gains of cooperation intersect a third issue requiring more research: how expected power shifts affect other states' incentives to cooperate with the unipole. Layne argues that 'rising powers such as China need wait only a decade or so to reshape the international system themselves and construct a new order that will reflect their interests, norms, and values'.

This reflects a bifurcated assessment of the ease of altering the system: despite still having far more material power than any other state, any effort by the United States to revise the system will not work, in Layne's view; yet if all goes well and China becomes a superpower, he expects that for Beijing systemic activism will be a piece of cake. We have already noted a key problem with this argument: it is highly unlikely that China's leaders really expect their country to become a single superpower, as the United States now is. Rather, China experts report that Beijing's expectations about power trends mirror the widespread belief that capabilities will become more evenly distributed over the coming decades. China's leaders therefore can not rationally expect in any policy relevant time horizon to be in as strong a material position to revise the system as the United States presently is. Even if we set that objection aside, Layne's argument faces a conundrum: if the United States is not powerful enough now to create or revise institutions, then why would China's position in a decade (or two, or three, or four decades for that matter) allow it to effectively alter the system? Put another way, what is the theory and evidence to support the argument that United States is, and will continue to be, especially incapable of altering the system, while China will be adept at doing so?

Layne's critique leads to a rich set of researchable hypotheses. One is that, barring a new system-shattering event on the scale of World War II (Legro's 'timing' constraint), no state will be able to engage in major institutional revisionism. Many of the factors Legro points to for why this strategy is likely to be hard for the United States to pull off would similarly apply to China. Another is that perhaps both can successfully pursue this strategy (the United States now, and China later). A third hypothesis is that a state rising to superpower status has more leverage than an existing superpower, perhaps because the mere act of rising creates momentum that other states want to join. A plausible argument can likely be made for this 'rising momentum' dynamic (Schweller's interesting observations about the 'delegitimation phase' are certainly very relevant on this score). On the other hand, path dependency is an obvious force pointing in the opposite direction. Developing a better theoretical sense of the ultimate answer is an important area for future research that has immense foreign policy implications; significantly, this is true no matter what assessment one has about how the distribution of power is changing.

**Where our critics are just wrong: balance of power theory in a *World out of balance***

So far, so nice. We and the other contributors to this exchange are, in a sense, collaborators on getting new lines of research off the ground in order to better understand the implications of unipolarity. But this should not divert attention from the core issue where real disagreement exists. Of the four questions our book puts on the table for investigation, it was the hoary issue of balancing that attracted the strong pushback. Balance of power theory is the oldest international relations theory we considered, the one written and developed in the multi- and bipolar international systems of past centuries, the one we thought we clearly showed was not operational in a world in which the United States' primacy is the status quo. Amazingly, even as a growing body of rigorous research confirms its inapplicability to the current system (see, for example, Nexon 2009; and Levy and Thompson 2010), some of the analysts contributing to this symposium just can not give up on balance of power theory.

*Putting 'soft balancing' in its place*

Charles Kupchan insists on the significance of what others have called 'soft balancing'. He stresses that it would have mattered in 2003, for example, if France, Germany, Russia and Turkey had not opposed the US invasion of Iraq and it would matter now if Moscow stopped pushing back against NATO expansion into its former imperial provinces. We agree that these and other multitudinous developments on the ground in Europe and Asia are important and worthy of attention: as we stressed, 'Other major powers do undertake actions that impede US goals in foreign policy, including military security. These actions matter, and US policymakers would prefer they not occur' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 62). Yet the question for us is not whether these 'constraining actions' (as we called them) are important and worthy of attention, but whether they alter our core findings about IR theory and systemic constraints on the United States. The answer is no. Our key point is that they are not manifestations of dynamics identified in balance-of-power or balance-of-threat theory. They are manifestations of the fact that states have conflicting interests and seek to pursue them. Always have, always will.

These constraining actions are significant, but trying to associate them with balancing imposes important costs. Calling these policies balancing suggests that they are merely the cutting edge of major new systemic balancing, but they are not. Calling these policies balancing suggests that the 'real' issue in play is underlying US power, but it is not. Calling these policies balancing suggests that they will go away as US power declines, but they will not. Calling these policies balancing suggests that the United States can somehow 'control' how many of these constraining actions occur over the years by acting, or not acting, in a certain way, but it can not. Our analysis shows that the number and severity of these constraining actions will not rise and fall over the years in direct response to certain US policies (for example, unilateralism) but instead will ultimately reflect a constellation of other factors that are particular to these other societies—the nature of their domestic policies, their commercial interests, and so on—that the United States cannot control.

Dressing up diplomatic bargaining in the garb of systemic balancing exacts an even larger price: the bowdlerization of IR theory. An IR theory worthy of the

name cannot become an elaborate description of unfolding events. To have any analytical use, concepts need to be defined in ways that exclude some phenomena—even important phenomena. Yet some of our critics seem to want to strip IR theory, and especially balance of power theory, of exactly the attributes that make it a theory and not lore or ideology or prophesy. If soft balancing proponents have their way, whenever two governments disagree and seek to push their favoured policy against the wishes of another, it is balancing. The attempt to make balance of power theory relevant to the current era threatens to make it meaningless, rendering all politics balance-of-power politics.

*Faith-based balance of power theory*

Christopher Layne's response graphically illustrates the cost of this practice. 'There is increasing evidence that [Brooks and Wohlforth] were wrong about the permanence of US primacy', he writes, and that, 'if balance-of-power realists were off somewhat on the timing, their key insight was correct: the over-concentration of power in US hands after the Cold War would spur the emergence of a multipolar international system in which American hegemony would be counter-balanced.' The evidence Layne cites as validating balance of power realism is 'relative growth rates and shares of world GDP'. In other words, if the US share of global GDP shrinks for any reason, the balance of power realists are right.<sup>7</sup> But if the US share stays constant or grows, as in the 1990s, the balance of power realists are still right, just a bit off on timing. If we see actual counter-balancing policies of the kind that the theory has traditionally identified—namely, a costly augmentation of military power by a single state, or a strongly combined military build-up by a group of states, to balance the military power of the leading state—as happened in the Cold War, balance of power realists are right.<sup>8</sup> If China had ramped up its defence spending to, say, 15 per cent of GDP—even at the cost of slowing down long term growth and therefore slowing or reversing the decline in the US share of global GDP—we can be pretty sure that Layne would have claimed that as evidence that the balance of power realists were right. Yet the fact that China keeps defence spending low as a percentage of its GDP (it has never exceeded 2.5 per cent since 1992 and has been almost exactly 2 per cent every year for the past decade<sup>9</sup>) is also evidence that balance of power realists are right. In turn, if China and Russia (or China, Russia and India, or France, Germany, and

---

<sup>7</sup> At points (for example, note 5) Layne seems to say that the world is already multipolar, but most of the discussion is about trends toward multipolarity. Either way, he claims the trends are enough to validate his theory.

<sup>8</sup> When specifying what specific behaviours balance of power theory would predict, Kenneth Waltz (1979, 125) identifies two things: (1) 'states allying ... even though they have strong reasons not to cooperate with one another [like] the alliance of France and Russia, made formal in 1894' and (2) 'making internal efforts to strengthen themselves, however distasteful or difficult such efforts might be [as with] the United States and the Soviet Union following World War II ... the United States by rearming despite having demonstrated a strong wish not to by dismantling the most powerful military machine the world had ever known; the Soviet Union by maintaining about three million men under arms while striving to acquire a costly new military technology despite the terrible destruction she had suffered in war.'

<sup>9</sup> Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.

Russia, or any other combination of potential balancers) had formed an alliance to counter US power, the balance of power realists surely would have claimed vindication. If, despite on-the-record predictions that such a balancing effort would occur, no such alliance emerged and the chief alliance formation since the Soviet Union's collapse has been NATO's expansion, the balance of power realists still claim vindication.

This is taking a venerable IR theory down to the scientific status of Brezhnev-era Marxism–Leninism. Any shift of GDP balances of any kind that reduces the US share validates the theory. Any other kind of shift is a timing problem: the revolution will come, even if the proletariat is getting fat. Counter-balancing policies validate the theory, as does their absence. According to Layne, China's economic growth—as well as Russia's, India's, Brazil's and Europe's—is a *response to unipolarity*.<sup>10</sup> Layne wants us to believe that if the United States were split in two, these countries would suddenly decide to stop growing so fast. Moreover, Layne thinks our analysis is falsified if unipolarity turns out not to be permanent. In other words, if history has stopped, we are right; if not, balance of power realists are right.

We, by contrast, developed and tested empirically a falsifiable proposition: that balance of power theory does not apply to a unipolar system. Note that we do not claim to falsify the theory. We recognize that balance of power theory does not purport to explain states' rates of economic growth and decline, or major events internal to states. The Soviet Union collapsed for reasons largely exogenous to balance of power theory, and so the mere emergence of unipolarity cannot be said to falsify it. Similarly, China's rapid growth and the slower growth rates of the United States and other wealthy states are not explained by balance of power theory and their occurrence does not impugn our analysis.

Unipolarity's durability does not bear on our proposition about the current irrelevance of balance of power theory, but rather affects the expected shelf life of our analysis. Twelve pages of the book (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 27–35, 40–42) document the fact of US material primacy. Layne calls this 'a static analysis'. Actually, it is a snapshot of the present with dynamic implications: all else equal, the bigger the gap in comprehensive power, the longer it takes for others to catch up. Our snapshot showed that the world was out of balance and systemic theories developed for balanced eras needed re-examination. If we expected multipolarity to reappear after a brief unipolar 'moment', as Layne, Waltz and many others did in the 1990s, then the shelf life of our analysis would be short. As noted above, although we can not know what the future holds, a rapid end of a single superpower world does appear extremely unlikely. Exogenous shocks that either lengthen or shorten the system's lifespan do not affect our argument about balance of power theory's inapplicability to a unipolar system. If an asteroid impacted China tomorrow and stalled the country's growth for 20 years, this would not make balance of power any weaker than it already is, nor would it make our argument any stronger. If the asteroid hit the centre of the United States and split the country in two, balance power theory would not be vindicated, and our argument would not be impugned.

---

<sup>10</sup> As Layne phrases it, his prediction is that 'unipolarity would stimulate the emergence of new great powers that would act as counterweights to American hegemony'.

Our analysis is subject to empirical verification and falsification on two counts. First, it leads to the expectation that so long as power remains heavily concentrated in the hands of the United States, there will be no counter-balancing. But we did not stop there; we also undertook a second testing strategy: we delineated the observable implications we would expect to find in the historical record if our argument were valid as well as those we would expect to find if balance of power realism had any purchase in the current era. Readers can evaluate for themselves the evidence we present for why our argument is valid. Given that Layne does not engage this evidence, nor specify any causal mechanisms linking changes in global economic balances to his theory, it is hard to know what to make of his objections other than to lament their distance from evidence-based social science. In this regard, Campbell Craig (2010) tellingly notes:

The absence of traditional military balancing against the US since the end of the Cold War, a fact of international life that almost no one now denies, poses a major problem for balance-of-power Realists, who argue that major powers are destined to build up their own military forces, and/or create formal military alliances, in order to balance against a dominant state. Prominent structural realists have predicted such balancing behaviour since the early 1990s, but it hasn't happened yet ... [B]alance-of power Realists must show why major powers have not shown any indication of balancing so far over two decades, indisputably a long time in the context of modern international history ... Otherwise, [they] are forced simply to assert that a new polar system will emerge, someday, simply because that is how international politics operates. This, as any student of social science knows, is an unfalsifiable argument. Nations simply are not trying to match the US in military capabilities or to form formal military alliances as they constantly did with respect to far less preponderant states over the past 300 years. Conventional Realists need to account for this: they need to show how balance-of-power theory can explain this absence. Responses that amount simply to a plea to 'just wait', or to describe behaviour as 'balancing' that never would have been called that before, do not fulfill this demand.

### *Beyond possibilistic security centrism*

In contrast to Layne, Glaser and Schweller see the same world that we see: one in which counter-balancing is absent. They respond to this by insisting that counter-balancing is possible. We agree, but took pains to emphasize that it is highly improbable (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 46–48). Their responses make our point. Glaser's argument that counter-balancing could happen relies upon the highly improbable assumption that it is reasonable to treat two regions—the European Union and 'Northeast Asia'—as if they can and will act like countries. For his part, Schweller sees an anti-US Russia–EU coalition as possible; we see it as highly improbable. Furthermore, both Glaser and Schweller note (as does Legro) that although the power differential in favour of the United States makes it very hard for the other major powers to counter-balance US capabilities, they might be sufficiently motivated to bear the extremely high costs of doing so if the United States threatened them by going on a campaign of global aggression and conquest. We agree. But what is the probability of this happening? As we noted (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 16), 'plausible arguments for the utility of widespread conquest in an age of nuclear weapons and low benefits of holding territory are hard to

imagine.' To say that the balancing constraint would kick in if the United States goes on Nazi-style rampage of global territorial conquest gives a sense of the theory's contemporary relevance.

Glaser also briefly contests our explanation for why counter-balancing is not occurring. In this instance, Glaser's ability to address our argument is hamstrung by the fact that he clings to a very particular view of state preferences. Specifically, his particular counter-argument only works if we assume that protecting the 'core security' of states—that is, ensuring their prospects for survival as sovereign units—is the sole motivation for balancing behaviour. Yet there is no reason to think that this is the case; status and 'secondary security' issues also matter in this regard. The latter part of Chapter 2 (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 48–58) provides compact case studies demonstrating how these other preferences drove earlier states toward counter-balancing and hegemonic rivalry with the leading powers of multi- and bipolar systems. On both theoretical and empirical grounds, therefore, we see little reason to accept Glaser's laser-like focus on core security as the Ur-preference of all states. And the moment one relaxes that assumption, it becomes clear, as Kupchan notes, that 'other states are not balancing against the United States because they do not have the material resources to do so; the power differential is simply too large'.

## **Conclusion**

We are indebted to *CRIA's* editors for organizing this symposium and to our distinguished colleagues for contributing their considerable intellectual firepower to the enterprise. Contributors generally endorsed our core finding that the systemic constraints featured in international relations scholarship are largely inoperative with respect to a United States that remains the sole superpower. They developed serious challenges to the idea of US led institutional revisionism that we failed to address and that lead directly to a promising research agenda. They generated new ideas about both systemic and non-systemic constraints that may well apply today. And they suggested potentially powerful theories about constraints on other states besides the United States. Save for the single issue of balance of power theory's relevance to the current international system, where we and some of our critics are in real disagreement (and they are wrong), every aspect of this exchange has been highly productive.

The contributors to this symposium are absolutely right that the world is changing. Capabilities are diffusing, the 2008 financial crisis and its legacy have harmed the United States' relative position, and China's spectacular rise continues to be felt globally and especially regionally. But there is a big difference between the exciting process of becoming a newly capable actor on the world stage and actually assuming a position of leadership. The premise for our book—that comprehensive, aggregate material capabilities are concentrated in the hands of a single state to a degree not encompassed in systemic international relations theory—continues to hold and, in all likelihood, will continue to do so for a long time.

As long as this is the case, our central theoretical conclusions will still obtain and the implications of this exchange for further research will remain centrally

important. When linked with other important areas of inquiry we have discussed in this article, these new lines of research promise compelling and relevant explanations of political outcomes in a world out of balance. While Simon Bromley is right that the question of the 'political utility of American primacy ... remains to be answered', this exchange has at least brought the answer a bit closer.

### Notes on contributors

**Stephen G Brooks** is an Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth, and has previously held fellowships at Harvard and Princeton. He received his PhD in Political Science with Distinction from Yale University. He is the author of *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* (Princeton University Press 2005) and *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton University Press 2008), co-authored with William Wohlforth.

**William C Wohlforth** is the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth College, where he teaches in the Department of Government. He received his doctorate from Yale and has taught at Georgetown and Princeton. His most recent books are *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (coedited, with G John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno) and *World Out of Balance: International Relations Theory and the Challenge of American Primacy* (co-authored with Stephen Brooks).

### References

- Baylis, John and Steve Smith (2008) *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relations*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Bromley, Simon (2008) *American power and the prospects for international order* (Cambridge: Polity)
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2008) *World out of balance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Brooks, Stephen G and William C Wohlforth (2009) 'Reshaping the world order: how Washington should reform international institutions', *Foreign Affairs* (March/April)
- Buzan, Barry (2004) *The United States and the great powers: world politics in the 21st century* (Cambridge: Polity Press)
- Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy (2002) 'War with Iraq is not in America's interest', *New York Times*, 26 September
- Craig, Campbell (2009) 'American power preponderance and the nuclear revolution', *Review of International Studies*, 35:1, 27–45
- Craig, Campbell (2010) 'Rebuttal of John Glenn's "The flawed logic of a MAD man"', *Review of International Studies*, DOI:10.1017/S0260210510001464
- Clark, Ian (2005) *Legitimacy in international society* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Clark, Ian (forthcoming) *Hegemony in international society* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Economist (2011) 'Threatening a sacred cow', 398:8720, 33–34
- Finnemore, Martha (2009) 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity: why being a unipole isn't all it's cracked up to be', *World Politics*, 61:1, 58–85
- Gilpin, Robert (1981) *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Hansen, Birthe (2001) *Unipolarity and the Middle East* (New York: St Martin's Press)

- Huntington, Samuel (1999) 'The lonely superpower', *Foreign Affairs*, 78:2, 35–49
- Ikenberry, G John (2001) *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Ikenberry, G John, Michael Mastanduno and William Wohlforth (2009) 'Unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences', *World Politics*, 61:1, 1–27
- Kennedy, Paul (1987) *The rise and fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House)
- Keohane, Robert (1984) *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Kreps, Sarah (2008) 'When does the mission determine the coalition? The logic of multilateral intervention and the case of Afghanistan', *Security Studies*, 17:3, 531–567
- Kreps, Sarah (2011) *Coalitions of convenience: United States military interventions after the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Kupchan, Charles A and Peter L Trubowitz (2007) 'Dead center: the demise of liberal internationalism in the United States', *International Security*, 32:2, 7–44
- Layne, Christopher (2009) 'America's Middle East grand strategy after Iraq: the moment for offshore balancing has arrived', *Review of International Studies*, 35:1, 5–25
- Legro, Jeffrey and Melvyn Leffler (2008) *To lead the world: American strategy after the Bush doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Levy, Jack S and William R Thompson (2010) 'Balancing on land and at sea: do states ally against the leading global power?', *International Security*, 35:1, 7–43
- Mastanduno, Michael (2009) 'System maker and privilege taker: US power and the international political economy', *World Politics*, 61:1, 121–154
- Miller, Benjamin (2010) 'Explaining changes in US grand strategy: 9/11, the rise of offensive liberalism, and the war in Iraq', *Security Studies*, 19:1, 26–65
- Mearsheimer, John (2001a) 'Guns won't win the Afghan war', *New York Times*, 4 November
- Mearsheimer, John (2001b) *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: Norton)
- Mearsheimer, John (2011) 'Imperial by design', *The National Interest*, 111, 16–34
- Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt (2002) "'Realists" are not alone in opposing war with Iraq', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 November, 50–59
- Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt (2003) 'An unnecessary war', *Foreign Policy*, Jan/Feb, 50–60
- Nexon, Daniel (2009) 'The balance of power in the balance', *World Politics*, 61:2, 330–359
- Norrloff, Carla (2010) *America's global advantage: US hegemony and international cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Parent, Joseph and Joseph Bafumi (2008) 'Of polarity and polarization', *International Security*, 33:1, 170–172
- Posen, Barry R (2001/2002) 'The struggle against terrorism: grand strategy, strategy and tactics', *International Security*, 26:3, 39–55
- Posen, Barry R (2007) 'Stability and change in US grand strategy', *Orbis*, 51:4, 561–567
- Press–Barnathan, Galia (2006) 'Managing the hegemon: alliances under unipolarity', *Security Studies*, 15:2, 271–309
- Rachman, Gideon (2011) 'Think again: American decline. This time it's for real', *Foreign Policy*, January/February, 59–63
- Schweller, Randall and Xiaoyu Pu (forthcoming 2011) 'Delegitimation and system change: eroding unipolarity and China's visions of international order', *International Security*
- Snyder, Jack, Robert Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch–Elkon (2009) 'Free hand abroad, divide and rule at home', *World Politics*, 61:1, 55–187
- SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Available at <http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>
- Voeten, Erik (2001) 'Outside options and the logic of Security Council action', *The American Political Science Review*, 95:4, 845–858
- Voeten, Erik (2005) 'The political origins of the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council', *International Organization*, 59:3, 527–557
- Von Hlatky, Stefanie (2001) 'To hedge, leverage, or compensate: a look at intra–alliance strategies', unpublished manuscript
- Walt, Stephen (2009) 'Alliances in a unipolar world', *World Politics*, 61:1, 86–120
- Waltz, Kenneth (1979) *Theory of international politics* (Addison–Wesley)
- Weitsmnn, Patricia (2004) *Dangerous alliances: proponents of peace, weapons of war* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)