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## U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World

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**T**his book addresses the central puzzle posed by Ikenberry in the introduction: "Why, despite the widening power gulf between the United States and other major states, has a counterbalancing reaction not yet taken place?" In this chapter, I provide an answer: "Because neither theory nor history suggest that a counterbalance is likely given today's distribution of capabilities." In other words, I argue that the absence of a counterbalance—or even the signs of one—is not a puzzle even for a very spare structural reading of realist theory. Among self-interested states, collective action in pursuit of a single goal—such as counterbalancing a hegemon—is very hard to achieve. In the history of ancient and modern states systems, durable hegemonies are common. The conditions that make for counterhegemonic alliances are rare. They are not only absent from the current unipolar system, but they are unlikely to be present for a very long time.

Before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, many analysts argued that the U.S. grand strategy of global engagement would precipitate counterbalancing by other major powers. Given that the initial American response to the attack was an intensified engagement policy that entailed even greater involvement in the security affairs of Eurasia and heightened demands on the policies of other states, counterbalancing would appear to be an even greater concern. If the world is, as

some contributors to this volume believe, on the cusp of a new balancing order, then the United States must proceed very circumspectly in its campaign against terrorism. Will a proactive antiterror strategy provoke counterbalancing among great powers? Because my explanation for the absence of balancing under unipolarity is rooted in the distribution of capabilities itself rather than more ephemeral factors, I do not expect even an intensified counterterror campaign embedded within a renewed U.S. strategy of engagement to provoke systemic counterbalancing on the part of other states.

I base the analysis on the assumption that a sound grand strategy must be attuned to long-term considerations of relative power. I seek to isolate the causal effect of such power considerations by analyzing current world politics as if nothing has changed since the eighteenth century *except* the distribution of material resources. In other words, by excluding all the factors that might mitigate the effect of classical balance-of-power considerations, I employ assumptions that are *most* favorable to the argument that a U.S. strategy of engagement will spark a counterbalance. I acknowledge that this is an analytical procedure that may not be persuasive to most policymakers and many scholars. Yet the arguments both scholars and practitioners make about world politics and U.S. policy presuppose just such a procedure. Regardless of one's stance regarding realism, the power-centric and structural analysis I perform here is necessary to advance the debate.

My objective is to assess one argument in a large and complex debate over U.S. grand strategy. Scholars have proposed many candidate explanations for the absence of balancing behavior after 1991, such as globalization, democracy, and nuclear deterrence. Moreover, balance-of-power considerations are only one contested part of the overall debate over grand strategy. Even realists who highlight the importance of the distribution of capabilities understand that it is but one of the many factors that must figure in the calculations of policymakers. Truth in advertising compels strict limits on any claims that can be made on behalf of the kind of analysis I present here. The ultimate contribution of this chapter is negative. International relations scholarship on the balance of power does not yield a clear finding that impugns the wisdom of a strategy of engagement for a state in America's unipolar position. In the complex calculation of the costs and benefits of engagement, the risk of sparking a counterbalance should not figure prominently. Given that many "disengagers" write as if their preferred strategy is backed up by a preponderance of scholarship on the balance of power, this negative contribution is quite relevant to the debate.

### Why No Balancing?

The absence of balancing among the great powers is a fact. To counterbalance, great powers must either increase military strength (internal balancing) or aggregate their capabilities in an alliance (external balancing).<sup>1</sup> During unipolarity's first decade, neither form of balancing took place. After the Cold War's end and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, most major powers cut defense outlays significantly. As table 3.1 shows, military spending by the major powers from 1995–2000 remained at historically low levels, in most cases declining as a share of economic output. And none of the much-heralded moves by other states to coordinate policy—the “European troika” of France, Germany, and Russia; the “special relationship” between Germany and Russia; the “strategic triangle” of Russia, China and India; and the “strategic partnership” between China and Russia—came anywhere close to aggregating capabilities to match the United States. The balancing rhetoric that accompanied these moves masked far more limited objectives: coordinating policy on regional issues; enhancing leverage in policy bargaining with the United States; and “prestige balancing,” the technique of using relatively low-cost gestures to distance oneself politically from Washington. Even as efforts to coordinate policy against Washington, these arrangements fell far short, as member states periodically demonstrated a willingness to cooperate closely with the United States when it suited their interests of the day—as, for example, Russia chose to do in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. By any reasonable benchmark, the current international system is one in which both external and internal balancing among great powers is at a historical low.

Three propositions that are consistent with realist theory solve the mystery of the missing balance. First, balancing is inefficient even in settings where the incentives to balance are strong: tightly interdependent regional systems with aggressive revisionists that are weak enough to be countered. In other words, balancing is hard even in systems like modern Europe, from whose experience most balance-of-power theory is derived. Second, the concentration of capabilities in the United States passes the threshold at which counterbalancing becomes prohibitively costly, and thus the dominant strategy for other major powers is some form of engagement. Third, in the current globally dispersed system, balancing is much less efficient and the threshold concentration of capabilities necessary to sustain unipolarity is far lower than it was in Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 168.

Table 3.1 Defense Expenditure of Major Powers, 1995–2000 Billions Constant 1998 \$US (as % GDP)

	USA	Britain	France	Germany	Russia	China	Japan
1995	298 (3.8)	39 (3)	42 (3.1)	35 (1.7)	43 (4.1)	14 (1.8)	37 (1)
1996	282 (3.5)	40 (3)	41 (3)	34 (1.6)	40 (3.8)	15 (1.8)	37 (1)
1997	281 (3.3)	37 (2.7)	41 (2.9)	33 (1.6)	42 (4.2)	17 (1.9)	38 (1)
1998	274 (3.1)	37 (2.5)	40 (2.8)	33 (1.5)	31 (3.2)	19 (2)	38 (1)
1999	275 (3)	37 (2.5)	40 (2.7)	34 (1.5)	38 (3)	21 (2.1)	38 (1)
2000	281	36	40	33	44	23	38

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), database on military expenditures: <http://first.sipri.org>.

Note: All figures for China and Russia are SIPRI estimates.

### The Inefficiency of Balancing

Imagine a debate in London in May 1811 on the question at heart of this book: why no counterbalance? Fifteen years of war would have demonstrated French power and threat. Yet, we would have witnessed the failure of five coalitions against France, each ending in disaster as one or more members chose to bandwagon with or hide from Napoleon. We would know that Foreign Secretary George Canning had offered France an *uti possidetis* (“keep-what-you-have”) peace, only to see it rejected by Napoleon. France would be at the peak of its power, ruling Spain, Italy, the Low Countries, and much of Germany directly. Austria, Prussia, Norway, and Denmark would be mere satellites of the Grand Empire. Only Britain, Sweden, Portugal, and Russia would be out of Napoleon's grasp, but of these only Britain would actively be balancing France. The small countries on the continent by now would have no choice but to bandwagon. But surely the greatest puzzle of all would be Russia—the one empire other than the British that could actually choose to balance—which would be busily collaborating with France against Britain. St. Petersburg would, in short, be undermining and alienating the *only* possible ally against French hegemony in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, balancing eventually did occur in the sixth, final, and finally successful coalition. But that coalition was only made possible by two events: Napoleon's invasion of Russia, which, not surprisingly, had the effect of strengthening the anti-French party in Czar Alexander's court, and by far the most important, the revealed *weakening* of France. Events in Russia and Spain revealed that France was less powerful than previously imagined. As a result, one by one the other great powers concluded that they would be better off joining a winning coalition against France than continuing to accommodate the preferences of a weakening Paris.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), chaps. 6–9.

The example illustrates three theoretical reasons to expect balancing among rational, self-interested states to be difficult. First, as Glen Snyder notes, "The logic of collective goods undercuts . . . balance-of-power theory."<sup>3</sup> The security associated with an international equilibrium can be enjoyed by all states, whether or not they pay for it by balancing. Hence, the standard logic of collective action predicts balancing capabilities are likely to be systematically undersupplied. The implication is that balancing will be inefficient, as in the Napoleonic example.

Second, politics—even international politics—is most often local. Because power—especially the power to take and hold territory—is difficult to project over long distances, for any state the most salient threats and opportunities tend to be nearby. Consequently, states are usually more concerned with their neighborhoods than with the global equilibrium. In the Napoleonic case, Russia opted for engagement with France in part because it had aims against the Ottoman Empire that Britain opposed. All the other powers had similar hopes and gripes—all of which played into Napoleon's hands. As Kenneth N. Waltz points out, balancing may occur despite states' shortsighted intentions.<sup>4</sup> True, but this may make balancing very inefficient, as the systemic imperative may need to reach extremes in order to overwhelm local considerations.

Third, to quote Snyder again, "Rational alliance formation is a matter of optimizing across security gains and autonomy losses."<sup>5</sup> Alliance commitments affect both security and autonomy. Security against a potential hegemon may be purchased through sacrificing autonomy in an alliance. The stronger the potential hegemon, the more explicit and comprehensive the necessary alliance commitment, and the greater the consequent sacrifice in autonomy. The more salient local as opposed to systemic imperatives, the greater the importance of autonomy losses associated with alliance formation relative to the security gains of attaining a systemic equilibrium.

These three theoretical considerations make balance-of-power theory more realistic by explaining why balancing will be inefficient, as in the Napoleonic case.<sup>6</sup> They all arise from the simple assumption that states re-

<sup>3</sup> Glen H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 50.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Reflection on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics*," in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 48.

<sup>6</sup> I explore this issue further in William C. Wohlforth, "Measuring Power and the Power of Theories," in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, ed. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002).

spond to systemic incentives in a roughly rational manner. The only way to reject them is to argue that states are systematically insensitive to relative costs and benefits—that they can be expected to engage in counterbalancing even when it is not in their interest to do so. Some formulations of balance-of-power theory imply such an argument by treating balancing as a system-determined imperative to which states respond in an automaton-like manner, or as a norm that transcends immediate state interests.<sup>7</sup> But there is no compelling reason to accept such an argument when applying balance-of-power theory to the current unipolar system. And while some formulations of realist theory suggest such an argument, there is nothing about realist theory generally that requires it.

To be sure, the more inefficient balancing is, the fewer the circumstances in which balance-of-power theory makes determinate predictions. Instead of being states' dominant strategy most of the time, balancing becomes a highly contingent choice. Even in an international system like the modern European one where the theory should work well, the conditions necessary to foster a strong systemic balancing imperative are rare. Systemic balancing only occurs when members of the prospective anti-hegemonic coalition conclude they have the capability to balance at less cost in the things they value (security, status, prosperity) than bandwagoning with the strongest power or standing aside from the contest. Had France been somewhat stronger (and, perhaps, less reckless), there is little in the historical record to suggest that its hegemony in Europe would not have lasted many decades. And had that been the case, rather than explaining the inefficiency of the anti-French balancing coalitions, these same three theoretical considerations would explain their complete absence.

### The Unipolar Threshold

This discussion brings us to one final proposition that is both consistent with realism (though rarely mentioned in standard treatments of balance-of-power theory) and illuminated by the example of Napoleon's Grand Empire. This proposition concerns not the efficiency but the very possibility of balancing. In any system, there is a threshold concentration of power in the strongest state that makes a counterbalance prohibitively

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Michael Nicholson, *Formal Theories of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 26; and Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley, 1957), 23. These sources are cited in Richard Rosecrance, "Has Realism Become Cost-Benefit Analysis?" *International Security* 26, no. 2 (fall 2001), 134, who makes this same point.

costly. This is what it means to call a system "unipolar."<sup>8</sup> Once again, we should not expect states to engage in counterbalancing when it is manifestly beyond their capability to do so. Once the system is past this threshold, further concentration of capabilities in the hands of the sole pole reinforces rather than undermines equilibrium. And the level of the unipolar threshold—the percentage of power that must be concentrated in the unipolar state in order to preclude systemic balancing—depends on the relative salience of local as opposed to global imperatives. That is, the unipolar threshold will vary in different international systems depending on the number and location of the states that comprise them.

Bearing these theoretical propositions in mind, consider the following three empirical attributes of the current international system.<sup>9</sup>

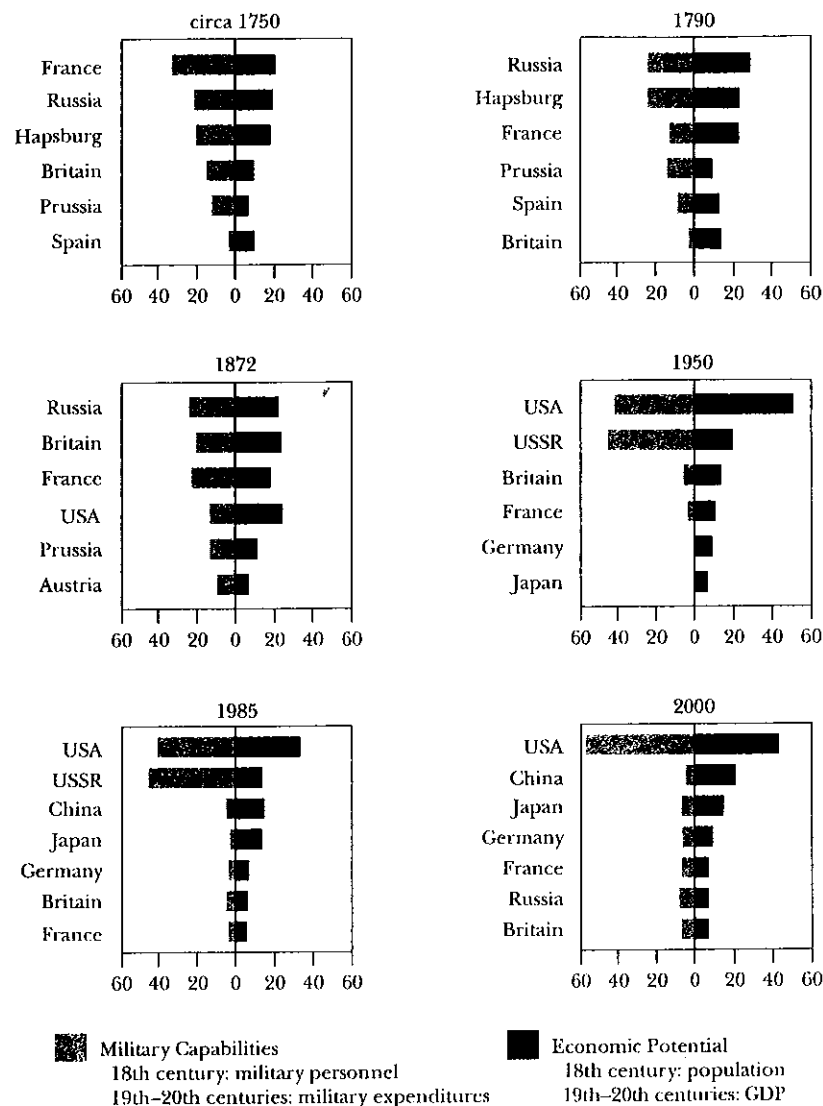
1. The United States is far more capable relative to other great powers than Napoleonic France—or any other European great power in the last three centuries. The graphs in figure 1 plot rough measures of economic and military capabilities in the European and global international systems since the eighteenth century. More detailed historical research ratifies the impression those rough measures convey: the states responsible for all the classical bids for hegemony in Europe possessed a much smaller initial share of the total capabilities in the great-power subsystem. From a *much* narrower material base than the United States currently possesses, France actually managed to pass the unipolar threshold for the years of the Grand Empire.

2. The United States possesses a much more complete portfolio of material capabilities than any European system leader. The graphs in figure 1 illustrate the conventional wisdom that the United States' post-1991 dominance in military and economic power is unprecedented in modern history. Not only does the United States have a margin of superiority that greatly exceeds that of the British Empire at its peak, it also has the edge in every important dimension of power. By devoting only 3–4 percent of its economy to the military, it generates 55 percent of all defense spending and 80 percent of military research and development among the world's seven most powerful states. It also accounts for 43 percent of economic production, 40 percent of high-technology production, and 50 percent of total research and development expenditures. No state in history could do this. Leading states tended to be either great commercial and naval powers or great land powers—never both.

<sup>8</sup> I analyze this question in greater depth in William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 21, no. 1 (summer 1999): 1–36.

<sup>9</sup> The discussion here elaborates on the treatment of these issues in Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World."

Fig. 1 Comparing Hegemonies: Distribution (Percentage) of Economic and Military Capabilities among the Major Powers



Sources: Eighteenth-century data: Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). GDP, 1870–1985; Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992* (Paris: OECD, 1995). GDP, 2000: Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook 2001* (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/>). Military expenditures, 1872–1985: J. David Singer and Melvin Small, "National Material Capabilities Data, 1816–1985," computer file (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research). Military Expenditures, 2000: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), database on military expenditures: <http://first.sipri.org>.

Notes: Germany = Federal Republic of Germany and Russia = USSR in 1950, and 1985. Maddison's estimates are based on states' modern territories. For 1870, I added his estimates for Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia; and Russia and Finland. 2000 GDP figures are calculated using purchasing power parity (PPP) ratios, which, according to the CIA, may overstate the size of China's economy by 25%. China's and Russia's military expenditures for 2000 are SIPRI estimates.

The comprehensiveness of U.S. preponderance is critical. Because of the norm of sovereignty, the international system is de jure anarchic, but because of vast inequalities of material power, it is de facto hierarchical.<sup>10</sup> The problem for any hegemon is how to reconcile the reality of its dominance with the useful fiction of state equality. Hence, all hegemonies try to legitimate their position. The more unambiguous a given hegemon's dominance, the easier it will be to foster such legitimacy. In a competitive system, states will try to exploit their comparative advantages in pursuit of status. If the hegemon's portfolio of capabilities is heavy in one class of power assets, lesser states can be counted on to try to enhance the premium on other kinds of assets. The more complete the hegemon's portfolio of power capabilities, the less credible such strategies will be, and the easier it will be for others to accept the hegemon's expansive role as legitimate.

3. The United States has already achieved unipolar status. In other words, the status quo is American dominance. True, after 1991 the United States expanded into areas in Central Europe and Asia formerly under Moscow's sway to the dismay of a weakened Russian state. But in the main theaters of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, U.S. engagement is the status quo. While most alliance theory concerns counterbalancing by status quo states against an aspiring, revisionist power, in the current system restoring equilibrium is a revisionist project. All of the arguments in political science concerning the difficulty of overthrowing a settled, complex, path-dependent social equilibrium now work for rather than against the hegemon. In light of this literature, the barriers to organizing collective action against the status quo United States are much higher than those that frustrated balancing against aspiring, revisionist would-be hegemonies like Napoleonic France.

Theory and history thus suggest that even if the United States were physically located in Eurasia, and there were no nuclear weapons, globalization, democracy, modern international institutions, or new norms against the use of force, it could sustain a unipolar system. It would only need to be a bit stronger relative to rivals than Napoleon's France was, and the evidence shows that it possesses and will long maintain a far greater share of system capabilities than France ever had.

### The Geography of U.S. Unipolarity

Of course, the United States is not in Eurasia, while all other great powers and potential great powers are. This simple reality captures two further at-

<sup>10</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

tributes of the current international system that differentiate it from its European predecessors.

4. United States capabilities are "offshore." Geography is a material explanation for reduced threat perceptions. As Stephen M. Walt notes, "States that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away. Other things being equal, states are more likely to make their alliance choices in response to nearby powers than in response to those that are distant."<sup>11</sup> A systemic concentration of power that is separated from all other major players by two oceans is less threatening to others, regardless of U.S. intentions or institutions.

5. The international system is global—and all other great powers are clustered in and around Eurasia. In contiguous international systems such as modern Europe, systemic and local imperatives fuse at a lower threshold than in dispersed systems. A hegemon thus needs more power to stave off a counterbalance, since local concerns are less likely to divert other powers from systemic balancing. It is striking in this context how strong local imperatives were in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

The current system is global, rather than regional, and the unipolar state is offshore. These two geographical features dramatically alter the relationship between local and systemic imperatives. Distance reduces the salience of American unipolarity, while proximity maximizes salience of the capabilities of the other great powers vis-à-vis each other. They are much more likely to have aspirations and gripes regarding each other than regarding the distant unipolar power. Local threats and opportunities are thus much more likely to thwart systemic balancing in this than in other systems. Thus, the unipolar threshold is *lower* in the current international system than it was in modern Europe; counterhegemonic balancing is likely to be *less* efficient; and the United States has a far larger and more comprehensive preponderance in the distribution of material capabilities than any leading state in modern history. Simply extending the logic of standard balance-of-power theory to the geographical realities of today's unipolar system suggests:

(a) that other great powers have lower incentives to counterbalance the hegemon than in European systems because balancing brings fewer security gains (owing to the hegemon's offshore location) and greater autonomy losses (owing to location of all other great powers on the Eurasian landmass).

(b) that other great powers face larger collective action problems in fashioning a counterhegemonic alliance than states in analogous posi-

<sup>11</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 23.

tions in past international systems. Overcoming the collective action problem requires that one or a few states face particularly salient or concentrated incentives to balance. The greater the extent to which major powers are embedded in regional security systems, the less likely it is that any one will face sufficiently concentrated incentives to pay the up front costs of organizing a counterbalance.

(c) that attempts on the part of individual states to balance via internal efforts are likely to spark local counterbalancing (either through compensatory internal efforts, regional alliances, or alliances with the United States in the classic "checkerboard" pattern) before they substantially constrain the United States.

Standard treatments of balance-of-power theory feature vulnerable, revisionist, centrally located putative hegemon possessing marginal brute power advantages and highly asymmetrical power portfolios in closely integrated international systems. That is, they concern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And even in that setting, organizing a counterbalance could be precarious and uncertain. By contrast, America's capabilities are relatively greater and more comprehensive than those of past hegemon, are located offshore, they stand behind rather than against the status quo, and the prospective balancing powers are comparatively close regional neighbors embedded in complex regional subsystems containing relatively capable states. The basic propositions set forth above suggest that this is a state of affairs that augurs for stability. Put differently, examining simply the distribution of material capabilities, the system is not in disequilibrium, and the systemic balancing imperative is weak. Simply by considering noncontroversial propositions about the inefficiency of balancing and factoring in geography, the mystery of the missing counterbalance is solved, even if we do not consider nuclear weapons and other clearly important new factors in world politics.

### Explaining the Unipolarity Debate

This discussion does leave one puzzle unanswered: why do so many thoughtful people think the current system is "incipiently multipolar"?<sup>12</sup> According to Richard Haass, "As power diffuses around the world, America's position relative to others will inevitably erode."<sup>13</sup> Charles Kupchan sees "a global landscape in which power and influence are more equally

distributed" as a "near term" prospect that will bring "the return of competitive balancing" among great powers.<sup>14</sup> Samuel Huntington agrees, arguing that America's unipolar "moment" has already given way to a "unimultipolar" structure that will soon yield to an unambiguously multipolar one.<sup>15</sup>

One answer is the common tendency of commentators to shift the goal posts. Under bi- or multipolarity, the prolonged absence of a major power war was considered a historical achievement. In those systems, even the temporary abeyance of geopolitical competition among great powers was a striking puzzle that scholars labored long to try to explain. Under unipolarity, scholars appear to take comparatively amicable relations among all the great powers for granted, and suddenly the sine qua non of polar status is the ability to impose solutions to intractable regional conflicts or civil wars within distant states of little or no strategic importance. Thus, in Huntington's view, a truly unipolar state "could effectively resolve all important international issues alone, and no combination of other states would have the power to prevent it from doing so." This is demanding standard, to say the least. When the European great powers failed to get their way in the Balkans in the nineteenth century they did not cease being great powers, just as United States did not lose its superpower status when it failed to prevail in Vietnam. It would never have occurred to any observer of any other interstate system to apply Huntington's definition to any previous hegemon.

A second explanation for inflated expectations of multipolarity's return is the selection of misleading reference points. For example, the only historical referent Huntington identifies for a unipolar system is the Roman Empire at its peak—not a state system at all, nor indeed a system to which anyone before 1991 would have thought to apply the concept of polarity. Compared to a military empire like Rome, any states system seems multipolar.

Perhaps more influential is the memory of the tight bipolar system of the early Cold War. Figure 2 plots a standard measure of the systemic concentration of capabilities for the top six great powers over the last two centuries. What this indicator seeks to capture is the degree to which capabilities are concentrated in the hands of one or a few states within the great-power subsystem. Overall, the story this index tells is that in the post-World War II era capabilities have been much more concentrated than in the nineteenth

<sup>12</sup> The phrase is Snyder's, *Alliance Politics*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States after the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, "Life after Pax Americana," *World Policy Journal* 16 (fall 1999): 20–27.

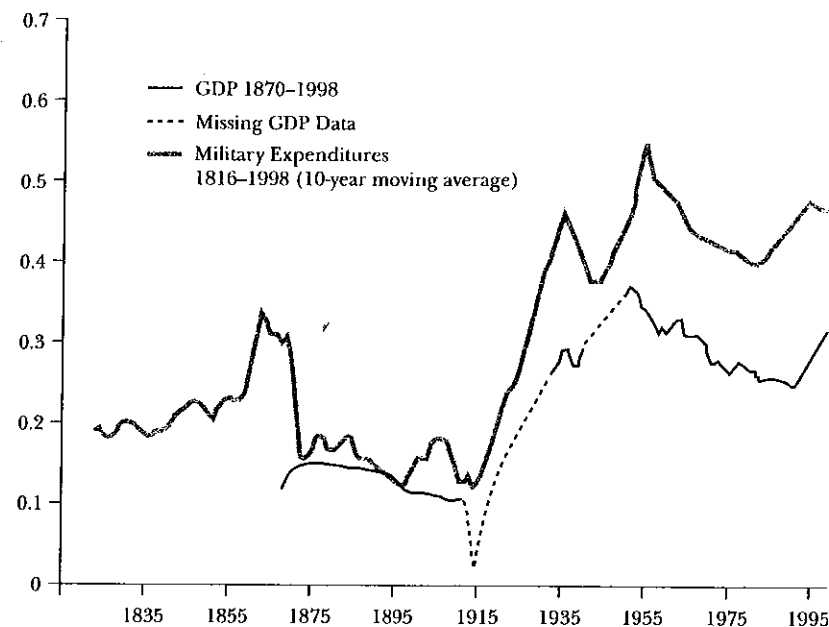
<sup>15</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 35–49.

century. Capabilities were remarkably evenly distributed among great powers in the classical era of the balance of power in Europe. Waltz truly captured the uniqueness of post-World War II international politics with his structural concept of bipolarity. But the highest peacetime levels of overall concentration were in the early bipolar era around 1948–52. It was then that the two superpowers dominated all other great powers to a degree that no state—including the United States—can today. While Soviet decline, Japanese stagnation, and U.S. growth have increased concentration since the mid-1980s, economic and military capabilities are still more dispersed among great powers now than in the early bipolar era. What this means in practice is that the second-tier great powers are relatively more capable vis-à-vis the United States today than they were vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union in the early Cold War. To the extent that expectations concerning the sole superpower at the dawn of unipolarity are influenced by memories the relative dominance of the two superpowers at the dawn of bipolarity, the former is bound to disappoint.

A final explanation for misperceived polarity shifts is the changing composition of the international system—in particular the vast increase in the number of lesser powers compared to great powers. Figure 3 plots the military personnel and general military-industrial capabilities (an index of population, energy use, military personnel, and military spending) of the top five powers as a percentage of the world total. It indicates that the great powers still represent a large proportion of world power capabilities (though, again, not as great as in the early bipolar era). But the dramatic increase in the number of states over the last half century means that there are simply many more states with at least some offensive capability and often substantial defensive capability than in most of the international systems of the past. To the extent that the indicators in figure 3 capture the ability of states to field some kind of military force that can defend territory and local waters, the global balance of defensive power has shifted steadily against the great powers—not surprising given the increased number of lesser states.

The result is again to enhance the salience of local imperatives compared to the systemic balance among great powers. Each great power in each region has to think about more and more capable non-great power neighbors than did the great powers of earlier international systems. At the same time, the ability of great powers to determine the character of relations through the system is less than it was in much simpler and smaller regional systems like nineteenth-century Europe, with fewer and weaker non-great power actors. The effect of a declining ratio of great powers to lesser states was already observable in the latter bipolar era, as commentators continually hailed each instance of regional independence from the superpowers as the return of multipolarity. Waltz showed that they were

Fig. 2 Singer/Small Concentration Index for Top Six Powers



Sources: GDP, 1870–1990: Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995); GDP 1991–1998: Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, various years). Military expenditures, 1872–1985: J. David Singer and Melvin Small, “National Material Capabilities Data, 1816–1985,” computer file (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research). Military expenditures, 1985–1998: International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance* (London: IISS, various years).

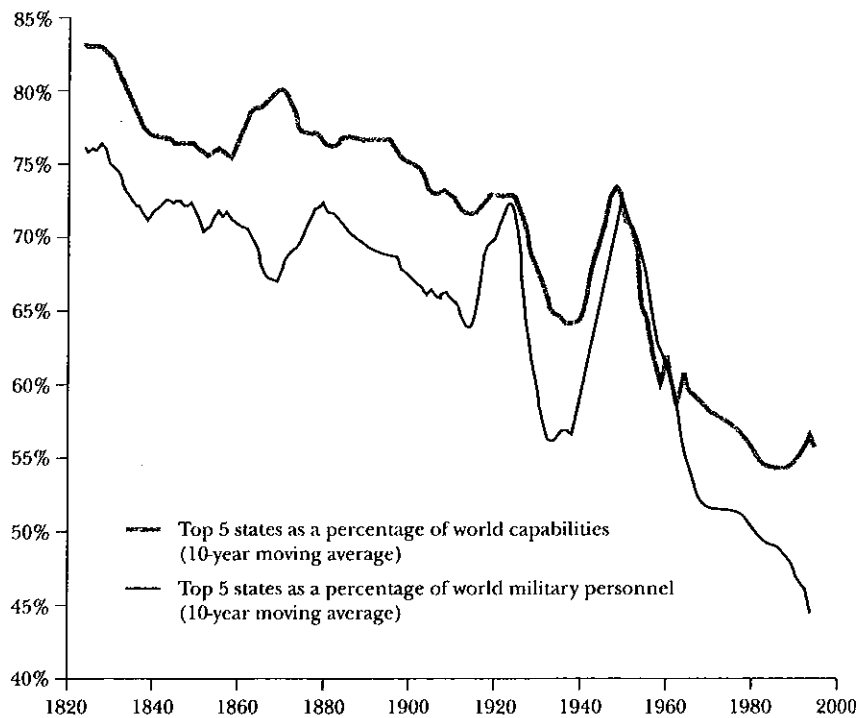
Notes: Singer and Small’s measure of the concentration of power is: standard deviation of the percentage shares of each state divided by the maximum possible standard deviation in a system of size  $N$ . The properties of the measure as compared to other measures of concentration in the social sciences are discussed in James Lee Ray and J. David Singer, “Measuring the Concentration of Power in the International System,” in *Measuring the Correlates of War*, ed. J. David Singer and Paul F. Diehl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

wrong, in that the system was still bipolar.<sup>16</sup> But they were right that it was less concentrated in the 1970s than in the 1950s. Because expectations today are based on comparisons to the nineteenth century and the early bipolar era, America’s inability to impose settlements (at low cost) on dozens of regional states is often taken as evidence that the system is not really unipolar.

The indicators presented in figures 2 and 3 are crude and need to be supplemented by historical research on changing power relationships. But they do convey efficiently what more detailed research appears to rat-

<sup>16</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

Fig. 3 Great Power Capabilities as a Percentage of World Total



Source: J. David Singer and Melvin Small, "National Material Capabilities Data, 1816-1985," computer file (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research). Downloaded from <http://www.eugenesoftware.org>. See D. Scott Bennett and Allan Stam III, "EUGene: A Conceptual Manual," *International Interactions* 26 (2000): 179-204.

Notes: Capabilities represented by Singer and Small's composite index, which combines the following indicators with equal weights: total population, urban population, energy consumption, iron and steel production, military expenditures, and military personnel.

ify: the current system is characterized by an unprecedented hegemony within the great-power subsystem, and a novel proliferation of lesser states outside that subsystem.

### Unipolarity, Balancing, and the Case for Disengagement

The structure of the international system has shifted from bipolarity to unipolarity, but American grand strategy has undergone no such transformation. The United States continues to follow a strategy of maintaining a preponderance of power globally and deep engagement in the security affairs of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. It has adapted rather than abandoned the central institutions and practices it fostered during the

bipolar era, expanded NATO to Central Europe, strengthened its military alliance with Japan, and taken on a great many other less heralded new security commitments in areas formally under Moscow's sway. To support this strategy, the United States continues to maintain a military establishment on a scale comparable in absolute terms to the peacetime years of the Cold War.

Such behavioral continuity in the face of structural change has prompted many scholars to argue that it is time to develop a strategy for disengaging the United States from the security affairs of Eurasia. While not all of these scholars are self-described realists, they generally accept the realist premise that a sound grand strategy must be attuned to the systemic distribution of power. They differ on the details but agree on a central proposition: the risks of continuing the strategy of preponderance outweigh the risks of early disengagement.<sup>17</sup> Their argument demands an extremely complex assessment of the costs and benefits of engagement. After September 11, 2001, the main question was naturally whether engagement makes terror attacks against the United States more likely. The analysis in this chapter cannot address that crucial question. What it can do is clarify the relationship between unipolarity, engagement, and balancing behavior.

The current strategy of engagement is consistent with but not necessitated by the system's material structure. Critics of realism are right that a full explanation for America's choice of grand strategy must include path-dependency, inertia, domestic politics, and ideas (though they are wrong that any realist claims structure dictates strategic choice). The strategy is consistent in that the material environment places few restrictions on a strategy of engagement while offering numerous demands for American involvement. Given the increased ratio of lesser states to great powers, and thus the expanding list of intrastate conflicts, as well as the unprecedented concentration of capabilities in the United States, it is not surprising that Washington's involvement is so frequently demanded as well as denounced. But this structure does not require U.S. engagement. Disengagers are right that America *can* "come home." Indeed, because unipolarity dampens traditional great-power threats to the core security of the United States, the current strategy may be difficult to sustain, particularly if Americans perceive a tight link between the engagement strategy and the terrorist threat to their homeland.

<sup>17</sup> See Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (winter 1996/97): 5-54; Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (summer 1997): 86-124; Eugene Gholtz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (spring 1997): 5-48; Kupchan, "Life after Pax Americana," 20-27.

In assessing the costs and risks of competing grand strategies, three propositions derived from the foregoing analysis of the distribution of capabilities ought to be considered:

First and most importantly, a continued U.S. grand strategy of engagement will not produce a counterbalance. The debate over balancing dynamics and U.S. grand strategy requires two critical judgments. First, will the systemic balancing imperative soon come to dominate the strategies of the second-tier great powers? That is, in maximizing their preference for security, status, or wealth, will these states find that the systemic imperative to counterbalance U.S. power outweighs more local imperatives when these two levels contradict each other? The second judgment is just as critical but rarely noted: to what extent is balancing behavior contingent on U.S. strategy as opposed to its underlying capabilities? For America cannot choose to become less powerful; it can only decide how and where to wield its latent power. Disengagers must argue that U.S. engagement increases incentives for others to balance substantially over what they would do to counter "disengaged" U.S. potential. As Kenneth Waltz has shown, actors in a competitive system seek to emulate or undercut successful practices.<sup>18</sup> To some degree, America's preponderance will elicit such a competitive response no matter what it does. The question is whether engagement materially affects that response.

I established that the distribution and location of material capabilities suggest that local imperatives will overwhelm the systemic resentment of American power in the concrete strategic choices of other major states. To be sure, American success will elicit strategies of emulation and competition from other states. But my explanation for the missing counterbalance suggests that these responses are not especially sensitive to U.S. strategy.

Second, the strategy may affect levels of cooperation among great powers. Cooperation is hard among states in anarchy. Realists argue that cooperation is contingent on power—either a shared threat or hegemonic dominance. Liberals, institutionalists, and constructivists think cooperation does not require specific power configurations. These different theories have different explanations for post-1991 cooperation that are hard to evaluate on existing data. For realists, cooperation is an outgrowth of U.S. hegemony. The strength of institutions reflects the strength of the state that creates them. If realists are right, then disengagement decreases the leverage available to Washington to effect cooperation, and to build and run the institutions that make its dominance cheaper and more efficient. The United States uses the security dependence of other states to push through cooperative solutions on a variety of issues that favor its in-

terests.<sup>19</sup> Disengagement reduces security dependence of others and reduces the incentives American policymakers can provide to other actors to forge cooperation.

Many of these levers of influence were on display in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. While the ultimate outcome of the antiterror campaign will not be known for many years, the initial phase clearly showed the utility of engagement in fostering a coalition against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Long-standing relationships with Uzbekistan, for example, coupled with a large supply of carrots and sticks vis-à-vis Russia, helped the United States quickly project power into Central Asia—one of the most remote spots in Eurasia. If the strategy of engagement does not directly generate increased terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland, then, on balance it pays important dividends in responding to unexpected security threats.

Third, the strategy affects the incentives for intra-great-power balancing. I have argued that the absence of a counterbalance against American power is largely a structural result. The absence (or, at least, the muted level) of competitive balancing *among* great powers in Eurasia may be a consequence of U.S. strategy. If America brought its forces home, its latent power would continue to figure in the calculations of other states. Still, the security problem would become more acute. Charles Kupchan argues that "cobinding" through institutions can create stable regional systems in Asia and Europe without direct U.S. engagement.<sup>20</sup> Gholtz, Press, and Sapolsky argue that even without elaborate institutions, these regions can create stable multipolar systems by relying on defense-dominant military postures.<sup>21</sup> These arguments seem more plausible in Europe than Asia, where most regional experts would expect the return of competitive balancing if Washington extracted itself from the area.

The propositions I developed here provide one explanation for low levels of security or prestige competition among great powers since 1990. Constructivist, institutionalist, and liberal theories provide another.<sup>22</sup> We cannot know with confidence which is true (or which is true about which region or issue) because the outcome is overdetermined. On the question of should the United States come home, however, the predictions of

<sup>19</sup> For a vivid and well-documented case, see David E. Spiro, *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (fall 1998): 40–79.

<sup>21</sup> Gholtz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America."

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the American Postwar Order," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (winter 1998/99): 43–78.

<sup>18</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

different theories diverge. If most realist theories are right, the resultant multipolar regions would become much more competitive strategic environments. Competitive environments could foster more capable actors. Such an environment would affect domestic debates inside critical states—Japan and Germany are prime examples—over whether to create the capabilities and institutions of a great power. Again, the realist and constructivist/liberal explanations of these “anomalous” states would receive a real test if America came home. If American withdrawal sparked an arms race between Japan and China, for example, what sorts of new capabilities and strategies might emerge? In short, it is possible that disengagement could decrease relative U.S. power by creating a more competitive Eurasia that could incubate one or a few fearsome states in the future. Disengagement could thus produce the ironic (or tragic) result that the United States would have to reengage—possibly under even more dangerous circumstances than are imaginable today.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I developed an explanation for the absence of competitive balancing among great powers after 1991 that has implications for the debate over U.S. grand strategy. An influential argument holds that a continued strategy of engagement will prompt a counterbalancing reaction on the part of other major powers and therefore that the United States should disengage itself from the security affairs of Eurasia. Given that the initial U.S. response to the terror attacks on New York and Washington was a dramatically enhanced engagement strategy, this argument remains central to long-term strategic planning.

If it can be shown that the international system is not teetering in a precarious disequilibrium and primed for counterbalancing, then the argument for early disengagement loses some force. I accepted as a starting point for analysis the assumption that relative power is important in explaining state behavior and should be considered when framing strategic choices. In order to evaluate the causal effect of such power considerations as rigorously as possible, I sought to isolate them by assuming away all the manifold changes in world politics since the eighteenth century except for changes in the distribution and location of capabilities. That is, the analytical procedure and the assumptions I employed were most favorable to the standard argument that current U.S. grand strategy contradicts the systemic balancing imperative.

My main conclusion is that well-known realist theories of the relations among standard geopolitical variables—the number of states and the dis-

tribution, composition, and location of material capabilities—predict that the systemic balancing imperative is very unlikely now to assume the salience it did in seventeenth- to twentieth-century Europe, where balance-of-power theory developed. The balancing imperative—often a weak force in the past—will not soon dominate great-powers’ strategic choices in today’s novel unipolar system. United States power is too great, too comprehensive, too far offshore, and too deeply enmeshed in (rather than arrayed against) the status quo to provoke a classical counterbalancing reaction. The greater salience of local over systemic imperatives in today’s international system means that the United States can be engaged deeply in the security affairs of Eurasia without sparking counterbalancing efforts. Thus, the very feature of the unipolar system that causes many scholars to question its longevity—the ability of regional actors sporadically to defy the preferences of the major powers—actually works to prolong it. For all of these reasons, the United States could in all likelihood decline relative to other great powers for many decades without jeopardizing its ability to continue in its present strategic role in world politics.

The fact that the United States can continue its current strategic course does not mean it should do so. For one thing, if Americans come to perceive a direct link between the engagement strategy and the terrorist threat to their homeland then the strategy’s cost will rightly be seen in a new light and the case for “coming home” will be strengthened. And some of the positive attributes of a unipolar system are not contingent on U.S. strategy. Whether or not the United States is engaged, there will be no anti-U.S. counterbalancing coalition and no challenge to U.S. primacy in the policy relevant future.

If, however, there is no direct link between the strategy of engagement and the attractiveness of the U.S. homeland as a target for terror, then the case for engagement is strengthened. By dampening security and status competition among second-tier great powers, the United States keeps Eurasia less competitive and thus less likely to breed tough, militarily powerful states. By keeping other states somewhat dependent on itself for security, Washington obtains leverage on other issues and is in a better position to foster cooperation among self-interested states. Naturally, Washington generally ensures that the resultant cooperative equilibria reflect its interests. The United States obtains large but hard-to-measure gains from the deference it receives in exchange for the forward deployment of its considerable resources. In a pinch, Washington can use its hegemonic position to extract unilateral advantage. Given the fact that engagement is unlikely by itself to drain American resources, an engaged United States in a better position than a disengaged one to respond to a major crisis or unexpected geopolitical challenges. These arguments

seemed to be ratified by the initial U.S. response to the unexpected security threat from terrorism.

As daunting as the challenge of terrorism seems in the wake of September 11, the challenge would be even more formidable in a world on the verge of a structural shift to multipolarity. Fortunately, we are not in such a world. Because unipolarity dampens the traditional great-power security threats of power balancing and hegemonic rivalry—the prime security threat for most great powers for most of modern history—the United States and its allies can contemplate innovative and potentially expensive responses—military, economic, and political—to new security threats.