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The Unipolar Illusion Revisited

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The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment

The key grand strategic issue confronting U.S. policymakers today is whether the United States can escape the same fate that has befallen the other great powers that have contended for hegemony since the origin of the modern international state system (circa 1500). Since the early 1990s, U.S. policymakers have embraced primacy and adopted an ambitious grand strategy of expanding the United States' preponderant power—notwithstanding the seemingly ironclad rule of modern international history that hegemony always provoke, and are defeated by, the counterhegemonic balancing of other great powers. U.S. primacy also has widespread support in the scholarly community. Primacist scholars claim that U.S. hard-power capabilities are so overwhelming that other states cannot realistically hope to balance against the United States, nor do they have reason to because U.S. hegemony is benevolent.¹ Like their policymaking counterparts, they believe that hegemony advances U.S. interests and that the United States can maintain its preeminence deep into the century.

The United States' hegemonic grand strategy has been challenged by Waltzian balance of power realists who believe that the days of U.S. primacy are numbered and that other states have good reason to fear unbalanced U.S. power.² More recently, other scholars have argued that, albeit in nontraditional

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1. For arguments that the United States can be a successful hegemon, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially chaps. 1, 5; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); and William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41. See also Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (July/August 2002), pp. 20–33; Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 49–88; and G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of Postwar Order," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 43–78.

2. Following the Soviet Union's demise, Kenneth N. Waltz and I predicted that unipolarity would quickly give way to multipolarity by stimulating the rise of new great powers. See Christopher

forms, counterbalancing against the United States already is occurring. While many of these scholars favor primacy, they acknowledge that unless the United States wields its preponderant power with restraint, it could fall victim to a counterhegemonic backlash.

One of the key questions in the scholarly debate is: What constitutes balancing? Those who cling to a traditional definition of balancing, and those who argue that there are new post-Cold War forms of balancing, disagree primarily on two issues: What are the instruments of a balancing strategy, and what motivations drive states to engage in counterhegemonic balancing? Primacists define balancing in hard-power terms. Balancing is about using military power, alliances, or both to stop a hegemon. Primacists claim that states balance against a hegemon because they are afraid of being conquered by it.

This traditional definition of balancing has been challenged by scholars who argue that unipolarity has given rise to new forms of balancing. Unlike states engaged in hard balancing, states that employ these new forms of balancing do not believe that the hegemon poses an existential threat, though it may pose a more subtle kind of threat. Hence, they are searching for strategies to restrain it peacefully and ameliorate the possibly harmful impact its preeminence may have on them. These new forms of balancing employ nonmilitary instruments of power. For example, "soft balancing" involves the use of diplomacy, international institutions, and international law to constrain and delegitimize the actions of a hegemonic United States.³ "Economic prebalancing" occupies a middle ground between soft balancing and hard balancing. States that pursue economic prebalancing are trying to avoid the risks of engaging in a premature arms buildup aimed at the United States by concentrating first on closing the economic and technological gap between them and the United

Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; and Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 44–79. Obviously, these predictions were wrong. I still believe, however, that the analytical case made to support the prediction that unipolarity would cause new great powers to emerge as counterweights was correct. Indeed, with China's rise we gradually may be seeing the fulfillment of that prediction. For extended discussion, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

3. For discussions of soft balancing, see Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 126–132; Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 7–45; and T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 46–71. For counterarguments, see Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 109–139; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 72–108.

States. Successful economic prebalancing lays the foundation for hard balancing in the future.⁴

Because soft balancing and economic prebalancing have been ably discussed and debated elsewhere, I do not discuss them further in this article.⁵ Instead, I contribute to the debate about what constitutes balancing by focusing on another new form of counterbalancing, which I call “leash-slipping.”⁶ States engaging in leash-slipping do not fear being attacked by the hegemon. Rather, they build up their military capabilities to maximize their ability to conduct an independent foreign policy.

In this article I address three fundamental questions. First, is the United States insulated from challenge because of its alleged status as a nonthreatening, or benevolent, hegemon? Second, since the Cold War’s end, have other states balanced against the United States? The answers to these two questions hold the key to answering a third: How long is U.S. hegemony likely to last? My central arguments are threefold. First, there are strong reasons to doubt the claim that other states view U.S. primacy as nonthreatening. Second, unipolarity has not altered the fundamental dynamics of international politics: other states always have compelling incentives to offset the preponderant capabilities of the very powerful, even if the hegemon does not pose an existential threat to them. Third, because the United States’ expansionist grand strategy reinforces other states’ perceptions that U.S. unipolar power is threatening, the United States must adopt a different grand strategy: an offshore balancing strategy of self-restraint.

This article unfolds as follows. First, I examine the reasons why Waltzian balance of power realists erred in predicting that the era of unipolarity would be only a brief transitional period between those of bipolarity and multipolarity. Second, I define “hegemony” and describe the United States’ post-Cold War hegemonic grand strategy. Third, I critique arguments advanced by primacists to support their claim that U.S. hegemony will be long-lasting. Fourth, I demonstrate that in a unipolar world, the definition of “balancing”

4. China is following an economic prebalancing strategy. Beijing’s attempt to spin its great power emergence as a “peaceful rise” is strong evidence that Chinese leaders fear that the United States could act preventively against them before they can develop China’s full economic potential and convert it into hard military power. See Mark Brawley, “The Political Economy of Balance of Power Theory,” in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 110–111.

5. For my views on these two forms of balancing, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, chap. 7.

6. I thank Michael Desch for suggesting this term.

needs to be refined. Fifth, I define “leash-slipping” and describe three cases where U.S. allies have employed it as means of counterbalancing U.S. hegemony. Finally, I discuss the policy implications of my argument for future U.S. grand strategy.

Why Balance of Power Realists Were Wrong About Unipolarity

The core proposition of Waltzian balance of power realists (and defensive realists) is that bids for hegemony fail because they are opposed by the counterbalancing efforts of other states.⁷ For this reason, realists predicted that following the Cold War’s end, hard balancing against the United States would quickly cause the international system’s distribution of power to revert to multipolarity. Three reasons largely explain why the Waltzians were wrong. First, they failed to appreciate fully the “duality of American power” in a unipolar world; that is, they did not recognize that second-tier major powers would face pressures both to align with the U.S. hegemon and to balance against it.⁸ Second, they did not foresee that virtually all of the possible counterbalancers—Russia, China, Germany, and Japan—had internal problems that constrained their ability to balance against the United States. Simply stated, the Waltzians underestimated the geopolitical consequence of the Soviet Union’s sudden demise: there were no other states with the capabilities to step into the post–Cold War geopolitical vacuum and act as counterweights to the United States.⁹ Third, they did not understand that balancing against an extant hegemon would be more difficult than countering a rising one.¹⁰

U.S. Hegemonic Exceptionalism: An Overview

In this section I offer a definition of “hegemony” and describe the nature of U.S. hegemony, specifically. I then discuss the case of U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism and, in particular, the military-strategic case for U.S. hegemonic

7. As Barry R. Posen states, not only does balance of power theory suggest that “expanding hegemony will be opposed and stopped,” but there is “ample historical evidence that this is the case.” Posen, *The Sources of Military Conduct: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 68–69.

8. The phrase “duality of American power” is borrowed from Michel Fortmann, T.V. Paul, and James J. Wirtz, “Conclusions,” in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*, p. 366.

9. Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 30.

10. Balance of power theory is good at predicting that power balances eventually will form whenever too much power is concentrated in the hands of a single great power, but it cannot predict how long it will take for this to happen. *Ibid.*

exceptionalism. The section concludes with an examination of the argument that the United States is a “benevolent hegemon.”

DEFINITION OF HEGEMONY

What is hegemony? First, hegemony is about raw, hard power. Militarily, a hegemon’s capabilities are such that “no other state has the wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it.”¹¹ A hegemon also enjoys “economic supremacy” in the international system and has a “preponderance of material resources.”¹² Second, hegemony is about the dominant power’s ambitions. A hegemon acts self-interestedly to safeguard its security, economic, and ideological interests.¹³ Third, hegemony is about polarity. Because of its overwhelming advantages in relative military and economic power over other states in the international system, a hegemon is the only great power in the system, which is therefore, by definition, unipolar.¹⁴ Fourth, hegemony is about will. A hegemon purposefully exercises its overwhelming power to impose order on the international system.¹⁵ Finally, hegemony is fundamentally about structural change, because “if one state achieves hegemony, the system ceases to be anarchic and becomes hierarchic.”¹⁶ Yet, as Robert Gilpin notes, because “no state has ever completely controlled an international system,” hegemony is a relative, not an absolute, concept.¹⁷ When a great power attains hegemony, as, for example, the United States did in Western Europe after World War II, the system is more hierarchic—and less anarchic—than it would be in the absence of hegemonic power.¹⁸ Implicit in Gilpin’s observation is a subtle, but important, point: al-

11. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 40.

12. Andrew Gamble, “Hegemony and Decline: Britain and the United States,” in Patrick Karl O’Brien and Armand Clesse, eds., *Two Hegemonies: Britain, 1846–1914, and the United States, 1941–2001* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2002), p. 130; and Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 32.

13. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 29–30, 144. International political economy scholars claim that one of the attributes of hegemony is the provision of public, or collective, goods to the international system. See Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). By supplying collective goods, hegemons give “other states an interest in following their lead.” Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 30.

14. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 40.

15. According to Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., hegemony prevails in the international system when “one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so.” Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), p. 44.

16. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 34 n. 13.

17. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 28.

18. For the argument that the United States established hegemony over Western Europe following World War II, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.

though the United States is a hegemon, it is not omnipotent—there are limits to its ability to shape international outcomes. This explains why the United States has been unable to suppress the insurgency in Iraq (and failed in the Vietnam War), and why it has not succeeded in compelling either North Korea or Iran to halt their nuclear weapons programs.

Nevertheless, the United States' hegemonic power is not illusory. As Kenneth Waltz notes, power does not mean that a state possesses the ability to get its way all of the time.¹⁹ Material resources never translate fully into desired outcomes (military strategists acknowledge this when they observe that "the enemy has a vote" in determining the degree to which a state can realize its strategic goals). Although a hegemon does not get its way all of the time, its vast power will help it get its way with other states far more often than they will get their way with it. Precisely because the United States is a hegemon, there is a marked asymmetry of influence in its favor. In international politics, the United States does not get all that it wants all of the time. But it gets most of what it wants an awful lot of the time, and it affects other states far more than other states affect it.

THE NATURE OF U.S. HEGEMONY

U.S. hegemony is the product of two factors.²⁰ First, the United States enjoys a commanding preeminence in both military and economic power. Second, since the Soviet Union's disappearance, no other great power has emerged to challenge U.S. preponderance. In this sense, U.S. hegemony is the result of objective material conditions. At the same time, however, since the early 1990s the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations each have pursued a grand strategy aimed at preventing the emergence of new great powers that could challenge U.S. hegemony; in this respect, the perpetuation of U.S. primacy is a matter of policy.²¹

19. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 191–192.

20. The points made in this and the next three paragraphs are developed at length in Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*. My argument differs from John Mearsheimer's claim in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* that the purported "stopping power of water" prevents great powers from attaining hegemony beyond their own region. For more on how Mearsheimer and I differ, see Christopher Layne, "The 'Poster Child' for Offensive Realism: America as Global Hegemon," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter 2002), pp. 120–164.

21. The George W. Bush administration has declared that the United States will use its hegemonic power to ensure that other states have no "hope of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States." George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002). The first overt expression of the United States' post-Cold War hegemonic grand strategy was embodied in the 1992 classified document "Defense Planning Guidance" for fiscal years 1994–97, prepared by the Pentagon during the George H.W. Bush ad-

U.S. hegemony marks the fulfillment of long-standing grand strategic objectives. Since the early 1940s, the United States has striven to create a unipolar distribution of power in the international system. And in the three regions that matter the most to it—Western Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf—it has maintained a permanent military presence both to prevent the emergence of new poles of power and to establish the kind of regional stability necessary to uphold a U.S.-dominated international order by more or less replacing anarchy with hierarchy in those regions.

Although some scholars argue that as a hegemon the United States is a status quo power, its grand strategy is actually a peculiar mix. The United States is a status quo power in that it aims to preserve the existing distribution of power. Consistent with the logic of offensive realism, however, the United States is also an expansionist state that seeks to increase its power advantages and to extend its geopolitical and ideological reach. To preserve the status quo that favors them, hegemonies must keep knocking down actual and potential rivals; that is, they must continue to expand. The Athenian leader Alcibiades captured this reality when, urging the Athenians to mount the (ultimately disastrous) Sicilian expedition, he stated, “We cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining but must scheme to extend it, for, if we cease to rule others, we are in danger of being ruled ourselves.”²²

THE CASE FOR U.S. HEGEMONIC EXCEPTIONALISM

Is hegemony likely to be a winning grand strategy for the United States? Or will “imperial overstretch” be its undoing?²³

ministration. Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992. The document stated that the objective of U.S. grand strategy henceforth would be to maintain U.S. hegemony by preventing the emergence of new great power rivals in Europe and East Asia. Although the Clinton administration toned down the rhetoric about unipolarity, it accepted this strategy. I disagree with those who have argued that the George W. Bush administration’s approach to U.S. grand strategy—its determination to maintain overwhelming U.S. geopolitical dominance and its muscular idealism—breaks sharply with the principles and assumptions that guided U.S. policymakers from the 1940s through 2000. For the argument that the administration turned its back on the United States’ post-1945 grand strategy, see Jim Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004); and Ivo H. Daadler and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2003). For an excellent rebuttal, see Melvyn P. Leffler, “Bush’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 144 (September/October 2004), pp. 22–28.

22. Quoted in Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), p. 372.

23. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

Since the Cold War's end, many international relations theorists and strategic analysts have argued that the United States will not fall victim to the fate of past hegemonies. They advance two distinct lines of argumentation to support this claim of U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism. The first is strategic: other states cannot balance against the United States because of its formidable military and economic capabilities, nor do they need to do so because U.S. military power does not threaten them. The second line of argumentation is based on the notion that the United States is a benevolent hegemon. This purported benevolence is the product of several factors, including the benefits that other states derive from U.S. hegemony and the trust in U.S. intentions that is instilled in other states because the United States is a liberal democracy.

THE MILITARY-STRATEGIC CASE FOR U.S. HEGEMONIC EXCEPTIONALISM

The most robust argument for long-lasting U.S. hegemony is that unipolarity transforms the nature of international politics and negates the balancing dynamic postulated by Waltzian theory. William Wohlforth argues that the theory's predictions do not hold in a unipolar world, because "there is a threshold concentration of power in the strongest state that makes a counterbalance prohibitively costly."²⁴ U.S. primacists assert that the United States' hard power has surpassed this threshold and that the sheer magnitude of its military, technological, and economic power discourages would-be peer competitors from even attempting to compete geopolitically against it.

U.S. hegemony also magnifies the collective action problems that invariably affect the timeliness and efficiency of counterbalancing.²⁵ U.S. military capabilities are so formidable that in a unipolar world, there is no other state powerful enough to act as a magnet—and as a protective shield against U.S. reprisals—for others that might want to organize a countercoalition.²⁶ In the absence of a "coalition magnet," assembling a group of states with enough hard power to

24. William C. Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World," in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 103–104. See also Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World"; and Brooks and Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective."

25. For an explanation of the factors that may prevent timely and efficient counterhegemonic balancing, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 341–344; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 123–128; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 164–170, 196–198; and Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (August 1966), pp. 266–279.

26. This concept of a coalition magnet is suggested by the observation that one of the conditions likely to trigger a hard-balancing coalition against the United States in the future is "when one or more of the major powers gains sufficient capabilities to challenge U.S. power." Fortmann, Paul, and Wirtz, "Conclusions," p. 372.

confront the United States successfully is difficult. States that might otherwise be tempted to balance against it are vulnerable to being singled out as potential rivals, and being punished by the hard fist of U.S. power.

Another strategic argument for hegemonic exceptionalism—based on balance of threat theory—is that most states have no reason to balance against the United States because they do not feel militarily threatened by it.²⁷ The mere asymmetry of power in a hegemon's favor does not, so the argument goes, constitute a threat to others' security, because the state posing the greatest threat is not necessarily the strongest one in the system. According to Stephen Walt, "threat" is a function of several factors, including a state's aggregate power (determined by population, economic and military capabilities, and technological prowess); geographic proximity to other states; possession of offensive military capabilities; and aggressive intentions (or, more correctly, the perception of such intentions).²⁸

Proponents of the balance of threat approach assert that geography inhibits the ability of the United States to project its power into Eurasia, so other major states need not worry too much about being the targets of U.S. military action.²⁹ There is also a second way in which geography purportedly neutralizes the threat of U.S. hegemony: while the United States is an ocean away, "the other major powers lie in close proximity to one another, [and thus] they tend to worry more about each other than they do about the United States."³⁰ For the major Eurasian powers, the need to engage in regional balancing against nearby threats diverts their attention from any threat posed by U.S. hegemony. This dynamic also allows the United States to pursue a divide-and-rule policy of keeping these powers too preoccupied to counterbalance it by playing them off against one another.³¹

Yet another reason why the second-tier major powers purportedly have not

27. The seminal work on balance of threat theory is Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. See also Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 123–124. As Walt puts it, "The United States is by far the world's most powerful state, but it does not pose a significant threat to the vital interests of the major powers." Stephen M. Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance': Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy," in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*, p. 139 (emphasis in original).

28. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 22–26.

29. This claim parallels Mearsheimer's assertion about the "stopping power of water."

30. Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance,'" p. 137. For a similar argument, see Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World," p. 107; and Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 124, 187–191.

31. Jack S. Levy argues that counterbalancing coalitions were unlikely to form against Britain, the nineteenth century's preponderant offshore power, and are unlikely to do so against the United States today, because offshore powers "have fewer capabilities for imposing their will on major continental states, fewer incentives for doing so, and a greater range of strategies for increasing their influence by other means." Levy, "What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?" in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*, p. 42.

engaged in hard balancing against the United States is that they do not believe U.S. hegemonic power poses an existential threat; that is, U.S. dominance has not threatened their sovereignty.³² T.V. Paul cites several reasons for this perception of U.S. hegemony. First, the United States is a defender of the international system's territorial status quo. Second, although the United States is a quasi-imperial power, it is not a land-grabber; that is, its empire rests on indirect control rather than on direct rule. Third, in contrast to the other hegemonic powers of modern international history, the United States does not need to annex other states' territory to enhance either its wealth or its military capabilities. Fourth, most of the second-tier major powers have secure, second-strike nuclear deterrent forces that serve to immunize their homelands from conquest.³³

THE UNITED STATES AS A "BENEVOLENT HEGEMON"

The argument that the United States is a benevolent hegemon focuses on how U.S. intentions and actions (and perceptions thereof) affect other states, and blends balance of threat theory, hegemonic stability theory, and liberal theories of international relations. In contrast to the view that the United States' commanding lead in military and economic power prevents other states from balancing against it, the benevolent hegemon argument recognizes that there are circumstances in which other states might come to fear the United States and seek to counter it. Whether others accept U.S. hegemony or oppose it depends, therefore, on how the United States is perceived to exercise its power.³⁴ Hence,

32. See Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy."

33. *Ibid.*, p. 56. Paul subscribes to balance of threat theory. Although U.S. policies are not sufficiently threatening to prompt others to engage in hard balancing, that could change: "As long as the United States abstains from empire building that challenges the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a large number of states, a hard-balancing coalition is unlikely to emerge either regionally or globally. If, however, it pursues empire building, it would no longer be a status quo power, but a revisionist state bent on forcefully altering the international order. The constraints on the United States against an overt imperial strategy are many, but the war on terrorism and the need for oil could yet push it further in this direction. An overt imperial strategy, if adopted, would eventually cause great friction in the international system, built around the independent existence of sovereign states, especially major power actors." *Ibid.*, p. 71. Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander argue, on the other hand, that the second-tier major powers have the material capabilities to form a hard-balancing coalition against the United States but have no reason to do so because U.S. enmity is focused not at them but at terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and rogue states such as Iran, North Korea, Syria, and (before March 2003) Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Lieber and Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing."

34. See Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, especially chaps. 1, 5; G. John Ikenberry, "Democracy, Institutions, and American Restraint," in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*, pp. 213–238; Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the Postwar Order"; Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment"; Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance,'" pp. 121–154; and

it “has an interest in not driving other states to abandon cooperation with the dominant state and move toward a strategy of resistance or balancing.”³⁵ The United States can gain others’ willing acceptance of its hegemony by adopting policies that benefit other states, acting with self-restraint, and comporting itself as a liberal hegemon.³⁶

Hegemonic stability theory purportedly illustrates the beneficent aspect of U.S. preponderance.³⁷ It is usually associated with international political economy theory, whose core claim is that to function effectively, the international economic system needs a dominant power to perform the following key tasks: provide a stable reserve currency and international liquidity; serve as a lender and market of last resort; and make and enforce the rules that govern the international political and economic systems. In international political economy terms, hegemony (or, at least, liberal hegemony) is useful because the hegemon’s actions confer systemwide benefits by providing these public goods. The logic of hegemonic stability theory also can be extended to other aspects of international politics, including security. As Gilpin has noted, a hegemonic power also can use its military power to stabilize the international system (at least in key geographic regions).³⁸ According to both variants of hegemonic stability theory, other states will cooperate with a benign hegemon because they benefit strategically and economically. For these reasons, as John Ikenberry puts it, bandwagoning with a hegemon is “an attractive option when the lead state is a mature, *status quo* power that pursues a restrained and accommodating grand strategy.”³⁹

Hegemonic stability theory posits that the United States can employ its many military, economic, and diplomatic instruments as inducements to ward

Stephen M. Walt, “Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 59–62, 56.

35. G. John Ikenberry, “Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity,” report to the National Intelligence Council, July 28, 2003, http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports_stratreact.html.

36. To ensure that the United States is regarded as a benevolent hegemon, analysts recommend a number of measures that it can take to “be nice” to other states, including using force with restraint; avoiding unilateral military action; adopting a defensive realist military posture; acting multilaterally and allowing others to have a voice in how the United States exercises its power; and making concessions to others’ interests to secure their cooperation (e.g., by ratifying the Kyoto treaty on climate change and joining the International Criminal Court). See, for example, Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 223–232; and Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off-Balance,’” pp. 141–152.

37. On hegemonic stability theory, see Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); and Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939*.

38. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, pp. 144–145.

39. Ikenberry, “Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence,” p. 35.

off potential challenges to its preeminence.⁴⁰ Militarily, it has considerable leverage. For example, it can offer a protective shield to states in unstable regions, which is a strong incentive for them to bandwagon with the United States—or, less charitably, to free ride by passing the buck for maintaining their security to the United States.⁴¹ Also, U.S. military power helps provide the geopolitical prerequisites for an open international economy from which most states supposedly benefit: stability in key regions as well as secure access to what Barry Posen calls the “global commons” of sea, air, and space—that is, the media through which global communications are transmitted and through which goods and people move.⁴² In addition, the United States has lots of economic and financial carrots that it can either withhold from states that contest its hegemony or give as rewards to those that accept it.⁴³

The United States also supposedly can defuse other states’ fears of its hegemonic power by voluntarily exercising self-restraint and forgoing unilateral actions. As Ikenberry puts it, “American hegemony is reluctant, open, and highly institutionalized—or, in a word, liberal. This is what makes it acceptable to other countries that might otherwise be expected to balance against hegemonic power, and it is also what makes it so stable and expansive.”⁴⁴ That is, by exercising its preponderance through multilateral institutions and accepting externally imposed restraints on its power, the United States can demonstrate to others that its hegemony is benign, because it is based on mutual consent, and give-and-take.⁴⁵ Moreover, the fact that the United States is a democratic hegemon not only alleviates others’ fears of its hegemonic power,

40. The discussion in the remainder of this section is based on Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy”; Lieber and Alexander, “Waiting for Balancing”; Michael Mastanduno and Ethan B. Kapstein, “Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War,” in Kapstein and Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 1–27; Ethan B. Kapstein, “Does Unipolarity Have a Future?” in Kapstein and Mastanduno, *Unipolar Politics*, pp. 464–490; T.V. Paul, “Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory,” in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*, pp. 1–25; and Fortmann, Paul, and Wirtz, “Conclusions.”

41. Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 187–191. Ikenberry contends that most of the other potential counterbalancers to the United States are in a “security box,” and need U.S. protection against actual or potential regional rivals. Ikenberry, “Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence,” p. 10.

42. Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of American Hegemony,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 5–46.

43. Other states may benefit from the collective goods provided by U.S. hegemony, but they worry about the relative distribution of power in the international system, because today’s ally (or benevolent hegemon) can always become tomorrow’s rival. Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), p. 500 (emphasis in original).

44. Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the Postwar Order,” p. 77.

45. G. John Ikenberry, “Introduction,” in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*, p. 10.

but also pulls them into the U.S. orbit. Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan have argued that the liberal democratic nature of the United States' domestic political system legitimates U.S. hegemony and simultaneously reassures others of its benevolence.⁴⁶

Many U.S. policymakers believe that the United States is a benevolent hegemon. As National Security Adviser Samuel Berger argued in a 1999 speech, "We are accused of trying to dominate others, of seeing the world in zero-sum terms in which any other country's gain must be our loss. But that is an utterly mistaken view. It's not just because we are the first global power in history that is not an imperial power. It's because for 50 years, we have consciously tried to define and pursue our interests in a way that is consistent with the common good—rising prosperity, expanding freedom, collective security."⁴⁷ More recently, President George W. Bush employed the rhetoric of hegemonic benevolence in his January 2004 State of the Union address by declaring, "We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire."⁴⁸ And the administration's 2002 National Security Strategy asserts that the rest of the world will accept U.S. hegemony because rather than using its "strength to press for unilateral advantage," the United States seeks to "create a balance of power that favors human freedom: conditions in which all nations and all societies can choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic liberty."⁴⁹ Like Berger, Bush simply was echoing his father, President George H.W. Bush, who stated in his January 1992 State of the Union address: "A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent superpower: the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power—and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained; they trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what's right."⁵⁰ U.S. policymakers understand the reasoning that underlies balance of threat theory, and—with words, though much less with deeds—they have incorporated it into the United States' grand strategy.

46. G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "The Legitimation of Hegemonic Power," in David P. Rapkin, ed., *World Leadership and Hegemony* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1990), p. 52.

47. Samuel R. Berger, "American Power: Hegemony, Isolationism, or Engagement," remarks prepared for delivery, Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 1991, http://www.cfr.org/publication/3600/american_power/html.

48. George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 21, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040120-7.html>.

49. George W. Bush, "Introduction," in Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, p. i.

50. "State of the Union: Transcript of President Bush's Address on the State of the Union," *New York Times*, January 29, 1992.

U.S. Hegemonic Exceptionalism—A Critique

For the United States, a great deal rides on two questions: Is U.S. hegemony different from that of past great powers, and will the United States succeed where others have failed? In this section, I demonstrate that the arguments in favor of U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism are weak: the United States is not exempt from the fate of past hegemons.

BALANCE OF THREAT THEORY REEXAMINED

Balance of threat theory contains key weaknesses that undermine its utility as an argument for the benevolence of U.S. hegemony. The theory's most important weakness is its inability to draw a clear distinction between "power" and "threat." This is unsurprising given that three of the threat variables used by Walt—aggregate capabilities, geographic proximity, and offensive capabilities—correlate closely with military power. The difficulty of differentiating power from threat is apparent when he applies balance of threat theory to explain great power behavior. For example, although he correctly observes that every post-1648 bid for European hegemony was repulsed by a balancing coalition, it is unclear whether counterbalancing occurred because would-be hegemons were powerful, because other states perceived that their intentions were threatening, or both.⁵¹

Balance of threat theory's difficulty in distinguishing between power and threat is mirrored in the real world, where grand strategists are always wrestling with the question of whether policy should be based on other states' capabilities or their intentions. Usually, measuring a rival's capabilities is far easier than ascertaining with confidence what it intends to do with them. Thus, grand strategy often is driven by worst-case scenario assumptions. As Walt acknowledges, "In a world of independent states, the strongest one is always a potential threat to the rest, if only because they cannot be entirely sure what it is going to do with the power at its command."⁵² Nevertheless, policymakers do try to estimate rivals' intentions. In making their assessments, they frequently use the nature of other states' domestic political systems and ideologies as predictors of their foreign policy behavior. Sometimes this leads to correct assessments of threat, and sometimes not.⁵³

51. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 28–29. Walt does not downplay the importance of power as a factor in inducing balancing behavior; he simply says it is not the only factor. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

52. Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 61.

53. In his classic work on the origins of World War II in Europe, A.J.P. Taylor argued that the key issue confronting British policymakers during the 1930s was ascertaining Hitler's intentions: Was

Notwithstanding the problems discussed above, balance of threat theory is helpful when the international system is multipolar. When power is more or less equally distributed among three or more great powers, knowing who is threatening whom—or who threatens whom the most—is difficult. Because capability-based assessments alone cannot answer this question, strategists must also try to assess others' intentions. In a multipolar system, the risk of guessing wrong about a rival's intentions is cushioned strategically precisely because there are multiple great powers. A state that gets it wrong about a rival's aims can organize a countervailing coalition to oppose it, or it can try to pass the buck of stopping the expansionist state to the other great powers.

In a unipolar world, however, balance of threat theory is less useful. The greater the concentration of power in the international system, the more dangerous it becomes to make determinations of threat based on intentions rather than capabilities. Unipolarity substantially erases the distinction between balancing against threat versus balancing against power, because the threat inheres in the very fact that hard-power capabilities are overconcentrated in the hegemon's favor. As Colin Elman suggests, "It is possible that, when states are approaching capabilities of hegemonic proportions, those resources alone are so threatening that they 'drown out' distance, offense-defense, and intentions as potential negative threat modifiers."⁵⁴ The consequences of guessing wrong about a hegemon's intentions are likely to be far worse in a unipolar system than in a multipolar system.

Precisely because unipolarity means that other states must worry primar-

he a traditional German statesman who could be appeased, or a megalomaniac with dangerously revisionist aims who had to be opposed? See Taylor, *Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Atheneum, 1983). The geopolitical events of 1938—the *Anschluss* and the Munich crisis—did not resolve this question in London; the November 1938 *Kristallnacht*, however, caused key policymakers to conclude that Nazi Germany's nefarious domestic policies meant that its foreign policy intentions were malign. On the other hand, between 1945 and 1948, U.S. policymakers contributed to the intensification of the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union by wrongly concluding that its domestic system and ideology signaled that the Kremlin was committed to an aggressive external policy in Europe, even though they knew that Soviet military and economic capabilities were limited. For critical assessments of the United States' Soviet policy from 1945 to 1949, see Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1996* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); and Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978). For the neo-orthodox counterargument that the Soviet Union was a threat because of its ideology, see John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). On U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union during the early Cold War years, see also Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, chap. 3.

54. Colin Elman, "Introduction," in John A. Vasquez and Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2003), p. 16.

ily about the hegemon's capabilities rather than its intentions, the ability of the United States to reassure others is limited by its formidable—and unchecked—capabilities, which always are at least a latent threat to other states.⁵⁵ This is not to say that the United States is powerless to shape others' perceptions of whether it is a threat. But doing so is difficult because in a unipolar world, the burden of proof is on the hegemon to demonstrate to others that its power is not threatening.⁵⁶

Even in a unipolar world, not all of the other major powers will believe themselves to be threatened (or to be equally threatened) by the hegemon. Eventually, however, some are bound to regard the hegemon's power as menacing. For example, although primacists assert that U.S. hegemony is nonthreatening because U.S. power is "offshore," this manifestly is not the case. On the contrary, in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, American power is both onshore (or lurking just over the horizon in the case of East Asia) and in the faces of Russia, China, and the Islamic world. Far from being an offshore balancer that is "stopped by water" from dominating regions beyond the Western Hemisphere, the United States has acquired the means to project massive military power into, and around, Eurasia, and thereby to establish extraregional hegemony in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf.⁵⁷

REGIONAL BALANCING AND U.S. HEGEMONY

Another argument that scholars frequently invoke to support the claim that U.S. hegemony will not be challenged is that the major Eurasian powers will be too busy competing against each other to worry about the United States, and will want to enlist it as an ally against their regional rivals. Although superficially plausible, this argument overlooks two key points. First, the history of the modern international state system until 1945 demonstrates that when faced with a bid for hegemony, rival great powers put their own enmities on the back-burner and formed temporary alliances to defeat it. For example, during the Napoleonic Wars, England made common cause with Russia (with which it competed for influence in the Baltic and the Near East, and on India's Northwest Frontier) to defeat France. At the turn of the twentieth cen-

55. Walt concedes that the very fact of U.S. hard power creates difficulty for the United States in persuading others that it is not a threat to them. The United States "may" convince others that it is not a threat if it "acts wisely." Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 61. On the other hand, it may not succeed in altering their perceptions of a U.S. threat no matter how much wisdom informs its diplomacy.

56. I am grateful to Michael Desch for suggesting this point to me.

57. For extended discussion, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.

tury, England set aside its rivalries with France and Russia and joined with them in containing Wilhelmine Germany. Similarly, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, London entered into an alliance with Moscow. Explaining Britain's willingness to ally with the Soviet Union—theretofore regarded by British policymakers as threatening geopolitically and ideologically—Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I should at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons."

Second, although regional balancing could work to the United States' advantage, it would be more likely to do so in a future multipolar system rather than in a unipolar one. The Cold War illustrates this point. During the Cold War, the United States was hegemonic in the non-Soviet world. Although deeply ambivalent (or worse) about U.S. hegemony, the West Europeans nonetheless accepted—reluctantly—U.S. primacy because the United States protected them from the Soviet threat.⁵⁸ In the absence of a hostile countervailing pole (or poles) of power in today's unipolar world, however, there is a higher risk that others—even erstwhile U.S. allies—will come to see U.S. hegemony as a greater threat than U.S. preponderance during the Cold War.

The likelihood that the major Eurasian powers may engage in regional balancing, in fact, is a more powerful argument for an offshore balancing strategy than it is for a hegemonic one: as an offshore balancer in a multipolar world, the United States could safely retract its military power from Eurasia because the regional powers would focus their strategic attention primarily on the security threats posed by their neighbors rather than on the United States.⁵⁹ The United States could enhance its relative power position simply by standing on the sidelines while security competitions sapped the relative power positions of the major Eurasian powers.

MULTILATERALISM AND U.S. HEGEMONY

The argument that U.S. hegemony can be long-lasting if the United States acts multilaterally is doubtful. Its proponents assert that by acting multilaterally,

58. Immediately after World War II, West European elites were more concerned with domestic balances of power (keeping the communist parties out of power) than with the external balance of power. Hence, instead of being driven by the need to balance against the Soviet Union, their foreign policies were driven primarily by the need to bandwagon with the United States, which allowed them to receive U.S. economic aid that helped consolidate their political positions.

59. Walt makes a similar point: "As the world's most powerful country, the United States will inevitably face greater suspicion and resentment than it did when it was one of several Great Powers (as it was from 1900 to 1945), or even when it was one of two superpowers (as it was from 1945 to 1989)." Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 60–61.

the United States can establish its credentials as a benevolent hegemon and insulate itself from counterbalancing. The very hallmarks of international politics, however—anarchy, self-help, and competition—mean that, in the realm of security, unilateral strategies are always the default option of great powers. As John Mearsheimer writes, “States operating in a self-help world almost always act according to their own self-interest and do not subordinate their interests to the interests of other states, or to the interests of the so-called international community. The reason is simple: it pays to be selfish in a self-help world.”⁶⁰ Smart policymakers in other states know this and understand the implications with respect to U.S. behavior.

Prophylactic multilateralism cannot inoculate the United States from counter-hegemonic balancing. The reality of the United States’ enormous power cannot be hidden by the veil of multilateralism. Moreover, what the feisty Brooklyn Dodgers’ manager Leo Durocher said about baseball is also true in international politics: nice guys finish last. The United States did not attain hegemony by being nice, but rather by assertively—and, occasionally, aggressively—using its power. Although the United States may profess its regard for others’ interests and its commitment to multilateralism, it can use its power unilaterally to others’ detriment whenever it chooses.⁶¹ If other states did not understand this before (though many of them did), the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq dispelled any illusion. For much of the world, the invasion shattered one of the most important foundations upon which the notion of benevolent U.S. hegemony is based: the perception that the United States is a status quo power. Since the Cold War’s end, notes Walt, “The United States has not acted as a ‘status quo’ power: rather, it has used its position of primacy to increase its influence, to enhance its position vis-à-vis potential rivals, and to deal with specific security threats.”⁶²

Indeed, the idea that the United States—until the George W. Bush administration—preferred to act multilaterally is more myth than fact. Although this administration has been more inept diplomatically than many of its predecessors, the substance of its policy has been the same: the United States acts multilaterally when it can (i.e., when others support U.S. policies), and unilaterally

60. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 33.

61. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” p. 28. As Robert Jervis notes, a hegemon’s capabilities are more important to other states than its intentions because “minds can be changed, new leaders can come to power, values can shift, new opportunities and dangers can arise.” Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), p. 105.

62. Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 23. For another important argument that from 1945 until 2001 U.S. administrations pursued—often unilaterally—a non-status quo grand strategy, see Stephen Sestanovich, “American Maximalism,” *National Interest*, No. 79 (Spring 2005), pp. 13–23.

when it decides that it must, which is much of the time.⁶³ Following World War II, the United States created a web of security and economic institutions to solidify its hegemony in the non-Soviet world and promote its grand strategic ambitions. In doing so, it availed itself of its allies' strategic resources (and kept them from drifting into the Soviet sphere), but it never intended to be constrained by its allies—and seldom was.⁶⁴ All post-1945 U.S. administrations “have believed that the only way” the United States could attain its most critical grand strategic goals “was to keep others from having too much influence” on its policies.⁶⁵ In the Suez, Berlin, and Cuban missile crises, and during the Vietnam War, the United States acted unilaterally. Similarly, according to Stephen Sestanovich, it also did so during the Euromissile crisis of the early 1980s and during the negotiations on German reunification.⁶⁶ And although the U.S.-led NATO interventions in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999 may have appeared to be—and certainly were depicted by Washington as—multilateral actions, they were not. As Walt observes, “America’s European allies complained during both episodes, but could do little to stop the United States from imposing its preferences upon them.”⁶⁷ In truth, when they felt

63. A related charge against the administration is that it blundered when, immediately after September 11, President Bush told the rest of the world that it had only two choices: they could either support the United States unquestioningly or oppose it and incur its wrath. Blunder or not, the administration hardly was the first to engage in such bullying tactics. During the height of the Cold War, for example, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles argued that it was “immoral” for the nonaligned bloc to remain neutral in the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union.

64. Anyone who has delved into the primary sources of American post-World War II diplomacy knows that when U.S. diplomats speak of “consulting” with allies, they really mean that Washington will inform them of the policies it already has decided to pursue. Even during the 1950s—the supposed high-water mark of U.S. multilateralism—key American policymakers made no secret of their unilateralist preferences. Belying NATO’s mythical image as the institutional acme of multilateralism, U.S. unilateralism was very much on display in relations with the West Europeans. When consulting the West Europeans, Secretary of State Dean Acheson said the trick was to find a way to communicate with them “without limiting U.S. freedom of action unduly.” Acheson to Bruce, September 19, 1952, *FRUS* (Foreign Relations of the United States), 1952–54, Vol. 5, p. 325. Similarly, Secretary of State Dulles told West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer that Washington could not commit to a prior consultation formula that would tie its hands. Dulles to Adenauer, November 29, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955–57, Vol. 4, p. 212. As Dulles told the National Security Council, “It was harder for the United States than for other NATO nations to agree to full consultation on all policy matters, because of the world-wide commitments and interests of the United States. . . . We do not want to be in a position where we are unable to act promptly if necessary for the reason that we are obliged to consult with the NATO Council before taking action.” Memorandum of discussion, 348th meeting of the National Security Council, December 12, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955–57, Vol. 4, p. 216.

65. Sestanovich, “American Maximalism,” p. 13.

66. As Sestanovich says of the George H.W. Bush administration’s “consultation” of U.S. allies during the negotiations on German reunification: “From the president on down, it usually amounted to respectful listening, followed by actions that paid little or no attention to what other governments said.” *Ibid.*, p. 17.

67. Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 46.

that U.S. interests required doing so, preceding administrations acted no less unilaterally than did the Bush administration in deciding (foolishly) to invade Iraq in March 2003.⁶⁸

THE UNITED STATES AS A DEMOCRATIC HEGEMON

Many primacists believe that the United States can be a successful, benevolent hegemon because it is a liberal democracy. This argument rests on wobbly reasoning. Certainly, there is a considerable literature purporting to show that the quality of international politics among democracies differs from that between democracies and nondemocracies; that is, democracies cooperate with each other, constitute a “pluralistic security community,” accord each other respect, and conduct their affairs based on shared values and norms (transparency, give-and-take, live and let live, compromise, and peaceful dispute resolution). These ideas comport with the Wilsonian ideology that drives U.S. grand strategic behavior, but there is powerful evidence demonstrating that democracies do not behave better toward each other than toward nondemocracies.

The mere fact that the United States is a democracy does not negate the possibility that other states will fear its hegemonic power. First, theories that posit a special democratic (or liberal) peace are contradicted by the historical record. When important geopolitical interests are at stake, *realpolitik*—not regime type—determines great power policies.⁶⁹ Contrary to liberal theory, democracies (and liberal states) have threatened to use military force against each other to resolve diplomatic crises and have even gone to the brink of war. Indeed, democracies have not just teetered on the brink; they have gone over it. The most notable example of a war among democracies occurred in 1914 when democratic Britain and France went to war against democratic Germany.⁷⁰ Today, the gross imbalance of U.S. power means that whenever the United States believes its interests are threatened, it will act like other hegemons typically have acted, notwithstanding that it is a democracy.⁷¹

68. The important objection to the Bush administration’s Iraq policy is not that it was unilateral, but that it was unwise (and would have been just as unwise even if pursued “multilaterally”).

69. See Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 5–49.

70. For the argument that World War I in the West was a war among democracies, see Christopher Layne, “Shell Games, Shallow Gains, and the Democratic Peace,” *International History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 799–813. For a supporting argument, see Ido Oren, “The Subjectivity of the ‘Democratic’ Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 147–185.

71. Of course, the fact that the United States purportedly is a democratic hegemon does nothing to cause nondemocratic states (either second-tier major powers or lesser-ranking regional powers) to regard U.S. primacy as benevolent. On the contrary, because the United States seeks to export its

Second, the term “democracy” itself is subjective; democracy has many different—contested—meanings.⁷² To say that two states are democracies may conceal more than it reveals. Take the U.S. relationship with Europe, for example. Although liberal international relations theory stresses that democracies are linked by shared norms and values, in recent years—and especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—polling data suggest that the United States and Europe share few common values. A September 2004 survey of 8,000 respondents on both sides of the Atlantic, cosponsored by the German Marshall Fund and the Compagnia di Sao Paolo of Turin, Italy, found that 83 percent of Americans and 79 percent of Europeans concurred that the United States and Europe have different social and cultural values.⁷³ On a host of important domestic and international issues, including attitudes toward the role of international law and institutions, Americans and Europeans hold divergent views. Although this split may be less pronounced among transatlantic elite opinion than it is among mass opinion, if, over time, the gulf continues at the public level, it will eventually influence foreign policy behavior on both sides of the Atlantic.

In international politics there are no benevolent hegemons. In today’s world, other states dread both the overconcentration of geopolitical influence in the United States’ favor and the purposes for which it may be used. As Paul Sharp writes, “No great power has a monopoly on virtue and, although some may have a great deal more virtue than others, virtue imposed on others is not seen as such by them. All great powers are capable of exercising a measure of self-restraint, but they are tempted not to and the choice to practice restraint is made easier by the existence of countervailing power and the possibility of it

domestic institutions and values abroad—often by seeking regime change—and categorizes other states as “threats” because of their domestic political systems and ideologies, it is perceived by such states as a threat. Given that states and regimes want to survive, it is unsurprising that states perceiving a U.S. threat to their interests and to regime survival seek to defend themselves—often by adopting asymmetric strategies, including acquiring weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorism.

72. David Collier and Stephen Levitsky, “Research Note: Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (April 1997), pp. 430–451. See also Oren, “The Subjectivity of the ‘Democratic’ Peace.”

73. Glen Frankel, “Opposition to U.S. Policy Grows in Europe,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2004. See also Craig Kennedy and Marshall M. Bouton, “The Real Trans-Atlantic Gap,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 133 (November/December 2002), pp. 64–74; Daniel M. Nelson, “Transatlantic Transmutations,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 51–66; and “American Values: Living with a Superpower,” *Economist*, January 4, 2002, pp. 18–20. I am grateful to Gabriela Marin Thornton for calling my attention to both the *Washington Post* story and the Nelson article. A recent Harris survey found that Europeans see the United States as a greater threat to international stability than either China or Iran. John Thornhill, David Dombey, and Edward Allen, “Europeans See U.S. as Greater Threat to Stability than Iran,” *Financial Times* (London), June 19, 2006.

being exercised.”⁷⁴ While Washington’s self-proclaimed benevolence is inherently ephemeral, the hard fist of U.S. power is tangible.

Coming to Grips with Balancing

More balancing is occurring against the United States than U.S. primacists acknowledge. To understand why, it is necessary reconsider the definition of “balancing.” Although balancing is the most ubiquitous form of great power grand strategic behavior, identifying actions that qualify as balancing is not always easy.⁷⁵ As Randall Schweller points out, “Although arguably the most frequently used term in international politics, balancing remains an ambiguous concept.”⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Jack Levy observes that scholars disagree about how balancing behavior should be defined and the kinds of outcomes predicted by balance of power theory.⁷⁷

WHAT IS “BALANCING?”

Fundamentally, balancing is a countervailing strategy.⁷⁸ States balance when power is overconcentrated, because power asymmetries put weaker states at risk of being dominated by the strongest one. In most of the literature, balancing refers to hard (i.e., military) balancing against an existential threat: that is, the danger that weaker states can be invaded and conquered by the stronger power.⁷⁹ States try to preserve their territorial integrity either by deterring the stronger power or by defeating it if deterrence fails—through military build-ups (internal balancing) or through participation in counterhegemonic coalitions (i.e., external balancing), or in some instances, by doing both.⁸⁰ Given the

74. Paul Sharp, “Virtue Unrestrained: Herbert Butterfield and the Problem of American Power,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (August 2004), pp. 300–315.

75. Although balancing is the most common strategy to deal with the rise of a too-powerful rival, great powers can follow other strategies, including bandwagoning, buck-passing, bait-and-bleed, and hiding. For discussions, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 153–162; Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 18–31; Paul Schroeder, “Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–148; and Randall L. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall 2004), pp. 167–168.

76. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats,” p. 166.

77. Jack S. Levy, “Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design,” in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*, pp. 129–130.

78. Elman, “Introduction,” p. 8.

79. See, for example, Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 139; Elman, “Introduction,” p. 8; Paul “Introduction”; and Schweller, “Unanswered Threats,” p. 166.

80. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 118, 168; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 156–157; and Levy, “What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?” p. 35.

nature of the threat posed by a rising hegemon, the tendency to define balancing as a military response to an existential threat is understandable. Doing so, however, fails to capture the geopolitical dynamics in the era of U.S. hegemony.

BALANCING IN A UNIPOLAR WORLD

The current unipolar distribution of power in the international system is unprecedented. For the first time since the Roman Empire at its zenith, the international system is dominated by an *extant* hegemon. As discussed above, U.S. hegemony means that other states have incentives to bandwagon with the United States because they can benefit from its primacy. At the same time, because of the United States' overwhelming hard-power capabilities, other states find it difficult—and possibly dangerous—to engage in traditional counterbalancing (hard balancing) against the reigning hegemon. In a unipolar world, states must adapt to U.S. hegemony by finding balancing strategies that avoid direct military confrontation with the hegemon. Notwithstanding the paucity of hard balancing against the United States, other states have sought alternative methods of balancing against it, especially soft balancing. To date, these efforts have failed to create a new constellation of power in the international system. That unipolarity has not given way to a multipolar distribution of power, however, does not mean there has been an absence of balancing behavior by other states. It is important to differentiate between the intentions driving states' strategies and the outcomes those policies produce. Balancing (which is behavior at the unit level), therefore, should not be conflated with the actual attainment of balance (which is a systemic outcome).

Precisely because counterbalancing against an actual hegemon is much more complex than balancing against a rising one, a reconsideration of the types of state strategies that should be categorized as balancing is needed. In particular, there is one form of counterbalancing that heretofore has been overlooked: leash-slipping.

Leash-Slipping: Three Cases of Balancing against U.S. Hegemony

In this section, I define “leash-slipping.” I then offer three case studies to demonstrate that states have attempted to counterbalance U.S. hegemonic power.

The United States' hard power poses a nonexistential (or soft) threat to others' autonomy and interests. By acquiring the capability to act independent of the United States in the realm of security, however, other states can slip free of the hegemon's leash-like grip and gain the leverage needed to compel the

United States to respect their foreign policy interests. As Posen writes, other major states are expected “at a minimum [to] act to buffer themselves against the caprices of the U.S. and will try to carve out the ability to act autonomously should it become necessary.”⁸¹ Leash-slipping is not traditional hard balancing because it is not explicitly directed at countering an existential U.S. threat. At the same time, it is a form of insurance against a hegemon that might someday exercise its power in a predatory and menacing fashion.⁸² As Robert Art puts it, a state adopting a leash-slipping strategy “does not fear an increased threat to its physical security from another rising state; rather it is concerned about the adverse effects of that state’s rise on its general position, both political and economic, in the international arena. This concern also may, but need not, include a worry that the rising state could cause security problems in the future, although not necessarily war.”⁸³ If successful, leash-slipping would result in the creation of new poles of power in the international system, thereby restoring multipolarity and bringing U.S. hegemony to an end.

BRITAIN’S ATTEMPT TO CREATE A “THIRD FORCE,” 1945–48

In the years immediately after World War II, Britain aspired to emerge as a “third force” in world politics to balance against both the United States and the Soviet Union. As Sean Greenwood observes, “In the late 1940s, Britain was, and intended to remain, a world power.”⁸⁴ British policymakers recognized that their country’s status was under assault by both superpowers, but they seemed to particularly dislike the Americans and to fear the United States’ global ambitions.⁸⁵

Britain’s post-1945 inclination to balance against the United States reflected London’s discomfort with its increasing dependence on Washington.⁸⁶ During

81. Barry R. Posen, “ESDP and the Structure of World Power,” *International Spectator*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January–March 2004), p. 9.

82. As Posen states, “Though the U.S. may be a benign hegemon today, there is no reason to assume it will always be so.” *Ibid.*

83. Robert J. Art, “Europe Hedges Its Security Bets,” in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*, p. 180.

84. Sean Greenwood, *Britain and the Cold War, 1945–91* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), p. 73.

85. Robert M. Hathaway writes, “Everywhere Britain saw its position challenged, perhaps its very safety threatened, by the two parvenus on the international scene, Soviet Russia and the United States.” Hathaway, *Ambiguous Partnership: Britain and America, 1944–47* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 49. As soon-to-be British Prime Minister Anthony Eden accurately observed of the Americans in 1954, “They want to run the world.” Quoted in David Dumbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 215.

86. See, for example, the comments of U.S. Ambassador Lewis Douglas (1948) and Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskill (1952), quoted in Dumbleby and Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart*, pp. 195, 205.

the war, Washington had treated Britain as a junior partner in the Grand Alliance, and, London realized, was likely to continue doing so in the postwar world.⁸⁷ In his May 1945 “Stocktaking on VE Day” memorandum, Sir Orme Sargent, a ranking Foreign Office official, noted that “in the minds of our big partners, especially in that of the United States, there is a feeling that Great Britain is now a secondary power and can be treated as such, and that in the long run all will be well if they—the United States and the Soviet Union—as the two supreme World Powers of the future understand one another. It is this misconception which it must be our policy to combat.”⁸⁸

Under Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin’s direction, from mid-1945 to mid-1948, Britain tried to preserve coequal power with the United States and the Soviet Union by constituting itself as a geopolitical third force.⁸⁹ Bevin’s ambition, Michael Hogan observes, “stopped at nothing less than the preservation of Great Britain as a major power in a world increasingly dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union.”⁹⁰ Because of its diminished relative power in the international system, to match the postwar power of the Soviet Union and the United States, Britain would need to hold on to its Middle Eastern imperial interests (especially in Egypt and Iraq) and supplement its power through close association with some combination of France, Western Europe, and the British Empire/Commonwealth.⁹¹ “By such means and others,” observes Zara Steiner, “Britain tried to free herself from American domination and to forge an independent foreign policy.”⁹²

87. John Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–1949* (Leicester, U.K.: Leicester University Press, 1983), pp. 66–67. The literature on the wartime Anglo-American rivalry on economic and colonial issues—and the U.S. goal of displacing Britain as the dominant world power—is extensive. For useful accounts, see Hathaway, *Ambiguous Partnership*; Warren Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–45* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain, and the War against Japan, 1941–1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).

88. Quoted in Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–1949*, pp. 55–56.

89. The standard work on Bevin is Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary* (London: Heineman, 1983). Bullock’s orthodox interpretation of Bevin’s diplomacy—that his goal was not to create a third force, but rather to draw the United States into a long-term peacetime military commitment to Western Europe—has been challenged by more recent scholarship. See, for example, Sean Greenwood, *The Alternative Alliance: Anglo-French Relations before the Coming of NATO, 1944–1948* (London: Minerva, 1996). See also Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 45–48; and Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–1949*, pp. 118–125.

90. Hogan, *The Marshall Plan*, p. 109.

91. Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943–1945* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 72–75.

92. Zara Steiner, “The Fall of Great Britain: Peace, Stability, and Legitimacy,” in Geir Lundestad, ed., *The Fall of Great Powers: Peace, Stability, and Legitimacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 73.

For Britain, living in a world dominated by the United States was unappealing. As Robert Hathaway comments, “London officials were determined to resist any tendency to relegate Great Britain to a position of secondary rank or importance in international affairs. This consideration, more so than fear of Russia or any other country, led to the decision to obtain their own nuclear capability. To do otherwise would be tantamount to forsaking great power status. Years later former Prime Minister Clement Atlee of Great Britain was to explain the decision to build a bomb by referring not to the Soviet Union but to the United States. ‘It had become essential,’ he remembered. ‘We had to hold up our position vis-à-vis the Americans. We couldn’t allow ourselves to be wholly in their hands.’”⁹³ Foreign Office officials made a similar point repeatedly during the third force policy debates in late 1947 and early 1948. If Britain could create a third force, Gladwyn Jebb observed, there would be a “completely new balance of power in Europe and indeed the world.”⁹⁴ But if the strategy failed, P.M. Crosthwaite argued, Britain—and Western Europe—would be reduced to the status of “pygmies between two giants, dependent on one for protection from the other and living in constant expectation of being trampled underfoot when they quarrel.”⁹⁵ Although acknowledging that both superpowers threatened Britain’s world power status, London focused primarily on the “American threat.” The third force policy, Alan Milward observed, “would admirably serve Britain’s diplomatic aim, providing both security and independence from the United States.”⁹⁶

In the end, Britain’s attempt to establish itself as a geopolitical third force failed, largely because Britain lacked the hard-power capabilities to support its policy.⁹⁷ Still, British strategy during the mid-to-late 1940s was a clear case of leash-slipping.

FRENCH COUNTERBALANCING UNDER DE GAULLE

President Charles de Gaulle’s challenge to U.S. hegemony in the early 1960s is another example of leash-slipping. Although France did not fear a U.S. invasion, de Gaulle believed that, because of its overwhelming power, the United

93. Hathaway, *Ambiguous Partnership*, p. 227.

94. Quoted in Hogan, *The Marshall Plan*, p. 113. Jebb further observed that unless the third-force strategy succeeded, “we shall eventually have to make the choice between becoming a Soviet satellite state or the poor dependency of an American pluto-democracy.” *Ibid.*

95. Quoted in *ibid.*

96. Alan S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945–1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 242.

97. Robin Edmonds, *Setting the Mould: The United States and Great Britain, 1949–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 203.

States was driven “automatically” to extend its influence and “to exercise a preponderant weight, that is to say, a hegemony over others.”⁹⁸ This was especially true in transatlantic relations. Moreover, following the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, de Gaulle concluded that the world had become unipolar—dominated by a hegemonic United States—and therefore that Europe had lost its military and diplomatic independence.⁹⁹ As Walter LaFeber writes, de Gaulle “feared unchecked American military and economic power, believing that, because the United States would use the power unilaterally and irresponsibly, the French could suffer annihilation without representation.”¹⁰⁰ De Gaulle’s strategy aimed to constrain U.S. power and regain Europe’s autonomy by creating a new pole of power in the international system that was independent of U.S. control. Specifically, he sought to develop an independent French nuclear force, cement the Franco-German alliance as the basis of an independent Western Europe, and construct a common West European defense policy.¹⁰¹

U.S. policymakers recognized that, if realized, de Gaulle’s “grand ambition” of creating an independent West European pole of power would threaten the United States’ West European grand strategy. As President John Kennedy said, “If the French and other European powers acquire a nuclear capability, they would be in a position to be entirely independent and we might be on the outside looking in.”¹⁰² “Here,” comments Frederic Bozo, “we are at the heart of the Franco-American misunderstanding. Despite its rhetoric on the subject since the early 1950s, the interest of the United States consisted in avoiding Europe of the Six being transformed into an autonomous strategic entity that would radically modify the givens of the transatlantic situation and would compromise U.S. preeminence in Europe.”¹⁰³ The United States applied heavy pressure in an (unsuccessful) attempt to derail the French nuclear program. It did succeed, however, in compelling West Germany to vitiate the 1963 Franco-German treaty (which was intended to be the catalyst for the emergence of an autonomous West European defense capability). As Marc Trachtenberg ob-

98. Quoted in Edward A. Kolodziej, *French International Policy under de Gaulle and Pompidou: The Politics of Grandeur* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 91.

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

100. LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, p. 227.

101. For two excellent discussions of de Gaulle’s strategy vis-à-vis the United States, see Frederic Bozo, trans. Susan Emanuel, *Two Strategies for Europe* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); and Jeffrey Glen Giauque, *Grand Designs and Visions of Unity: The Atlantic Powers and the Reorganization of Western Europe, 1955–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

102. Remarks of President Kennedy to the National Security Council, January 22, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63*, Vol. 13, p. 486.

103. Bozo, *Two Strategies for Europe*, p. 81.

serves, the Kennedy administration forced West Germany to choose between France and the United States, and it told the Germans that if they did align with the United States, “it would have to be on American terms [i.e., U.S. hegemony in Western Europe].”¹⁰⁴ “Top American officials,” notes Trachtenberg, “made it clear that they intended to take the lead and that Europe, especially Germany, would have to follow.”¹⁰⁵ The Kennedy administration’s hard-line response to de Gaulle’s challenge to U.S. primacy underscores U.S. policymakers’ recognition that U.S. hegemony would collapse if Western Europe successfully emerged as an independent geopolitical actor in international politics. For the same reasons it opposed de Gaulle, the United States now opposes the European Union’s efforts to create an autonomous defense capability.

THE EUROPEAN UNION’S SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY

The European Union’s current state-building effort—including its creation of a common foreign and security policy supported by independent military capabilities, and an integrated European defense industry—is another example of anti-U.S. leash-slipping. From the moment the Cold War ended, the Europeans have manifested “stirrings of independence bordering on insubordination” that reflects their growing restiveness with U.S. dominance of transatlantic relations.¹⁰⁶ At its January 1999 and December 1999 summits, the EU took an important step toward military autonomy by adopting its European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).¹⁰⁷

ESDP is envisioned as the backbone of an independent European security policy—that is, a security policy determined by the Europeans without U.S. input and sustained solely by European hard-power capabilities. Although the EU does not perceive an existential threat from the United States, as Posen ar-

104. Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 375–376.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

106. Jolyon Howorth and John T.S. Keeler, “The EU, NATO, and the Quest for European Autonomy,” in Howorth and Keeler, eds., *Defending Europe: The EU, NATO, and the Quest for European Autonomy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 7.

107. For background information on how ESDP evolved from the European Security and Defense Initiative, which was a “classic transatlantic burden-sharing exercise designed to strengthen the Alliance’s European pillar,” see Stuart Croft, Jolyon Howorth, Terry Teriff, and Mark Webber, “NATO’s Triple Challenge,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (July 2000), pp. 495–518; Howorth and Keeler, “The EU, NATO, and the Quest for European Autonomy”; and Frederic Bozo, “The Effects of Kosovo and the Danger of Decoupling,” in Howorth and Keeler, *Defending Europe*, pp. 61–77.

gues, "The timing and reasons for the development of ESDP suggest that they can largely be traced back to the problem of unipolarity."¹⁰⁸ Specifically, ESDP reflects the EU's desire to invest itself with the capability to act independent of the United States in the realms of security and foreign policy, create more options for itself geopolitically, and express its overall dissatisfaction with Europe's security dependence on the United States.¹⁰⁹

In late 2000 the EU decided to establish a 60,000-man rapid reaction force, which—according to European Commission President Romano Prodi, French President Jacques Chirac, and French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin—would constitute the embryo of an EU army, with a chain of command, headquarters, and planning staff separate from NATO.¹¹⁰ The United States reacted harshly to this ESDP initiative, demanding that NATO—the instrument through which it exercises hegemony in Europe—must not be undermined. Secretary of Defense William Cohen declared that if the EU created an independent defense capability outside the alliance's structure, NATO would become a "relic of the past."¹¹¹ To uphold NATO's primacy, the Clinton administration proclaimed the so-called Three D's: ESDP must not diminish NATO's role, duplicate its capabilities, or discriminate against alliance members that do not belong to the EU.¹¹²

Transatlantic frictions arising from European efforts to build an independent military capability flared again during the Iraq war. For many European policymakers and analysts, the key lesson learned from this war is that unless Europe can support its diplomacy with its own hard-power capabilities, Washington will pay little heed to European views on international political issues. As the invasion phase of the Iraq war was winding down, France and Germany (along with Belgium and Luxembourg) met to lay the foundations for an independent European military capability—including a European mili-

108. Posen, "ESDP and the Structure of World Power," p. 15.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

110. Philip Webster, Richard Beeston, and Martin Fletcher, "French Trigger NATO Furore," *Times* (London), December 8, 2000; Michael Evans, "Chirac Blows Cover of New European Army," *Times* (London), December 8, 2000; and Anton La Guardia and Michael Smith, "France Snubs America over European Army," *Daily Telegraph*, December 7, 2000.

111. Quoted in Douglas Hamilton and Charles Aldinger, "EU Force Could Spell NATO's End, Cohen Says," *Washington Post*, December 6, 2000.

112. Madeleine Albright, "Albright Press Conference at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium, February 19, 1997." The Three D's—the nondiminishment and especially the nonduplication prescriptions—effectively would foreclose the EU from ever achieving strategic autonomy and would ensure its continuing security dependency on the United States, given the latter's virtual monopoly on NATO military capabilities in such key areas as intelligence, advanced surveillance and reconnaissance systems, power projection, and precision-guided munitions.

tary headquarters—built around the Franco-German core of “old Europe.”¹¹³ Explaining this initiative, President Chirac stated that the purpose was to begin the process of building a pole of power capable of playing its role in a multipolar system and of balancing the United States.¹¹⁴ Predictably, Washington reacted coolly to this initiative, which Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Robert Bradtke called “not helpful.”¹¹⁵ In October 2003 the U.S. ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns, voiced the Bush administration’s hostility toward the EU’s initiative, calling it “one of the greatest dangers to the transatlantic relationship.”¹¹⁶

U.S. policymakers’ reaction to the ESDP initiative reflects long-standing American fears of an equal and independent Europe and Washington’s pervasive suspicion that, in this regard, ESDP is the “camel’s nose in the tent”—in other words, that it will become a rival to NATO’s supremacy in European security affairs.¹¹⁷ As Bozo suggests, the United States regards all European steps toward autonomy “with reticence bordering on hostility,” and it is incapable of accepting any European defense effort that it does not control.¹¹⁸

Conclusion: The Waning of U.S. Hegemony

Since the Cold War’s end, most U.S. grand strategists have believed that American hegemony is exceptional, and therefore that the United States need not worry about other states engaging in counterhegemonic balancing against it. They advance two reasons for this assessment. First, drawing on balance of threat and hegemonic stability theories, some scholars argue that other states regard the United States as a benevolent, or nonthreatening, hegemon. Second, some scholars claim that strategically the United States is immune from counterhegemonic balancing because overwhelming U.S. military and economic power makes it impossible for others to balance against the United States. The case for U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism, however, is weak.

113. Judy Dempsey, “EU Leaders Unveil Plan for Central Military HQ,” *Financial Times* (London), April 30, 2003.

114. Quoted in *ibid.*

115. Quoted in Robert Graham and Gary Dinmore, “Paris Plays Down Threats from Washington,” *Financial Times* (London), April 24, 2003.

116. Quoted in Judy Dempsey, “U.S. Seeks Showdown with EU over NATO,” *Financial Times* (London), October 17, 2003.

117. See Joseph Fitchett, “EU Takes Steps to Create a Military Force without Treading on NATO,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 1, 2000; James Kitfield, “European Doughboys,” *National Journal*, February 26, 2000; and Carol J. Williams, “Conference Highlights Flaws of NATO’s Kosovo Campaign,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2000.

118. Bozo, “The Effects of Kosovo and the Danger of Decoupling,” pp. 68, 75.

To be sure, contrary to the predictions of Waltzian balance of power theorists, unipolarity persists. No new great powers have emerged to restore equilibrium to the balance of power by engaging in hard balancing against the United States—at least, not yet. This has led primacists to conclude that there has been no balancing against the United States. However, the primacists' focus on both the failure of new great powers to emerge and the absence of hard balancing distracts attention from other forms of behavior—notably leash-slipping—by major second-tier states that ultimately could lead to the end of unipolarity. Unipolarity is the foundation of U.S. hegemony and, if it ends, so will U.S. primacy.

U.S. hegemony cannot endure indefinitely. Even the strongest proponents of primacy harbor an unspoken fear that U.S. hegemony will provoke the very kind of geopolitical backlash that they say cannot happen (or at least cannot happen for a very long time).¹¹⁹ In fact, although a new geopolitical balance has yet to emerge, there is considerable evidence that other states have been engaging in balancing against the United States—including hard balancing. U.S. concerns about China's great power emergence reflect Washington's fears about the military, as well as economic, implications of China's rise. Other evidence suggests—at least by some measures—that the international system is closer to a multipolar distribution of power than primacists realize. In its survey of likely international developments through 2020, the National Intelligence Council's report *Mapping the Global Future* notes: "The likely emergence of China and India as new major global players—similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the early 20th century—will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two centuries. In the same way that commentators refer to the 1900s as the American Century, the early 21st century may be seen as the time when some in the developing world led by China and India came into their own."¹²⁰ In a similar vein, a recent study by the Strategic Assessment Group projects that by 2020 both China (which *Mapping the Global Future* argues will then be "by any measure a first-rate military power") and the European Union could each have nearly as much power as the United

119. Although he is the foremost advocate of the view that the United States is too powerful to be balanced against, William Wohlforth (with Stephen Brooks) argues that the United States "needs to act with magnanimity in the face of temptation" to reassure the rest of the world that U.S. primacy is nonthreatening. That is, he seems to be saying that others can and will balance against the United States if they fear U.S. power. Brooks and Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," p. 33.

120. National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2004), p. 47.

States.¹²¹ Projecting current trends several decades into the future has its pitfalls (not least because of the difficulty of converting economic power into effective military power). But if this ongoing shift in the distribution of relative power continues, new poles of power in the international system are likely to emerge in the next decade or two.

The future of U.S. hegemony centers on the questions of timing and costs. How long can the United States maintain its unipolar position? Do the benefits of perpetuating unipolarity outweigh the costs? In 1993 I suggested that by 2010, unipolarity would give way to multipolarity.¹²² In contrast, in 1999 William Wohlforth stated “that if Washington plays its cards right, [U.S. hegemony] may last as long as bipolarity.”¹²³ The post–World War II bipolar era lasted forty-five years. So by Wohlforth’s calculations, U.S. preponderance could last until around 2030. The difference in these two predictions was, at most, only about twenty years.

Two decades may seem like a long time, but in truth it is not—especially for strategists, who are paid to look beyond the events of the day and think about how states’ interests will be affected over the longer term by shifting power configurations. Two historical examples illustrate how much can change geopolitically in twenty years. In 1918–20 Germany was defeated and seemingly shackled by the Treaty of Versailles. By the summer of 1940, however, it was ascendant on the European continent. In 1896 a “splendidly isolated” Great Britain generally was acknowledged as the dominant world power. Twenty years later, the rise of German, U.S., and Japanese power had eroded its global position and forced a profound change in British grand strategy, including the entente with France and the consequent “continental commitment” that sucked London into World War I.¹²⁴ Far from being splendidly isolated, Britain was enmeshed in the horrors of trench warfare, and its soldiers were being slaughtered in the futile July 1916 Somme offensive. The

121. The Strategic Assessment Group’s analysis of current and projected world-power shares was based on the international futures model developed by Barry Hughes. For a discussion of the methodology and a summary of the group’s findings, see Gregory F. Treverton and Seth G. Jones, *Measuring National Power* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2005), pp. iii, ix–x.

122. Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion,” p. 7.

123. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” p. 8.

124. For a powerful argument that the entente with France and the continental commitment were ill advised—and that Britain could, and should, have avoided being dragged into World War I—see Niall Ferguson, *Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). See also Daniel A. Baugh, “British Strategy during the First World War in the Context of Four Centuries: Blue-Water versus Continental Commitment,” in Daniel M. Masterson, ed., *Naval History: The Sixth Symposium of the U.S. Naval Academy* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1987), pp. 105–106.

change in Britain's geopolitical fortunes between 1896 and 1916 is a reminder that a state's position of dominance in international politics can melt away with unexpected rapidity.

The United States enjoys no privileged exemption from the fate of past hegemony. American primacists conflate balancing (a grand strategy pursued by individual states) with the attainment of balance in the international system (a more or less equal distribution of power among the great powers). That others' balancing efforts have not yet produced a balance of power does not mean they are not trying to offset U.S. hegemony, although these balancing efforts will require time to bear fruit. Thus, contrary to my 1993 prediction, the United States probably will not be challenged by great power rivals as early as 2010. Yet, it also is doubtful that U.S. hegemony will endure until 2030, as Wohlforth predicted in 1999. The key question facing American strategists, therefore, is: Should the United States cling to unipolarity for, at best, another two decades? Or should it abandon its hegemonic grand strategy for a less ambitious one of offshore balancing?

There are two versions of offshore balancing from which the United States can choose: multilateral or unilateral.¹²⁵ As a multilateral offshore balancer, the United States would act both to "reassure its allies that it will use force with wisdom and restraint" and to "reduce the fear created by its superior power by giving other states a voice in the circumstances in which it will use force."¹²⁶ Multilateral offshore balancing is problematic for four reasons. First, it is internally inconsistent, because its twin goals of preserving U.S. primacy while persuading others that they need not fear U.S. power do not mesh.¹²⁷ Second, the idea that the United States should exercise its power in concert with others runs counter to the fundamental realities of international politics.¹²⁸ Third, even if the United States could reassure its allies that it will use

125. On offshore balancing, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*; Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 86–124; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; and Walt, *Taming American Power*. Mearsheimer contends that the United States already is an offshore balancer. I concur that the United States should be an offshore balancer, but demonstrate that its policy since the early 1940s has been a grand strategy of extraregional hegemony, not offshore balancing.

126. Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 226.

127. Walt argues that the United States should not relinquish "the advantages that primacy now provides" and that "the central aim of U.S. grand strategy should be to preserve its current position for as long as possible." *Ibid.*, p. 219.

128. In the realm of security, states—even the United States and its allies—tend to have conflicting, rather than convergent, interests. When the members of international institutions disagree with U.S. policies, they will not act to legitimize them, which means that the United States would be left with the choice of abandoning policies it deems important (or even vital) or allowing its interests to be defined by others.

its power wisely, its ability to reassure potential adversaries such as China and Russia remains doubtful. Finally, multilateral offshore balancing can fairly be viewed as a backdoor strategy for preserving U.S. hegemony, rather than as a policy of restraint.¹²⁹

At bottom, multilateral offshore balancing does not address the United States' "hegemony problem," which is not caused by U.S. unilateralism. The real problem is that too often the United States acts unwisely (or, as in the case of Iraq, foolishly)—something it just as easily can do multilaterally as unilaterally. Although some analysts blame the George W. Bush administration for the United States' hegemony problem, the facts suggest otherwise. Concerns about unchecked U.S. power in a unipolar world first were voiced almost simultaneously with the Soviet Union's collapse. And it was during the Clinton administration that U.S. officials first acknowledged in so many words that America had a hegemony problem.

The United States has a hegemony problem because it wields hegemonic power. To reduce the fear of U.S. power, the United States must accept some reduction in its relative hard power by adopting a multipolar—and essentially unilateral—offshore balancing strategy that accommodates the rise of new great powers.¹³⁰ It also must rein in the scope of its extravagant ambitions to shape the international system in accordance with its Wilsonian ideology. The United States does not need to be an extraregional hegemon to be secure. Its quest for hegemony is driven instead by an ideational, deterritorialized conception of security divorced from the traditional metrics of great power grand strategy: the distribution of power in the international system and geography.¹³¹ Thus, to reduce others' concerns about its power, the United States must practice *self-restraint* (which is different from choosing to be constrained by others by adopting a multilateral approach to grand strategy). An America

129. Many adherents of defensive realism and of balance of threat theory actually are closet Wilsonian liberal internationalists. Stephen Van Evera is an example of the former, and Walt is an example of the latter. In *Taming American Power*, Walt asserts that U.S. liberal ideology is a key component of U.S. influence (p. 219). He also says that, as an offshore balancer, "the United States would still be actively engaged around the world, through multilateral institutions such as NATO, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization, and through close ties with specific regional allies." *Ibid.*, p. 22. Moreover, he speaks approvingly of the Bush and Clinton administrations for promoting the United States' core ideological values (p. 30), and of their efforts to expand U.S. power—albeit, he claims, this was expansion through multilateralism (p. 49). Since Wilson's time, liberal internationalism has been the dominant force driving the United States' quest for extraregional hegemony. For detailed discussion, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, especially chaps. 1, 6.

130. For detailed discussion of unilateral offshore balancing, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, especially chap. 8.

131. This theme is developed in *ibid.*, especially chaps. 1, 6, 9.

that has the wisdom and prudence to contain itself is less likely to be feared than one that begs the rest of the world to stop it before it expands hegemonically again.

If the United States fails to adopt an offshore balancing strategy based on multipolarity and military and ideological self-restraint, it probably will, at some point, have to fight to uphold its primacy, which is a potentially dangerous strategy. Maintaining U.S. hegemony is a game that no longer is worth the candle, especially given that U.S. primacy may already be in the early stages of erosion. Paradoxically, attempting to sustain U.S. primacy may well hasten its end by stimulating more intensive efforts to balance against the United States, thus causing the United States to become imperially overstretched and involving it in unnecessary wars that will reduce its power. Rather than risking these outcomes, the United States should begin to retrench strategically and capitalize on the advantages accruing to insular great powers in multipolar systems. Unilateral offshore balancing, indeed, is America's next grand strategy.