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Introduction

Since the Soviet Union collapsed almost two and a half decades ago, the United States has enjoyed unparalleled power in the international system. U.S. preponderance is particularly marked in the military realm. The United States is the only country whose military has a global "defense" perimeter. In Pentagon-speak, Central Command is not in charge of defending the territory around Lebanon, Kansas, the geographic center of the contiguous forty-eight United States. Rather, it is in charge of maintaining – and, if necessary, creating – conditions that Washington considers secure in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. To promote security on a global scale, the U.S. military maintains or has access to more than 1,000 facilities scattered over more than 140 countries, in which more than 200,000 U.S. military personnel are stationed. In their leisure time, they can enjoy one of the 234 golf courses the Pentagon runs around the world.[1]

No other state in modern history has enjoyed this sort of power preponderance. At the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, Britain was the most powerful state in the world. In the era when global power projection relied mostly on naval forces, British strategists developed a yardstick to guarantee Britain's edge: the Royal Navy had to remain as powerful as the two next-largest navies combined. Today, eighteen

[1] See: Vine (2009).

countries operate blue-water war fleets. The U.S. Navy fleet is larger than all the other seventeen combined.[2]

But size only begins to tell the story of U.S. military predominance. U.S. advantage in the realm of military technology is even more pronounced. The superiority of its combat aviation, for example, is remarkable. The F-15 fighter jet – for decades one of the workhorses of U.S. air-to-air combat – has a record of 107–0 in one-on-one confrontations. This explains why, paradoxically, there are no "aces" – pilots who have achieved the five "kills" necessary for the honorific title – on active duty in the U.S. Air Force. Faced with virtually certain defeat, few other pilots dare face U.S. fighter jets. With such skewed odds, the U.S. military achieves full air superiority – a key advantage in battle – soon after it engages any opponent. As a result, while during the last half-century U.S. air power has inflicted tens of thousands of casualties on the ground in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among other theaters, the last American soldier killed by enemy air power died on April 15, 1953, fighting in the Korean War.[3]

U.S. preponderance in land power is similarly pronounced. The most effective among other fighting land forces – the British and French armies, both of which are U.S. allies – are roughly the same size as the smallest branch of the U.S. military machine, its Marine Corps.[4] Going down the ranks of foreign armies, their odds of successfully facing U.S. land forces in combat quickly become vanishingly small. At the outset of the 1991 Gulf War, for example, Iraq possessed the world's fifth-largest army, with more than 3,000 Soviet-designed tanks. Still, the discrepancy in technology and training between U.S. and Iraqi forces was so great that U.S. forces managed to expel their opponents from Kuwait while suffering only 148 combat fatalities.[5] In fact, engagements in which U.S. forces faced more of their Iraqi counterparts did not result in higher U.S. casualties. To the contrary, the larger the number of Iraqi ground forces engaged in battle, the greater the casualties they suffered.[6]

[2] See: Work (2005, 16).
[3] See: Bowden (2009).
[4] See: SIPRI (2013).
[5] See: Global Security (1991).
[6] See: Press (2001).

In sum, the U.S. armed forces are one order of magnitude more powerful than any other military.[7] This superlative power-projection ability is made possible by the capacious U.S. defense budget, which, over the past decade, has represented almost half of global defense expenditures. Not only does the United States spend vast resources on its current military power; it also invests lavishly in defense research and development (R&D). Indeed, the U.S. defense R&D budget is around 80 percent of the *total* defense expenditures of its most obvious future competitor, China.[8] This means that the massive U.S. advantage in military technology can hardly be eroded anytime soon. In fact, it may well augment.

As a result of its across-the-spectrum military preponderance, the United States possesses – and will for the foreseeable future continue to possess – "command of the commons."[9] If Washington so decides, it has the capability to deny any other country access to space, airspace, and the high seas. Whereas some countries (namely all other nuclear powers) might be able to avoid defeat in a defensive war against the United States, none can compete with it militarily on a global scale. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, no other state has the capability to engage in prolonged politico-military operations around the globe.[10] Granted, several other states possess regional spheres of influence. But, to use Kenneth Waltz's felicitous turn of phrase, the United States is the only state to possess "global interests which it can care for unaided, though help may often be desirable."[11] Since the fall of the Soviet Union, then, the United States has been the world's sole great power. We live in a unipolar world.

Summary of the Book's Argument

This book addresses the three most important questions we can ask about how a unipolar world works. Is it durable? Is it peaceful? And,

[7] See: SIPRI (2013).
[8] See: SIPRI (2012).
[9] See: Posen (2003); Lieber (2005, 16).
[10] Although there is some debate about the precise moment at which the Cold War ended, most scholars place it in the fall of 1989, when the Soviet Union allowed the self-determination of its client states in Eastern Europe, leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, which started on November 9 that year.
[11] Waltz (1964, 888).

what is the best grand strategy that a unipolar power such as the contemporary United States can implement?

Over the remainder of the book, I lay out three central arguments, each answering one of these questions. First, I argue that, in a nuclear world, unipolarity has the potential to be durable, but whether in fact it lasts depends on the strategy of the unipole. My theory therefore lays out the reasons why unipolarity may be durable and the conditions under which its durability is more likely. The key argument here is that the durability of a unipolar world depends on two variables – one systemic and one strategic.

To begin with, the possibility of maintaining one state's preponderance in military power depends on the expected costs of a war between the unipole and a rising challenger. The higher these costs – which are determined by the technology of warfare – the narrower the range of situations that will prompt the rise of a military challenge. This means that unipolarity is in principle durable and, indeed, more likely to last in a nuclear world like ours, in which the expected costs of great-power war are terrifically high.[12]

Durability is not guaranteed only by the high costs of war, however. On the contrary, it also depends on a second factor, namely the strategy of the unipole regarding the economic growth of major powers. If the unipole accommodates the continuing growth of rising economic powers, it gives them fewer incentives to militarize. To do so, the unipole must eschew economic policies that might jeopardize the development of other important states. It must also refrain from attempting to extend its military dominance in their region, because this might threaten their long-term economic viability. If, instead, the unipole implements a strategy that threatens to contain the economic growth of rising powers, then these other states have greater incentives to invest in additional military capabilities beyond those that assure their immediate security and survival, thereby putting up a military challenge to the unipole.

Depending on these two factors, then, rising powers in a unipolar world may continue to convert their growing latent power into military

[12] I first explored this line of thought in Monteiro (2009, chapter 3). Other studies of the impact of nuclear weapons on unipolarity include Craig (2009) and Deudney (2011).

power beyond the point at which their survival is guaranteed by a nuclear deterrent; or they may become satisfied status quo military powers once they acquire the ability to deter any state, including the unipole, by developing a nuclear arsenal.[13]

Second, I show that a unipolar world is not peaceful. Despite frequent U.S. involvement in military conflicts throughout the last two and a half decades, not much has been written on the question of how unipolarity may contribute to interstate war.[14] I claim that unipolarity generates conditions propitious for significant conflict.[15] Neither the structure of a unipolar world nor U.S. strategic choices have a clear beneficial impact on the overall prospects for peace. The absence of a global balance of power between two or more states, while eliminating great-power competition, makes room for significant conflict beyond the most powerful states in the system. Unipolarity will generate abundant opportunities for war between the unipole and recalcitrant minor powers that do not have the capabilities or allies necessary to deter it. It will also make ample room for conflict among minor powers, which are less likely to be disciplined by great-power allies, as would be the case when an overall balance of power is present. As a result, unipolarity will be prone to produce asymmetric and peripheral conflicts.

Finally, my argument about grand strategy derives from the claims I make about durability and peace. Because the optimal strategy for a unipole varies depending on specific features of its situation – namely, the costs of war and the benefits it extracts from its power preponderance – that strategy cannot be determined a priori theoretically. Still, it is possible to determine, based on the arguments I make about unipolar peace and durability, what is the optimal strategy for a unipole such as the contemporary United States, for which the costs of war vis-à-vis peripheral states are low relative to the benefits it extracts from its current international position of preponderance.

I argue that the United States' interests are best served by a grand strategy of defensive accommodation, which combines a military strategy aimed at maintaining the international status quo – what I call

[13] On the distinction between latent and military power, see: Mearsheimer (2001a, 55–56). I treat this distinction in Chapter 2.
[14] See: Wohlforth (1999).
[15] See: Monteiro (2009, chapter 1); Monteiro (2011/2012).

defensive dominance – with an economic strategy that makes room for accommodating the interests of rising major powers.

For the United States, defensive accommodation has pluses and minuses. On the downside, it will lead to frequent U.S. involvement in peripheral military conflicts. On the upside, it is the only strategy that allows for the durability of U.S. military power preponderance.

Militarily, defensive dominance requires the unipole's regular involvement in conflicts aimed at maintaining the status quo. At the same time, however, it lowers incentives for regional arms races that would lift the power of all competitors relative to that of the United States, undermining the durability of its position. Defensive dominance is therefore conducive to a durable unipolar world. The present circumstances, in which the United States derives non-negligible economic benefits from its preponderant place in the international system, make defensive dominance preferable to disengagement, which would make room for major powers to compete with each other, eventually undermining U.S. power preponderance. Defensive dominance is also a superior strategic option vis-à-vis an attempt to increase the unipole's global position – what I call offensive dominance. To begin with, offensive dominance is likely to entail even greater U.S. involvement in interstate wars. In addition, when implemented in regions inhabited by major powers that enjoy growing economic capabilities, offensive dominance would prompt them to balance against the unipole in an attempt to guarantee their long-term survival through continued economic growth. Defensive dominance is therefore the best grand-strategic military option of the United States, allowing for the maintenance of its status as *primus inter pares*.

Defensive dominance is not sufficient to guarantee the durability of U.S. power preponderance, however. As a military strategy, it says nothing about the economic posture of the unipole. To give other states incentives to allow the continuation of U.S. military preponderance, the United States must also implement an economic strategy of growth accommodation toward major economic powers. As a consequence, the continuation of the current U.S. position as a unipole is only possible by implementing a strategy that will not only involve U.S. military forces in frequent action but may also eventually make room for other major powers to overtake the U.S. economy. Clearly, the maintenance of U.S. military power preponderance is not free of cost.

These arguments highlight the mixed view of unipolarity I lay out ahead. Although military power preponderance certainly allows the unipole to shape the system in ways that are beyond the reach of one great power among several, it is not without peril. Minor powers who find themselves in opposition to the unipole will have great incentives to boost their defensive capabilities. Relations with such powers will be harder to manage and, at least before they acquire greater defensive capabilities, more likely to devolve into armed conflict. At the same time, a unipole must balance the international demands of global management with the domestic investments required to maintain its power preponderance.

In this sense, the ironic saying "may god protect us from answered prayers" applies to the U.S. global position after the demise of the Soviet Union.[16] Its erstwhile foe long gone, Washington continues to face the consequences of the power vacuum left by Moscow's demise as a global competitor, which are not an unmitigated boon.

At the same time, although the picture I paint in this book is certainly less rosy than most other views of the post–Cold War world, nothing in my argument foreordains the decline of U.S. power. My theory of unipolarity accounts for the possibility of frequent conflict in a nonetheless durable unipolar system. Such is the paradoxical nature of power preponderance. The overall power advantage possessed by the contemporary United States does not mean that it will be able to convert policy preferences into outcomes peacefully. Preponderant power, at least preponderant *military* power, does not necessarily get states what they want.

Existing Literature on Unipolarity

Because the end of the Cold War took most observers by surprise, little thought had been given to unipolarity before it was upon us.[17] During the past two-and-a-half decades, however, a sizable literature on the topic has emerged. Scholarly debates on unipolarity have focused on the question of systemic stability, which can, in turn, be split into two issues: durability and peace. Policy makers and analysts, in turn, have

[16] See: Mantel (2009, 489).
[17] For an early exception, see: Kaplan (1957).

intensely debated a third issue: the pros and cons of each strategic option available to the United States in a unipolar era.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the most prevalent argument about a unipolar world was that it was not durable. Charles Krauthammer, for instance, wrote of a "unipolar *moment*."[18] Realists such as Waltz argued that other great powers would soon emerge, reestablishing the global balance of power.[19] This consensus prevailed throughout the 1990s.

Sociologically and perhaps even psychologically, the early focus on concerns about the durability of U.S. power preponderance reflected the trauma produced among specialists in international relations by the sudden end of the Cold War. Having failed to predict what was arguably the most momentous transformation of world politics since the emergence of IR as a scientific discipline in the post–World War II years, IR scholars were determined to "get it right" this time.[20] This anxiety about predicting the next big transformation led many to foresee an impending turn toward multipolarity caused by Russia's recovery and the ascendancy of several new powers, such as China, India, or even a united Europe. None of these developments materialized, however.

Theoretically, the view that U.S. power preponderance could not possibly last was reinforced by the prominent role of the balance of power as a key concept in IR theory, which led scholars to expect the novel absence of a systemic balance of power to last only briefly until other great powers (re)emerged.[21] Accordingly, balance-of-power scholars spent the 1990s prophesizing the imminent end of our unipolar world.[22] Given this consensus that unipolarity was not durable, the question of whether it was peaceful received little scrutiny during the first decade of the post–Cold War era.

[18] Krauthammer (1990/1991, 23–33, emphasis added).
[19] See: Layne (1993); Waltz (1993).
[20] Here and throughout the book, I adhere to the convention of using "IR" to refer to the discipline of international relations and "international relations" to refer to its substantive domain of study. On IR's failure to predict the end of the Cold War, see: Gaddis (1992/1993); Koslowski and Kratochwil (1994).
[21] On the balance of power, see: Little (2007); Nexon (2009).
[22] On systemic theory and unipolarity, see: Schroeder (1994); Mastanduno (1997); Mastanduno (1999); Mastanduno and Kapstein (1999).

In policy circles, the 1990s debate on unipolarity was marked by arguments for and against a scaled-down global role for the United States. This was the decade in which the West enjoyed the "peace dividend" it earned by outlasting its Cold War rival. Some saw in this an opportunity for the United States to decrease its involvement in security arrangements around the globe – in the popular expression, it was time for America to "come home."[23] In the absence of a peer-competitor, the argument went, U.S. forces no longer needed to be stationed around the world. This position was vigorously countered by those who saw in the absence of a peer-competitor an opportunity to do precisely the opposite: consolidate the reach of U.S. power, either by soft or hard, military means. Ultimately, the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations opted for this most proactive strategy, maintaining and often augmenting the U.S. role in at least one key region, Europe. U.S. strategy in the 1990s also entailed a sizable direct military presence in the Middle East for the first time, as U.S. forces remained stationed in the region in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, both the academic and policy debates on unipolarity were reshaped. The reasons for this simultaneous transformation were different in each case, however. In the scholarly world, the unipolar moment thesis lost traction to arguments in favor of the durability of unipolarity, which increased the stakes for the peacefulness of a unipolar world. In the policy realm, the debate was shifted by the momentous impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the worldview of most U.S. policy makers – and on their view of the United States' role in the world.

The consensus that unipolarity would soon come to an end was undone in 1999 by William Wohlforth's influential article, "The Stability of a Unipolar World."[24] Forcefully opposing the view that U.S. decline was predetermined, Wohlforth argued that unipolarity is durable. U.S. preponderance is so marked, he wrote, that "[f]or many decades, no state is likely to be in a position to take on the United States in any of the underlying elements of power."[25]

[23] See: Gholz and Press (1997).
[24] Wohlforth (1999).
[25] Ibid., 8.

Furthermore, Wohlforth argued that a durable unipolar world was a good thing, because unipolarity is also peaceful. In his view, "the existing distribution of capabilities generates incentives for cooperation."[26] U.S. power preponderance not only ends hegemonic rivalry but it also gives the United States the "means and motive to maintain key security institutions in order to ease local security conflicts and limit expensive competition among the other major powers."[27] This optimistic view of unipolarity became one of the most influential perspectives in debates about current international politics, echoing in theoretical terms Francis Fukuyama's views on the "end of history" and the universalization of Western liberal democracy.[28]

Two years after Wohlforth's successful transformation of the theoretical debate on U.S. power preponderance, the policy debate on U.S. strategy in a unipolar world suffered the 9/11 shock. After the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the ranks of those who opposed a global U.S. presence – which were not particularly thick to begin with during the 1990s – dwindled further. As a result, the debate largely shifted to one about whether to increase the level of U.S. involvement, with "liberal hawks" advocating the maintenance of the soft dominance of the 1990s and "neoconservatives" arguing for a more active U.S. role, reshaping the world with its power, if necessary by military means. During the George W. Bush administration (2001–8), this latter perspective carried the day, resulting in the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Today, none of these three debates – on unipolar durability, peace, and strategy – has reached a consensus. The question of whether unipolarity is durable continues to be the object of much spirited debate. Many, such as Robert Kagan, continue to argue that "American predominance is unlikely to fade any time soon."[29] Likewise, Josef Joffe writes that the United States will continue to be the world's default power and indeed "an überpower."[30] Others believe that U.S. power preponderance is in serious decline, however.[31] Potential

[26] Ibid., 38.
[27] Ibid., 7–8.
[28] Brooks and Wohlforth (2008); Fukuyama (1992).
[29] Kagan (2008, 86).
[30] Joffe (2009).
[31] See: Layne (2006a).