1 *Introduction: unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences*

G. JOHN IKENBERRY, MICHAEL MASTANDUNO, AND WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH

American primacy in the global distribution of capabilities is one of the most salient features of the contemporary international system. The end of the Cold War did not return the world to multipolarity. Instead the United States – already materially preeminent – became more so. We currently live in a one superpower world, a circumstance unprecedented in the modern era. No other great power has enjoyed such advantages in material capabilities – military, economic, technological, and geographical. Other states rival the United States in one area or another, but the multifaceted character of American power places it in a category of its own. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, slower economic growth in Japan and Western Europe during the 1990s, and America's outsized military spending have all enhanced these disparities. While in most historical eras the distribution of capabilities among major states has tended to be multipolar or bipolar – with several major states of roughly equal size and capability – the United States emerged from the 1990s as an unrivaled global power. It became a "unipolar" state.

Not surprisingly, this extraordinary imbalance has triggered global debate. Governments, including that of the United States, are struggling to respond to this peculiar international environment. What is the character of domination in a unipolar distribution? If world politics is always a mixture of force and consent, does unipolarity remove restraints and alter the mix in favor of force? Is a unipolar world likely to be built around rules and institutions or based more on the unilateral exercise of unipolar power? These questions have been asked in the context of a global debate over the projection of power by the former George W. Bush administration. To what extent was America's foreign policy after 2001 a reflection simply of the idiosyncratic and provocative strategies of the Bush administration itself, rather than a

manifestation of the deeper structural features of the global system of power? These concerns over how a unipolar world operates – and how the unipolar state itself behaves – are the not-so-hidden subtext of world politics at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Classic questions of international relations (IR) theory are at stake in the debate over unipolarity. The most obvious question concerns balance of power theory, which predicts that states will respond to concentrated power by counterbalancing.[1] The absence of a balancing response to American unipolar power is a puzzle to some, while others argue that incipient or specific types of balancing behavior are in fact occurring.[2] A related debate is over power transition theory, which focuses on the specific forms of conflict that are generated between rising and declining hegemonic states.[3] The abrupt shift in the distribution of capabilities that followed the end of the Cold War and the rise of China after the Cold War raise questions about the character of conflict between dominant and challenger states as they move along trajectories of rise and decline. A unipolar distribution also raises issues that scholars grappled with during the Cold War, namely the structure and dynamics of different types of polar systems. Here the questions concern the ways in which the features of polarity affect the durability and war-proneness of the state system.[4] Likewise, scholarly debates

[1] See Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions and Research Design," in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 128–153.

[2] G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); and T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortman, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). On incipient balancing, see Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 24, 1 (Summer 2000): 5–41; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise," *International Security* 17, 4 (Spring 1993): 5–51; Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," *International Security* 30, 1 (Summer 2005): 7–45; and Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, 1 (Summer 2005): 109–139.

[3] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958); and A F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[4] See Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, 3 (April 1964): 390–406; Richard N. Rosecrance, "Bipolarity, Multipolarity and the Future," *Journal of Conflict*

about threat perception, the impact of regime characteristics on foreign policy, the propensity of dominant states to provide collective goods, and the ability of a state to translate preponderant capabilities into effective influence are also at stake in the debate over unipolarity.[5]

This book is a systematic inquiry into the logic and dynamics of unipolarity. Its starting point is the distinctive distribution of capabilities among states in the contemporary global system. The central question driving our inquiry is straightforward: To what extent – and, if so, how – does this distribution of capabilities matter for patterns of international politics?

In their initial efforts to make sense of an American-dominated international system, scholars and observers have invoked a wide array of grand terms such as empire, hegemony, unipolarity, imperium, and "uni-multipolarity."[6] Scholars are searching for a conceptual language to depict and place in historical and comparative perspective the distinctive political formation that has emerged after the Cold War. But this multiplicity of terms obscures more than it reveals. In this project, unipolarity refers narrowly to the underlying material distribution of capabilities, and not to the political patterns or relationships depicted by terms such as empire, imperium, and hegemony. What makes the global system unipolar is the distinctive distribution of material resources. An important research question is whether and in what ways this particular distribution of capabilities affects patterns of

Resolution 10 (September 1966): 314–327; Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* 93 (Summer 1964): 881–909; Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley, 1957).

[5] For example, Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Responses to American Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2006); Robert Jervis, "The Remaking of a Unipolar World," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, 3 (2006): 7–19.

[6] A huge literature has emerged – or returned – depicting America as an empire. See, for example, Charles Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). On hegemony, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). On imperium, see Peter Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). On uni-multipolarity, see Samuel Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* 78, 2 (March/April 1999): 35–49.

international politics, creating outcomes that are different than what one might expect under conditions of bipolarity or multipolarity.

Setting up the inquiry in this manner requires a basic distinction between power as material resources and power as influence. Power resources refer to the distribution of material capabilities among states. The global system today – seen in comparative historical perspective – has concentrated power capabilities unprecedented in the modern era. But this observation should not prejudge questions about the extent and character of influence or about the logic of political relationships within the global system. Powerful states, even unipolar ones, may not always get the outcomes they prefer. Nor should this observation about the concentration of power prejudge the question of whether the global system is coercive, consensual, legitimate, or illegitimate. Describing the system as unipolar leaves unanswered the Weberian questions about the logic and character of the global political system that is organized around unipolarity.[7]

In the remainder of this chapter, we develop a framework for analyzing unipolarity and highlight the arguments of the chapters that follow. The individual contributions develop hypotheses and explore the impact of unipolarity on the behavior of the dominant state, on the reactions of other states, and on the properties of the international system. While the book takes as a starting point the causal impact of unipolarity as a concentrated distribution of capabilities, individual chapters explore more complex causal chains. Polarity may have effects, in other words, that are not captured by the typical neorealist explanatory scheme with which the concept is associated. Finnemore, for example, stresses potent social and ideational constraints the need for legitimacy places on the unipole, while Ikenberry develops the reciprocal interaction between unipolarity and the US-sponsored liberal international order. In all chapters, however, unipolarity looms as a potentially important factor affecting patterns of behavior over the long term.

Collectively, we find that unipolarity does have a profound impact on international politics. International relations under conditions of unipolarity force us to rethink conventional and received

[7] In this way, we are following a basic distinction that is made in the power theory literature. See, in particular, David A. Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

understandings about the operation of the balance of power, the meaning of alliance partnerships, the logic of international economic cooperation, the relationship between power and legitimacy, and the behavior of satisfied and revisionist states. A unipolar distribution of capabilities will eventually give way to other distributions. The argument advanced here is not that unipolarity will last indefinitely, but that as long as it does last, it will constitute a critical factor in understanding patterns of foreign policy and world politics.

Definition and measurement

Scholars use the term "unipolarity" to distinguish a system with one extremely capable state from systems with two or more great powers (bi-, tri-, and multipolarity). Unipolarity should also be distinguished from hegemony and empire, which refer to political relationships and degrees of influence rather than to distributions of material capability. The adjective "unipolar" describes something that has a single pole. International relations scholars have long defined a pole as a state that (a) commands an especially large share of the resources or capabilities states can use to achieve their ends, and (b) excels in all the component elements of state capability, conventionally defined as size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military might, and organizational-institutional "competence."[8]

A unipolar system is one whose structure is defined by the fact that only one state meets these criteria. The underpinnings of the concept are familiar to international relations scholars. They flow from the massive literature on polarity, and especially from Waltz's seminal treatment. The core contention is that polarity structures the horizon of states' probable actions and reactions, narrowing the range of choice and providing subtle incentives and disincentives for certain types of behavior. An appreciation of polarity yields a few important insights about patterns of behavior in international politics over the long term. Even for those scholars most persuaded of its analytical utility, polarity is at best a necessary part of explanation rather than a sufficient

[8] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 131.

explanation.[9] The distribution of capabilities may be a place to begin an explanation, but is rarely enough to complete one.

Polarity is a theoretical construct; real international systems only approximate various polar ideal types. The polarity concept implies a threshold value of the distribution of capabilities. The more unambiguously the poles in a real international system pass the threshold, the more confidence analysts can have that the properties attributed to a given system structure in theory will obtain in practice. The more unambiguously the capabilities of the great powers in a multipolar system clearly stand apart from all other states and are comparable to each other, the more relevant are the insights from the theoretical literature on multipolarity. Waltz often discussed the logic of a bipolar system as if it were a two-actor system. The more dominant the superpowers were in reality, the more confidence analysts could have that those logical deductions actually applied. In reality, the Cold War international system was never "perfectly" bipolar. Analysts used to speak of loose vs. tight bipolarity, and debated whether the Soviet Union had the full complement of capabilities to measure up as a pole.

How do we know whether or to what degree an international system has passed the unipolar threshold? Using the conventional definition of a pole, an international system can be said to be unipolar if it contains one state whose overall share of capabilities places it unambiguously in a class by itself compared to all other states. This reflects the fact that poles are defined not on an absolute scale but relative to each other and to other states. In addition, preponderance must characterize all the relevant categories of state capabilities.[10] To determine polarity, one has to examine the distribution of capabilities and identify the states whose shares of overall resources obviously place them into their own class.

There will doubtless be times in which polarity cannot be determined, but now does not appear to be one of them. Scholars largely agree that there were four or more states that qualified as poles before 1945; that by 1950 or so only two measured up; and that by the 1990s

[9] For a comprehensive critical review of the polarity literature, see Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

[10] William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 21, 1: 1–36; William Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World," in Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled*, 98–118; Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

one of these two poles was gone. They largely agree, further, that no other power – not Japan, China, India or Russia, nor any European country, nor the EU – has increased its overall portfolio of capabilities sufficiently to transform their standing.[11] This leaves a single pole.

There is widespread agreement, moreover, that any plausible index aggregating the relevant dimensions of state capabilities would place the United States in a separate class by a large margin.[12] The most widely used measures of capability are GDP and military spending. As of 2009, the United States accounted for roughly a fifth of global GDP and over 40 percent of GDP among the established great powers (see Table 1.1). The post-Cold War US economic position surpasses that of any leading state in modern history, with the sole exception of the United States' own standing in the early Cold War years (when World War Two had temporarily depressed every other major economy). The size and wealth of the United States' economy mean that the generation of its massive military capabilities represented only roughly 4 percent of its GDP in 2009 (Table 1.2), compared to the nearly 10 percent it averaged over the Cold War's peak years of 1950–1970, as well as the similarly large burdens borne by most of the major powers of the past.[13]

[11] Some scholars argue that bipolarity or multipolarity might characterize international politics in certain regional settings. See, for example, Robert Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty First Century," *International Security* 23, 4 (Spring 1999): 81–117; and Andrew Moravcsik, "The Quiet Superpower," *Newsweek* (June 17, 2002, Atlantic Edition).

[12] See, e.g., Ethan B. Kapstein, "Does Unipolarity Have A Future?" in Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 464–490; Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Wohlforth, "Stability of a Unipolar World"; Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World"; Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*; William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Arvind Virmani, "Global Power from the 18th to the 21st Century: Power Potential (VIP2), Strategic Assets & Actual Power (VIP)," Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, Working Paper 175, New Delhi (2005). The most comprehensive contrarian view is Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), whose main arguments are that the United States is weaker economically than it seems (a claim mainly about the future); and that US military capability is comparatively ineffective at achieving favorable outcomes (a claim about utility).

[13] Calculated from *Budget of the United States Government Fiscal Year 2005: Historical Tables* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2005).

Table 1.1 *Economic indicators for the major powers, 2009*

	GDP, current prices ($ billion)	% Great power GDP, current prices	% World GDP, current prices	% World GDP, PPP	GDP per capita, current prices	Public debt (% GDP)	Productivity ($ GDP per hour worked)
United States	14,256	42.2	23.3	20.3	46,381	52.9	55.3
China	4,519	13.4	7.4	12.5	3,404	18.2	n.a.
Japan	5,068	15	8.3	5.9	39,731	192.1	38.3
Germany	3,353	9.9	5.5	4	40,875	77.2	50.5
Russia	1,660	4.9	2.7	3	11,690	6.9	n.a.
France	2,676	7.9	4.4	3	42,747	79.7	53.2
Britain	2,184	6.5	3.6	3.1	43,736	68.5	44.9

Notes: % World GDP, PPP is World Bank estimate for 2005. Differences between PPP (purchasing power parity) and market exchange rate measures are discussed in Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, ch. 2. Data for United States public debt are from 2005. Productivity estimates are from 2005.
Sources: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2010; World Bank, *2011 International Comparison Program, Preliminary Results*. Public debt: *CIA World Factbook 2010*. Hours worked: *OECD Employment Outlook 2010, Statistical Annex*. Productivity: *OECD Compendium of Productivity Indicators 2008*.

Table 1.2 *Defense expenditures for the major powers, 2009*

	Defense expenditures ($ billion)	% Great power defense expenditures	% World defense expenditures	Defense expenditures % of GDP	Defense R&D expenditures ($ billion)
United States	663.3	62.9	43	4.3	74.2
China	98.8	9.4	7	2	n.a.
Japan	46.9	4.4	3	0.9	1.6
Germany	48	4.6	3	1.3	1.4
Russia	61	5.8	4	3.5	n.a
France	67.3	6.4	4	2.3	4.4
Britain	69.3	6.6	4	2.5	3

The United States now likely spends more on defense than the rest of the world combined (Table 1.2). Military research and development (R&D) may best capture the scale of the long-term investments which now give the United States a dramatic qualitative edge over other states. As Table 1.2 shows, in 2008 US military R&D expenditures were more than six times greater than those of Germany, Japan, France, and Britain combined. By some estimates over half the military R&D expenditures in the world are American. And this disparity has been sustained for decades: over the past thirty years, for example, the United States invested over three times more than the EU combined on military R&D. Hence, on any composite index featuring these two indicators the United States obviously looks like a unipole. That perception is reinforced (see Table 1.3) by a snapshot of science and technology indicators for the major powers.

These vast commitments do not make the United States omnipotent, but they do facilitate a preeminence in military capabilities vis-à-vis all the other major powers that is unique in the post-seventeenth-century experience. While other powers can contest US forces operating in or very near their homelands, especially over issues on which nuclear deterrence is credible, the United States is and will long remain the only state capable of projecting major military power globally.[14] This dominant position is enabled by what Barry Posen calls "command of the commons" – that is, unassailable military dominance over the sea, air, and space. The result is an international system that contains only one state with the capability to organize major politico-military action anywhere in the system.[15] No other state or even combination of states is capable of mounting and deploying a major expeditionary force outside its own region, except with the assistance of the United States.

[14] Sustained US investment in nuclear capabilities, against the backdrop of Russian decline and Chinese stasis, has even led some to question the existence of stable deterrence between these countries. See Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30, 4 (2006): 7–44.

[15] David Wilkinson, "Unipolarity without Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 1, 2 (1999): 141–172; Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East*; Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, 1 (2003): 5–46.

Table 1.3 *Science and technology indicators for the major powers, 2006–2009*

	Value added of high-technology industries ($ million) (2007)[1]	Share of value added of high-technology industries ($ million) (2007)	Gross domestic expenditure on R&D ($ million PPP) (2008)	No. of triadic patent families (2008)[2]	Science and engineering doctoral degrees (2006)	PCs per 1000 people (2006)	Internet access per 1000 people (2008)	Secure Internet servers[3] per million people (2009)
United States	374,233.0	30.70%	398,194.0	14,828	30,452	810	760	1,234
China	166,003.0	13.60%	141,400.0	433	22,953	60	220	1
Japan	128,897.0	10.60%	149,212.9	14,126	8,122	800	750	519
Germany	85,806	7.00%	76,796.9	6,027	10,243	660	750	641
Russia	9,640	0.80%	22,121.0	49	19,725	130	320	11
France	42,174.0	3.50%	42,893	2,430	56,770	650	680	210
Britain	51,786.0	4.30%	38,707.50	1,658	9,761	800	760	905

Notes:

[1] In 2007 dollars. High technology defined by the National Science Board as "aerospace, communications and semiconductors, computers and office machinery, pharmaceuticals, and scientific instruments and measuring equipment."

[2] Triadic patent families represent attempts to receive patents for an invention in the United States, Europe, and Japan. See www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind06/c6/c6g.htm; data for China/Russia from 2005.

[3] Secure Internet servers use encryption technology in Internet transactions. See www.netcraft.com

Sources: World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2010*; OECD, *Main Science and Technology Indicators*, May 2010; National Science Board, *Science and Engineering Indicators*, 2010 Volume 2; *R&D Magazine*, Battelle, OECD, IMF, CIA.