



The Proof of Primacy

By Thomas Donnelly

What used to be called the “post–Cold War world” has gone through three distinct periods. First, the “Long 1990s”—beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and ending with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—marked a time of drift and, at least in international politics, American confusion and indecision. The second, from 9/11 until the March 19, 2003, invasion of Iraq, was a period of transition, during which the Bush administration struggled to fashion a response to events that destroyed its illusions that the world’s problems could be “managed” by a small knot of confident and competent pragmatists, acting in the spirit of humble realpolitik. The invasion of Iraq marked the start of the third period—a new era of Pax Americana, distinguished by the energetic exercise of U.S. power not simply to protect the status quo of American global preeminence but to extend the current liberal international order, beginning in the Middle East.

The collapse of the Soviet empire left the United States as the world’s “sole superpower.” After decades of Cold War competition, and centuries of struggle among Europe’s great powers, the notion of an extended American peace seemed counterintuitive, to put it mildly. Even at the moment of triumph, essayist Charles Krauthammer anticipated no more than a “unipolar moment,” a blink in time.

Strategic “realists,” committed to the proposition that international politics is a Hobbesian struggle for power, naturally assumed that other nations would find some way to counterbalance the dominance of the United States. Liberal idealists, who tend to be highly suspicious of American power, looked to international law and institutions to constrain the unilateral or otherwise energetic exercise of U.S. power, particularly military power.

The 1990s were a deeply disappointing decade for political scientists of various stripes, as potential challengers to U.S. preeminence stumbled or fell out of the competition completely. Japan and Germany, the two great powers who had appropriately exploited the U.S. defense umbrella

of the Cold War to rebuild modern industrial economies, discovered—to the surprise of many—that economic power alone did not translate directly into geopolitical strength; the era of “geoeconomics” never materialized. And then the Japanese and German economies stagnated while the U.S. economy grew like a weed.

In 1991 the Soviet Union wheezed into the dustbin of history and immediately began to decompose. The rump Russia contracted to a four-hundred-year low, handing back centuries’ worth of conquests to Central Asians, East and Southeast Europeans, and other Russian borderlanders—or at least to the local politburos. For most of the decade, the question was whether Russia would disintegrate further. The hard hand of Vladimir Putin seems to have arrested the rot while stamping out a good deal of his country’s taste for liberty, but Russia still plays but a much-reduced role in international affairs, whatever pomp and circumstances still accrue to the Russian nuclear arsenal.

Only China, with its booming economy and creakily modernizing military, seemed to fit the bill as emerging “peer competitor”—a Pentagon term of art that enjoyed a brief fad but rapidly collapsed

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of its own weight. While China remains a rising power—and many East Asian states have already begun to hedge against future Chinese aggressiveness by prematurely kowtowing toward Beijing—the People’s Republic still has a long way to go. The regime has lost its Maoist obsession with ideological purity, but at some cost to its cohesion and sense of legitimacy. China now seems driven by nationalism of the nineteenth-century variety, which might serve domestically but probably will be increasingly problematic internationally. Beijing’s leaders face the devil’s own dilemma: how to challenge the very international order that is the framework for its growth and its political “rise,” without provoking the United States to regard it as an enemy.

Krauthammer himself made these points in an essay entitled “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” in *The National Interest* in late 2002.¹ In his estimation, the phenomenon of unipolarity only “accelerated” in the 1990s. Written after the attacks of September 11, 2001, but before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, it seemed to Krauthammer that the gap in power between the United States and the rest of the world had opened even more widely. The surprising victory in Afghanistan clearly influenced his conclusions: that exceptional demonstration of “latent” U.S. military power revealed that, far from being the graveyard of the American empire, the conquest of the Taliban and the installation of President Hamid Karzai made Afghanistan the benchmark of a renewed and seemingly effortless assertion of American power.

Krauthammer also observed two other notable effects in the Bush administration’s response to the events of 9/11. The quick economic recovery demonstrated a new “resiliency” that replaced the old isolationist sense of American invulnerability; yes, we could be attacked by a terrorist organization exploiting the openness of U.S. society, but despite the shock of the attacks, the larger effect was to stir Americans to new efforts and a new assertion of U.S. power. This, in turn, produced a third effect: it accelerated even further the realignment of great powers. Even China, which had for a decade and more been laboriously cultivating an alliance with Pakistan and with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, could only stand aside while U.S. diplomats and soldiers began rearranging the existing order to permit the invasion of Afghanistan to go forward.

Krauthammer’s piece captures very well the spirit of the time between 9/11 and the war in Iraq. This second “post-Cold War” period shook the world, the United

States, and the Bush administration from the slumbers of the Long 1990s. Not only were the policies of the first Bush and Clinton terms swept aside, but so were the “realist” bromides of the 2000 Bush campaign. The president could not reconcile the impulse to be “humble” with the imperatives of hegemony; the aversion to “nation-building” and other forms of military stability operations also receded.

This period was marked more by action than reflection; more by military operations than grand strategy-making. When the White House released the formal *National Security Strategy of the United States* in September 2002, it was unclear that its arguments and geopolitical goals were anything more than a sophisticated cover story for invading Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. And the further refinement of the Bush strategy still is a product of the president’s speechmaking rather than a formal governmental process, “interagency” or otherwise. Indeed, the interagency combat often seems the most savage war-making of all; to read the newspapers, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is totally surrounded—and continues to attack. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice is more often portrayed as President Bush’s translator than an actor in these policy melodramas.

Still, the decision to remove Saddam Hussein and to build something more decent and democratic in the regime’s place does mark a new, third epoch in the “unipolar era.” Moreover, this break has been reinforced by President Bush’s recent speeches vowing to “transform” the politics of the greater Middle East and questioning the United States’ previous willingness to tolerate a variety of autocratic local allies in the name of narrow “stability” or Cold War, balance-of-power habit. What has begun is the real test of the Pax Americana—the active employment of American power to promulgate liberal political principles and thereby fashion an enduring peace.

The Prospects for Primacy

As in the early 1990s, there are many who anticipate an American failure in this grand endeavor. The theories of power-balancing are so deeply rooted in political science that many scholars see in the Iraq War experience the exhibition of behavior they have so long predicted; some exceptionally clever theorists, mindful of the military, economic, and political strength of the United States, construe evidence of “soft balancing,” meaning the use of mechanisms of international

institutions—most notably the United Nations Security Council but also international law—to constrain the exercise of American power.

There is also a long-held American belief that the exercise of power—even by the United States itself—is inherently corrupting and an invitation to tyranny. Beginning with the Antifederalists and then the Jeffersonians of the founding era, this tradition is leery of war and the use of military force. A part of this fear stems from the horrors of battle, but a larger element is the fear of how the requirements of war-making threaten liberty at home.

This impulse finds strong expression in the presidential candidacy of former Vermont governor Howard Dean. His early and unvarying opposition to the war in Iraq is premised not simply on his judgments about the threat, or lack thereof, from Saddam or Iraq's weapons programs. Nor is it just a reflection of the argument that the war against al Qaeda—the narrow interpretation of the “global war on terrorism”—must be won before the United States undertakes further initiatives or overly stretches its military. At its core, the Dean candidacy taps into a strain of skepticism about the use of American power in the world; these habits are deeply ingrained, particularly, in the modern Democratic Party. And its fears are not just that our European allies are estranged from a “militaristic” American policy, or the trigger-happy, “cowboy” cartoonish image of President Bush, but suspicion that wartime measures will infringe upon domestic liberties. Hence the hyperventilation about the Patriot Act, complaints about the suspension of habeas corpus rights in cases of suspected terrorists, and concerns about the status of Afghan detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

But while the upcoming campaign seems to offer the prospect of a stark choice and the potential to reverse the course charted by George Bush, it may be impossible to roll back the strategic realities of geopolitical unipolarity or undo the facts of Pax Americana. This is not to deny Governor Dean's sincerity when he asserts that the capture of Saddam Hussein is of no consequence and makes Americans no safer. It is, rather, to assert that the process of “unipolarization,” unchecked in the 1990s, “accelerated” by the war in Afghanistan, is moving yet faster.

To understand this phenomenon, it is especially useful to consider a 1999 article by William Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” published in *International Security*. Despite the necessary social-science mumbo-jumbo—impressive if impenetrable charts and graphs on things like “comprehensive national power”

and “the correlates of war”—this remains a remarkably readable essay that merits close attention.

Wohlforth's argument, still *contra* much of the *mundum*, is that American hegemony is built to last: unipolarity is itself stable, peaceful, and durable. Despite the ongoing guerrilla war in Iraq, the article seems even more percipient today than when it was written at the conclusion of the Long 1990s, before Afghanistan and before Operation Iraqi Freedom. The following summarizes Wohlforth's basic case:

“First,” he wrote, “the system is unambiguously unipolar. The United States enjoys a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries.”² This is surely still the case—indeed, it is an argument meant to place the extent of American power in the broadest historical context possible. On the scale of millennia, the period since 1999 accounts for almost nothing.

“Second,” Wohlforth contended, “the current unipolarity is prone to peace. . . . No other major power is in a position to follow any policy that depends for its success on prevailing against the United States in a war or extended rivalry.”³ Just as American power cannot possibly have declined so precipitously in less than four years—the preponderance of U.S. strength having been amassed over more than two centuries—neither can another state have gained so rapidly. No rival anti-American coalition has shown any sign of emerging, at least in the traditional measures of national power.

The third element of Wohlforth's triad is that “the current unipolarity is not only peaceful but durable. It is already a decade old, and if Washington plays its cards right, it may last as long as [the Cold War] bipolarity. For 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.”⁴ This final point seems as obvious today as in 1999; yes, Chinese economic and military strength has continued to grow. And, especially in the particular case of a decapitating strike on Taiwan, the People's Liberation Army can make a U.S. response very challenging. But the overall strategic balance between the United States and China is probably shifting away from Beijing. In a “globalized” world, the distinction between regional and global power is increasingly illusory, making it difficult for Beijing to maintain its own private sphere of influence independent from the overarching Pax Americana.

And there are more gems of wisdom in the essay that have great relevance in regard to the post-Saddam

order. Wohlforth quietly but effectively calls into question the recent fad for “asymmetric” warfare. He notes that American academics and analysts were misled during the Cold War by the asymmetries between Soviet military power and the other measures of power, which heavily favored the United States and its allies. As the sole superpower, the U.S. edge in every measure of power is so pronounced that achieving a similar asymmetric advantage is all but impossible. The prospects for victory in asymmetric warfare are reduced. This rightly reminds us that terrorism is the warfare of the weak.

Speaking of alliances, Wohlforth is likewise penetrating about the limited utility of coalitions: “Alliances aggregate power only to the extent that they are reliably binding and permit the merging of armed forces, defense industries, [research and development] infrastructures, and strategic decision-making.” A hegemonic power like the United States, meanwhile, “has only to make sure its domestic house is in order. In short, a single state gets more bang for the buck than several states in alliance. . . . Right away, the odds are skewed in favor of the unipolar power.”⁵

Finally, the United States retains immense strategic advantages of geography. Wohlforth’s language is academic but the point is clear: “[P]ower indexes alone cannot capture the importance of the fact that the United States is in North America while all the other potential poles are in and around Eurasia.” Projecting power halfway around the world is hard to do—whether from North America (or military bases overseas) to Afghanistan or, for our enemies, in reverse. Perhaps in the future the world will come to remember September 11, 2001, as the Japanese have come to remember December 7, 1941: the day a slumbering America awoke to change the world.

Notes

1. Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *The National Interest*, Winter 2002/2003.
2. William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), p. 7.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 29.