

# Unrest Assured

Nuno P. Monteiro

## Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union more than two decades ago, the United States has been the world's sole great power. It maintains a military that is one order of magnitude more powerful than any other;<sup>1</sup> defense spending close to half of global military expenditures;<sup>2</sup> a blue-water navy superior to all others combined;<sup>3</sup> a chance at a splendid nuclear first strike over its erstwhile foe, Russia;<sup>4</sup> a defense research and development budget that is 80 percent of the total defense expenditures of its most obvious future competitor, China;<sup>5</sup> and unmatched global power-projection capabilities.<sup>6</sup> The post-Cold War international system is thus unipolar.

The end of the Cold War took most observers by surprise, with little thought having been given to the possibility of a unipolar world.<sup>7</sup> Since then, however, a sizable literature on the topic has begun to focus on two issues: the durability and peacefulness of unipolar systems.<sup>8</sup>

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1. See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2010: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 196–198.

2. See *ibid.*, p. 202.

3. See Robert O. Work, “Winning the Race: A Naval Fleet Platform Architecture for Enduring Maritime Supremacy” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2005), p. 16.

4. See Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Spring 2006), pp. 7–44.

5. See SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2010*, pp. 196–198, 202.

6. See Barry Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 5–46; and Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 16.

7. For an early exception, see Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957).

8. Durability and peace have often been discussed in the context of systemic “stability.” In 1964, Kenneth N. Waltz defined a system’s stability “in terms of its durability, as well as of the peacefulness of adjustment within it.” Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Summer 1964), p. 887. Later, however, he revised his view on stability, redefining it exclusively in terms of durability and dropping the requirement for peace. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 161–163, 199–204. In 1993, Waltz went as far as to write, “I

Throughout the 1990s, the prevailing argument was that unipolarity was not durable. Charles Krauthammer, for instance, wrote of a “unipolar moment.”<sup>9</sup> Structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz argued that other great powers would soon emerge to challenge the United States and reestablish the systemic balance of power.<sup>10</sup> Believers in the transient nature of unipolarity expressed little or no interest in the notion of unipolar peacefulness.

In 1999, however, William Wohlforth challenged the consensus that unipolarity would soon end. Indeed, in “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” he underscored its durability.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Wohlforth further argued that a durable unipolar world is also a peaceful world. In his view, “the existing distribution of capabilities generates incentives for cooperation.”<sup>13</sup> U.S. power preponderance not only ends hegemonic rivalry but gives the United States incentives to manage security globally, limiting competition among major powers.<sup>14</sup> This benevolent view of unipolarity, which Wohlforth developed further in *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* with his coauthor, Stephen Brooks, emerged as one of the most influential perspectives in debates about current international politics, echoing Francis Fukuyama’s popular view of the “end of history” and the universalization of Western liberal democracy.<sup>15</sup>

The question of unipolar durability remains the subject of spirited debate. Many analysts, such as Robert Kagan, continue to argue that “American predominance is unlikely to fade any time soon.”<sup>16</sup> Others, however, believe that it is in serious decline.<sup>17</sup> Potential peer competitors, especially China, are on the

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made [the mistake of conflating peace and stability] in ‘The Stability of a Bipolar World,’ but have since corrected the error.” Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 44–79, at p. 45 n. 5. Later, peace was brought back into the concept of stability by William C. Wohlforth in “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” his sequel to Waltz’s 1964 article, in which Wohlforth adopts Waltz’s early framework, according to which stability requires both durability and peace. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), p. 8 n. 11. Given these multiple definitions, I avoid the notion of “stability” altogether.

9. Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Winter 1990/91), p. 23.

10. See Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics.”

11. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World.”

12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

14. See *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

15. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

16. Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p. 86.

17. See Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United

rise.<sup>18</sup> U.S. travails in Afghanistan and Iraq seem to confirm Paul Kennedy's argument on the inevitability of imperial overstretch,<sup>19</sup> and some see the financial crisis that began in 2008 as the death knell of U.S. predominance.<sup>20</sup> Given all of these factors, Robert Pape argues that "the unipolar world is indeed coming to an end."<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, the question of unipolar peacefulness has received virtually no attention. Although the past decade has witnessed a resurgence of security studies, with much scholarship on such conflict-generating issues as terrorism, preventive war, military occupation, insurgency, and nuclear proliferation, no one has systematically connected any of them to unipolarity. This silence is unjustified. The first two decades of the unipolar era have been anything but peaceful. U.S. forces have been deployed in four interstate wars: Kuwait in 1991, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan from 2001 to the present, and Iraq between 2003 and 2010.<sup>22</sup> In all, the United States has been at war for thirteen of the twenty-two years since the end of the Cold War.<sup>23</sup> Put another way, the first two decades of unipolarity, which make up less than 10 percent of U.S. history, account for more than 25 percent of the nation's total time at war.<sup>24</sup> And yet, the theoretical consensus continues to be that unipolarity encourages peace. Why? To date, scholars do not have a theory of how unipolar systems operate.<sup>25</sup> The debate on whether, when, and how unipolarity will end (i.e., the debate on durability) has all but monopolized our attention.

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States' Unipolar Moment," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 7–41; Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony—Myth or Reality? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Summer 2009), pp. 147–172; and Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 7–44.

18. See David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008); and Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 41–72.

19. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987); and Richard Haass, "What Follows American Dominion?" *Financial Times*, April 15, 2008.

20. See Stephen S. Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong, *The End of Influence: What Happens When Other Countries Have the Money* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

21. Robert A. Pape, "Empire Falls," *National Interest*, No. 99 (January/February 2009), pp. 21–34, at p. 22.

22. Throughout the article, I use the list of interstate wars found in the Correlates of War, ver. 4.0, dataset. See Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayma, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-state, Extra-state, Intra-state, and Non-state Wars, 1816–2007* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).

23. I place the end of the Cold War in 1989, when the Soviet Union allowed the self-determination of its client states in Eastern Europe.

24. Bruce D. Porter calculates that the United States spent thirty-four years at war prior to 1995, putting the number of war years for 1776–2011 at forty-six. See Porter, "The Warfare State," *American Heritage*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (July/August 1994), p. 56.

25. Robert Jervis has noted this before. See Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 188.

In this article, I provide a theory of unipolarity that focuses on the issue of unipolar peacefulness rather than durability. I argue that unipolarity creates significant conflict-producing mechanisms that are likely to involve the unipole itself. Rather than assess the relative peacefulness of unipolarity vis-à-vis bipolar or multipolar systems, I identify causal pathways to war that are characteristic of a unipolar system and that have not been developed in the extant literature. To be sure, I do not question the impossibility of great power war in a unipolar world. Instead, I show how unipolar systems provide incentives for two other types of war: those pitting the sole great power against another state and those involving exclusively other states. In addition, I show that the type of conflict that occurs in a unipolar world depends on the strategy of the sole great power, of which there are three. The first two—defensive and offensive dominance—will lead to conflicts pitting the sole great power against other states. The third—disengagement—will lead to conflicts among other states. Furthermore, whereas the unipole is likely to enter unipolarity implementing a dominance strategy, over time it is possible that it will shift to disengagement.

I support my theory with several empirical examples. These do not aim at systematically testing my argument, for two reasons. First, the unipolar era is too short a period to test structural mechanisms. Second, the United States has consistently implemented a strategy of dominance, limiting opportunities to test my claims on the consequences of disengagement.<sup>26</sup>

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I define the key terms used in my theory. In the second section, I review the literature on unipolarity and peace. In the third section, I lay out my theory. The next three sections discuss the three strategies of defensive dominance, offensive dominance, and disengagement and show how each can produce conflict. In the conclusion, I discuss implications for theory and policy.

### *Key Concepts*

In this section, I define unipolarity, distinguish it from other systems, describe the types of state that exist in a unipolar world, and introduce a typology of possible wars among them.<sup>27</sup>

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26. See G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, "Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 25.

27. The claims I make in this section are definitional rather than argumentative. Therefore, they are not right or wrong and should be evaluated instead according to their usefulness. See Gary Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Unipolar systems have three defining features. First, unipolarity is an interstate system. Thus, it is not coeval with empire.<sup>28</sup> As Robert Jervis notes, “Unipolarity implies the existence of many juridically equal nation-states, something an empire denies.”<sup>29</sup> As Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright explain, in empires, intersocietal divide-and-rule practices replace interstate balance-of-power dynamics.<sup>30</sup> These differences are significant enough that my theory, which focuses on balance of power dynamics, should not be expected to account for imperial systems.

Second, unipolarity is anarchical. Anarchy results from the incomplete power preponderance of the unipole. As Waltz puts it, a great power cannot “exert a positive control everywhere in the world.”<sup>31</sup> Other states have significant freedom of action and may well pursue independent policy preferences on issues they care more about than the unipole.<sup>32</sup> By highlighting the limits of the unipole’s power, anarchy helps to distinguish between unipolar and hegemonic systems.<sup>33</sup> If the unipole increases its power to the point where it can control the external behavior of all other states, then it has become a hegemon, making the system hierarchical. My theory would no longer apply.

Third, unipolar systems possess only one great power, which enjoys a preponderance of power and faces no competition.<sup>34</sup> (As soon as competition emerges, the system is no longer unipolar.) Unlike in bipolar and multipolar systems, there is no systemic balance of power in a unipolar system. Today, Waltz would say that the United States is the only “pole” to possess “global interests which it can care for unaided, though help may often be desirable.”<sup>35</sup>

By distinguishing unipolarity from hegemonic, imperial, bipolar, and multi-

28. On empire, see Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Christopher Layne and Bradley Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

29. Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” pp. 190–191.

30. See Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (May 2007), p. 253.

31. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” p. 888.

32. See Josef Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 27–28; and Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), p. 11.

33. See Robert Gilpin, “The Rise of American Hegemony,” 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). The literature is often unclear on the distinction between hegemonic systems and empires. See William C. Wohlforth, Stuart J. Kaufman, and Richard Little, “Introduction,” in Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 15.

34. This aspect is common to most of the literature. See Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), p. 5 n. 2; and Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, “Introduction,” p. 4.

35. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” p. 888.

polar systems, my definition reveals the unique historical character of the post–Cold War era. History records numerous empires, including ancient Egypt, Persia, China, and Rome. France under Louis XIV and again under Napoleon I, and the United States in 1945–49 are cases of bipolar or (unbalanced) multipolar systems, in which at least two states have commensurate power-projection capabilities, though of different types. Napoleonic France, though a potential continental hegemon in Europe, was no match for British naval power. Similarly, early–Cold War U.S. power was balanced by that of the Soviet Union, which possessed unquestioned conventional superiority on the Eurasian landmass. In short, since the end of the Cold War, an unprecedented unipolar United States has operated in an anarchic interstate system.

To say that the world is unipolar is to describe the systemic distribution of power, not the strategy of the sole great power. A unipole can pursue one of three grand strategies: defensive dominance, offensive dominance, or disengagement.<sup>36</sup> The key to distinguishing among them is the unipole's attitude toward the global status quo, which I define based on three components: territorial arrangements, international political alignments, and the global distribution of power. Using an offensive-dominance strategy, the unipole seeks to revise at least one of the status quo's components in its favor. With a strategy of defensive dominance, it tries to maintain all three components. In a strategy of disengagement, it pays no attention to the maintenance of the international status quo, allowing others to change it in their favor.

In a unipolar system, states other than the sole great power can be divided into two categories. The first category comprises major powers, which, even though their power-projection capabilities are inferior to those of the unipole, possess sufficient capabilities to deter any state in the system. (To do this, a

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36. I use Robert J. Art's definition of grand strategy as the conjunction of foreign policy goals with military posture. See Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 2. The three broad strategic options I list are overarching categories, encompassing at least six more nuanced strategies that vary on a continuum from more limited to more ambitious. The first is isolationism, which involves a restricted use of force, limited to guaranteeing the survival of the unipole and the security of its territory. The second is offshore balancing, which, like isolationism, does not require a priori international commitments, but prescribes intervention abroad to prevent the rise of peer competitors. Third, selective engagement entails interventions in conflicts in areas of strategic interest. Fourth, collective security requires participation in international institutions that jointly manage global security. Fifth, primacy involves the unipole's regular use of military force to further its interests, though stopping short of a global empire. The sixth strategy involves a sustained effort by the unipole to directly control substantial areas of the world. Isolationism is the only disengagement strategy. Offshore balancing, selective engagement, and collective security are all defensive dominance strategies, varying only in their prescriptions for how a unipole can best defend its position in the system. Primacy and global empire are revisionist strategies of offensive dominance. See Barry Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996/97), pp. 5–53.

country must have a plausible chance of avoiding defeat in an all-out defensive war against a potential aggressor.) Examples from this category include all of the nuclear powers beyond the United States: China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, and the United Kingdom. The second category is composed of states that lack sufficient capabilities to deter the unipole, or so-called minor powers.<sup>37</sup>

Unipolarity thus yields a typology of states that captures two fundamental differences: between the unipole and all other states, which lack comparable power-projection capabilities; and between major powers, which can deter the unipole, and minor powers, which cannot. From this typology, I derive six kinds of war according to the rank of the belligerents: wars between (1) great powers, (2) a great power and a major power, (3) a great power and a minor power, (4) two major powers, (5) a major power and a minor power, and (6) two minor powers. In the next section, I discuss the conventional argument that unipolarity is peaceful and describe its predictions for each of these types of war.

### *Unipolarity and Peace*

Wohlforth offers a concise argument that unipolarity is peaceful:

[T]he current unipolarity is prone to peace. The raw power advantage of the United States means that an important source of conflict in previous systems is absent: hegemonic rivalry over leadership of the international system. 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 an extended rivalry. None is likely to take any step that might invite the focused enmity of the United States. At the same time, unipolarity minimizes security competition among the other great powers. As the system leader, the United States has 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. For their part, the second-tier states face incentives to bandwagon with the unipolar power as long as the expected costs of balancing remain prohibitive.<sup>38</sup>

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37. These two categories—major and minor powers—are purposely broad. The former is common to the literature. The latter is less common and encompasses what Wohlforth calls “second-tier states” and “lesser powers.” See Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” pp. 7–8. I recognize that each of them includes very different states. Both contemporary China and North Korea, for instance, fall under the major power label despite their vast differences. Similarly, both Japan and Niue fit my minor power category, despite the six orders of magnitude between their gross domestic products. For the purposes of my theory, however, differences within each category matter relatively little, not enough to justify further complication.

38. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” pp. 7–8. Note how Wohlforth’s view is remarkably similar to the leaked, and latter dropped, Defense Planning Guidance of 1992. See Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8,

Wohlforth claims not only that the unipole can stave off challenges and preclude major power rivalries, but also that it is able to prevent conflicts among other states and create incentives for them to side with it.<sup>39</sup> The unipole's advantage is so great that it can settle any quarrel in which it intervenes. As Wohlforth writes, "For as long as unipolarity obtains, . . . second-tier states are less likely to engage in conflict-prone rivalries for security or prestige. Once the sole pole takes sides, there can be little doubt about which party will prevail."<sup>40</sup> This is the core logic of Wohlforth's argument that unipolarity is peaceful. But what specifically does his argument say about each of the six possible kinds of war I identified in the previous section?

Clearly, great power war is impossible in a unipolar world. In Wohlforth's famous formulation: "Two states measured up in 1990. One is gone. No new pole has appeared:  $2 - 1 = 1$ ."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, by arguing that unipolarity precludes hegemonic rivalries, Wohlforth makes no room for wars between the sole great power and major powers. These are, according to him, the two main reasons why a unipolar world is peaceful. Unipolarity, he writes, "means the absence of two big problems that bedeviled the statesmen of past epochs: hegemonic rivalry and balance-of-power politics among major powers."<sup>42</sup>

I agree with Wohlforth on these two points, but they are only part of the picture. Granted, the absence of great power wars is an important contribution toward peace, but great power competition—and the conflict it might engender—would signal the emergence of one or more peer competitors to the unipole, and thus indicate that a transition to a bipolar or multipolar system was already under way. In this sense, great power conflict should be discussed

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1992. In 2009, Wohlforth added another way in which systemic power preponderance makes for peace: by decreasing status ambiguities. See William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 28–57. Wohlforth, however, acknowledges that "[i]n actual world politics, . . . the quest for status is likely to be intertwined with other aims in extremely complex ways," making a conclusive test of this particular factor difficult, if not impossible. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," p. 43. On status in a unipolar world, see also Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 63–95.

39. G. John Ikenberry has advanced a somewhat similar argument for why the current unipolar world is, in his view, peaceful. For him, unipolar peace is a consequence of the highly institutionalized and widely accepted character of U.S. leadership. This argument, however, is contingent on the character of American unipolarity and does not derive from a unipolar structure. In fact, the institutional setting Ikenberry describes has been operative since the beginning of the Cold War. See Ikenberry, "Democracy, Institutions, and American Restraint," in Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivalled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 215, 237–238.

40. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," pp. 24–25.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 26. See also Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," p. 195.

within the context of unipolar durability, not unipolar peace. Indeed, including this subject in discussions of unipolar peacefulness parallels the mistakes made in the debate about the Cold War bipolar system. Then, arguments about how the two superpowers were unlikely to fight each other were often taken to mean that the system was peaceful. This thinking ignored the possibility of wars between a superpower and a lesser state, as well as armed conflicts among two or more lesser states, often acting as great power proxies.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, Wohlforth claims that wars among major powers are unlikely, because the unipole will prevent conflict from erupting among important states. He writes, "The sole pole's power advantages matter only to the degree that it is engaged, and it is most likely to be engaged in politics among the other major powers."<sup>44</sup> I agree that if the unipole were to pursue a strategy of defensive dominance, major power wars would be unlikely. Yet, there is no compelling reason to expect that it will always follow such a course. Should the unipole decide to disengage, as Wohlforth implies, major power wars would be possible.

At the same time, Wohlforth argues that the unipole's power preponderance makes the expected costs of balancing prohibitive, leading minor powers to bandwagon. This is his explanation for the absence of wars between the sole great power and minor powers. But, as I show, the costs of balancing relative to bandwagoning vary among minor powers. So Wohlforth's argument underplays the likelihood of this type of war.

Finally, Wohlforth's argument does not exclude all kinds of war. Although power preponderance allows the unipole to manage conflicts globally, this argument is not meant to apply to relations between major and minor powers, or among the latter. As Wohlforth explains, his argument "applies with less force to potential security competition between regional powers, or between a second-tier state and a lesser power with which the system leader lacks close ties."<sup>45</sup> Despite this caveat, Wohlforth does not fully explore the consequences of potential conflict between major and minor powers or among the latter for his view that unipolarity leads to peace.

How well, then, does the argument that unipolar systems are peaceful account for the first two decades of unipolarity since the end of the Cold War? Table 1 presents a list of great powers divided into three periods: 1816 to 1945,

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43. See Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics*, pp. 36–43; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 3d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 189, 350; Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (April 1964), pp. 390–406; and Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," pp. 881–909.

44. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," p. 25.

45. *Ibid.*

Table 1. Great Powers since 1816

	Multipolarity		Bipolarity		Unipolarity	
	Dates	Years	Dates	Years	Dates	Years
Austro-Hungarian Empire	1816–1918	103				
France	1816–1940	125				
Prussia/Germany	1816–1918 / 1925–45	124				
Italy	1860–1943	84				
Japan	1895–1945	51				
United Kingdom	1816–1945	130				
Russia / Soviet Union	1816–1917 / 1922–45	126	1946–89	44		
United States	1898–1945	48	1946–89	44	1990–2011	22
Total		791		88		22

SOURCES: Data are from the Correlates of War, ver. 4.0, dataset, modified by the author as follows: only the Soviet Union and the United States are counted as great powers from 1946 to 1989, and only the United States is counted as a great power since 1990. See Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayma, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-state, Extra-state, Intra-state, and Non-state Wars, 1816–2007* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).

Table 2. Interstate Wars Involving Great Powers since 1816

	Multipolarity	Bipolarity	Unipolarity
Great power years	791	88	22
Great power years at war	143	14	13
Percentage of great power years at war	18%	16%	59%
Wars involving great powers	33	3	4
Incidence of war per great power year	4.2%	3.4%	18.2%

SOURCES: Data are from the Correlates of War, ver. 4.0, dataset. See Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayma, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-state, Extra-state, Intra-state, and Non-state Wars, 1816–2007* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).

multipolarity; 1946 to 1989, bipolarity; and since 1990, unipolarity.<sup>46</sup> Table 2 presents summary data about the incidence of war during each of these periods. Unipolarity is the most conflict prone of all the systems, according to at least two important criteria: the percentage of years that great powers spend at war and the incidence of war involving great powers. In multipolarity, 18 percent of great power years were spent at war. In bipolarity, the ratio is 16 percent. In unipolarity, however, a remarkable 59 percent of great power

46. The inception date of 1816 is determined by the availability of data on interstate wars covered in the COW, ver. 4.0, project. See Sarkees and Wayma, *Resort to War*.

years until now were spent at war. This is by far the highest percentage in all three systems. Furthermore, during periods of multipolarity and bipolarity, the probability that war involving a great power would break out in any given year was, respectively, 4.2 percent and 3.4 percent. Under unipolarity, it is 18.2 percent—or more than four times higher.<sup>47</sup> These figures provide no evidence that unipolarity is peaceful.<sup>48</sup>

In sum, the argument that unipolarity makes for peace is heavily weighted toward interactions among the most powerful states in the system. This should come as no surprise given that Wohlforth makes a structural argument: peace flows from the unipolar structure of international politics, not from any particular characteristic of the unipole.<sup>49</sup> Structural analyses of the international system are usually centered on interactions between great powers.<sup>50</sup> As Waltz writes, “The theory, like the story, of international politics is written in terms of the great powers of an era.”<sup>51</sup> In the sections that follow, however,

47. This sharp increase in both the percentage of great power years spent at war and the incidence of conflict is particularly puzzling given that the current unipole—the United States—is a democracy in a world populated by more democracies than ever before. In light of arguments about how democracies are (1) better able to solve disputes peacefully, (2) select only into those wars they can win, and (3) tend to fight shorter wars, this should mean that the United States would spend fewer years at war than previous nondemocratic great powers. On democracies’ bargaining advantages, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); and Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, “Bargaining and Fighting: The Impact of Regime Type on War Onset, Duration, and Outcomes,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Fall 2004), pp. 296–313. On selection effects, see Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). On democracies fighting shorter wars, see D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, “The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 344–366.

48. Some scholars might argue that wars in the post–Cold War world have been less lethal than those of the past. See, for example, Bethany Encina and Nils Petter Gleditch, “Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths,” *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 21, Nos. 2/3 (June 2005), pp. 145–166. It is difficult, however, to parse the role of polarity in a decrease in lethality. See Bruce Russett, “Peace in the Twenty-First Century?” *Current History*, January 2010, p. 11. Furthermore, part of the explanation for this decrease in lethality may lie in the U.S. decision to develop a highly capitalized military aimed at minimizing casualties. See Jonathan D. Caverley, “Death and Taxes: Sources of Democratic Military Aggression,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2008; and Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 67–106.

49. See Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” p. 8 n. 12.

50. See Michael Mastanduno, “Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), p. 50.

51. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 72. By setting “the smallest possible number [of great powers] in a self-help system” at two, however, Waltz has nothing to say on the workings of a unipolar system. See *ibid.*, p. 136. Taking him at his word, Brooks and Wohlforth question the applicability of structural balance of power theory to a unipolar world. See Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, p. 48. My argument shows how, much to the contrary, applying balance of power theory to a unipolar world provides important analytical insight. Waltz seems to have recently acknowledged this. When asked in an interview what would he change if he were to write *Theory of*

I show that in the case of unipolarity, an investigation of its peacefulness must consider potential causes of conflict beyond interactions between the most important states in the system.

### *Unipolarity, Strategy, and Conflict*

In this section, I analyze how the unipole's strategic choices—defensive dominance, offensive dominance, or disengagement—can trigger conflict-producing mechanisms between the unipole and other states, or among the latter. I take the distribution of power between the unipole and major powers as fixed. The ways in which unipolarity may be transformed into either a bipolar or a multipolar order, which may or may not lead to conflict, are beyond the scope of my argument. So are the ways in which the unipole may increase its power preponderance and become a global hegemon or an empire. Thus, my theory lays out how each of the unipole's grand strategic choices produces conflict in the context of a unipolar structure that is at least somewhat durable.

Specifically, I show how, in addition to wars between major and minor powers and to wars among the latter, two other types of war are likely to be prevalent in a unipolar world. First, and resulting from either of the dominance strategies, are wars pitting the sole great power against minor powers. Second, and stemming from a disengagement strategy, are major power wars. My theory explores the different mechanisms leading to each type of war.

My theory therefore differs from Wohlforth's in two key aspects. First, Wohlforth believes that power preponderance in a unipolar system is so marked that the expected costs of balancing are always prohibitive. Consequently, every state in the system will bandwagon with the unipole, making it impossible for the latter to be involved in wars. In contrast, I show that some states face lower costs of balancing relative to bandwagoning. They are therefore more likely to become recalcitrant minor powers, with whom the sole great power is likely to go to war even when implementing a defensive-dominance strategy.

Second, Wohlforth assumes that the unipole will always implement a strategy of defensive dominance: it will not engage in offensive revisionism, nor will it disengage from the world. I show how both offensive dominance and

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*International Politics* again today, he replied, "I certainly would add something about unipolarity . . . on what a unipolar world might be like, and what the advantages and disadvantages of such a world were likely to be." Kenneth N. Waltz, "Theory Talk #40: Kenneth Neal Waltz—The Physicist of International Politics," *Theory Talks*, June 3, 2011, p. 4, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2011/06/theory-talk-40.html>.

disengagement are plausible strategic options for the unipole and then extrapolate the types of conflict that each is likely to produce. Specifically, offensive dominance (like its defensive variant) is likely to pit the unipole against recalcitrant minor powers. Disengagement, for its part, brings with it the possibility of wars between major powers.

The basic intuition behind my argument is straightforward. In bipolarity and multipolarity, alliance blocs allow disputes involving minor powers to be aggregated into broader great-power tensions. A dispute involving a great power and a lesser state tends to provoke a response by the latter's great power sponsor, producing a confrontation between two great powers.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, disputes between lesser states often elicit the intervention of each side's great power ally, again resulting in great power confrontation. These aggregation mechanisms, however, are not possible in unipolarity because there is no potential great power sponsor for a state threatened by the unipole—or by another state aligned with it. Thus, although unipolarity dampens great power competition, it produces competition between the unipole and recalcitrant minor powers and, when the unipole disengages from the world, among major and minor powers.

An emerging unipole is likely to implement a (defensive or offensive) dominance strategy, for two reasons. First is geopolitical inertia. Unipolarity is likely preceded by either bipolarity or multipolarity, both of which foster alliances with major and minor powers.<sup>53</sup> These alliances are likely to carry on into a unipolar world. As a result, an emerging unipole is likely to continue to engage in international affairs, at least through a strategy of defensive dominance—as reflected in the metaphors of a global policeman or night watchman often used to describe U.S. strategy throughout the 1990s. Second, a temptation to reengineer the system may lead the unipole to opt for a strategy of offensive dominance. Unipolarity minimizes structural constraints on grand strategy, and the unipole is likely to see in offensive dominance an opportunity to extract maximum benefits from its preponderance of power.<sup>54</sup> These two

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52. According to Waltz, the mechanisms through which great powers become involved in conflicts involving lesser states differ in multipolarity and bipolarity. Whereas in multipolarity the poles can be dragged into unwanted conflicts by lesser powers, in bipolarity this is less likely to happen. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–193.

53. The other possibility is that a unipolar world emerges from an imperial or a hegemonic order, in which case it is also likely that the unipole will maintain close ties with some of the new major and minor powers. On alliance patterns, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 137–168.

54. On how unipolarity reduces constraints on the unipole, see Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural

reasons support dominance—be it defensive or offensive—as the strategy of choice for a unipole in a newly born unipolar system.<sup>55</sup>

After an initial period of dominance, however, the unipole may move toward a disengagement strategy. Two incentives may encourage such a shift. First, the wars into which either dominance strategy is likely to drag the unipole may overextend its capabilities. The unipole will increasingly see disengagement as allowing it to replenish its power. Second, the costs of such wars will rise cumulatively over time, possibly leading to the gradual emergence of domestic opposition to the unipole's chosen strategy. My argument is not that the unipolar structure of the system predetermines such a shift, but rather that the maintenance of a dominance strategy is not predetermined by unipolarity either.

Furthermore, the unipole does not need to follow one of these strategies globally. It could pursue offensive dominance in one region, defensive dominance in another, and disengagement from yet another. For instance, between 1990 and 2001, the United States implemented a strategy of defensive dominance everywhere except in Africa, from which it largely disengaged after withdrawing from Somalia in 1994. Between late 2001 and 2005, when the Bush Doctrine was in full force, the United States shifted to an offensive-dominance strategy in the Middle East, toppling regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, while maintaining its defensive dominance in Europe and East Asia and remaining largely disengaged from Africa.<sup>56</sup>

This diversity of strategic options available to the unipole highlights the predictive limits of structural theory. Waltz famously argued that a theory of international politics, not being a theory of foreign policy, was ill equipped to predict how particular states would act.<sup>57</sup> As other scholars have noted, "Polarity is at best a necessary part of an explanation rather than a sufficient explanation."<sup>58</sup> A full causal account of any conflict would have to take into consideration, beyond structural incentives, the unit-level decisions that lead

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Perspective," pp. 192–194; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 94–95; and Jack Snyder, Robert Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 155.

55. For a theory of how the United States chooses among different strategies, see Benjamin Miller, "Explaining Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Fall 2011), pp. 26–65.

56. On the Bush Doctrine, see Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 112–156.

57. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 67–73, 121–122. For a critique, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June 2009), pp. 241–256.

58. Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, "Introduction," p. 5. See also Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," p. 191.

to a breakdown in the bargaining process. Accordingly, my theory does not predict which states will become involved in conflicts in a unipolar world. Structures, however, provide incentives. In Waltz's formulation, they "shape and shove."<sup>59</sup> Thus, a unipolar structure makes some states more prone to involvement in conflicts and encourages certain paths toward war. The path taken depends on the unipole's strategy.

The extant view on unipolar peace presupposes that the unipole will consistently implement a strategy of defensive dominance. The next section shows how this strategy is likely to generate significant conflict.

### *Defensive Dominance*

A unipole carrying out a defensive-dominance strategy will seek to preserve all three aspects of the status quo: maintaining the territorial boundaries and international political alignments of all other states, as well as freezing the global distribution of power.<sup>60</sup> This strategy can lead to conflict in two ways, both of which stem from uncertainty about the unipole's intentions. First, not knowing the extent of the unipole's determination to pursue a strategy of defensive dominance may spur some minor powers to develop their capabilities. Second, uncertainty about the degree to which the unipole will oppose small changes to the status quo may lead some minor powers to attempt them. In both cases, the opposition of the unipole to these actions is likely to lead to war. In this section, I lay out these two pathways to conflict and then illustrate them with historical examples.

To be sure, states can never be certain of other states' intentions.<sup>61</sup> There are a couple of reasons, however, why this uncertainty increases in unipolarity, even when the unipole appears to be determined to maintain the status quo. First, other states cannot be certain that the unipole will always pursue nonrevisionist goals. This is particularly problematic because unipolarity minimizes the structural constraints on the unipole's grand strategy. As Waltz writes, "Even if a dominant power behaves with moderation, restraint, and forbearance, weaker states will worry about its future behavior. . . . The absence of se-

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59. Kenneth M. Waltz, "Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics*," in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 343.

60. Put differently, when implementing a defensive dominance strategy, the unipole will focus on what Wolfers called "milieu goals" as opposed to "possession goals." Milieu goals pertain to "the shape of the environment in which the nation operates." Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 73.

61. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 31.

rious threats to American security gives the United States wide latitude in making foreign policy choices.”<sup>62</sup> Second, unipolarity takes away the principal tool through which minor powers in bipolar and multipolar systems deal with uncertainty about great power intentions—alliances with other great powers. Whereas in these other systems minor powers can, in principle, attenuate the effects of uncertainty about great power intentions through external balancing, in a unipolar world no great power sponsor is present by definition. In effect, the systemic imbalance of power magnifies uncertainty about the unipole’s intentions.<sup>63</sup>

Faced with this uncertainty, other states have two options. First, they can accommodate the unipole and minimize the chances of conflict but at the price of their external autonomy.<sup>64</sup> Accommodation is less risky for major powers because they can guarantee their own survival, and they stand to benefit greatly from being part of the unipolar system.<sup>65</sup> Major powers are therefore unlikely to attempt to revise the status quo. Minor powers are also likely to accommodate the unipole, in an attempt to avoid entering a confrontation with a preponderant power. Thus, most states will accommodate the unipole because, as Wohlforth points out, the power differential rests in its favor.<sup>66</sup>

62. Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 28–29. My argument does not assume that a professedly status quo unipole is in fact a revisionist state, only that minor powers cannot be certain of its intentions. On whether revisionist states are necessary for the basic logic of structural realism to work, see Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107; Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90; Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Security Bias: What Security Dilemma?” *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 90–121; and Andrew H. Kydd, “Sheep in Sheep’s Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 1997), pp. 114–155.

63. Put differently, unipolarity makes the security dilemma more acute. See Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; and Charles L. Glaser, “The Security Dilemma Revisited,” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 171–201. As Colin Elman argues, power preponderance trumps all other dimensions that go into a state’s calculus of threat, making the unipole threatening regardless of its location and intentions, as well as the offense-defense balance. See 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.

64. I opt for “accommodate” over “bandwagon” as the latter has a narrower, more purposeful sense, implying a form of appeasement. Accommodation implies merely acceptance of the unipole’s preferences, without necessarily involving active appeasement. On bandwagoning, in general, see Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 3–43; Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit”; and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 139–140. On bandwagoning in a unipolar context, see Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” pp. 108–111.

65. On the benefits of accommodation, see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World’s Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005); and G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

66. See Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” pp. 7–8. Even if major powers would decide to bolster their capabilities, their guaranteed survival would decrease the unipole’s ability to

Accommodation, however, entails greater risks for minor powers because their survival is not assured if the unipole should turn against them. Thus some of them are likely to implement a second strategic option—resisting the unipole.

The structure of the international system does not entirely determine whether or not a minor power accommodates the unipole. Still, structure conditions the likelihood of accommodation in two ways. To begin, a necessary part of a strategy of dominance is the creation of alliances or informal security commitments with regional powers. Such regional powers, however, are likely to have experienced conflict with, or a grievance toward, at least some of its neighboring minor powers. The latter are more likely to adopt a recalcitrant posture. Additionally, by narrowing their opportunities for regional integration and security maximization, the unipole's interference with the regional balance of power is likely to lower the value of the status quo for these minor powers.<sup>67</sup> As the literature on the "value of peace" shows, countries that attribute a low value to the status quo are more risk acceptant. This argument helps explain, for example, Japan's decision to attack the United States in 1941 and Syria's and Egypt's decision to attack Israel in 1973.<sup>68</sup> In both cases, aggressor states knew that their capabilities were significantly weaker than those of their targets. They were nonetheless willing to run the risk of launching attacks because they found the prewar status quo unacceptable.<sup>69</sup> Thus, for these states, the costs of balancing were lower relative to those of bandwagoning.

In an international system with more than one great power, recalcitrant minor powers would, in principle, be able to balance externally by finding a great power sponsor.<sup>70</sup> In unipolarity, however, no such sponsors exist.<sup>71</sup> Only major powers are available, but because their survival is already guaranteed, they are likely to accommodate the unipole. And even if some do not, they are unlikely to meet a recalcitrant minor power's security needs given that they possess

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prevent them from doing so. In any case, should a major power start balancing against the unipole, the world would be witnessing a dynamic that would potentially lead to the end of unipolarity, a possibility that belongs to discussions of unipolar durability, not unipolar peace.

67. This may also provide reputational incentives for minor powers to stand firm in the face of demands made by the unipole. See Todd S. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 627–660.

68. See John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

69. Furthermore, ideological reasons may increase the proclivity of certain minor powers to confront the unipole. Regimes grounded on ideologies fundamentally at odds with those espoused by the unipole are more likely to refuse being co-opted. This logic, however, does not derive from the structure of a unipolar system, and therefore does not belong in my theory.

70. The terms "external" and "internal" balancing come from Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 116, 163.

71. For a discussion of balancing in the context of unipolarity, see Robert J. Art, Stephen G. Brooks, William C. Wohlforth, and Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Correspondence: Striking the Balance," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter 2005/06), pp. 177–196.

only limited power-projection capabilities.<sup>72</sup> As such, recalcitrant minor powers must defend themselves, which puts them in a position of extreme self-help.

There are four characteristics common to states in this position: (1) anarchy, (2) uncertainty about other states' intentions, (3) insufficient capabilities to deter a great power, and (4) no potential great power sponsor with whom to form a balancing coalition. The first two characteristics are common to all states in all types of polarity. The third is part of the rough-and-tumble of minor powers in any system. The fourth, however, is unique to recalcitrant minor powers in unipolarity. This dire situation places recalcitrant minor powers at risk for as long as they lack the capability to defend themselves. They depend on the goodwill of the unipole and must worry that the unipole will shift to a strategy of offensive dominance or disengagement. Recalcitrant minor powers will therefore attempt to bolster their capabilities through internal balancing.

To deter an eventual attack by the unipole and bolster their chances of survival in the event deterrence fails, recalcitrant minor powers will attempt to reinforce their conventional defenses, develop the most effective asymmetric strategies possible, and, most likely in the nuclear age, try to acquire the ultimate deterrent—survivable nuclear weapons.<sup>73</sup> In so doing, they seek to become major powers.

Defensive dominance, however, also gives the unipole reason to oppose any such revisions to the status quo. First, such revisions decrease the benefits of systemic leadership and limit the unipole's ability to convert its relative power advantage into favorable outcomes. In the case of nuclear weapons, this limitation is all but irreversible, virtually guaranteeing the recalcitrant regime immunity against any attempt to coerce or overthrow it. Second, proliferation has the potential to produce regional instability, raising the risk of arms races. These would force the unipole to increase defense spending or accept a narrower overall relative power advantage. Third, proliferation would lead to the

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72. In fact, even in bipolar and multipolar systems, the security guarantees provided by a great power often prove unreliable. See Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

73. Waltz recently made this point: "There is only one way that a country can reliably deter a dominant power, and that is by developing its own nuclear force." Kenneth N. Waltz, "Theory Talk #40," p. 2. See also Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," p. 212; and Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," p. 54. Similarly, Campbell Craig believes that incentives for proliferation will lead to the spread of nuclear weapons, creating a peaceful unipolar world. See Craig, "American Power Preponderance and the Nuclear Revolution," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 36. This argument ignores the potential for conflict in the proliferation process, however. On how the process of nuclear proliferation creates incentives for preventive wars, see Nuno Monteiro, "Three Essays on Unipolarity," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009; and Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself? Nuclear Proliferation and Preventive War," working paper, Yale University, 2011.

emergence of a recalcitrant major power that could become the harbinger of an unwanted large-scale balancing attempt.

The unipole is therefore likely to demand that recalcitrant minor powers not revise the status quo. The latter, however, will want to resist such demands because of the threat they pose to those states' security.<sup>74</sup> Whereas fighting over such demands would probably lead to defeat, conceding to them peacefully would bring the undesired outcome with certainty. A preventive war is therefore likely to ensue.

In the second causal path to war, recalcitrant minor powers test the limits of the status quo by making small revisions—be they territorial conquests, altered international alignments, or an increase in relative power—evocative of Thomas Schelling's famous "salami tactics."<sup>75</sup> The unipole may not, however, accept these revisions, and instead demand their reversal. For a variety of reasons, including incomplete information, commitment problems, and the need for the minor power to establish a reputation for toughness, such demands may not be heeded. As a result, war between the unipole and recalcitrant minor powers emerges as a distinct possibility.<sup>76</sup>

Regardless of the causal path, a war between the unipole and a recalcitrant minor power creates a precedent for other recalcitrant minor powers to boost their own capabilities. Depending on the unipole's overall capabilities—that is, whether it can launch a second simultaneous conflict—it may also induce other recalcitrant minor powers to accelerate their balancing process. Thus, a war against a recalcitrant minor power presents other such states with greater incentives for, and (under certain conditions) higher prospects of, assuring their survival by acquiring the necessary capabilities, including nuclear weapons.

At the same time, and depending on the magnitude of the unipole's power preponderance, a war against a recalcitrant minor power creates an opportunity for wars among major and minor powers—including major power wars. To the extent that the unipole's power preponderance is limited by its engagement in the first war, its ability to manage confrontations between other states elsewhere is curtailed, increasing the chances that these will erupt into mili-

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74. On the role of the indivisibility of the object of dispute as a cause of war, see James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414.

75. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 66–69.

76. See Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War"; Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Sechser, "Goliath's Curse."

tary conflicts. Therefore, even when the unipole is engaged, war remains a possibility.

Between the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States generally implemented a strategy of defensive dominance. During this period, the dynamics described in this section can be seen at work in the cases of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the 1999 Kosovo War, as well as in the Kargil War between India and Pakistan, and in North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs.

On August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein ordered his forces to invade Kuwait, convinced the United States would not oppose this revision of the status quo. During the months that followed, the United States assembled an international coalition determined to restore Kuwaiti independence, and it obtained UN authorization to use force if Iraq did not withdraw its occupation forces by January 15, 1991. Two days after this deadline, the U.S.-led coalition began military action against Iraqi forces, expelling them from Kuwait in six weeks.<sup>77</sup>

Two points deserve mention. First, the Gulf War was triggered by Iraq's miscalculation regarding whether the United States would accept Iraqi annexation of Kuwait. At the outset of the unipolar era, great uncertainty surrounded the limits of what actions U.S. decisionmakers would find permissible.<sup>78</sup> Iraq miscalculated the degree of U.S. flexibility, and war ensued. Second, the war was made possible by unipolarity, which placed Iraq in a situation of extreme self-help. Indeed, lack of a great power sponsor—at the time, the Soviet Union was in strategic retrenchment—was duly noted in Baghdad. Immediately after the war, Saddam's foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, lamented, "We don't have a patron anymore. . . . If we still had the Soviets as our patron, none of this would have happened."<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, in 1999, Serbian leaders miscalculated U.S. tolerance to ethnic violence in Kosovo, a secessionist province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

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77. See Michael R. Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995); Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

78. Such uncertainty was genuine, and even U.S. leaders did not know whether to intervene to restore the status quo ante. Indeed, it was reportedly British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who persuaded U.S. President George H.W. Bush to take military action to restore Kuwaiti independence, telling him that "aggression must be stopped. . . . [I]f an aggressor gets away with it, others will want to get away with it too, so he must be stopped, and turned back." See Thatcher, "Frontline Oral History Interview," PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/thatcher/1.html>.

79. Quoted in Thomas L. Friedman and Patrick E. Tyler, "From the First, U.S. Resolve to Fight," *New York Times*, March 2, 1991.

In March 1999, reacting to increasing brutality in the province, the international community convened a conference, which produced the Rambouillet accords. This agreement called for the restoration of Kosovo's autonomy and the deployment of NATO peacekeeping forces, both unacceptable to Serbian authorities, who refused to submit to it.<sup>80</sup> In response, NATO launched a bombing campaign in Yugoslavia. In early June, after nine weeks of bombing, NATO offered the Serbian leadership a compromise, which it accepted, ending the war.<sup>81</sup>

Once the war had started and it became clear that Serbia had overreached, Belgrade relied on the support of its ancestral major power ally, Russia. Serbian strategy during the war thus aimed in part at buying time for Russia to increase pressure on NATO to cease hostilities. Contrary to Belgrade's expectations, however, Russian support for Serbian aims eroded as the war continued. On May 6, Russia agreed with the Group of Seven nations on a plan that included the deployment of UN peacekeepers and a guarantee of Yugoslavia's territorial integrity. By mid-May, faced with Serbia's obduracy, Moscow began to press its ally to accept the offer. Thus, not only did Russian support fail to prevent a U.S.-led intervention, but it was instrumental in convincing Serbia to accede to NATO's demands.<sup>82</sup>

The only war between major powers to have occurred thus far in a unipolar world—the Kargil War between India and Pakistan—started, as my theory would have predicted, while the United States was involved in Kosovo.<sup>83</sup> In May 1999, India detected Pakistani forces intruding into the Kargil sector in Indian-controlled Kashmir. This action triggered the first Indo-Pakistani war of the nuclear age, which ended on July 4—after the cessation of military operations in Kosovo—when President Bill Clinton demanded Pakistan's withdrawal, which occurred on July 26.<sup>84</sup>

In the absence of a great power sponsor and uncertain of U.S. intentions,

80. See Rambouillet Agreement, [http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ksvo\\_ambouillet\\_text.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ksvo_ambouillet_text.html).

81. See Barry R. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Spring 2000), pp. 39–84; and Daniel R. Lake, "The Limits of Coercive Air Power: NATO's 'Victory' in Kosovo Revisited," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Summer 2009), pp. 83–112.

82. See Posen, "The War for Kosovo," pp. 66–71.

83. Pakistani plans for a Kargil-like operation were started years before. Coincidentally or not, the operation was put in motion only after the opening of the war over Kosovo. See Feroz Hassan Khan, Peter R. Lavoy, and Christopher Clary, "Pakistan's Motivations and Calculations for the Kargil Conflict," in Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 64–91, especially pp. 76–79.

84. For an account of the U.S. role in ending the conflict, see Bruce Riedel, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House," in Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia*, pp. 130–143.

Iran and North Korea—both recalcitrant minor powers—have made considerable efforts to bolster their relative power by developing a nuclear capability. Unsurprisingly, the United States has consistently opposed their efforts, but has so far been unable to persuade either to desist.

The North Korean nuclear program dates to the 1960s, but most of the nuclear development was conducted in a world with a status quo unipole.<sup>85</sup> Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, North Korea sought to elude U.S. opposition without ever crossing the nuclear threshold. The North Korean regime seemed to have understood that the United States would view an explicit move toward a nuclear breakout as an extreme provocation and raise the possibility of a preventive war. When the United States shifted to a strategy of offensive dominance in late 2001, however, Pyongyang wasted little time in acquiring its nuclear deterrent.

Iran, too, pursued a nuclear program throughout the 1990s.<sup>86</sup> The Iranian nuclear program, started in the 1950s, gained new impetus with the end of the Cold War as the result of a confluence of factors: the 1989 replacement of an antinuclear supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, with a pronuclear Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; the discovery of Iraq's covert nuclear program during the 1991 Gulf War; and, above all, an increased U.S. presence in the region following that war.<sup>87</sup> A decade later, the expansion of Iran's nuclear program prompted the State Department to proclaim, "We believe Iran's true intent is to develop the capability to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons."<sup>88</sup> Iran's nuclear program continued throughout the period in which the United States shifted toward a strategy of offensive dominance, to which I turn next.

### *Offensive Dominance*

A unipole carrying out an offensive-dominance strategy wants to revise the status quo in its favor by acquiring more territory, by favorably changing the alignment of other states, or by altering the distribution of power in its own benefit—or some combination of these.

Territorial conquest, which is the most ambitious goal of an offensive-dominance strategy, is a daunting task in an age of nationalism and is thus

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85. See David Albright and Kevin O'Neill, eds., *Solving the North Korean Nuclear Puzzle* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Science and International Security, 2000).

86. See National Intelligence Council (NIC), "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities" (Washington, D.C.: NIC, 2007).

87. See Greg Bruno, "Iran's Nuclear Program" (Washington, D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, 2008), <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-nuclear-program/p16811>.

88. Richard Boucher, spokesperson for the State Department, speaking in May 2003, quoted in *ibid.*

likely to be rare.<sup>89</sup> Efforts to alter the international alignments of other states or the balance of power can be pursued through soft power and persuasion, but this is unlikely to prove sufficient, and the unipole may decide to use force.<sup>90</sup>

By putting recalcitrant minor powers in a position of extreme-self help, an offensive-dominance strategy triggers two pathways to conflict. In both cases, a deterrence breakdown leads to a preventive war.

Following the first pathway: the unipole makes revisionist demands that recalcitrant minor powers are unlikely to accept peacefully, because these pose a threat to their survival. Given its preponderance of power, the unipole may decide to go to war.

The second causal pathway follows a slightly more complex logic. Like its defensive version, a strategy of offensive dominance provides strong incentives for recalcitrant minor powers to balance internally. These attempts to bolster their relative power, however, are likely to lead to war with the unipole before the recalcitrant power is able to acquire additional capabilities. The reason for this outcome is that the unipole will oppose any attempt by minor powers to revise the status quo in a way that is detrimental to its interests.

In addition, wars pitting a recalcitrant minor power against a unipole implementing a strategy of offensive dominance have two effects common to defensive dominance. First, they encourage other recalcitrant minor powers to redouble their balancing efforts. Second, they may make room for wars among major and minor powers.

Reacting to the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States adopted a strategy of offensive dominance in the Middle East. Although this short period has produced only a slim empirical record that can be harnessed to support my theory, the mechanisms I posit can best be seen at work in the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The United States' goal was to revise Iraq's international alignment and decrease its relative power by installing an accommodating regime in Baghdad and ending Saddam's putative weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program.<sup>91</sup>

In the end, no WMD were found after the invasion.<sup>92</sup> Still, Saddam had pos-

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89. See David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

90. See Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

91. See Lawrence Freedman, "War in Iraq: Selling the Threat," *Survival*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 7-49; Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Report on Whether Public Statements Regarding Iraq by U.S. Government Officials Were Substantiated by Intelligence Information" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate, 2008).

92. See Joseph Cirincione, Jessica Tuchman Mathews, George Perkovich, with Alexis Orton, *WMD in Iraq: Evidence and Implications* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,

sessed a nuclear program, which he stopped only grudgingly when UN-imposed sanctions in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War made it impossible to acquire the materials and technology needed for a nuclear deterrent.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, the possibility of Iraq acquiring nuclear weapons, which Washington was convinced would soon become a reality, featured prominently in the George W. Bush administration's argument for going to war.<sup>94</sup>

Although confronted with an imminent invasion, Saddam refused to back down. His rationale seems to have been based on his estimate that, first, France or Russia would intercede on Iraq's behalf, preventing war and, second, if that failed, Iraqi forces would be capable of increasing the military costs for the United States to the point at which American public opinion would force Washington to back down.<sup>95</sup> None of this happened. China, France, and Russia—all major powers—did oppose UN authorization to use force against Iraq, but when the United States displayed an unequivocal determination to invade anyway, no major power did much to stop it.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, U.S.-led coalition troops toppled Saddam's regime in three weeks, and major military operations ended within a month of the invasion date.

The Iraq War also led other recalcitrant minor powers to accelerate their proliferation attempts. Having been identified by President Bush, alongside Iraq, as members of the "axis of evil," Iran and North Korea were particularly quick to respond.<sup>97</sup> A mere two weeks after the fall of Baghdad, Pyongyang officials informed their American counterparts that North Korea possessed nuclear weapons, making the country immune to any U.S. attempts to depose its regime.<sup>98</sup> Iran, too, has ramped up its nuclear program since 2002 and is likely to continue pursuing a nuclear capability while trying to avoid preventive action

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2004); and Charles Duelfer, "Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction" (Baghdad: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2004).

93. See Duelfer, "Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction."

94. See Stephen Rademaker, "U.S. Sees Spread of Nuclear Weapons Greatest Security Challenge" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2006); and President George W. Bush, "Presidential Candidates' Debate," September 30, 2004.

95. See Kevin Woods, Michael R. Pease, and Mark E. Stout, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Official U.S. Joint Forces Command Report* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2006).

96. See Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 372.

97. Waltz argues along the same lines: "When President Bush identified the countries that he said constituted an 'axis of evil'—namely, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—and then proceeded to invade one of them—namely, Iraq—that was certainly a lesson quickly learned by both Iran and North Korea. That is to say, that if a country wants to deter the United States it has to equip itself with nuclear force. I think we all have seen that demonstrated very clearly." Waltz, "Theory Talk #40," p. 2.

98. See David E. Sanger, "North Korea Says It Now Possesses Nuclear Arsenal," *New York Times*, April 25, 2003.

by the United States.<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately for the prospects of peace, it is also likely the United States will oppose this development and, if necessary, resort to the use of force.<sup>100</sup>

### *Disengagement*

Disengagement requires the unipole to avoid interfering with the balance of power in regions other than its own. (The unipole cannot disengage from its own region.) Such a strategy decreases tensions between the unipole and other states, making wars involving the unipole less likely, but it also makes room for conflicts among competing major and minor powers.

Given the great-power vacuum created by a disengaged unipole, each region beyond the unipole's can be treated as a small-scale quasi system unto itself. The regions from which the unipole disengages are, in effect, insulated from the global mechanisms of conflict created directly by a unipolar structure. These regions can be unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. Interaction between major powers in each of them will be governed by the dynamics that regulate great power interaction in unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar systems.

Unipolar regions beyond the unipole's own should be rare. Even a disengaged unipole is likely to feel threatened by the emergence of a regional hegemon in another major region of the globe. (In fact, such a regional hegemon rising in an important region would qualify as a peer competitor, reestablishing the systemic balance of power and putting an end to unipolarity.) It is possible, however, that in peripheral areas of the globe regional unipolarity would emerge without upsetting a disengaged unipole. I call this situation "nested unipolarity."<sup>101</sup>

In a nested unipolar region from which the global unipole nonetheless remains disengaged, conflict-producing dynamics will emerge, along the lines of those described above in the sections about strategies of offensive and defensive dominance. Given uncertainty about its intentions, a strategy of defensive dominance on the part of a regional hegemon will also trigger pathways to

99. See NIC, "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities."

100. Preventive military action may also be an option for the preeminent U.S. ally in the region, Israel. See Whitney Raas and Austin Long, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Spring 2007), pp. 7-33.

101. During the Cold War, particularly when U.S. power was perceived to be waning, the policy of the U.S. government was often to sponsor regional "influentials" that could be relied on to foster U.S. goals in their region. Indeed, this was stated U.S. policy during Richard Nixon's administration. The United States did not, however, disengage from these regions. See Robert Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability 1969-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

conflict in the region.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, a regional unipolar power that pursues a strategy of offensive dominance should generate regionally the same conflict-producing mechanisms that were described above at the global level.

The remaining regions will be either bipolar or multipolar. No consensus exists on their comparative peacefulness.<sup>103</sup> In fact, there are plausible causal mechanisms accounting for conflict in both types of system. One can therefore expect that both bipolar and multipolar regions will feature significant levels of conflict—involving minor and major powers—when left on their own.

Specifically, the literature notes two causes of conflict in bipolar systems. Each can be adapted to bipolar regions. First, with only two regional powers, there are no opportunities for regional external balancing, making deterrence less likely to succeed in case of a regional imbalance of power. Second, major powers in bipolar regions are focused on each other, which increases tensions and the odds of conflict. Both are good reasons to expect conflict in bipolar regions left alone by the unipole.

The literature also discusses four causes of conflict in multipolarity. Each can be adapted to a multipolar region. First, with three or more regional powers, there is a high likelihood of competition that can eventually lead to conflict. Second, the regional distribution of power is less likely to be balanced before alliances are made. Imbalances of power are more likely to generate predatory conflicts, with two or more states ganging up on another. Third, regional multipolarity increases the potential for miscalculations about relative power, which, in turn, raise the odds of conflict. Finally, multipolar regions present ample opportunities for buck-passing, making balancing more difficult.<sup>104</sup>

Besides facilitating conflict among major and minor powers in other regions, disengagement will yield peace for the unipole only if two requirements are fulfilled. First, the unipole must disengage from all regions beyond its own. Second, it must disengage completely from each of these regions. Disengagement must be global because dominance in one region leads to the emergence

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102. The absence of nuclear proliferation in the Western Hemisphere seems to challenge my theory. This can be easily explained, however. Most states in the region have—as my theory predicts—opted for accommodating the United States. The few recalcitrant minor powers left in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., Cuba and Venezuela) have to be particularly careful about any attempt to develop a nuclear capability. After all, the hottest moment of the Cold War—the 1962 Cuban missile crisis—resulted from opposition by the United States (then merely a great power in a bipolar world) to the presence of nuclear weapons in its vicinity. For the time being, no recalcitrant minor power in the region possesses the capabilities necessary to start a nuclear program without inviting a preventive U.S. strike.

103. See Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics*; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*; Deutsch and Singer, “Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability”; and Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World.”

104. This summary of the causes of conflict in bipolarity and multipolarity follows John J. Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 71–88.

of recalcitrant minor powers. In addition, this would alert minor powers in other regions to the dangers of extreme self-help. In the absence of a pure disengagement strategy at the global level, therefore, potential recalcitrant minor powers everywhere are likely to act as if the unipole were engaged in their region, and will thus take actions that bolster their chances of survival vis-à-vis a potentially threatening unipole. Disengagement must also be complete because even defensive dominance places recalcitrant minor powers in a situation of extreme self-help. Disengagement thus requires the unipole to extract itself completely from military alliances, withdraw its security guarantees to others, recall forward-deployed forces, and so on. Limited, or selective, engagement is likely to trigger the same type of conflict (though through different causal mechanisms) as complete offensive dominance.<sup>105</sup>

Failure to meet these two conditions effectively turns the unipole's strategy into a form of defensive dominance, albeit a selective one. Incomplete disengagement decreases the predictability of the unipole's future behavior, leading recalcitrant minor powers to behave as if the unipole remained engaged and, therefore, threatening to their survival. Disengagement, then, while always producing regional wars, staves off wars involving the unipole only if it is implemented as a pure strategy. A mixed strategy—a form of dominance limited either in its regional scope or in the means involved—is likely to compound the problems of disengagement with those of dominance.

In sum, disengagement opens the door to regional competition, leading to wars involving both minor and major powers. If incomplete, disengagement will also result in wars involving the unipole, similar to the ones described in the previous two sections.

The United States has not pursued a strategy of global disengagement since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Scholars therefore have no empirical record against which to test the conflict-producing mechanisms resulting from a disengagement strategy. Foreign policy analysts, however, have written about the potentially devastating effects of a disengaged United States. Stephen Rosen argues that U.S. disengagement would lead to nuclear proliferation and arms races in Asia and the Middle East. He concludes that the alternatives to American empire would be even less appealing.<sup>106</sup> Fareed Zakaria writes that disengagement would produce “a world in which problems fester and the buck is endlessly passed, until problems explode.”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Michael Mandelbaum writes that U.S. disengagement “would deprive the interna-

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105. On selective engagement, see Posen and Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy.”

106. Stephen Peter Rosen, “An Empire, If You Can Keep It,” *National Interest*, No. 71 (Spring 2003), pp. 51–61.

107. Fareed Zakaria, “Preview of a Post-U.S. World,” *Newsweek*, February 5, 2007.

tional system of one of its principal safety features, which keeps countries from smashing into each other.”<sup>108</sup> Niall Ferguson calls this situation “apolarity” and describes “an anarchic new Dark Age; an era of . . . civilization’s retreat into a few fortified enclaves.”<sup>109</sup> Robert Lieber, with more detail but no less gloom-and-doom, describes the potential consequences of U.S. disengagement as follows:

In Asia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan would have strong motivation to acquire nuclear weapons—which they have the technological capacity to do quite quickly. Instability and regional competition could also escalate, not only between India and Pakistan, but also in Southeast Asia involving Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and possibly the Philippines. Risks in the Middle East would be likely to increase, with regional competition among the major countries of the Gulf region (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq) as well as Egypt, Syria, and Israel. Major regional wars, eventually involving the use of weapons of mass destruction plus human suffering on a vast scale, floods of refugees, economic disruption, and risks to oil supplies are all readily conceivable.<sup>110</sup>

U.S. policymakers understand this logic, too. American forces are stationed around the world following what Josef Joffe calls the “pacifier logic,” according to which only the presence of forces external to the region can stave off acute security competition, which could eventually lead to conflict. This logic underpins U.S. security guarantees in Asia (to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) as well as in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>111</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This article has laid out a theory of unipolarity that accounts for how a unipolar structure of the international system provides significant incentives for conflict. In doing so, my argument corrects an important problem with extant research on unipolarity—the absence of scholarship questioning William Wohlforth’s view that a unipolar world is peaceful. In this respect, Wohlforth’s words ring as true of extant scholarship today as they did in 1999: “When balance-of-power theorists argue that the post–Cold War world is headed toward conflict, they are not claiming that unipolarity causes conflict. Rather, they are claiming that unipolarity leads quickly to bi- or multipolarity. It is not unipolarity’s peace but its durability that is in dispute.”<sup>112</sup> Not anymore.

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108. Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath*, p. 195.

109. Niall Ferguson, “A World without Power,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 143 (July/August 2004), p. 34.

110. Lieber, *The American Era*, p. 53.

111. See Josef Joffe, “Europe’s American Pacifier,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 54 (Spring 1986); and John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56.

112. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” p. 24.

It is not that the core of Wohlforth's widely shared argument is wrong, however: great power conflict is impossible in a unipolar world. Rather, his claim that unipolarity is peaceful has two important limitations. First, it focuses on great powers. But because unipolarity prevents the aggregation of conflicts involving major and minor powers into conflict between great powers, scholars must look beyond great power interactions when analyzing the structural incentives for war. Second, Wohlforth assumes that the unipole's only reasonable strategic option is defensive dominance. But given that unipolarity provides the unipole with ample room for defining its foreign policy, offensive dominance and disengagement are equally plausible strategies. This requires a look at how these two additional strategies facilitate conflict.

After correcting for these two limitations, it becomes clear that unipolarity possesses much potential for conflict. Contrary to what Wohlforth argued, unipolarity is not a system in which the unipole is spared from any conflicts and major powers become involved only in peripheral wars. Instead, a unipolar system is one that provides incentives for recurrent wars between the sole great power and recalcitrant minor powers, as well as occasional wars among major and minor powers. That is the central prediction of my theory.

To be sure, the unique historical character of the current unipolar era makes the task of building a general theory of unipolarity difficult. Particularly, it requires great care in distinguishing between those features of the post-Cold War world that are intrinsic to a unipolar system and those that stem from specific aspects of contemporary international politics. Two points deserve mention.

First, my theory of conflict in unipolarity is robust to changes in military technology. Still, some such changes would mean the end of unipolarity. At one end of the scale, some scholars argue that the widespread possession of equalizing technologies such as nuclear weapons would turn all minor powers into major powers and decrease the use of the unipole's power-projection capabilities in ways that might invalidate the label of unipolarity.<sup>113</sup> At the other end of the scale, should the unipole develop a splendid first-strike capability against all other states—an unlikely prospect, no doubt—its relative power would increase, perhaps replacing anarchy with hegemony.<sup>114</sup> Both of these developments would mean that my theory no longer applies.

Second, my argument is robust to changes in the geographical configuration of the distribution of power. Were a future unipolar era to feature a continen-

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113. See Kenneth N. Waltz and Scott D. Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

114. See Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 40–92.

tal, rather than an offshore, unipole, the paths to conflict described above would still apply. A continental unipole's inability to disengage from its neighbors might increase the proportion of conflict in which it will be involved at the expense of conflicts between others, but the conflict-producing mechanisms would remain the same.<sup>115</sup>

From the perspective of the overall peacefulness of the international system, then, no U.S. grand strategy is, as in the Goldilocks tale, "just right."<sup>116</sup> In fact, each strategic option available to the unipole produces significant conflict. Whereas offensive and defensive dominance will entangle it in wars against recalcitrant minor powers, disengagement will produce regional wars among minor and major powers. Regardless of U.S. strategy, conflict will abound. Indeed, if my argument is correct, the significant level of conflict the world has experienced over the last two decades will continue for as long as U.S. power remains preponderant.

From the narrower perspective of the unipole's ability to avoid being involved in wars, however, disengagement is the best strategy. A unipolar structure provides no incentives for conflict involving a disengaged unipole. Disengagement would extricate the unipole's forces from wars against recalcitrant minor powers and decrease systemic pressures for nuclear proliferation. There is, however, a downside. Disengagement would lead to heightened conflict beyond the unipole's region and increase regional pressures for nuclear proliferation. As regards the unipole's grand strategy, then, the choice is between a strategy of dominance, which leads to involvement in numerous conflicts, and a strategy of disengagement, which allows conflict between others to fester.

In a sense, then, strategies of defensive and offensive dominance are self-defeating. They create incentives for recalcitrant minor powers to bolster their capabilities and present the United States with a tough choice: allowing them to succeed or resorting to war in order to thwart them. This will either drag U.S. forces into numerous conflicts or result in an increasing number of major powers. In any case, U.S. ability to convert power into favorable outcomes peacefully will be constrained.<sup>117</sup>

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115. In this sense, the current unipolar world is a hard case for the components of my theory that deal with strategies of dominance. The United States, as an offshore unipole, can more easily disengage from most of the world's regions. Still, despite enjoying this privileged position, the United States has been involved in significant conflict. See Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 7–43.

116. See Richard Rosecrance, "Overextension, Vulnerability, and Conflict: The 'Goldilocks Problem' in International Strategy: A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 145–163.

117. On how a nuclearized world would constrain the unipole, see Campbell Craig, "American

This last point highlights one of the crucial issues where Wohlforth and I differ—the benefits of the unipole’s power preponderance. Whereas Wohlforth believes that the power preponderance of the United States will lead all states in the system to bandwagon with the unipole, I predict that states engaged in security competition with the unipole’s allies and states for whom the status quo otherwise has lesser value will not accommodate the unipole. To the contrary, these minor powers will become recalcitrant despite U.S. power preponderance, displaying the limited pacifying effects of U.S. power.

What, then, is the value of unipolarity for the unipole? What can a unipole do that a great power in bipolarity or multipolarity cannot? My argument hints at the possibility that—at least in the security realm—unipolarity does not give the unipole greater influence over international outcomes.<sup>118</sup> If unipolarity provides structural incentives for nuclear proliferation, it may, as Robert Jervis has hinted, “have within it the seeds if not of its own destruction, then at least of its modification.”<sup>119</sup> For Jervis, “[t]his raises the question of what would remain of a unipolar system in a proliferated world. The American ability to coerce others would decrease but so would its need to defend friendly powers that would now have their own deterrents. The world would still be unipolar by most measures and considerations, but many countries would be able to protect themselves, perhaps even against the superpower. . . . In any event, the polarity of the system may become less important.”<sup>120</sup>

At the same time, nothing in my argument determines the decline of U.S. power. The level of conflict entailed by the strategies of defensive dominance, offensive dominance, and disengagement may be acceptable to the unipole and have only a marginal effect on its ability to maintain its preeminent position. Whether a unipole will be economically or militarily overstretched is an empirical question that depends on the magnitude of the disparity in power between it and major powers and the magnitude of the conflicts in which it gets involved. Neither of these factors can be addressed a priori, and so a theory of unipolarity must acknowledge the possibility of frequent conflict in a nonetheless durable unipolar system.

Finally, my argument points to a “paradox of power preponderance.”<sup>121</sup> By

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Power Preponderance and the Nuclear Revolution,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35 (January 2009), pp. 27–44.

118. See Michael Mastanduno, “System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 121–154; and Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” pp. 86–120.

119. Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” p. 213.

120. *Ibid.*, pp. 212–213, footnote omitted from the original text.

121. At least two other paradoxes stemming from power preponderance have been highlighted in the literature. First, Joseph S. Nye Jr. finds it paradoxical that the United States, though a unipole,

putting other states in extreme self-help, a systemic imbalance of power requires the unipole to act in ways that minimize the threat it poses. Only by exercising great restraint can it avoid being involved in wars. If the unipole fails to exercise restraint, other states will develop their capabilities, including nuclear weapons—restraining it all the same.<sup>122</sup> Paradoxically, then, more relative power does not necessarily lead to greater influence and a better ability to convert capabilities into favorable outcomes peacefully. In effect, unparalleled relative power requires unequaled self-restraint.

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needs (in his view) multilateralism and cooperation from other states to achieve its policy preferences on key international issues. See Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 509–524. Second, Bruce Cronin delineates a "paradox of hegemony" that he believes derives from an inherent tension between a unipole's egotistical role as a great power and its altruistic role as the guarantor of the system's peace and stability. See Cronin, "The Paradox of Hegemony: America's Ambiguous Relationship with the United Nations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March 2001), pp. 103–130. 122. On the need for U.S. restraint, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest*, No. 111 (January/February 2011), pp. 16–34; Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *American Interest*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (November/December 2007), pp. 7–32; and Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).