

# Soft Balancing against the United States

Robert A. Pape

President George W. Bush and his administration are pursuing a profoundly new U.S. national security strategy. Since January 2001 the United States has unilaterally abandoned the Kyoto accords on global warming, rejected participation in the International Criminal Court, and withdrawn from the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, among other unilateralist foreign policies. Although the United States gained considerable international sympathy following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration chose to conduct military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan with the aid of only one country: Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> In 2002 the administration announced that it would replace the Baathist regime in Iraq, a country that posed no observable threat to attack the United States, and to do so with military force “unilaterally if necessary.”<sup>2</sup> The United States went on to conquer Iraq in early 2003 despite vigorous efforts by many of the world’s major powers to delay, frustrate, and even undermine war plans and reduce the number of countries that would fight alongside the United States. Since then, the United States has threatened Iran and Syria, reaffirmed its commitment to build an ambitious ballistic missile defense system, and taken few steps to mend fences with the international community.

The Bush strategy is one of the most aggressively unilateral U.S. national security strategies ever, and it is likely to produce important international consequences. So far, the debate has focused almost exclusively on the immediate

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*Robert A. Pape is Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago.*

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The author would like to thank the following individuals for offering valuable comments: Kenneth Abbott, Karen Alter, Robert Art, Richard Betts, Risa Brooks, Michael Desch, Alexander Downes, Daniel Drezner, Charles Glaser, Elizabeth Hurd, Ian Hurd, Chaim Kaufmann, Charles Lipson, Michael Loriaux, John Mearsheimer, Jeremy Pressman, Sebastian Rosato, Duncan Snidal, Jack Snyder, Hendrik Spruyt, Kenneth Waltz, and Alexander Wendt. He is also grateful to the members of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago and to participants in the conference on preemption held by the Triangle Institute on Security Studies at Duke University on January 17, 2003.

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1. As an unnamed senior Bush administration official said, “The fewer people you have to rely on, the fewer permissions you have to get.” Quoted in Elaine Sciolino and Steven Lee Meyers, “U.S. Plans to Act Largely Alone,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2001.

2. “In Cheney’s Words: The Administration’s Case for Replacing Saddam Hussein,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2002; and George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002).

consequences of individual elements of the Bush foreign policy—on abandoning the ABM treaty, conquering Iraq, or failing to accept international limits on the use of force embodied in the United Nations.<sup>3</sup> Despite the significance of these issues, however, the long-term consequences of aggressive unilateralism and the Bush strategy as a whole are likely to be even more momentous.

Throughout history, states that have pursued aggressive unilateral military policies have paid a heavy price. In fact, major powers have often balanced against such states, though few analysts think that this will happen to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Historically, major powers have rarely balanced against the United States and not at all since the 1990s when it has been the sole superpower. The conventional wisdom among policymakers is that Europe, Russia, China, Japan, and other important regional actors such as Turkey and Brazil may grumble, but they will not stand in the way of U.S. military policies and will quickly seek to mend fences once the United States imposes its will by implementing these policies.

Recent international relations scholarship has promoted the view that the United States, as a unipolar leader, can act without fear of serious opposition in the international system. In the early 1990s a number of scholars argued that major powers would rise to challenge U.S. preponderance after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that unipolarity was largely an “illusion” that will not last long.<sup>5</sup> By the late 1990s, however, as it became increasingly evident that

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3. On the debate over Bush's policies on national missile defense, 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; Heritage Commission on Missile Defense, *Defending America: A Plan to Meet the Urgent Missile Threat* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1999); and Philip H. Gordon, “Bush, Missile Defense, and the Atlantic Alliance,” *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 17–36. On Iraq, see Kenneth M. Pollack, “Next Stop Baghdad,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (March/April 2002), pp. 32–48; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 134 (January/February 2003), pp. 51–61; and Robert A. Pape, “The World Pushes Back,” *Boston Globe*, March 23, 2003. On the UN, see Michael J. Glennon, “Why the Security Council Failed,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (May/June 2003), pp. 16–35.

4. Although most critics of the United States' unilateralist diplomatic policies present a compelling case that these policies are increasing anti-Americanism around the world, they generally stop short of outlining the full long-term risks of aggressively unilateral military policies for the position of the United States in the world. On U.S. unilateral diplomacy, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Yu Zhou, “American Unilateral Approach Threatens International Relations,” *Beijing Review*, August 16, 2001, pp. 8–10; Peter W. Rodman, “The World's Resentment,” *National Interest*, No. 60 (Summer 2000), pp. 8–10; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Stephen M. Walt, “Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 56–78.

5. Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; Kenneth N. Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 915–916; Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for

unipolarity had not immediately given way to a new round of multipolar politics, the scholarly conventional wisdom began to change. While recognizing that states have often balanced against superior power in the past, most contemporary scholars of unipolarity assert that the United States commands such a huge margin of superiority that second-class powers cannot balance against its power, either individually or collectively. As William Wohlforth writes, "The raw power advantage of the United States means that . . . second-tier states face incentives to bandwagon with the unipolar power."<sup>6</sup>

This article advances three propositions that challenge the prevailing view that major powers cannot balance against the United States. First, the most consequential effect of the Bush strategy will be a fundamental transformation in how major states react to future uses of U.S. power. The United States has long been a remarkable exception to the rule that states balance against superior power. Aside from the Soviet Union, major powers have rarely balanced against it. The key reason is not the United States' overwhelming power relative to that of other major powers, which has varied over time and so cannot explain this nearly constant pattern. Rather, until recently the United States enjoyed a robust reputation for nonaggressive intentions toward major powers and lesser states beyond its own hemisphere. Although it has fought numerous wars, the United States has generally used its power to preserve the established political order in major regions of the world, seeking to prevent other powers from dominating rather than seeking to dominate itself. The Bush strategy of aggressive unilateralism is changing the United States' long-enjoyed reputation for benign intent and giving other major powers reason to fear its power.

Second, major powers are already engaging in the early stages of balancing behavior against the United States. In the near term, France, Germany, Russia, China, Japan, and other important regional states are unlikely to respond with traditional hard-balancing measures, such as military buildups, war-fighting alliances, and transfers of military technology to U.S. opponents. Directly confronting U.S. preponderance is too costly for any individual state and too risky for multiple states operating together, at least until major powers become confident that members of a balancing coalition will act in unison. Instead, ma-

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Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 5–33; and Charles A. Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–79.

6. William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 7–8.

major powers are likely to adopt what I call “soft-balancing” measures: that is, actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies. Soft balancing using international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements has already been a prominent feature of the international opposition to the U.S. war against Iraq.

Third, soft balancing is likely to become more intense if the United States continues to pursue an aggressively unilateralist national security policy. Although soft balancing may be unable to prevent the United States from achieving specific military aims in the near term, it will increase the costs of using U.S. power, reduce the number of countries likely to cooperate with future U.S. military adventures, and possibly shift the balance of economic power against the United States. For example, Europe, Russia, and China could press hard for the oil companies from countries other than the United States to have access to Iraqi oil contracts, which would increase the economic costs of U.S. occupation of the country. Europeans could also begin to pay for oil in euros rather than in dollars, which could reduce demand for the dollar as the world’s reserve currency and so increase risks of inflation and higher interest rates in the United States. Most important, soft balancing could eventually evolve into hard balancing. China and European states could also increase their economic ties with Russia while the Kremlin continues or even accelerates support for Iran’s nuclear program, a step that would negate U.S. economic pressure on Russia while signaling the start of hard balancing against the United States.

Soft balancing, however, is not destiny. The Bush administration’s national security strategy of aggressive unilateralism is the principal cause of soft balancing and repudiating this strategy is the principal solution. In practice, this would mean an explicit rejection of the strategy’s most extreme elements (e.g., unilateral preventive war), renunciation of the most serious reasons to doubt U.S. motives (e.g., unilateral control over Iraqi oil contracts), and reestablishment of the U.S. commitment to solve important international problems multilaterally (e.g., a renewed commitment to the UN). The reputation of the United States for benign intent would slowly return, and the incentives for balancing against it would markedly decline. Although rare circumstances may require the unilateral use of U.S. power in the future, the security of the United States would be significantly enhanced if the Bush administration abandoned its policy of aggressive unilateralism.

This article evaluates the Bush administration’s national security strategy on its key assumption: that states will not balance against aggressive unilateral uses of U.S. power. First, it develops a theory of security in a unipolar world

that lays out the logic of balancing against a sole superpower. Second, it uses this theory to explain why states have not balanced against the United States in the past. Third, it articulates why U.S. unilateralism is beginning to change these dynamics. Fourth, it outlines how the strategy of soft balancing works and its potential costs for the United States. Finally, it presents the policies most likely to diffuse incentives for major powers to balance against the United States in the future.

### *A Theory of Security in a Unipolar World*

Although the United States is commonly described as “a unipolar superpower,” a clear definition of the meaning of unipolarity remains elusive. To determine how today’s structure of the international system affects the incentives and behavior of both the unipolar leader and the world’s other important powers, it is important to clarify the conceptual boundary that separates unipolarity from either a multipolar or bipolar system, on the one hand, and a hegemonic or imperial system, on the other.

#### DEFINITION OF UNIPOLARITY

The distinct quality of a system with only one superpower is that no other single state is powerful enough to balance against it. As a unipolar leader, the United States is also more secure than any other state in the world, able to determine the outcome of most international disputes, and has significant opportunities to control the internal and external behavior of virtually any small state in the system.

A unipolar world, however, is a balance of power system, not a hegemonic one. Powerful as it may be, a unipolar leader is still not altogether immune to the possibility of balancing by most or all of the second-ranked powers acting in concert. To escape balancing altogether, the leading state in the system would need to be stronger than all second-ranked powers acting as members of a counterbalancing coalition seeking to contain the unipolar leader. The term “global hegemon” is appropriate for a state that enjoys this further increase in power, because it could act virtually without constraint by any collection of other states anywhere in the world (see Figure 1).

In a unipolar world, the extraordinary power of the leading state is a serious barrier to attempts to form a counterbalancing coalition for two reasons. First, the coalition would have to include most or possibly even all of the lesser major powers. Second, assembling such a coalition is especially difficult to coordinate. As a result, forming a balancing coalition requires the sudden solution of

**Figure 1. International Systems with One Strong State**

Balance of Power Systems	Hegemonic Systems
multipolarity ↔ unipolarity	hegemony ↔ empire

a difficult collective action problem in which several powers must trust one another where buck-passing by any could doom them all.

In multipolar systems, too, the strongest power may enjoy such a wide margin of superiority over all others that containing it may require a coalition of several states. This situation of “unbalanced” multipolarity, however, is distinguishable from a unipolar world by the existence of at least one state that can mount a reasonable defense, at least for a time, even against the multipolar leader. In doing so, the state can provide the public good of serving as an “anchor” for a counterbalancing coalition by shouldering the risk of containing the leading state when others are unable, unwilling, or undecided. The most famous example is Britain’s role in sparking the several coalitions against Napoleonic France from 1793 to 1815. Similarly, in Europe in 1940–41, both Britain and the Soviet Union showed themselves capable of serving as an anchor against Nazi Germany until an even larger coalition could be formed.<sup>7</sup> Today, however, no possible rival of the United States could reasonably assume this role. The absence of such an anchor marks the critical break between today’s world and the past several centuries of major power politics.

Degrees of hegemony are also distinguishable. The difference between a global hegemon and an imperial hegemon is the level of control that the most powerful state exercises over subordinate states. A global hegemon is unchallengeably powerful. An imperial hegemon exercises a measure of control over second-ranked powers, regulating their external behavior according to the established hierarchy, even to the point of enforcing acceptable forms of internal behavior within the subordinate states.<sup>8</sup> Further, an imperial hegemon can create and enforce rules over the use of force, norms that apply to subordinate

7. Strictly speaking, the Soviet Union was not fighting alone in 1941. In practice, however, Britain and the United States provided so little assistance or distraction until late 1942 that Moscow had to shoulder most of the burden of confronting German military power during this period. For a discussion of unbalanced multipolarity, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

8. On the definition of empire, see Stephen Peter Rosen, “An Empire, If You Can Keep It,” *National Interest*, No. 71 (Spring 2003), pp. 51–62.

states but not to the hegemon itself. As a result, it can take steps to establish a monopoly on the use of force, and even second-ranked powers can lose important aspects of their sovereignty even if they are not formally occupied.<sup>9</sup>

Although differences in specific systems are important, from the standpoint of a theory of unipolar politics, the key boundary is between a balance of power system and a hegemonic one. This line separates a world in which the second-ranked powers can still act to preserve their security independent of the leading state from a world in which they cannot. Once the relative power of the leading state reaches this threshold, second-ranked powers may begin to worry about the consequences this might have for their security, but they can do little about it. As a result, second-ranked powers have tremendous incentives to contain the unipolar superpower's further expansion, or even to seek a shift in the distribution of power back toward multipolarity, depending on the perceived intentions of the leading state.

#### CONDITIONS THAT THREATEN SECOND-RANKED POWERS

In a balance of power system, states must guard against three security problems: (1) the threat of direct attack by another major power; (2) the threat of indirect harm, in which the military actions of a major power undermine the security of another, even if unintentionally; and (3) the possibility that one major power will become a global hegemon and thus capable of many harmful actions, such as rewriting the rules of international conduct to its long-term advantage, exploiting world economic resources for relative gain, imposing imperial rule on second-ranked powers, and even conquering any state in the system.

In general, major powers have commonly balanced against indirect as well as direct threats to their security. For instance, the United States acted to balance Germany before both world wars, even though it did not pose a direct threat to the United States in either case. Although historians debate whether the United States entered World War I in 1917 in response to the spillover effects of Germany's submarine campaign against Great Britain or the general fear that a victorious Germany would become a global hegemon, no major scholar contends that Germany posed an imminent threat to the United States. In World War II, the leading realist analysis calling for U.S. intervention to bal-

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9. A unipolar superpower, like great powers in general, could create and maintain one or several regional empires that regulate the behavior of weak states according to the established hierarchy. Arguably, the United States has done just this in Central America and may be doing this in the Persian Gulf.

ance Germany explicitly ruled out a direct threat to invade or bombard the United States, and instead justified intervention on the basis of the indirect harm to U.S. security that might occur if a victorious Germany went on to establish exclusive control over economic resources and markets in Europe, Asia, and South America.<sup>10</sup> The experience of the United States before both world wars was not unique, because the European balancing coalitions against Germany began to form long before the aspiring hegemon actually attacked a major power.<sup>11</sup>

Concerns over indirect threats are likely to be greater in unipolar systems than in other balance of power systems. A unipolar leader is so strong that it may engage in military actions in distant regions of the world that are often likely to have real, if inadvertent, consequences for the security of major powers that are geographically close or have important economic ties to the region. For instance, how the unipolar leader wages a war on transnational terrorism can reduce or improve the security of other major powers, giving them a powerful security interest in how such a war is waged. Further, there is less ambiguity in a unipolar than a multipolar world about which state can make a bid for global hegemony, and even minor steps in this direction by a unipolar leader can create a common fear among second-ranked powers. Hence, other states may have reason to oppose military action by a unipolar leader, even if it has no intention of harming them directly.

This logic implies that perceptions of the most powerful state's intentions are more important in unipolar than in multipolar worlds. Because a unipolar leader is already stronger than all individual second-ranked powers, additional increments of power are unlikely to significantly increase its ability to become a global hegemon. For this reason, although the leading state's relative power gains are viewed with suspicion, they are ultimately of secondary importance in the politics of unipolarity.

More important is how others perceive the unipolar leader's motives. The overwhelming power of the unipolar leader means that even a modest change

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10. On the decision of the United States to balance Germany before both world wars, see Ernest R. May, *The World War and American Isolationism, 1914–1917* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (New York: New American Library, 1951); Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 41–56; and Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942).

11. V.R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach to War in 1914* (London: Macmillan, 1973); and Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

in how others perceive the aggressiveness of its intentions can significantly increase the fear that it would make a bid for global hegemony. In fact, the threshold for what counts as an “aggressive” intention by a unipolar leader is lower than for major powers in a multipolar world because its capability to become a global hegemon is given. Thus, even a unipolar leader that adopts unilateral policies that merely expand its control over small states or that make only modest relative power gains can be viewed as aggressive, because these unilateral acts signal a willingness to make gains independently, and possibly at the expense of others.

#### THE LOGIC OF BALANCING AGAINST A SOLE SUPERPOWER

Major states have at least as much incentive to balance against a unipolar leader that poses a direct or indirect threat to their security as they would against strong states in a multipolar world. The main question is whether they can do so, and how.

Balancing against a unipolar leader is possible, but it does not operate according to the rules of other balance of power systems. In general, states may cope with an expansionist state through either “internal” balancing (i.e., rearmament or accelerated economic growth to support eventual rearmament) or “external” balancing (i.e., organization of counterbalancing alliances). In most multipolar systems, both forms of balancing are possible.<sup>12</sup>

Against a unipolar leader, however, internal balancing is not a viable option because no increase in standing military forces or economic strength by just one state is adequate to the task. This follows from the definition of a unipolar world and not from specific details about individual states’ capabilities. Attempts at internal balancing by any one state are also likely to lead to a prompt, harsh response by the unipolar leader; this possibility is sufficiently obvious that individual states would rarely try such efforts on their own.<sup>13</sup>

States concerned about a unipolar leader, thus, have only the option of external balancing, but they face serious difficulties in coordinating their efforts. As developed below, soft balancing is a viable strategy for second-ranked powers to solve the coordination problems they encounter in coping with an expan-

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12. In bipolar systems, only internal balancing is relevant because no third state is strong enough to matter. On internal and external balancing and the logic of bipolarity, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), chap. 8.

13. The futility of internal balancing has another important implication. Although one might think that a major power’s attempts to balance a unipolar leader through internal efforts would spark local counterbalancing against the major power by other major powers, the obvious weakness of individual internal balancing against a unipolar leader means that this scenario is not likely to emerge in the first place.

sionist unipolar leader. So long as the unipolar leader has not already become a global hegemon, the lesser major powers can band together to contain its predominate military power. The key question is not whether these states have the collective power to do so, but whether they can solve their collective action problem and work together to form a balancing coalition.

Scholars of international politics are used to thinking about the problem of collective action in the context of a multipolar system, where buck-passing is the main obstacle to the formation of a counterbalancing coalition. Balancing is risky business. Strong states rarely welcome others standing in their way and can impose harsh penalties on those that do. In a multipolar system, major powers have a reasonable chance of defending themselves individually against even the strongest state in the system, and so each can try to make others pay the price for confronting the revisionist state. For this reason, states in a multipolar system are often slow to balance against powerful rivals, and the formation of a balancing coalition is generally an incremental process in which new members are added over time.<sup>14</sup>

The dynamics of balancing are different in a unipolar system. Balancing against a unipolar leader cannot be done by any one state alone; it can only be done by several second-ranked states acting collectively. This means that buck-passing is not an option. Because no one state—by definition—is powerful enough to balance a sole superpower, no state is available to catch the buck. Instead, the main problem of states wanting to balance against the unipolar leader is fear of collective failure. An individual state may fear that there are not enough states to form an effective countercoalition, that it will take too long for a sufficient number to organize, or that the unipolar leader will single it out for harsh treatment before the balancing coalition has coalesced.

Thus, the logic of balancing against a sole superpower is a game of coordination in which assuring timely cooperation is the principal obstacle. In this situation, each member of a potential balancing coalition is best off cooperating with others to balance the unipolar leader. At the same time, each member's decision to balance depends on the expectation that others will also balance, which in turn depends on the others' expectations of its balancing behavior. As Thomas Schelling articulated, the outcome of coordination games

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14. In cases of hegemonic challengers in multipolar international systems, buck-passing was a problem. Before both world wars, Great Britain, France, and Russia were slow to cooperate against the German challenge and paid stiff penalties for their foot-dragging. Members of the final coalition, however, were able to solve their buck-passing problems, with the result that balancing was late but did eventually occur.

depends on the process of converging expectations<sup>15</sup>—a process that is especially likely to delay hard balancing. Directly confronting the preponderant military capability of a sole superpower before the full coalition has assembled would likely lead to a quick defeat and the loss of valuable members of an effective balancing coalition. Hence, the formation of a hard-balancing coalition against a unipolar leader is likely to occur abruptly, or not at all, rather than by incrementally adding members to a balancing coalition over time.

Although a sole superpower's preponderance of strength increases the incentive for second-ranked powers to delay hard balancing until they can coordinate collective action, it does not weaken the common interest that these states have in balancing against an aggressive unipolar leader. In a unipolar system, states balance against threats, defined by the power and aggressive intentions of the revisionist state. The power of a unipolar leader may keep other states from forming a balancing coalition, but it is still a key reason why these states may wish to do so. As a result, second-ranked states that cannot solve their coordination problem by traditional means may turn to soft-balancing measures to achieve this aim.

Soft-balancing measures do not directly challenge a unipolar leader's military preponderance, but they can delay, complicate, or increase the costs of using that extraordinary power. Nonmilitary tools, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality, can have a real, if indirect, effect on the military prospects of a unipolar leader.<sup>16</sup>

Most important, soft balancing can establish a basis of cooperation for more forceful, hard-balancing measures in the future. The logic of balancing against a sole superpower is about coordinating expectations of collective action among a number of second-ranked states. In the short term, this encourages

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15. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

16. Soft balancing differs from "soft power," which refers to the ability of (some) states to use the attractiveness of their social, cultural, economic, or political resources to encourage other governments and publics to accept policies favorable toward their state, society, and policies. Although uses of soft power are not limited to security issues, in principle a state with excellent soft-power resources might be in a better than average position to organize a balancing coalition (or to prevent the formation of one against it). Favorable perceptions of a unipolar leader's intentions are thus an important soft-power asset. If a unipolar leader's aggressive unilateralism undermines favorable perceptions of its intentions, this also has the effect of reducing its soft power to block the formation of a counterbalancing coalition. In general, however, soft power is an attribute of a state, whereas soft balancing involves the nonmilitary policies that states can use to limit and offset the leading state in the international system. On soft power, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

states to pursue balancing strategies that are more effective at developing a convergence of expectations than in opposing the military power of the leading state. Building cooperation with nonmilitary tools is an effective means for this end.

The logic of unipolarity would suggest that the more aggressive the intentions of the unipolar hegemon, the more intense the balancing by second-ranked states, to the extent balancing is possible at all. If the unipolar leader does not pursue aggressively unilateral military policies, there should be little balancing of any kind against it. If, however, the unipolar leader pursues aggressive unilateral military policies that change how most of the world's major powers view its intentions, one should expect, first, soft balancing and, if the unipolar leader's aggressive policies do not abate, increasingly intense balancing efforts that could evolve into hard balancing.

### *Why the United States Has Been Exempt—Until Now*

Thus far, the long ascendancy of the United States has been a remarkable exception to the general rule that states balance against superior power.<sup>17</sup> The United States was the world's strongest state throughout the twentieth century and, since the end of the Cold War, has been the leader of a unipolar international system. The most reliable long-run measure of a state's power is the size of its gross national product, because economic strength ultimately determines the limit of a state's military potential. For the past century, the U.S. share of gross world product was often double (or more) the share of any other state: 32 percent in 1913, 31 percent in 1938, 26 percent in 1960, 22 percent in 1980, and 27 percent in 2000.<sup>18</sup> During this period, the United States fought numerous major wars, determining the outcomes of World Wars I and II and, more recently, fighting against Iraq in 1991, Bosnia in 1995, and Serbia in 1999. Yet aside from the Soviet Union, no major power has sought to balance against the United States.<sup>19</sup> Why not?

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17. On the tendency for an international balance of power to emerge and for this tendency to increase with the relative power of the leading state, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

18. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 202, 436; and *World Development Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000).

19. Other important exceptions include mid-nineteenth-century Britain and Germany. Moreover, many scholars have doubted the universal applicability of balance of power theory. For historical exceptions, see Brian Healy and Arthur Stein, "The Balance of Power in International History: Theory and Reality," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 1973), pp. 33–61; and Paul Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management," in Klaus Knorr,

Scholars of international politics have given three answers. The first is that states balance against superior power,<sup>20</sup> but the process is uneven and slow.<sup>21</sup> As Kenneth Waltz argues, the weak have a common interest in balancing against the strong, and there is little that the dominant state can do to arrest this tendency: "A dominant power may behave with moderation, restraint, and forbearance. Even if it does, however, weaker states will worry about its future behavior."<sup>22</sup> Yet balancing poses risks. Superior powers do not take kindly to states that oppose their will. Weak states recognize these risks and are often content to pass the buck on to others. Buck-passing explains why balancing was slow to develop against Germany before both world wars and why balancing has been slow to emerge against the United States since the end of the Cold War.

The second answer stresses the U.S. reputation for benign intentions. Stephen Walt contends that states balance not so much against power alone, as against threat—the combination of raw power and perceived aggressive intent. In his view, states may have good or bad intentions, and only states with aggressive intentions provoke others to balance against it.<sup>23</sup> The United States has had fairly moderate foreign policy intentions compared with those of most other great powers throughout the past two centuries, never seeking to conquer a major country that was not already at war with it or one of its allies and never seeking to build an empire or to establish a sphere of influence beyond its own region of the world.<sup>24</sup> Thus, during the Cold War, Western Europe and Japan sided with the stronger United States against the weaker, but more ag-

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ed., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976), pp. 173–225. For a broad challenge that argues that balance of threat rather than balance of power better explains the causes of alliances, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

20. Why do states not bandwagon with a threat rather than balance against it? Although there are important qualifications, international relations scholarship has found that major powers have a strong preference for balancing, because bandwagoning—even for profit—still leaves them vulnerable to an expansionist power. Bandwagoning is favored overwhelmingly by small states too weak to defend themselves without a major power patron. See Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; and Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107.

21. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 8.

22. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," p. 915.

23. To be clear, a state that is seen as aggressive, even if it is not the most powerful in the system, can provoke others to balance against it. Conversely, even the most powerful state may avoid becoming the target of balancing, provided that other powerful states are seen as much more aggressive. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

24. For instance, in the late 1930s when U.S.-Japanese relations deteriorated, none of the main powers in the region—Britain, the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, and China—sided with the weaker, but expansionist Japan. Similarly, during the Cold War, Western Europe and Japan sided with the stronger United States against the weaker, but more aggressive Soviet Union.

gressive Soviet Union. Despite the enormous potential threat posed by U.S. power, no one has balanced against the United States because it has generally manifested nonaggressive intentions.

The third answer focuses on U.S. grand strategy. Mearsheimer argues that the United States pursued a strategy of “offshore balancing” throughout the twentieth century, focusing on preventing strong states from dominating important regions of the world rather than dominating those regions itself.<sup>25</sup> It was this strategy that called the United States to the defense of its European allies in World Wars I and II, of South Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War, and of Kuwait in 1991. As a result, U.S. grand strategy has effectively reassured major powers such as Europe, Russia, Japan, and China that the United States, even as a sole superpower, poses little threat to them.<sup>26</sup> At least until the Bush Doctrine, U.S. grand strategy avoided giving others much reason to balance against the United States.

Scholars may argue over which of these answers is the most convincing. Each, however, has an element of truth and together explain more than any one alone. No other great power in history has been so dominant, has had such a high reputation for nonaggressive intentions, and has limited itself to offshore balancing—all at the same time. This triple combination is probably the best explanation for why the United States has gotten a pass from balance of power politics so far.

To the extent that one factor has been especially important since the United States became the sole superpower, it is probably the U.S. reputation for benign intent. Consider the evidence that would be needed to support each of the above three positions. If, as Waltz suggests, the structure of the unipolar system encourages balancing but that buck-passing will make the process slow and uneven, then evidence of either balancing or buck-passing among the major powers should exist, especially during periods when the United States used its considerable military power. If, however, Walt and Mearsheimer are correct that the United States’ reputation for good intentions, bolstered by a grand strategy of offshore balancing, effectively reassures major powers, then there should be little evidence of either balancing or buck-passing.

Strikingly, from 1990 to 2000 no significant instances of balancing occurred

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25. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

26. Mearsheimer believes that the U.S. strategy of offshore balancing is dictated more by limits in U.S. capabilities than by benign intentions. He agrees with Walt, however, on the effect of the United States pursuing a limited-aims grand strategy.

against the United States; nor was there notable buck-passing among the world's major powers in which one encouraged another to balance U.S. power. In the 1990s, resentment of U.S. preponderance led some major powers to complain of U.S. "arrogance" and to call for a new "counterweight" to American strength. Counterbalancing was limited to rhetoric, however, and it did not involve changes in military spending or opposition to U.S. uses of force, either directly or indirectly.<sup>27</sup> Starting in the mid-1990s, the United States began to increase its defense spending, while Europe, Japan, and China did not and Russia's military spending rapidly declined.<sup>28</sup> At the start of the 1990s, U.S. defense spending exceeded the next seven countries combined. By the decade's end, it exceeded the next eight.

Similarly, major powers did not act to restrain the use of U.S. military power in three extended conflicts during the period: Iraq in 1991, Bosnia in 1995, and Kosovo in 1999. Although major powers were often reluctant to join these military campaigns, in no case did they take action to impede, frustrate, or delay U.S. war plans; or actively oppose the use of U.S. military power; or discourage other states from supporting America's wars. In Iraq in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999, the United States ended with more military allies than it began. As in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, some major states grumbled, but none took measures to contain the use of U.S. military power.

Overall, the record of the 1990s does not reflect a balancing process that was slow or erratic. The politics of unipolarity changed, however, once the United States began to act in ways that would undermine its reputation for benign intent.

### *Unilateralism and the United States' Changing Reputation*

The Bush national security strategy asserts the right of the United States to wage unilateral preventive war against so-called rogue states and calls for a military posture that will keep U.S. preponderance beyond challenge from any state in the world. Under the Bush administration, the United States has moved vigorously to implement this game plan by waging a preventive war against Iraq and by accelerating the move toward developing a national missile defense (NMD). These military policies are creating conditions that are

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27. In 1991 French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas warned that "[U.S.] might reigns without balancing weight," while Chinese leaders warned that "unipolarity was a far worse state of affairs than bipolarity." Quoted in Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion," p. 36.

28. International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1998/99* (London: IISS, 2000).

**Table 1. Declining Image of the United States, 2000–03 (percentage favorable)**

	United Kingdom	France	Germany	Italy	Spain	Russia	Turkey
U.S. Image							
1999/2000	83	62	78	76	50	37	52
July 2002	75	63	61	70	—	61	30
February 2003	48	31	25	34	14	28	12
Change 2002–03	–27	–32	–36	–36	—	–33	–18

SOURCE: Pew Global Attitudes Project, *America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties: A Nine Country Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, March 2003).

likely to fundamentally change how other major powers react to future uses of U.S. power. Although these policies may add marginally to the United States' world power position, this is not the heart of the matter. Rather, these policies are changing how other states view U.S. intentions and the purposes behind U.S. power, putting at risk the United States' long-enjoyed reputation for benign intent. If these policies continue, the damage to the image of the United States will have negative consequences for U.S. security.

#### THE CHANGING IMAGE OF THE UNITED STATES

The image of the United States has been plummeting even among its closest allies since preparations for preventive war against Iraq began in earnest. International public opinion polls show that the decline is especially sharp from July 2002 (the month before Bush administration officials began calling for the war) to March 2003 (the month military operations started). During this period, the percentages of the populations in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia, and Turkey who viewed the United States favorably declined by about half, as Table 1 shows.

This decline is closely related to perceptions of rising unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy. As Table 2 shows, majorities in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia, and Turkey as well as a near majority in the United Kingdom believe that U.S. foreign policy is highly unilateral and has negative consequences for their country. Table 2 also shows that these publics believe that these negative consequences are specifically due to the foreign policy of the "Bush administration" rather than to a "more general problem with America," but also that they support greater independence between their country and the United States.

**Table 2. U.S. Foreign Policy and Independence from the United States, 2002–03**  
(percentage of respondents)

	United Kingdom	France	Germany	Italy	Spain	Russia	Turkey
U.S. foreign policy considers others							
Yes	44	21	53	36	—	21	16
No	52	76	45	58	—	70	74
Effect of U.S. foreign policy on our country							
Negative	42	71	67	52	57	55	68
Positive	30	9	11	17	9	11	14
Why U.S. policy produces a negative effect							
Bush administration	56	76	68	52	53	29	35
United States in general	31	15	30	36	33	48	48
Both	11	7	1	7	10	17	12
U.S.-European security ties							
Remain close	40	30	46	30	24	17	17
Be more independent	48	67	52	63	60	72	62

SOURCES: Pew Global Attitudes Project, *What the World Thinks in 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, December 2002); and Pew Global Attitudes Project, *America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties: A Nine Country Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, March 2003).

International polls also shed light on the underlying reasons for these attitudes. As Table 3 shows, although public opinion in France, Germany, Russia, and other European states strongly supported the U.S. war against terrorism, a large majority in each country did not believe that the United States seriously considered Saddam Hussein a threat and felt that the United States' true motivation was securing access to Iraqi oil.

In addition, foreign leaders expressed concern about U.S. unilateralism during the lead-up to the war. Although individual foreign leaders occasionally made such public remarks from the late 1990s onward,<sup>29</sup> it was only during the fall of 2002 and winter of 2003 that many collectively declared support for

29. In 1999 French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine described the United States as a "hyper-power"; in the same year, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder warned that the danger of "unilateralism" by the United States was "undeniable." The January 2000 "National Security Blueprint" of the Russian Federation warned of "attempts to create an international relations structure . . . under U.S. leadership and designed for unilateral solutions (including the use of military force) to key issues in world politics." All quoted in Walt, "Beyond bin Laden," p. 60.

**Table 3. International Support for War on Iraq and Terrorism, November 2002 (percentage of respondents)**

	United States	United Kingdom	France	Germany	Russia
What explains U.S. use of force					
U.S. sees Saddam as threat	67	45	21	39	15
U.S. wants Iraq's oil	22	44	75	54	76
U.S. war on terrorism					
Support	89	69	75	70	73
Oppose	8	23	23	25	16

SOURCE: Pew Global Attitudes Project, *What the World Thinks in 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, December 2002).

a multipolar world to limit U.S. unilateralism. In February 2003 France's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, asserted, "We believe that a multipolar world is needed, that no one power can ensure order through the world." Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed and went further to explain that his country's concerns served as the basis for union with European states against U.S. unilateralism. Putin stated, "We believe here, in Russia, just as French President Jacques Chirac believes, that the future international security architecture must be based on a multipolar world. This is the main thing that unites us. I am absolutely confident that the world will be predictable and stable only if it is multipolar."<sup>30</sup> Also during this period, it became common for foreign leaders to declare their suspicion of U.S. "ulterior motives," a phrase that evoked a rare round of applause when de Villepin uttered it at UN in February 2003.

#### WHY UNILATERALISM IS CHANGING THE U.S. IMAGE

The root cause of widespread opposition to U.S. military policies under President George W. Bush's administration does not lie in the political values or character of France, Germany, Russia, China, and important regional states, factors that do not point in a single direction and that have not changed significantly since July 2002.<sup>31</sup> Nor does it lie in a shift in U.S. relative power,

30. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, February 16, 2003, in "Poles Apart," *Le Monde*, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), March 17, 2003; and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Moscow Itar-Tass, in FBIS, February 9, 2003.

31. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth contend that opposition to the Bush strategy among various European states and Russia was driven not by incentives to balance the United States, but by the coincidence of two main factors: domestic politics, especially in the case of Ger-

which has hardly changed in this short time. Rather, the key reason is that the Bush strategy is changing the United States' long-enjoyed reputation of benign intent. Precisely because the United States is already so powerful, even a small change in how other perceive the aggressiveness of U.S. intentions can cause other major powers to be concerned about their security.

On its face, the rhetoric of the Bush strategy may appear to present few reasons for major powers and other states to change their view of U.S. intentions. Its chief objective is to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to rogue states, principally Iran, Syria, Libya, North Korea, and Iraq (before March 2003). To achieve this aim, the United States asserts the right to destroy a rogue state's military power "unilaterally if necessary," to build a national missile defense to defeat efforts by rogue states to develop long-range ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States, and to maintain the primacy of U.S. military power to keep other states from "surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."<sup>32</sup>

The main concern of other states is not with the goals of U.S. policy, but with the means, especially with the Bush administration's willingness to use unilateral military action to achieve its otherwise acceptable goals. Such action violates long-standing international norms against the use of preventive war as a legitimate policy tool, provides important relative gains for the United States in a region of the world crucial to the economic growth of major states, and increases the United States' already considerable military advantages over major nuclear powers.

PREVENTIVE WAR. Iraq is the United States' first preventive war. Although the United States has used force to defend allies from military attack, to stop the spread of ethnic and ideological insurgencies, and to protect oppressed

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many; and hard bargaining, particularly for Russia. Their evidence, however, shows that neither alternative factor provides much explanatory power independent of the key international pressures generated by the Bush Doctrine. Brooks and Wohlforth note that in the summer of 2002 Chancellor Schröder started to use opposition against the United States for domestic political advantage, but gained no increased German public support until Vice President Dick Cheney's public call for preventive war on Iraq on August 26. They also confirm that Russia gave up a great deal (oil contracts worth \$8–\$20 billion) to oppose Iraq, which should not have happened if hard bargaining to make absolute gains had been the main motive behind Russia's behavior. See Brooks and Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 72–108.

32. Key Bush administration national security policy statements include "In Bush's Words: Substantial Advantages of Intercepting Missiles Early," *New York Times*, May 2, 2001; "President Bush's State of the Union Address," *New York Times*, January 30, 2002; "In Cheney's Words: The Administration's Case for Replacing Saddam Hussein," *New York Times*, August 27, 2002; and Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*.

peoples, it had never before conquered a country to stop that state from gaining military power. Until now, many analysts have thought that democratic values and institutions would make classic territorial aggrandizement to conquer, occupy, and transform another country that does not pose an imminent military threat impossible. The U.S. conquest of Iraq, however, challenges one of the most important norms in international politics—that democracies do not fight preventive wars—and so undermines the assurance that comes from the expectation that democratic institutions can keep a sole superpower from altering the status quo to its advantage.

Officially, the Bush strategy is described as “preemption,” but the strategy against rogue states fits with the more aggressive policy of preventive war, a fact recognized in the Bush administration’s own national security strategy statements. What is at issue in the definition of the strategy is not simply who fires the first shot—preemption and preventive war are both policies that allow the United States to attack countries that have not opened fire against it—but whether the threat is imminent and thus whether only a military strike can respond to it.<sup>33</sup>

A preemptive war is fought against an opponent already in the process of mobilizing military forces for an imminent attack, usually within a matter of days. The enemy’s intent to attack is not assumed or even merely expected; it is observed by concrete changes in the operational status of the enemy’s military capabilities. With war under way, the incentive for preemptive attack is to deny the aggressor the advantage of completing the first move: that is, to destroy oncoming enemy forces while they are mobilizing and more vulnerable than they would be once the enemy’s first strike has begun. The timing of a preemptive war is determined by observable changes in the operational readiness of the enemy’s military forces.<sup>34</sup>

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33. Paul W. Schroeder, “The Case against Preemptive War,” *American Conservative*, October 21, 2002, pp. 19–27; Richard K. Betts, “Striking First: A History of Thankfully Lost Opportunities,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 17–24; Ivo H. Daalder, James M. Lindsay, and James B. Steinberg, *The Bush National Security Strategy: An Evaluation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2002); and Chaim D. Kaufmann, “Overstretching America,” paper presented to the Triangle Institute on Security Studies, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, January 17, 2003.

34. On preemptive war, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), chap. 6; Richard K. Betts, “Surprise Attack and Preemption,” in Graham T. Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Joseph S. Nye Jr., eds., *Hawks, Doves, and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), pp. 54–79; Dan Reiter, “Exploding the Powder Keg Myth: Preemptive Wars Almost Never Happen,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 5–34; and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 3.

In contrast, a preventive war is fought to keep an opponent from acquiring military capabilities long before—often years before—it begins to mobilize forces for an attack. Preventive war logic generally takes the opponent's intent to use newly acquired military capabilities for granted or bases such expectations on broad conclusions derived from the opponent's character or past behavior. The primary purpose of preventive war is not merely to deny the aggressor the advantage of striking first—this is a lesser included benefit. Instead, the chief purpose is to engage the adversary before it can shift the long-term military balance of power in its favor. For this reason, the timing of a preventive attack has little to do with changes in the operational status of the enemy's military forces, because the goal is to conquer the target state before it has gained those military capabilities. The war starts when the preventive attacker's forces are ready.<sup>35</sup>

The Bush strategy against rogue states follows the normal understanding of preventive war in substance, if not in rhetoric. In fact, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, the principal statement of the Bush strategy, expressly redefines the meaning of “preemption” against rogue states to encompass traditional preventive war logic:

Legal scholars and international jurists often conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an imminent threat—most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack. We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries. . . . The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemies' attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.<sup>36</sup>

Classic preventive war logic is also a common theme in public speeches by administration officials, including President Bush, on Iraq: “We are acting now because the risks of inaction would be far greater. In one year, or five years, the

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35. On preventive war, see Alfred Vagts, “Preventive War,” *Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1956), pp. 263–350; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jack Levy, “Declining Power and Preventive Motivation for War,” *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82–107; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chap. 4; and Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War: Hegemonic Rivalry and the Fear of Decline* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

36. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, p. 15. The Bush strategy against terrorist groups relies on the normal use of the concept of preemption. For a sophisticated discussion of the role of preventive war logic in the Bush administration's national security strategy, see Kaufmann, “Overstretching America.”

power of Iraq to inflict harm on all free nations would be multiplied many times over.”<sup>37</sup>

The Bush administration’s strategy of preventive war represents a major departure from traditional U.S. security policy. Although the United States has historically maintained a policy of preemption—to strike first when credible evidence warned that an enemy was mobilizing military forces for an imminent attack—it has categorically ruled out preventive war on numerous occasions.<sup>38</sup> The United States conquered much of North America in the nineteenth century, used force to ensure that European powers could not establish a strong presence in the Caribbean Basin in the early twentieth century—including retaliation against Spain’s attack on the USS *Maine*, which led to the U.S. conquest of the Philippines—and intervened to defend the political status quo numerous times in the twentieth century. In no case, however, did the United States wage a classic preventive war to conquer a sovereign country, prior to the conquest of Iraq in March 2003.<sup>39</sup>

The United States’ traditional policy against preventive war is not unique. Over the past two centuries, no major democratic power has ever started a preventive war<sup>40</sup>—not Britain even at the height of its power in the nineteenth

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37. Bush, March 17, 2003, quoted in Kaufmann, “Overstretching America.”

38. During the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower’s administration authorized the Strategic Air Command to maintain the capability to turn the Soviet Union into “a smoking, radiating ruin in two hours” in response to intelligence that Soviet missiles were being fueled for an imminent attack; however, the administration ruled out initiating an attack before the Soviet Union had begun mobilizing for war. “National Security Council 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (April 14, 1950),” considered one of the most aggressive U.S. official policy statements during the Cold War, categorically ruled out preventive war to stop the Soviet Union from acquiring nuclear weapons in the 1950s. Lyndon Johnson’s administration considered but also ruled out preventive war against China’s nascent nuclear capabilities in the 1960s. See Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1988/89), pp. 5–49; and William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 54–99.

39. Max Boot contends that U.S. interventions in Latin America, Vietnam, and elsewhere have been “preemptive” and thus are consistent with the Bush Doctrine. Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Although one might doubt the wisdom of many of these small wars, Boot provides no evidence on the key point—that any of them were fought to prevent the target state from gaining military power with which to subsequently attack the United States. Moreover, a basic understanding of the main cases suggests that such preventive war motives were highly unlikely. On their own, Cuba, the Philippines, China, and Nicaragua in the late nineteenth century and North Korea and North Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century had little, if any, prospects of gaining sufficient military power to threaten the United States.

40. In the standard list of preventive wars over the past two centuries, all were started by authoritarian states: Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815), Austro-Prussian War (1866), Franco-Prussian War (1870), Russo-Japanese War (1904), World War I (1914), Germany-Soviet Union (1941), and Japan-

century,<sup>41</sup> or France in the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> The closest any democracy has come to a preventive war was Israel's Suez campaign against Egypt in 1956, an action encouraged and supported by a majority of the world's strongest states.<sup>43</sup>

The Bush administration's rhetoric is not limited to Iraq, but seeks to legitimate preventive war as a "normal" tool of U.S. statecraft. Now that the United States has actually acted on the Bush preventive war strategy, other countries will have to include in their calculations the possibility that it may do so again.

For other major powers, the main threat to their security stems not from the risk that the United States will eventually pose a direct threat to attack their homelands, but that the U.S. policy of preventive war is likely to unleash violence that the United States cannot fully control and that poses an indirect threat to their security. As a result, even though the United States means them no harm, other major states must still contend with the spillover effects of U.S. unilateral uses of force. These indirect effects are especially pronounced for U.S. military adventures in the Middle East, which could stimulate a general rise in the level of global terrorism targeted at European and other major states. As the French foreign policy adviser Bruno Tertrais explains: "The implementation of the U.S. strategy [of preventive war] tends to favor, rather than reduce, the development of the principal threats to which it is addressed: terrorism and proliferation. . . . The Al Qaeda organization . . . has now reached the shores of Europe, as shown by the [terrorist attacks] in Turkey (De-

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United States (1941). See Randall L. Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 1992), pp. 235–269.

41. Britain did use force in anticipation of growing challenges to its empire. It attacked Afghanistan in 1850–55 and again in 1878–80, and it fought the Boer War in South Africa in 1899–1902. In these cases, the British acted in response to initial attacks by local, irregular forces that they feared would escalate if major powers assisted their efforts. Britain may well have faced serious preemptive incentives to destroy local resistance groups before major power patrons could arm them. These cases, however, do not qualify as preventive war in the classic sense because Britain was acting to stop the escalation of immediate, ongoing military threats, not to prevent a future threat. Once violence begins, an opponent can often mobilize still more military forces in the near term, but this is not the essence of preventive war.

42. The closest the world has come to a preventive war by a major democracy was Germany's initiation of World War I in 1914. Most observers at the time believed that Germany was on the road to developing real democratic institutions. Indeed, it was the act of starting a preventive war against Russia and France in 1914 that destroyed most British and American elites' faith that Germany would likely develop as a democracy at all. Ido Oren, "The Subjectivity of the 'Democratic' Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 147–184.

43. Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 225–317. Israel's 1981 air attack that destroyed Iraq's nuclear power plant is an instance of a preventive strike, but it had little, if any, risk of escalating into a larger war. See Ilan Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy, 1977–1983* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), pp. 185–190.

cember 2003) and Spain (March 2004). The campaign conducted by the United States has strengthened the Islamists' sense of being totally at war against the rest of the world."<sup>44</sup>

**RELATIVE GAINS.** Foreign suspicion of U.S. intentions is exacerbated by the politics of oil. Conquering Iraq puts the United States in a strategic position to control virtually all of the Persian Gulf's vast oil reserves, potentially increasing its power to manipulate supply for political and even military advantage against Europe and Asia. This power could be used broadly by withdrawing Persian Gulf oil from the world market, or selectively by imposing a strategic embargo on a specific major power rival.

The main effect of U.S. control over Persian Gulf oil is to create relative, as opposed to absolute, power advantages for the United States.<sup>45</sup> Iraq possesses the world's second-largest oil reserves, which could provide economic returns to the United States. These benefits are unlikely to dramatically increase America's relative power position, because the United States is already the world's sole superpower and most wealthy state. Assume the extreme: that Iraqi oil production immediately ramps up to pre-1990 levels of about 3 million barrels per day and that the United States seizes fully 100 percent of these oil revenues, leaving nothing for the Iraqi population or economy and ignoring the costs of occupation. Even under these circumstances, U.S. gains from Iraqi oil revenues would total about \$30 billion a year or about 1/3 of 1 percent of the United States' \$10 trillion gross national product in 2003. This amount would

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44. Bruno Tertrais, *War without End: A View from Abroad* (London: New Press, 2004), p. 85. Official French analyses agree. The first vice president of the Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris stated, "The war in Iraq did not reduce the terrorist threat, and in fact, has increased the risk of attacks in the United States and Europe by increasing the level of Islamist and anti-American rhetoric, by diverting the attention of political leaders from the central issue of the war on terrorism, and by encouraging the view among the public that the war on terrorism is nearly won." Judge Jean-Louis Bruguière, *Terrorism and the War in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Center on the United States and France, U.S.-France Analysis Series, May 2003), p. 1. Given that nearly 10 percent of France's population is Muslim and that Germany was used as a staging ground for al-Qaida's September 11 attacks, it is perhaps not surprising that these two European countries were especially concerned about the consequences of the Bush strategy.

45. Absolute gains refer to the profit a state makes on a transaction independently of how others gain or lose on the deal. Relative gains refer to one state's profit compared with the profits and losses of others. Although absolute gains among states encourage cooperation, differences in relative gains make some better off than others and often explain why cooperation breaks down. Relative gains are especially problematic in cooperation over major economic or military matters that influence the long-term balance of power among states. See Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 485-508; and Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (December 1991), pp. 1303-1320.

be important to specific U.S. oil companies and their investors, but it would not make a significant difference to the balance of power among the United States, Europe, Russia, China, and Japan.

Even the value of the Persian Gulf region as a whole would add only modestly to the absolute level of U.S. power. Assuming the same standard as above, U.S. control of the region would add only about 3 percent to U.S. GNP. Moreover, a monopoly by U.S. companies over Persian Gulf oil would allow them to buy oil cheaply—because Arab producers would have nowhere else to go—resulting in lower oil prices for the United States and its major power rivals, except for Russia.<sup>46</sup>

Rather, the main effect would be a relative gain for the United States. Total control of Persian Gulf oil would give the United States monopoly power over a crucial source of economic growth.<sup>47</sup> Other states could develop new sources of oil to substitute for Persian Gulf oil, although the likely decline in oil prices following U.S. control of the Persian Gulf would make new oil development uneconomical. Most important, however, U.S. monopolization of Persian Gulf oil would be the single most significant act that the United States could take to increase its relative power, save for taking control of European or Asian resources. During the Cold War, the United States feared that Soviet conquest of the Persian Gulf would offer new political leverage against Europe and Asia. Many argued that such fears were based on unsophisticated economics, but this did not stop U.S. leaders from balancing against the Soviet threat to oil.<sup>48</sup>

Although many Americans doubt that the United States would use this new power, in fact it already is. For months, it has been threatening to deny oil contracts to French, Russian, and other oil companies if their countries do not co-

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46. The losers would be Arab states, other developing-world oil producers, and Russia, which is the only industrial power that is also a net exporter of oil. The countries whose companies have the oil contracts would probably not derive long-term economic advantage from those countries as a whole. Although U.S. and British companies owned almost all of the oil contracts, which kept the price of oil low from 1945 to 1973, it did little harm to the Germans, French, or Japanese. There is no reason to think that, had these last three owned some shares, their economies would have grown faster and those of the United States and Britain slower.

47. The importance of Persian Gulf oil is not expected to change for decades. According to the Bush administration, "By 2020, Gulf oil producers are projected to supply between 54 and 67% of the world's oil. . . . By any estimation, Middle East oil producers will remain central to world oil security. The Gulf will be a primary focus of U.S. international energy policy." National Energy Policy Development Group, *National Energy Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Vice President, May 2001), chap. 8, pp. 4–5.

48. See Ray Dafter, "World Oil Production and Security of Supplies," *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Winter 1979/80), pp. 154–176; and Robert H. Johnson, "The Persian Gulf in U.S. Strategy: A Skeptical View," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Summer 1989), pp. 122–160.

operate with U.S. military plans for Iraq. More important, other states may not share the confidence the United States has of its own good intentions. If the United States retains unilateral control over Iraq's oil, this is almost certain to favor U.S. companies and add to U.S. power, which is likely to magnify suspicion of the United States' power and purpose. Relative gains over economic stakes have been a principal cause of major power competition in the past.<sup>49</sup> U.S. unilateral preventive wars against rogue states in the Persian Gulf could create the same incentives today.

GROWING NUCLEAR ADVANTAGES. Suspicion of U.S. intentions is also aggravated by the Bush administration's nuclear policies, especially its pursuit of an ambitious system of national missile defense. Although the administration views NMD as a reasonable effort to protect the U.S. homeland from the threat of ballistic missiles from rogue states, other major powers see it as a signal of U.S. malign intent.<sup>50</sup>

The Bush administration appears determined to field the first-ever operational system to intercept ballistic missiles heading for the United States. Following aborted negotiations with Russia, the administration officially abandoned the ABM treaty in June 2002, authorized more than \$17 billion to construct a ballistic missile defense system in Alaska in December 2002, and plans to have the initial system operational in the early years of the second administration. The plan calls for ten ground-based interceptors and accompanying radars based in Alaska and California in the first year of operation, ten more interceptors in Alaska in the second year, and more ambitious, multilayer defenses after this point.<sup>51</sup>

Whether this system will effectively counter ballistic missiles from rogue states is difficult to assess, in part because no rogue state has yet tested an operational missile capable of hitting the United States. Concern over the poten-

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49. For evidence that concerns about relative gains impede cooperation among major powers, see Joseph M. Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Michael Mastanduno, "Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 73–113; and John C. Matthews III, "Current Gains and Future Outcomes: When Cumulative Relative Gains Matter," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 112–146.

50. On the consequences of U.S. national missile defense for other major powers, see Glaser and Fetter, "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy"; Dean A. Wilkening, *Ballistic Missile Defense and Strategic Stability*, Adelphi Paper 334 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2000); James M. Lindsay and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Defending America: The Case for Limited National Missile Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2001); and Victor A. Utgoff, *Missile Defense and American Ambitions* (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analysis, December 2001).

51. Eric Schmitt, "Antimissile System, in a Limited Form, Is Ordered by Bush," *New York Times*, December 18, 2002.

tial negative international consequences among the major powers, however, is already apparent. Most NATO members, including Great Britain, Germany, and France, have been consistently opposed to U.S. NMD.<sup>52</sup> Russia and China have gone further, explicitly stating their fears that it threatens their strategic nuclear capabilities. Although the United States has repeatedly declared that NMD is aimed only at North Korea and other rogue states, one Chinese government official stated, "That doesn't matter. The consequences are still terrible for us."<sup>53</sup> The U.S. claim that it needs missile defense to protect itself from rogue states is, according to one Russian general, "an argument for the naive or the stupid. . . . This system will be directed against Russia and against China."<sup>54</sup> In July 2000 China and Russia issued a joint statement declaring that U.S. NMD would have "the most grave adverse consequences not only for the security of Russia, China and other countries, but also for the security of the United States."<sup>55</sup>

Why is the prospect of U.S. ballistic missile defenses increasing the perception of insecurity among the world's major powers? In the nuclear age, the security of major powers depends on maintaining credible nuclear retaliatory capabilities. Even after the end of the Cold War, the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China continue to believe that their security requires nuclear forces that can respond to a nuclear attack on their homelands. On any given day, the United States and Russia have some 6,000 strategic nuclear warheads deployed in a fashion that could retaliate in short order against a nuclear strike from any state in the world; Great Britain has several hundred and China several dozen.

The development of U.S. NMD is creating a classic security dilemma between the United States and other major powers, especially with Russia and China. As the United States gains the capability to intercept missiles from rogue states, its efforts are increasing fears that this limited system will expand to allow it to achieve nuclear superiority. The problem is not that the United States will actually gain nuclear superiority in the near term—the inevitable

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52. See Stephen Cambone, *European Views of National Missile Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council of the United States, September 2000); and *Foreign Affairs—Eighth Report*, House of Commons, United Kingdom, November 2000, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmfaaff/407/40702.htm>.

53. Quoted in Eric Eckholm, "What America Calls a Defense China Calls an Offense," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000.

54. Quoted in Martin Nesirky, "Interview—Russian General Slams U.S. on Missile Plan," Reuters, February 14, 2000.

55. Quoted in Ted Plafker, "China Joins Russia in Warning U.S. on Shield," *Washington Post*, July 14, 2000.

technical difficulties with a new, sophisticated military system mitigate such immediate fears. Rather, it is that U.S. efforts will continue to expand, enabling Washington to pursue meaningful nuclear advantages in the long term.

The United States' ambitious pursuit of NMD is giving major powers reason to doubt its intentions. U.S. nuclear retaliatory capabilities are already stronger than those of any other state; thus nuclear deterrence already provides robust security against deliberate missile attack. Moreover, the September 11 terrorist attacks demonstrated that rogue states would probably find covert attack more reliable than low-quality ballistic missiles as a means to deliver a nuclear weapon against the United States. Further, the technological infrastructure—sophisticated radars and command and control networks—for a limited ballistic missile defense system against a small number of missiles from rogue states has the operational capacity to expand the system to counter a larger number of missiles from major powers. Accordingly, major powers have a basis to fear that U.S. NMD could evolve into a serious effort to acquire meaningful nuclear superiority, an effort that would make sense only if the United States had expansionist rather than status quo aims.<sup>56</sup>

The central problem is the dual purpose inherent in the technological infrastructure for ballistic missile defense, especially in the radars. During the 1990s, ballistic missile defense became more technologically feasible in part because of a dramatic improvement in the discrimination capacity of cutting-edge radars, such as the X-band radar capable of identifying, tracking, and differentiating thousands of individual targets with perhaps a sufficiently high resolution to overcome decoys and other countermeasures. Although the initial missile defense system will have a fairly small number of interceptors, the core of the system will include one special high-resolution radar in Alaska; fifteen upgraded and new radars in the United States, Greenland, South Korea, and the United Kingdom; and a new generation of ballistic missile detection satellites. Once this technological infrastructure is in place, major powers will have to consider the possibility that the United States could rapidly increase the capability of the system by adding more interceptors or other upgrades.<sup>57</sup>

China's small nuclear arsenal would be the most vulnerable to this new sys-

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56. An extremely limited NMD system, especially if confined to boost-phase intercept, would not create severe security dilemmas with Russia and China. See Glaser and Fetter, "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy."

57. Union of Concerned Scientists and MIT Security Studies Program, *Countermeasures: A Technical Evaluation of the Operational Effectiveness of the Planned U.S. National Missile Defense System* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000); and Edward O. Rios, "A Credible National Missile Defense: Do-able NMD," *Breakthroughs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 9–18.

tem. With only twenty single-warhead nuclear missiles capable of hitting the United States, Chinese leaders undoubtedly know that these strategic forces are vulnerable to a U.S. surprise attack. Today, even a highly successful U.S. attack that destroyed fifteen Chinese strategic nuclear missiles would still leave five nuclear warheads capable of retaliation. If, however, the United States builds a missile defense system to counter five or more ballistic missiles from a rogue state such as North Korea, leaders in Beijing are likely to fear that it is developing the capability to defeat Chinese retaliation as well.

Russia's nuclear arsenal would not be vulnerable to initial U.S. missile defenses, but the Bush administration's more ambitious plans could eventually create problems. Today, even the most effective U.S. strike that experts can imagine would still leave Russia with about 150 strategic nuclear warheads, more than enough to wreak unacceptable retaliation to deter a first strike. A missile defense designed to intercept five or so warheads from an Asian country is not likely to challenge Russia's nuclear deterrent. The Bush administration is interested in a more ambitious system, however, one that could destroy ballistic missiles from multiple rogue states and perhaps even "accidental" launches from Russia itself. Given these facts, it would be surprising if Russian security analysts did not believe that the administration's plan for a limited NMD would provide the United States with the infrastructure and experience to field a larger and more advanced system that could erode Russia's retaliatory capabilities.<sup>58</sup>

#### U.S. UNILATERALISM AND THE GLOBAL RESPONSE

The international image of the United States as a benign superpower is declining, particularly with regard to the aspects that are likely to erode its relative immunity to balance of power dynamics. Without the perception of benign intent, a unipolar leader's intervention in regions beyond its own, especially those with substantial economic value, is likely to produce incentives among the world's other major powers to balance against it. That the United States does not pose an imminent threat to attack any major power is not sufficient to prevent these incentives, because the main danger for second-ranked states is that the United States would pose an indirect threat or evolve from a unipolar leader into an unrestrained global hegemon. In a unipolar world, the response to an expansionist unipolar leader is likely to be global balancing.

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58. Igor Ivanov, "The Missile-Defense Mistake: Undermining Strategic Stability and the ABM Treaty," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 5 (September/October 2000), pp. 15–20.

## *The Strategy of Soft Balancing*

Balancing is about equalizing the odds in a contest between the strong and the weak. States balance when they take action intended to make it hard for strong states to use their military advantage against others. The goal can be to deter a strong state from attacking or to reduce its prospects of victory in war. Traditional hard balancing seeks to change the military balance in an actual or (more often) potential conflict by contributing military capabilities to the weaker side through measures such as a military buildup, war-fighting alliance, or transfer of military technology to an ally.

### HOW SOFT BALANCING WORKS

States can also seek to equalize the odds through soft balancing. Balancing can involve the utilization of tools to make a superior state's military forces harder to use without directly confronting that state's power with one's own forces. Although soft balancing relies on nonmilitary tools, it aims to have a real, if indirect, effect on the military prospects of a superior state. Mechanisms of soft balancing include territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition. All of these steps can weaken the military power that the superior state can bring to bear in battle.<sup>59</sup>

**TERRITORIAL DENIAL.** Superior states often benefit from access to the territory of third parties as staging areas for ground forces or as transit for air and naval forces. Denying access to this territory can reduce the superior state's prospects for victory, such as by increasing the logistical problems for the superior state or compelling it to fight with air or sea power alone, constraints that effectively reduce the overall force that a stronger state can bring to bear against a weaker one.

**ENTANGLING DIPLOMACY.** Even strong states do not have complete freedom to ignore either the rules and procedures of important international organizations or accepted diplomatic practices without losing substantial support for their objectives. Accordingly, states may use international institutions and ad hoc diplomatic maneuvers to delay a superior state's plan for war and so reduce the element of surprise and give the weaker side more time to prepare; delay may even make the issue irrelevant. Especially if the superior state is

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59. Thus, soft balancing differs from everyday international diplomacy, which often seeks to resolve disputes through compromise rather than through changes in the balance of power or the use of policies that limit a strong state's military power.

also a democracy, entangling diplomacy works not only by affecting the balance of military capabilities that can be brought to bear in the dispute but also by strengthening domestic opposition to possible adventures within the superior state.

**ECONOMIC STRENGTHENING.** Militarily strong, threatening states that are the targets of balancing efforts usually derive their military superiority from possession of great economic strength. One way of balancing effectively, at least in the long run, would be to shift relative economic power in favor of the weaker side. The most obvious way of doing this is through regional trading blocs that increase trade and economic growth for members while directing trade away from nonmembers. If the superior state can be excluded from the most important such blocs, its overall trade and growth rates may suffer over time.

**SIGNALS OF RESOLVE TO BALANCE.** Second-ranked powers seeking to act collectively against a sole superpower confront intense concern that the needed collective action will not materialize. Soft balancing, in addition to its direct usefulness in restraining aggression by a unipolar leader, may also address this problem by helping to coordinate expectations of mutual balancing behavior. If multiple states can cooperate, repeatedly, in some of the types of measures listed above, they may gradually increase their trust in each other's willingness to cooperate against the unipolar leader's ambitions. Thus, a core purpose of soft balancing is not to coerce or even to impede the superior state's current actions, but to demonstrate resolve in a manner that signals a commitment to resist the superpower's future ambitions. Accordingly, the measure of success for soft balancing is not limited to whether the sole superpower abandons specific policies, but also includes whether more states join a soft-balancing coalition against the unipolar leader.

#### HISTORICAL PRECURSORS IN MULTIPOLAR SYSTEMS

Soft balancing is most conducive to the politics of unipolar systems, but examples of it can be found in history. Today, the U.S. strategy of containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War is thought of as a military strategy, but this is not how it started out. The crucial first step was the Marshall Plan, a massive program of U.S. economic aid to rebuild the shattered industries, agricultural areas, and cities of Europe and Japan in the aftermath of World War II. This economic instrument helped desperate states resist the temptations of communist doctrines of class struggle and revolution; it also integrated Western Europe and Japan into a North Atlantic trading network. Although the Marshall Plan did not create military forces or commit states to use force against the Soviet Union, it was the crucial long-term bond that ensured that the world's key

industrial centers would be in the Western camp and that the Soviet Union would remain permanently inferior to it.<sup>60</sup>

A second example is Bismarckian Germany. After Germany's victory in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, France remained Bismarck's immediate problem, both because it retained the most latent power of any state on the continent and because it might have tried to avenge its loss. A comprehensive German-led alliance against the French, however, was not possible. Austria, Russia, and Britain were worried about France, but they were also worried about a newly unified Germany, and so could be tempted into an alliance with Paris. Bismarck's solution was to set up a series of cross-cutting alliances and contradictory international commitments that, at its peak, included half of Europe but excluded France. This system was largely useless in case of war, but that was not the point. As Josef Joffe has written, "Bismarck did not construct his system in order to aggregate power but to devalue it—balancing and stalemating à la Britain, but in totally un-British ways."<sup>61</sup> In other words, this new web of international cooperation isolated and balanced against a potentially superior power not through addition (amassing military forces in opposition) but through dilution (removing capabilities available to the opponent) and without confronting the power of the opponent directly.

#### THE START OF SOFT BALANCING AGAINST THE UNITED STATES

Soft balancing is replacing traditional hard balancing as the principal reaction of major powers to the Bush administration's preventive war doctrine. Until now, there has been no concept for this form of balancing behavior, and so it has been difficult to detect that the early stages of soft balancing against U.S. power have already started.

On August 26, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney called for the United States to launch a preventive war to depose Saddam Hussein. In September the United States issued its new strategy, asserting the right to wage preventive war against rogue states. Shortly thereafter, European, Middle Eastern, and Asian powers undertook a series of steps to contain U.S. military power using soft-balancing instruments.

First, France, Sweden, and other European states used institutional rules and procedures in the UN to delay, if not head off completely, U.S. preventive

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60. On the geopolitical significance of the Marshall Plan, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 30–31.

61. Josef Joffe, "Bismarck' or 'Britain'? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), p. 107.

war against Iraq. In the past, the United States has often been able to legitimate foreign and military policies by gaining the approval of the UN Security Council. In September 2002 it sought to gain such sanction for war against Iraq. France, however, threatened to veto the resolution authorizing war—which would have been the first time a U.S. resolution had ever been vetoed in the Security Council—unless two conditions were met: (1) the Bush administration would have to accept a serious effort to resolve matters with Iraq through weapons inspections; and (2) it would need to wait for a resolution authorizing war until after the inspections were completed. The administration agreed, even though this meant delaying its plan for war. In March 2003 the UN's chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, and the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, declared that the inspections had made substantial progress but would take months longer to complete—a judgment that effectively prevented the United States from gaining the votes necessary for a Security Council resolution in support of the war.

Second, Turkey and Saudi Arabia firmly denied the United States the use of their territory for ground forces and have been ambiguous about providing basing rights for logistic efforts and airpower. Turkey is the most important case because Bush administration officials made repeated efforts to gain its cooperation. In January 2003 the administration asked Turkey to allow the deployment of between 60,000 to 90,000 U.S. ground troops who then would cross Turkish territory into Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. Ankara balked. "The government has indicated its preparedness to meet American requests basically in all areas with the exception of the stationing of a large number of ground forces in Turkey," a Turkish official said. Turkey was strategically important to a low-cost, high-confidence strategy for defeating Iraq. The United States hoped to invade Iraq from Turkey in the north and Kuwait in the south, and so attack Saddam Hussein's overstretched military forces from different directions and quickly overwhelm them. Although U.S. officials expected that they could conduct a successful attack to conquer Iraq even without access to land bases in Turkey, they granted that such a war would be, as one ranking official put it, "harder and uglier." U.S. ships with an infantry division waited off the coast of Turkey for weeks, but the Turkish government remained firm.<sup>62</sup>

Third, China and South Korea are attempting to elevate their role in diplomatic negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program, making it more

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62. Philip Stephens, "A Deadline for War Looms as Allied Enthusiasm Fades," *Financial Times*, January 10, 2003; and Michael R. Gordon, "Turkey's Reluctance on Use of Bases Worries U.S.," *New York Times*, January 9, 2003.

difficult for the United States to use force. In October 2002 North Korea admitted to having an ongoing nuclear weapons program, declaring that in response to the growing U.S. threat to its country from the Bush doctrine of preventive war, it would accelerate its efforts to build nuclear weapons. The North Korean leadership offered to halt the nuclear program if the United States would sign a nonaggression treaty agreeing not to attack their country. While the United States has refused to make this pledge, South Korea has sided with North Korea, asking the United States to sign a nonaggression treaty in return for Pyongyang's agreement to abandon nuclear development and meeting with Japanese and Russian officials to gain their support for this position. December 2002 Gallup polls show that more South Koreans had a positive view of North Korea than of the United States. Of those surveyed, 47 percent felt positively about North Korea, while 37 percent held an unfavorable view. Only 37 percent had a positive view of the United States, while 53 percent viewed it unfavorably. This represented a significant change from 1994 when 64 percent of South Koreans surveyed said they liked the United States and only 15 percent disliked it. Also in December 2002 South Korea elected a new president, Roh Moo Hyun, who advocates continuation of the sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea and who, after the election, met with military officials and instructed them to draw up plans that assume a reduction in U.S. forces stationed there. "The U.S. military presence must be adjusted," says Kim Sang-woo, a foreign policy adviser to Roh.<sup>63</sup>

None of these moves directly challenges U.S. military power, but they all make it more difficult for the United States to exercise that power. They impose immediate costs and constraints on the application of U.S. power by entangling the United States in diplomatic maneuvers, reducing the pressure on regional states to cooperate with its military plans, and bolstering the claims of target states that U.S. military threats justify the acceleration of their own military programs. They also establish a new pattern of diplomatic activity: cooperation among major powers that excludes the United States.

If the United States remains committed to its unilateral military policies, such soft-balancing measures are likely to become more common. Balancing against a sole superpower such as the United States will have a logic of its

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63. Peter S. Goodman, "Anti-U.S. Sentiment Deepens in S. Korea," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2003; David J. Lynch, "Many S. Koreans Pin Blame on U.S., Not North," *USA Today*, January 6, 2003; John Burton, "Seoul May Seek U.S. Pledge on N. Korea," *Financial Times*, January 4, 2003; and John Burton, "Fears Grow over Widening Rift between Seoul and U.S.," *Financial Times*, January 13, 2003.

own, one perhaps not wholly unique, but one that is nonetheless distinctive to the condition of unipolarity.<sup>64</sup>

#### WHY SOFT BALANCING MATTERS

Soft balancing may not stop the United States from conquering a rogue state or from pursuing a vigorous nuclear buildup, but it can have significant long-term consequences for U.S. security. In the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, soft balancing had already encouraged millions of Europeans and hundreds of thousands of Americans to protest the impending war. Such protests can have important consequences for governments that support U.S. policy—or refuse to. In recent elections, German, Turkish, and even South Korean political leaders have already learned that anti-Americanism pays. Indeed, vigorous opposition to the Bush doctrine of preventive war in September 2002 was likely the pivotal factor enabling German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to recover from a position of almost certain defeat to win a new term. Even if the leaders of Britain and other members of the “coalition of the willing” against Iraq can avoid domestic backlash, few are likely to be willing to cooperate with future U.S. military adventures.

Soft balancing can also impose real military costs. The United States may be the sole superpower, but it is geographically isolated. To project power in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, it depends greatly on basing rights granted by local allies. Indeed, all U.S. victories since 1990—Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan—relied on the use of short-legged tactical air and ground forces based in the territory of U.S. allies in the region. Without regional allies, the United States might still be able to act unilaterally, but it would have to take higher risks in blood and treasure to do so.<sup>65</sup> Turkey’s refusal to allow U.S. ground forces on its soil reduced the amount of heavy ground power available against Iraq by one-third, thus compelling the United States to significantly alter its preferred battle plan, increasing the risk of U.S. casualties in the con-

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64. Certain actions, such as French withdrawal from operations to enforce the no-fly zones after the U.S. Desert Fox bombing campaign in December 1998, can be viewed as antecedents to the soft balancing witnessed today. The main differences are (1) merely withdrawing support for an action is not equivalent to actively seeking to stall or prevent the leading state’s use of power; and (2) action by just one state is unlikely to constitute notable balancing in a unipolar system.

65. In general, regional military bases serve as force multipliers, reducing the requirements for naval ships (at the distance between the United States and Asia, by more than two-thirds), lowering the costs of air transport operations (by about half in this case), and most important, making it possible to use heavy ground forces and tactical air forces (on the Korean Peninsula and in other Asian contingencies). Michael C. Desch, “Bases for the Future: U.S. Military Interests in the Post-Cold War Third World,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter 1992), pp. 201–224.

quest of Iraq, and leaving fewer forces to establish stability in the country after the war.

Soft balancers may also become more ambitious. As the U.S. occupation of Iraq continues, France, Germany, Russia, and China could press hard for the UN rather than the United States to oversee the administration of oil contracts in Iraq, perhaps even working with the new Iraqi government for this purpose. Even if they did not succeed, U.S. freedom of action in Iraq and elsewhere in the region would decline. If the United States gave in, it would lose control over which companies ultimately obtain contracts for Iraq's oil, and so pay a higher price for any continued presence in the region.

Further, Europeans and others may take steps that start to shift the balance of economic power against the United States. Today Europeans buy their oil in dollars, a practice that benefits the United States by creating extra demand for dollars as the world's reserve currency. This extra demand allows the United States to run outsized trade and government budget deficits at lower inflation and interest rates than would otherwise be the case. A coordinated decision by other countries to buy oil in euros would transfer much of this benefit to Europe and decrease the United States' gross national product, possibly by as much as 1 percent, more or less permanently.<sup>66</sup>

Most important, soft balancing could eventually evolve into hard balancing. Now that the United States has conquered Iraq, major powers are likely to become quite concerned about U.S. intentions toward Iran, North Korea, and possibly Saudi Arabia. Unilateral U.S. military action against any of these states could become another focal point around which major powers' expectations of U.S. intentions could again converge. If so, then soft balancing could establish the basis for actual hard balancing against the United States.

Perhaps the most likely step toward hard balancing would be for major states to encourage and support transfers of military technology to U.S. opponents. Russia is already providing civilian nuclear technology to Iran, a state that U.S. intelligence believes is pursuing nuclear weapons. Such support is

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66. Ideas for more intense soft balancing have been articulated by Chinese academics. Zhiyuan Cui, a professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, writes that "China is naturally . . . sensitive about American aggressive unilateralism" and identifies numerous "Chinese counterbalancing efforts to set against the unipolar power of the United States . . . using China's power in the UN Security Council to seek peaceful resolutions . . . supporting the euro by diversifying China's foreign currency holding . . . developing trade and security cooperation with Russia. . . . Indeed, the increasing cooperation between China and the EU may be the most important response to the Bush Doctrine on the part of both China and the EU." Zhiyuan Cui, "The Bush Doctrine: A Chinese Perspective," in David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, eds., *American Power in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), pp. 241–251.

likely to continue, and major powers may facilitate this by blocking U.S. steps to put pressure on Moscow. For instance, if the United States attempts to make economic threats against Russia, European countries might open their doors to Russia wider. If they did, this would involve multiple major powers cooperating for the first time to transfer military technology to an opponent of the United States. Collective hard balancing would thus have truly begun.

Traditional realists may be tempted to dismiss soft balancing as ineffective. They should not. In the long run, soft balancing could also shift relative power between major powers and the United States and lay the groundwork to enable hard balancing if the major powers come to believe this is necessary.

### *Preventing Soft Balancing in the Future*

The Bush strategy of preventive war against rogue states and aggressive unilateral military policies in general are increasing the incentives for major powers to balance against the United States. Since 2002, scholars, journalists, and diplomats have witnessed the result: a profound change in the world's response to American power. They have seen not simply the reluctance of traditional allies to join the U.S. war effort against Iraq, but active efforts by many of the world's major powers to delay, frustrate, and undermine U.S. war plans and reduce the number of countries that would fight alongside the United States.

Although some observers might have thought that major powers would easily mend fences with the United States after the conquest of Iraq, in fact there are signs of growing soft balancing against it. Perhaps the most important indicator concerns U.S. allies. Key countries that sided with the United States during the war are working with France and Germany in a manner that works against further U.S. military adventures. Following the March 2004 election, Spain's newly elected prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, declared, "I want Europe to see us again as pro-European. The war in Iraq has been a disaster and the occupation continues to be a great disaster. Spain is going to see eye to eye with Europe again. Spain is going to be more pro-Europe than ever."<sup>67</sup> In September 2003 the United Kingdom joined France and Germany in an effort independent of the United States to use diplomacy and economic statecraft to persuade Iran to limit its nuclear ambitions. In February 2005 these European efforts compelled the Bush administration to declare that it

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67. Quoted in Elaine Sciolino, "Spain Will Loosen Its Alliance with U.S., Premier-Elect Says," *New York Times*, March 16, 2004.

would not use force against Iran “at this point in time” and to support a multi-lateral approach to the issue, at least temporarily.<sup>68</sup>

Such widespread opposition is virtually unprecedented in U.S. history, especially by European and other major powers allied with the United States since World War II. The world is pushing back in response to the Bush administration’s strategy of aggressive unilateralism. For the first time, the United States has adopted a national strategy to conquer countries that are not attacking it or its allies, at a time of its choosing, whether other states agree with U.S. policies or not. That Iraq and most other announced possible targets of this preventive war strategy are important to the control of Persian Gulf oil only makes matters worse. That the Bush strategy simultaneously calls for other aggressive unilateral military policies that will increase U.S. nuclear advantages over major powers indicates the administration’s lack of concern about a backlash from these states.

Serious opposition to U.S. military policies is only likely to increase if the United States continues along its present course of aggressive unilateralism. Traditional hard balancing—military buildups, war-fighting alliances, and transfers of military technology to U.S. opponents—may not occur soon in today’s world, dominated as it is by the United States’ overwhelming military power. But states can dilute the U.S. advantage and contain the United States’ power in other ways. Even without directly confronting U.S. military might, major powers can use soft balancing tools—international institutions, economic statecraft, and ad hoc diplomatic arrangements—to limit the use of U.S. power in the short term and establish the crucial conditions for more ambitious balancing efforts in the long term.

Without broad international support, the Bush strategy for stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction to rogue states using preventive war and aggressive nuclear policies does not serve U.S. national security interests. Keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of authoritarian regimes is important, but even the world’s only superpower cannot afford to provoke—and, more significantly, to frighten—a majority of the major powers at once. Immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States’ NATO allies unanimously declared that the attacks were an act of aggression, and they offered to assist in joint defense. Indeed, many nations—including Germany and France—have military forces still serving in Afghanistan. But, unless the United States radically changes its avowed national security strategy, it risks

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68. “Timeline: U.S.-Iran Ties,” *BBC News*, March 12, 2005.

creating a world in which a broad, if loose, coalition of major powers (including most of its nominal allies) is more motivated to constrain the United States than to cooperate with it.

U.S. national security policy should rest on a calculation of costs and benefits about how to best defend the country and its citizens. The unilateral use of force may, on rare occasions, be the only way to prevent imminent harm to the United States, and so the benefits of an isolated use of unilateral force may overwhelm the costs of international opposition to it. A systematic U.S. policy of resolving numerous potential threats through the routine use of preventive war, however, is likely to pose far greater risks to U.S. security than it would solve. Smart unilateralism is often multilateral—especially when confronted with a spectrum of future dangers.

Soft balancing against the United States has begun, but balancing against a sole superpower is not destiny. At bottom, the world's major powers are reacting to concerns over U.S. intentions, not U.S. capabilities. Accordingly, the United States should mend fences; but after Iraq, it will take more than cheap talk to overcome the damage the Bush strategy of aggressive unilateralism is doing to America's reputation for benign intent. If the Bush administration repudiates preventive war as the centerpiece of U.S. national security strategy, vigorously participates in multilateral solutions to important international security issues such as Iran's nuclear program, strengthens international institutions by supporting the inclusion of Germany and other major powers as permanent members of the UN Security Council, and surrenders unilateral control over Iraq's oil contracts to a broader consortium of international companies, these would be meaningful steps to regain the United States' image as a benevolent superpower.