

# 4

## Keeping the World "Off-Balance": Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy

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**W**hat a difference a decade makes. The United States spent the 1980s fretting about its imminent decline, only to awake and discover that it was on top of the world. Both Trotsky and Team B turned out to be 180 degrees off, and it was the Soviet Union rather than the capitalist West that ended up on the ash-heap of history. Alarmist fears about an emerging Japanese superpower turned out to be equally misguided, and the "Japan That Could Say No" (to take the title of a best-selling tract by Shintaro Ishihara) became the "Japan That Said 'Uncle'" at century's end. Instead of becoming the "ordinary country" that some anticipated, facing a world "after hegemony," the United States found itself in a position of preponderance unseen since the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prominent examples of "declinist" thinking include Richard Rosecrance, ed., *America as an Ordinary Country* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979); and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). A belief that U.S. power was declining is also implicit in Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). Prominent dissenting views include Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). Samuel P. Huntington warned of Japanese ascendance in "Why International Primacy Matters," *International*

Just how good is the U.S. position? In 2001, the U.S. economy accounted for roughly one quarter of gross world product and was roughly 40 percent larger than its nearest competitor (Japan). The United States enjoyed robust growth for a decade while Japan has been mired in depression and ran up sizeable budget surpluses for the first time in several decades.<sup>2</sup> The United States now spends as much on defense as the next nine countries combined, and because six of the nine are close U.S. allies, this figure actually understates the U.S. advantage.<sup>3</sup> The United States is the world leader in higher education and advanced technologies, and especially the information technologies and service industries on which future productivity is likely to depend.<sup>4</sup> American society is also unusually open to immigration, new ideas, and new business practices, which makes it more adept at adapting to new conditions. America's situation is not perfect—as the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon demonstrated all too vividly—but one could hardly ask for much more.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, most Americans regard this position of primacy as undiluted good news. The bad news, such as it is, however, is that these developments left us intellectually ill-prepared for these new circumstances. It is one thing to exercise leadership when one's principal allies face the same overarching threat and have a strong interest in U.S. protection. It is quite another thing to be the dominant power when the only serious threat is a shadowy transnational terrorist network. Not surprisingly, the past decade has produced a lively debate on U.S. grand strategy, with different authors offering sharply contrasting advice on how the United States should respond to its position as the sole remaining superpower.<sup>6</sup>

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*Security* 17, no. 4 (spring 1993): 68–83. Japanese dominance is forecast in Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1985); and proclaimed in Shintaro Ishihara, *The Japan That Can Say No* (New York: Harper and Row, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> These favorable conditions are now changing: U.S. economic growth slowed dramatically in 2000–2001 and together with the tax cut voted in the spring of 2001, is likely to bring the U.S. federal budget back into deficit in the near future. But neither development threatens the U.S. position as the dominant world power.

<sup>3</sup> Based on data from *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies/Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph S. Nye and William A. Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 2 (March/April 1996): 20; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Technology Policy, *The New Innovators: Global Patenting Trends in Five Sectors* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Technology Policy, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> A good summary of the material bases of U.S. preponderance is found in William F. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (summer 1999): 5–41. On the adaptability of American society, see Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), chap. 15.

<sup>6</sup> A good survey of recent writings on U.S. grand strategy is Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (winter 1996–97): 5–53. Prominent examples in this genre include William Kristol and Robert

This chapter examines an important part of this puzzle, focusing on whether U.S. preponderance is likely to trigger a defensive backlash by other states. For most of its history, U.S. leaders did not have to worry very much about the possibility that other strong states might combine against them. Until the 1890s, the United States was too weak and geographically isolated to provoke widespread opposition, and U.S. leaders were free to concentrate on consolidating the U.S. position in the Western hemisphere. Even after it joined the ranks of the great powers, the United States generally avoided military commitments abroad unless there was an imminent threat to the global balance of power. Instead, the United States let other states bear the costs of keeping each other in check and got directly involved—as in 1917 and 1941—only when one state seemed about to establish a hegemonic position in Europe or Asia.<sup>7</sup> When it became clear that the European powers and Japan were too weak to uphold the balance of power after World War II, however, the United States did establish an extensive array of alliance commitments and began to maintain a large military presence overseas. Although there were occasional tensions with the U.S. alliance system, the major powers of Europe and Asia generally welcomed the commitment of U.S. power and were willing to defer to U.S. leadership.

According to some prominent theories of international politics, the situation now should be quite different. The United States is far and away the most powerful state on the planet, and no other state presently threatens to dominate either Europe or Asia. Because unbalanced power is an asset to its possessor but a potential danger to others, Americans now face the novel prospect that other major powers might concentrate on balancing *them*. At the very least, other states may be more inclined to resist U.S. leadership and look for ways to circumscribe Washington's freedom of action, simply to make sure that the United States does not impose its own preferences too enthusiastically. For the time being, therefore, the ability to formulate an effective foreign policy is likely to depend on whether other states show a strong tendency to balance the United States, and on whether U.S. leaders can devise ways to minimize these tendencies if and when they emerge.

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Richard N. Haass, "Foreign Policy in the Age of Primacy," *Brookings Review* 18, no. 4 (fall 2000): 2-7; Robert J. Art, *Selective Engagement: America's Grand Strategy and World Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); Nye, *Bound to Lead*; Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (summer 1997): 86-124; and Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: A Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (spring 1997): 5-48.

<sup>7</sup> See John J. Mearsheimer, "The Future of America's Continental Commitment," in *No End to Alliance: The United States and Western Europe. Past, Present and Future*, ed. Geir Lundestad (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); and idem, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 6.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. Part I examines why states tend to balance against other states and argues that structural theory cannot explain why efforts to balance U.S. power have been remarkably weak since the end of the Cold War. Part II consider several alternative explanations for the absence of any serious attempt to balance U.S. power and argues that balance-of-threat theory provides the best explanation for the surprising dearth of balancing behavior. Part III lays out a set of prescriptions based on these theoretical insights, emphasizing in particular the need for a policy of self-restraint, and identifies several areas where the United States may be departing from these precepts. The conclusion offers several caveats to these recommendations and identifies issues that merit further investigation.

### Why Do States Balance?

When considering why other states might join forces against the United States, an obvious place to begin is structural (i.e., "neorealist") balance-of-power theory.<sup>8</sup> According to structural theory, the condition of international anarchy gives states a powerful aversion to unbalanced power. Because weaker states cannot be sure that stronger states will not use their superior capabilities in ways that the weak will find unpleasant, they look for ways to limit the freedom of action of the strong. When the dangers that strong states pose seem especially clear and imminent, weaker states are likely to increase their own military capabilities, form defensive alliances, develop common military plans with their partners, or even initiate war in an attempt to shift the balance of power in their favor.<sup>9</sup>

Balance-of-power theory focuses on the distribution of material capabilities, such as population, economic wealth, natural resources, military forces, etc. It predicts that states will balance against the *strongest* state, defined as the state with the largest accumulation of material sources. The theory therefore implies that existing U.S. alliances will become more delicate, less cohesive, and harder to lead now that the Soviet Union is gone and the United States is overwhelmingly stronger than any other country.

<sup>8</sup> The *locus classicus* here is Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). See also Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), and Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> As Kenneth Waltz recently put it, "As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power. Faced with unbalanced power, some states try to increase their own strength or they ally with others to bring the international distribution of power into balance." See his "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1

The theory also predicts that other major powers will be looking for ways to limit the unilateral exercise of U.S. power. At a minimum, they will be more reluctant to help the United States pursue its foreign policy objectives; at a maximum, they will join forces to constrain Washington's freedom of action.

Is there any evidence of these tendencies? Yes. Both European and American officials have warned that NATO can no longer be taken for granted and signs of tension within the alliance are increasingly apparent.<sup>10</sup> French foreign minister Hubert Védrine has repeatedly complained about America's position as a "hyperpower" and once declared that "the entire foreign policy of France . . . is aimed at making the world of tomorrow composed of several poles, not just one." German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has offered a similar warning, declaring that the danger of "unilateralism" by the United States is "undeniable."<sup>11</sup> The recurring disputes of the past ten years and growing doubts about the U.S. commitment have led NATO's European members to commit themselves to building an independent European defense force for the first time since World War II, despite predictable misgivings on this side of the Atlantic. This initiative has been accompanied by European calls for an EU seat on the United Nations Security Council, a proposal endorsed by Javier Solana, former Secretary-General of NATO and the new European high representative for foreign affairs. Taken together, these developments herald a weakening of transatlantic ties and the emergence of a more forceful European voice in foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, China and Russia have responded to U.S. preponder-

<sup>10</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, "The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America Are Drifting Apart," *The National Interest* 54 (spring 1998-99) 3-11; Peter W. Rodman, *Drifting Apart? Trends in U.S.-European Relations* (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 1999); and Jeffrey Gedmin, "Continental Drift: A Europe United in Spirit against the United States," *The New Republic*, June 28, 1999, 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Craig R. Whitney, "NATO at 50: With Nations at Odds, Is It a Misalliance?" *New York Times*, February 15, 1999, A7. Or as a French academic recently put it: "[The United States] does what it wants. Through NATO it directs European affairs. Before we could say we were on America's side. Not now. There is no counterbalance." Michel Winock, quoted in "More Vehemently Than Ever: Europeans Are Scorning the United States," *New York Times*, April 9, 2000, A1, A8. For a fuller appreciation of Védrine's views, see Hubert Védrine with Dominique Moisi, *France in an Age of Globalization*, trans. Philip Gordon (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See Anne Swardson, "EU to Form European Military Force," *Washington Post*, December 12, 1999, A41; Peter Norman, "EU Edges Closer to Defense Policy," *Financial Times*, February 12, 2000, 5; Stephen Castle, "European Union Seeks Seat on Security Council," *The Independent*, November 18, 1999, 17. For background and analysis, see Francois Heisbourg, "Europe's Strategic Ambitions: The Limits of Ambiguity," Charles C. Kupchan, "In Defence of European Defence: An American Perspective," Jolyon Haworth, "Britain, France and the European Defence Initiative," and Guillaume Parmentier, "Redressing NATO's Imbalances," *Survival*, 42, no. 2 (summer 2000): 7-22, 11-2.

ance by seeking to resolve existing points of friction and increasing other forms of security cooperation, an effort that culminated in the signing of a formal treaty of friendship and cooperation in July 2001. Although the treaty was not directed at any specific country, it was explicitly intended to foster a "new international order" and Russian commentators described it as an "act of friendship against America."<sup>13</sup> Russian president Vladimir Putin has also called for increased cooperation between Russia and India and declared that India's emergence as a "mighty, developed, independent state" would be in Russia's interests because it would "help create a balance in the world." Even lesser states are looking for ways to put a leash on the United States: as Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez recently put it, "The twenty-first century should be multipolar, and we all ought to push for the development of such a world. So long live a united Asia, a united Africa, a united Europe."<sup>14</sup>

If one is looking for signs of balancing tendencies, in short, they are not difficult to find.<sup>15</sup> Yet it is striking how half-hearted and ineffective these efforts have been. Disagreements and policy disputes are hardly a new development in U.S. relations with its principal allies, yet there have been no significant defections in the ten years since the Soviet Union imploded. Russia, China, North Korea, and a few others have occasionally collaborated in order to signal their irritation with the United States, but their efforts fall well short of formal defense arrangements and Russia seems equally interested in building close ties with the West. Responses to U.S. preponderance pale in comparison to the powerful coalitions that formed to contain Wilhelmine Germany or the Soviet Union. United States allies may resent their dependence on the United States and complain about erratic U.S. leadership, but the old cry of "Yankee, Go Home" is strikingly absent in Europe and Asia. Instead, the United States is still formally allied with NATO (which has grown by three nations and is likely to add more in the next few years) and has renewed and deepened its military relationship with Japan. Its security ties with South Korea, Taiwan, and several other ASEAN countries remain firm, and its relations with Vietnam are improving. United States relations with India are probably better than they were during much of the Cold War. No one is making a serious effort to forge a meaningful anti-American alliance, despite the enormous dis-

<sup>13</sup> See "Russia and China Sign 'Friendship' Pact," *New York Times*, July 17, 2001, A1, A8.

<sup>14</sup> See "India a Great Power: Putin," *Times of India*, October 2, 2000, and Larry Rohter, "A Man with Big Ideas, a Small Country . . . and Oil," *New York Times*, September 24, 2000, section 4, 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Fareed Zakaria, "America's New Balancing Act," *Newsweek*, international edition, August 6, 2001.

parity of power in U.S. hands, and the September 2001 attacks may even have strengthened the U.S. diplomatic position in the short term.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, who are America's principal adversaries? Not the major powers of Europe and Asia, or even the rising power of China. Rather, America's recent enemies have been the isolated and impoverished regimes in Cuba, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and North Korea, a set of regimes that possess little power and even less international support.<sup>17</sup> With enemies like these, who needs friends?

From the perspective of structural balance-of-power theory, this situation is surely an anomaly. Power in the international system is about as *unbalanced* as it has ever been, yet balancing tendencies—while they do exist—are remarkably mild. It is possible to find them, but one has to squint pretty hard to do it. The propensity to balance is weak even though the United States has not been shy about using its power in recent years. How might we account for this apparent violation of realist logic?

### Why Other States Are Not Balancing the United States

The lack of a strong anti-American coalition has not gone unnoticed, and several scholars have recently offered several distinct explanations for its absence. Each identifies part of the reason why the world remains "off-balance," but none of these explanations is wholly convincing.

#### Unipolarity

In a pathbreaking article on the nature of unipolar systems, William C. Wohlforth argues that structural realism can provide a compelling explanation for the current dearth of genuine balancing behavior. His key insight is to recognize that the behavior of the major powers in today's unipolar world is likely to be quite different from their behavior in the bipolar and multipolar worlds of the past. In particular, Wohlforth argues

<sup>16</sup> See Josef Joffe, "Who's Afraid of Mr. Big?" *The National Interest*, 64 (summer 2001): 43-52.

<sup>17</sup> In 1999, these states possessed a combined GDP of \$194.4 billion. This figure is roughly 2% of U.S. GDP and less than two-thirds the size of the U.S. defense budget. Similarly, their combined defense spending in 1999 was roughly \$10.6 billion, compared to roughly \$292.1 billion for the United States. See *The Military Balance, 2000-2001* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2000).

that the unipolar structure of contemporary international politics discourages potential rivals from making a concerted effort to check America's preponderant position. So long as the United States maintains a healthy economic advantage and a global military presence that is second to none, other states will not dare to balance against it. Potential rivals will be unwilling to invite the "focused enmity" of the United States, and key U.S. allies like Japan and Germany will prefer to free-ride on U.S. protection rather than trying to create stronger military forces of their own. Hegemonic wars are by definition precluded, and great power competition will be correspondingly mild. Thus, Wohlforth concludes that unipolarity is likely to both long-lived and comparatively peaceful.

As discussed at greater length below, this argument contains a number of important insights. Because the United States is so far ahead, it is more dangerous for other states to oppose it openly and tempting for some states to continue to rely on U.S. protection. Yet there are at least two problems with Wohlforth's confident claim that no state (or group of states) would dare to challenge U.S. preponderance.

First, Wohlforth's analysis does not discuss the possibility that secondary states might try to constrain the United States without engaging in overt efforts to build a balancing coalition. Secondary states may be reluctant to openly combine against the United States (for fear of losing its protection or attracting its "focused enmity") but there are a host of lesser actions they can still undertake in order to complicate U.S. calculations and constrain its freedom of action. For example, Russia may be too weak to pose much of a danger to the United States, yet its reluctance to cooperate in the wake of NATO's decision to expand eastwards made it more difficult for the Clinton administration to handle its recurring confrontations with Iraq and Serbia. Indeed, had Moscow been less eager to show Washington that ignoring Russian interests was not cost-free, it might have joined the West in pressuring Baghdad and Belgrade and helped the United States avoid the collapse of UNSCOM in 1998 and the Kosovo War in the spring of 1999. Different Western policies might also make Moscow more amenable to U.S. requests that it limit the sale of nuclear technology to countries like Iran and put a damper on the emerging Sino-Russian rapprochement.

Similarly, even if China is unlikely to emerge as a true "peer competitor" for several decades, a combination of geography, technological acquisitions, and strategic innovation could enable a revisionist China to threaten U.S. interests in Asia. Its ability to do this will be affected, in part, by how much support it receives from other countries (e.g., Russia) and by whether the United States can count on rapid and efficient help from its



own allies in the region.<sup>18</sup> Unipolarity may discourage active balancing against the United States for the reasons Wohlforth describes, but other states can still engage in low-level efforts to impede U.S. initiatives.<sup>19</sup> And we now know that unipolarity did not deter the Al Qaeda terrorist network from attacking the United States, in order to demonstrate its opposition to the U.S. role in the Middle East and Persian Gulf and to bring the costs of these policies back home to America.

Second, and following from the first point, Wohlforth's structural explanation does not consider whether the propensity to balance against the United States could be affected by the specific military forces that the United States acquires or the ways that the United States chooses to use them. The omission is significant, because today's unipolar structure imposes very few external constraints on what the United States might decide to do. The Cold War imposed a certain discipline on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, but the absence of any serious rivals makes it easier for foreign and defense policy to be influenced by domestic interest groups, foreign lobbies, or ideological whims. Wohlforth is primarily worried that the United States might reduce its overseas role (which could encourage other states to catch up), and he downplays the possibility that the United States will overreach. Apart from exhorting U.S. leaders to preserve the U.S. lead and maintain existing U.S. overseas commitments (in order to keep the unipolar structure intact), Wohlforth's otherwise impressive analysis does not offer much practical policy guidance.

### Institutions and the Western Order

An alternative explanation for the absence of anti-American balancing highlights the unique institutional arrangements binding the United States and its allies together.<sup>20</sup> According to John Ikenberry, the Western order has long rested on the willingness of the United States to commit itself to a set of multilateral institutions that limit its ability to either threaten or abandon its major allies. The permeable nature of the U.S. po-

<sup>18</sup> See Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (spring 2001): 5-40.

<sup>19</sup> As the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* illustrates, even very weak actors (in this case, a terrorist group) can impose costs on the United States and force it to adjust its deployment practices.

<sup>20</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (winter 1998-99): 45-78; idem, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

litical system also gave potential balancers a variety of ways to monitor and shape U.S. policy, thereby reducing fears that the United States might use its power in ways that would threaten their own interests. These institutions, networks, and norms have broadened and deepened over the past four decades, and Ikenberry now sees them as akin to a formal constitution of the Western order. Accordingly, he regards the Western order as extremely robust (even in the absence of an external threat) and suggests that "stability will be an inevitable feature" of this system for many years to come.<sup>21</sup> But where Wohlforth traces stability to the unipolar material structure of the current system, Ikenberry sees it as the historically contingent, path-dependent product of institutionalized arrangements made over the course of the past five decades.

Ikenberry's account underscores the unusual durability of the U.S.-led alliance system, and the features he identifies account for some of its resilience since the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>22</sup> Yet the real question is whether the unique qualities of the Western alliance will persist now that the global distribution of power has been transformed by the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Institutions reflect the capabilities and interests of the states that create them, and these interests are likely to shift now that the structure of the system has been transformed.<sup>23</sup> During the Cold War, the United States and its allies had common interests in many areas, and especially on the core issues of national security. Although disagreements arose over out-of-area issues (e.g., Vietnam, Suez) or the fine details of NATO's military strategy (e.g., the debate on "flexible response" in the 1960s), there was little disagreement about what the alliance was for or what its central mission(s) were. Thus, the distribution of capabilities (and thus the definition of interests) and the nature of Western institutions pointed towards a similar set of policies and commitments.

Today, however, the distribution of power gives the United States less reason to commit itself to Europe, gives Europe less reason to be confident about U.S. support, and creates a greater chance for serious conflicts of interest between the United States and its long-time partners. NATO

<sup>21</sup> Ikenberry also suggests that "short of large-scale war or a global economic crisis, the American hegemonic order appears to be immune to would-be hegemonic challengers." See Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and American Postwar Order," 78.

<sup>22</sup> See also Robert McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization* 50, no. 3 (summer 1996): 445-75; Walt, "Structural Realism after the Cold War."

<sup>23</sup> Walt makes this point in "Structural Realism after the Cold War," 24-26. Indeed, NATO's principal mission has already changed in important ways, and it is somewhat misleading to think of it as the same institution. See also Lawrence Freedman, "The Transformation of NATO," *Financial Times*, August 6, 2001, 17; Celeste Wallander, "Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (autumn 2000): 705-35.

has persisted because Europeans still want the U.S. "pacifier" to remain in place, and because U.S. leaders have been willing to maintain that role even though there is no serious external threat to any of the European powers. But it is anyone's guess how long this commitment will last, and the Bush administration has made no secret of its desire to reduce the U.S. presence in Europe in order to devote more resources to other priorities.<sup>24</sup> The global war on terrorism is likely to provide the pretext for a further reduction in U.S. forces in Europe, thereby hastening NATO's evolution from a serious military alliance into a looser political confederation.<sup>25</sup>

In the end, Ikenberry's optimism rests on the belief that the existing institutional "glue" is sufficiently sticky to keep the United States and its allies together even if their interests begin to diverge. He may be right, but signs of strain are increasingly evident in the wake of NATO's haphazard interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the Bush administration's non-negotiable commitment to missile defense, abandonment of the ABM treaty, and continued disregard for its allies' opinions. The United States and Europe need not become enemies, but close friendship (let alone a meaningful alliance) can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>26</sup> European governments have been dismayed by the U.S. rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Bush administration's opposition to the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the global campaign to ban landmines, the treaty to establish an international criminal court, and the verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention. The September 2001 attacks may have triggered a renewed sense of unity in the short-term, but earlier differences have not been resolved and are likely to reemerge over time.<sup>27</sup>

These trends are not simply a consequence of the particular objectives of individual leaders or political parties; they also reflect the new structure

<sup>24</sup> According to an unnamed U.S. defense official, "The assumption is that cuts [in U.S. personnel] would primarily come out of Europe." See "Rumsfeld Aides Seek Deep Personnel Cuts in Armed Forces to Pay for New Weaponry," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2001, A3.

<sup>25</sup> That process will be furthered if NATO expansion is linked to closer ties between NATO and Russia, and if NATO turns out to be largely superfluous in the war on terrorism. See James Kurth, "The Next NATO: Building an American Commonwealth of Nations," *The National Interest* 65 (fall 2001): 5-16.

<sup>26</sup> Some of the institutional elements that Ikenberry identifies are probably irrelevant to the question of security commitments. Thus, he argues that transnational business and governmental connections help solidify relations within the American system, but it is not clear why such states require or reinforce the U.S. commitment to fight and die for Europe or Asia.

<sup>27</sup> European leaders emphasized that the U.S. response should be "proportional," and public opinion polls suggest that there are serious misgivings about the U.S. handling of the war in Afghanistan. See Steven Erlanger, "So Far, Europe Breathes Easier over Free Hand Given the United States," *New York Times*, September 29, 2001, B1, B6; and "German Opinion Swings against War." *ISN Security Watch*, October 25, 2001.

of world politics. The United States was committed to multilateralism during the Cold War because it needed allied support and wanted to keep the Soviet Union isolated. Now that the Cold War is over and the United States sits perched on the pinnacle of power, however, it is loath to let its allies restrict its freedom of action and less interested in multilateral approaches. As one U.S. official explained the decision not to use NATO to wage war in Afghanistan: "The fewer people you have to rely on, the fewer permissions you have to get."<sup>28</sup>

Viewed as a whole, these trends cast doubt on whether existing Western institutions can hold the United States and its allies together, because institutions can do little if the members are no longer committed to them. Conflicts of interest between the United States and Europe are likely to grow with time, especially if states such as China eventually present a serious challenge to U.S. interests. The Soviet Union threatened U.S. and European interests alike, but a rising China would pose little direct threat to Europe. In the future, European states might even regard China as an attractive strategic partner. The point is not to warn of a dangerous Sino-European alliance, it is merely to underscore that institutions formed in one strategic context are less likely to endure once that context has changed.

### Fear of U.S. Retrenchment

Other scholars discount the danger of an anti-American coalition because they believe that America's overseas presence is likely to diminish now that the Soviet threat is gone. Instead of worrying about U.S. dominance, in short, this view suggests that other states are more concerned that the United States might withdraw. Instead of banding together to keep the United States in check, therefore, most of the other major powers are happy to defer to U.S. leadership in the hopes of keeping U.S. forces committed in their regions.<sup>29</sup>

There is some truth in this interpretation as well, although the United States has yet to liquidate any of its major overseas commitments and is likely to expand some of them as part of the campaign against global terrorism. The United States has also been extremely active on the world stage and has been willing to exercise its power unilaterally on more than one occasion. Other states may worry about a U.S. withdrawal, but there is little sign that it is doing so yet. Thus, this perspective does a good job of

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Elaine Sciolino and Steven Lee Myers, "Bush Says 'Time is Running Out'; U.S. Plans to Act Largely Alone," *New York Times*, October 7, 2001, 1A.

<sup>29</sup> See Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 10.

explaining why balancing might be less likely at some point in the future, but it has trouble explaining why balancing tendencies have been so subdued for the past ten years. And if key U.S. allies really believe that a retrenchment is likely, one would expect to see more energetic efforts to develop their own defense capabilities, as opposed to the modest efforts seen to date.

To summarize: each of these explanations offers useful insights into why other states are not balancing against the United States, despite its historically unprecedented concentration of economic and military power. But each tells only part of the story and none offers detailed advice for how the United States can remain an activist, preponderant power without eventually generating a countervailing coalition. Let us therefore return to the more general question of why alliances form and consider the U.S. position from a slightly different perspective.

### Balance-of-Threat Theory

The anomaly of states failing to balance U.S. power largely vanishes if we focus not on power but on *threats*.<sup>30</sup> As I have argued at length elsewhere, balance-of-threat theory helps explain why most of the other major powers did not ally against the United States after World War II, when the United States controlled nearly half of the world economy, had sole possession of atomic weapons, and possessed large conventional forces as well. It also goes a long way to explaining why balancing has not occurred to any significant degree today.

Balance-of-threat theory argues that states form alliances to balance against *threats*. Threats, in turn, are a function of power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. Other things being equal, an increase in any of these factors make it more likely that other states (and especially other major powers) will regard the possessors of these traits as threatening and begin to look for some form of protecting themselves.

Gauging the balance of threats is not always easy, however. No one has yet devised a valid way to aggregate the different components of threat, and measuring each of these factors can be difficult in itself. As a result, it is sometimes hard to determine which of several possible threats is the most serious. Before World War II, for example, states in Central and East-

<sup>30</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and idem, "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia," *International Organization* 42, no. 2 (spring 1988): 275-316.

ern Europe did not balance vigorously against Nazi Germany because they also faced threats from each other and from the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> When threats are diffuse or indeterminate, states are more likely to remain neutral or hedge their bets in other ways.

When a particular state does appear especially dangerous, however, the optimal response is to get some other state to bear the costs of containing it.<sup>32</sup> Thus "buck passing" is the preferred response to most threats. When there is no one to pass the buck to, however, major powers prefer to balance against the most threatening state(s) rather than choosing to "bandwagon" with it. Bandwagoning is risky because allying with a threatening state requires trust in its continued benevolence. Because intentions can change, strong states usually choose to form defensive coalitions to contain the most threatening power, rather than trying to deflect the threat by joining forces with it.

Taken together, the four components of threat go a long way toward explaining why other states have not done very much to balance against the United States. Moreover, balance-of-threat theory also subsumes the partial explanations offered by Wohlforth, Ikenberry, and others.

*Power* In general, states with great power are threatening to others, because other states can never be sure how they will use these capabilities. As a state's power increases, moreover, other states will worry that it might be able to use its capabilities with impunity, and they will be likely to take action to prevent this. Up to a point, therefore, increases in a state's relative power will increase the tendency for others to balance against it. Thus, balance-of-power theory is not wrong; it is merely incomplete. Power is one of the factors that affects the propensity to balance, although it is not the only one nor always the most important.

Of course, a state's willingness to balance depends in part on whether doing so is likely to be effective.<sup>33</sup> This consideration explains why weak states are more likely to bandwagon than medium and major powers are: because they can do little to affect the outcome, they must seek the winning side at all costs.<sup>34</sup> By the same logic, a state could grow so powerful

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (spring 1992): 457.

<sup>32</sup> Emphasizing the prevalence of "buck passing" is Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 6.

<sup>33</sup> As Waltz noted, states that balance are safer "provided . . . that the coalition they join achieves enough defense or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking." See *Theory of International Politics*, 127. For a recent formal analysis of these issues, see Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). I discuss Powell's arguments in more detail below.

<sup>34</sup> In the words of Annette Baker Fox, "Instead of moving to the side of the less powerful and thereby helping to restore the balance, [small states] tended to comply with the de-

that other states might be reluctant to try to balance against it. The leading state's level of preponderance might fall short of true hegemony if it lacked the capacity to physically dominate the globe, yet other states might still decline to balance so as not to provoke the leading power to focus its superior capabilities on them. Moreover, the strongest power can also do more to reward states that choose to bandwagon, especially if it can persuade others that they will be rewarded (but not devoured) if they flock to its banner.

As noted above, the same logic underpins Wohlforth's claim that unipolarity will be durable and peaceful and thus provides some of the justification for a strategy of primacy. If the United States is big enough, the argument runs, other states will be dissuaded from challenging its position and may not even try to check its freedom of action. Thus, the relationship between power and balancing is curvilinear: states balance against power but *only up to a point*. If a state's power continues to grow beyond that point, others states will regard balancing as increasingly futile and will be less and less inclined to try it.

Although this argument appears to challenge the neorealist claim that states tend to balance, it is not really a violation of the theory. As Waltz has noted repeatedly, states in anarchy must adopt policies of self-help (or expect to suffer the consequences). So long as power is not too heavily skewed, buck passing and balancing are the most promising "self-help" strategies. If one state does become preponderant, however, bandwagoning may be the rational response. Thus, the United States has long enjoyed a hegemonic position in the Western Hemisphere, both because its immediate neighbors have been too weak to challenge it directly and because other great powers have been preoccupied by events in their own regions.<sup>35</sup> This argument implies that other states might be more likely to balance against the United States were its power to decline, which in turn suggests that the United States has ample incentive to preserve its material superiority.

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mands of the more powerful and thus to accentuate any shift in the balance of forces. . . . Viewed in this way, the small state's characteristic behavior may be described as 'anti-balance of power' while that of a great power is characteristically 'pro-balance of power.' " See her *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 185.

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Wohlforth suggests that "second-tier states" (by which he means all the major powers save the United States) "face structural incentives similar to lesser states in a region dominated by one power, such as North America." This view implies that the global structure of power now resembles the hegemony that the United States has long enjoyed in the Western hemisphere. See Wohlforth, "Stability of a Unipolar World," 25. It is also worth noting that the two countries that did challenge the United States—Castro's Cuba and the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua—had to rely on Soviet support in order to do so, paid an enormous price, and in the case of the Sandinistas, ultimately failed.

Yet several caveats should be acknowledged as well. First, this prescription makes sense only if one is fairly confident that the United States is well past the critical threshold beyond which other states are unlikely to balance. If the United States has not yet reached the point of inflection (i.e., where the propensity to balance begins to decline) then increases in power will tend to provoke anti-American coalitions.

Second, power is only one of the elements that states consider when deciding whether or not to balance. As discussed below, the tendency for other states to join forces against the United States will increase if the United States acquires especially threatening capabilities or if it uses its power capriciously, rather than using it in ways that other states regard as beneficial to their own interests.<sup>36</sup> It makes sense not to balance a preponderant power if aligning with it brings tangible benefits, but if one is going to face its "focused enmity" anyway, one might as well try to organize the combined capabilities that can keep the dominant power at bay. Thus, it is not simply a matter of what the United States *has*; how other states respond will also depend on what they think the United States will *do*.

Third, as already discussed, there is a range of possible responses that other states may make, ranging from all-out bandwagoning to free-riding, to passive noncooperation, to tacit opposition, and on to active balancing. States may not want to attract the "focused enmity" of the United States, but they may be eager to limit its freedom of action, complicate its diplomacy, sap its strength and resolve, maximize their own autonomy and reaffirm their own rights, and generally make the United States work harder to achieve its objectives. Such actions would fall well short of forming an explicit alliance directed against the United States, but U.S. policymakers would still find them troubling.<sup>37</sup>

By itself, therefore, the effects of power are probably indeterminate. America's current preponderance does worry other states and provides a modest incentive for them to balance, but it may also inhibit their willingness to take direct action to bring the United States to heel. By itself, therefore, power does not determine what other states are likely to do.

*Proximity* Because the ability to project power declines with distance, states that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away.

<sup>36</sup> See Francois Heisbourg, "American Hegemony? Perceptions of the U.S. Abroad," *Survival* 41, no. 4 (winter 1999-2000): 5-19.

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, peasants and other individuals with little material power or social status often devise elaborate strategies to subvert or limit the predations of more powerful actors. See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); and idem, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*



The geographic position of the United States is thus a tremendous asset, and it goes a long way toward explaining why other states are less worried by the concentration of power in U.S. hands. Because it is extremely difficult to project power across water and onto a foreign shore, U.S. power is less threatening to others and they are less inclined to balance against it.<sup>38</sup> America's geographic isolation also reduces the likelihood of territorial disputes with other major powers and allows the United States to take a more detached view of many international developments.

Moreover, because the other major powers lie in close proximity to one another, they tend to worry more about each other than they do about the United States. This feature explains why the United States is such a desirable ally for many Eurasian states: its power ensures that its voice will be heard and its actions will be felt, but it lies a comfortable distance away and does not threaten to dominate its allies physically. As a European diplomat puts it, "A European power broker would be a hegemon. We can agree on U.S. leadership, but not on one of our own."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Asian allies like Japan, Korea, and Taiwan favor a strong U.S. commitment because they see other states (and each other) as potentially dangerous and because they regard the physical presence of U.S. troops as a nonthreatening guarantor of regional stability.<sup>40</sup> Geography also explains why it would be difficult to conjure up an anti-American coalition combining Russia, China, and India, unless the United States acted in a remarkably myopic and aggressive fashion.

*Offensive Power* Other things being equal, states are more threatening when they acquire specific military capabilities (such as highly mobile, long-range military forces) or political capacities (such as a potentially contagious ideology) that pose a direct danger to the territorial integrity or political stability of other powers.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, other states are more

<sup>38</sup> The "stopping power of water," is emphasized by John Mearsheimer in *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 4. Although Mearsheimer explicitly rejects the idea of an "offense-defense" balance, he acknowledges that geographic features (such as large bodies of water) can make conquest more difficult.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Robert J. Art, "Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (spring 1996): 36. See also Christoph Bertram, *Europe in the Balance: Securing the Peace Won in the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> See Nye, "Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 4 (July 1995): 90-102; Thomas C. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (spring 1999): 49-80; and Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (winter 1993-94): 34-77.

<sup>41</sup> This is a central tenet of so-called offense-defense theory. For the most thorough statement of this argument, see Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War*, vol. 1, *The Structure of Power and the Risks of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999). For critiques, see Richard K.

likely to balance when states with large material resources acquire these particular specialized offensive capabilities. By contrast, when a state can defend its own territory but cannot attack others with high confidence, their incentive to balance against it will decline.

As noted above, the physical isolation created by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans reduces the direct military threat that the United States poses to other states, thereby reducing their propensity to balance. But this effect should not be overstated, given that other states are clearly worried about America's unparalleled power-projection capabilities. Thus Chinese military officials see the world as comprised of "one pole, but many powers," identify "U.S. hegemonism and power politics" as the central security problem in the world, and are acutely attentive to the global reach of U.S. military capabilities. Chinese, Russian, and European leaders have also been sharply critical of U.S. plans to develop national missile defenses, correctly seeing them as a potential threat to their own deterrent capabilities.<sup>42</sup>

In a general sense, the physical presence of U.S. ground forces in Europe or Asia is less threatening than its capacity to strike hostile targets virtually anywhere in the globe. Similarly, we should expect other states to be especially worried by the current campaign to create a national missile defense system (which would threaten other states' deterrent capabilities) or the potent air capabilities demonstrated by the United States in the 1991 Gulf War, the 1999 intervention in Kosovo, and the recent war in Afghanistan. According to balance-of-threat theory, increasing U.S. *offensive* capabilities will increase the tendency for other states to balance against the United States. By contrast, developing and deploying U.S. power in defensive modes (as in South Korea or Western Europe) is likely to reassure allies without provoking potential foes.

*Offensive Intentions* States are more likely to balance when they believe others have especially aggressive intentions.<sup>43</sup> The logic here is straight-

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166-98; and Keir Lieber, "Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (summer 2000): 77-104.

<sup>42</sup> See David Shambaugh, "China's Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security," *International Security* 24, no. 3 (winter 1999/2000): 52-79; Erik Eckholm, "Missile Wars: What America Calls a Defense China Calls an Offense," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000, section 4, 3; and Igor Ivanov, "The Missile Defense Mistake: Undermining Strategic Stability and the ABM Treaty," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 5 (September-October 2000): 15-20; and Thom Shanker, "Russians Resist Rumsfeld Effort to Set Aside ABM Treaty," *New York Times*, August 14, 2001, A9. See also the colloquium on "A Consensus on Missile Defense?" in *Survival* 43, no. 3 (autumn 1994): 61-94.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Powell has developed a formal model portraying alignment decisions in a world of three states. In its simplest form, the model suggests that states will usually prefer to wait or bandwagon rather than balance, depending in part on the available "technology of coer-

forward: because known aggressors are by definition harder to appease, the only choice is to assemble a countervailing coalition that is strong enough to stop them.

Here again, the United States gains by being perceived as *comparatively* benign. This does not mean that the United States always acts benevolently or that it is incapable of aggressive behavior. Rather, it means that most of the world's major powers do not see U.S. intentions as especially hostile or aggressive. This judgment probably reflects the relaxed nature of U.S. imperialism as well as the legacy of Cold War cooperation; as great powers go, the United States has been rather mild-mannered. Although some states are understandably concerned that U.S. power may be used to undermine their interests, none of the major powers seem to be worried that the United States will try to conquer them. The United States may be self-righteous, overweening, and occasionally trigger-happy, but it is not trying to acquire additional territory. As a result, other states are somewhat less inclined to balance against its otherwise daunting capabilities.<sup>44</sup>

Taken together, the principle sources of threat explain why balancing behavior has been muted thus far. The United States is by far the world's most *powerful* state, but it does not pose a significant *threat* to the vital interests of most of the other major powers.<sup>45</sup> Other states are wary of U.S. capabilities, but they are nowhere near as alarmed as the European powers were by Wilhelmine Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century, or by Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Similarly, the American threat to the medium powers of Europe and Asia is much less worrisome than the threat formerly posed by the Soviet Union, which combined power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions in an especially alarming package.<sup>46</sup>

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the model, this result occurs because the incentive to be on the winning side of a war outweighs the desire to reap a larger share of the postwar benefits. Powell's model is limited to the analysis of alignment decisions in wartime (the first move in the model is a decision by one state to attack one or both of the other two) and Powell admits that balancing may be more likely in prewar situations. Powell also notes that "the terms of the tradeoff between balancing and bandwagoning change if the attacker is more willing to use force than the other two states. . . . This lowers the payoff to bandwagoning and makes balancing more likely." In other words, the incentive to balance or bandwagon is affected by the judgment that states make about the intentions of others. Although Powell claims that his results challenge balance-of-threat theory, his conclusions are in fact not all that different. See *In the Shadow of Power*, chap. 5, especially 190.

<sup>44</sup> As noted earlier, this is a central theme in Ikenberry's analysis of the Western order.

<sup>45</sup> China may be a partial exception to this generalization, with Russia as a potential second candidate.

<sup>46</sup> See Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, chap. 8; and idem, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (spring 1985): 3-43.

## Impediments to Balancing

Balancing behavior is not automatic, and the main impediments to effective alliance formation help reinforce the U.S. position.<sup>47</sup> First, potential balancers may try to pass the buck to one another, hoping that their allies bear the brunt of the effort to deter, contain, or defeat an aggressor. If they buckpass or free-ride too much, however, the balancing coalition will not acquire enough strength to succeed or may simply dissolve amid mutual mistrust and recrimination.<sup>48</sup> Second, potential balancers must recognize their shared interests and communicate them to one another, and have to be able to trust each other enough to make workable defensive arrangements. Finally, to be truly effective, allies must coordinate strategy and avoid the temptation to seek unilateral advantages when opportunities to do so arise.

Given these potential pitfalls, a clever great power can try to thwart efforts to form a balancing coalition.<sup>49</sup> Aggressive states can try to mask the full extent of their ambitions, potential allies can be co-opted with bribes, and defensive coalitions can be split by offering concessions to one opponent but not to others. And if they are especially skillful, even powerful and aggressive states may defuse opposition long enough to accomplish their aims.<sup>50</sup>

## Summary

Balance-of-threat theory provides a compelling explanation for the absence of anti-American balancing both during and after the Cold War. Balance-of-threat theory largely subsumes the alternative explanations for the lack of a strong desire to balance U.S. power, and the impediments just described explain why states that might wish to form an anti-American coalition will face significant practical obstacles.

<sup>47</sup> Thus, Napoleon once remarked: "How many allies do you have? Five, ten, twenty? The more you have, the better it is for me." Quoted in Karl E. Roeder, *Baron Thugut and Austria's Response to the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 327.

<sup>48</sup> On these tendencies, see Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, no. 3 (August 1966): 266-79; Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), especially 63-64; and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 8.

<sup>49</sup> On Adolf Hitler's efforts to impede the balancing process, see Walt, "Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy."

<sup>50</sup> Bismarck's conduct of the Wars of German Unification (1864, 1866, 1870) is a classic example of this sort of statecraft. Under his leadership, Prussia fought three wars, unified Germany, and fundamentally altered the balance of power in Europe, yet without provoking a

These arguments raise the obvious question: is the danger of an anti-American coalition so remote as to be of little practical concern? The answer is no, for two reasons. First although it would require several acts of folly to bring such a coalition about, the United States is more likely to commit such acts if it assumes that the geopolitical costs will be negligible. Second, keeping the world "off-balance" is very much in the U.S. interest even if other states are disinclined to form an anti-U.S. alliance. The ability of the United States to achieve its foreign policy objectives at relatively low cost will depend in large part on whether other powers are inclined to support or oppose U.S. policies, and whether others find it easy or difficult to coordinate joint opposition to U.S. initiatives. The more other states worry about U.S. preponderance, the more likely they are to take steps—however modest and covert—designed to undermine or obstruct U.S. efforts. The United States is likely to be both more secure and better able to achieve its chosen ends if other states do not see its preponderant position as especially worrisome. Thus, even if an anti-American alliance is presently unlikely, U.S. policymakers should try to reduce other states' incentives to interfere or resist in limited but still problematic ways. Let us now consider how the United States can achieve that general objective.

### **A Strategy of Self-Restraint**

The United States cannot alter its geographic position (save by giving up territory or by conquering more), and it cannot change the distribution of capabilities either rapidly or unilaterally (save by rapidly disarming or by wrecking its own economy deliberately). Accordingly, the recommendations set forth here assume that the United States will continue to hold its current position of primacy, and they focus on ways that it can diminish the *offensive* elements of U.S. power or attempt to convey benign intentions whenever possible.

#### **Maintain U.S. Capabilities**

As discussed earlier, the enormous disparity between the United States and the other major powers helps keep the world "off-balance." Because the U.S. possesses such large advantages, it can provide benefits for states whose interests are compatible with its own. If U.S. power were to decline significantly, other states would have less to gain from cooperating with the United States and less to lose by challenging it. United States strength

can be a source of attraction and may even deter some adversaries from acting to thwart U.S. aims. Thus, maintaining its material superiority is the first step towards discouraging the formation of a countervailing coalition.

Unfortunately, with great power comes great ambition, and usually, more than a little arrogance. The more powerful a state is, the more it can hope to accomplish and the less it will display a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind." In the near term, therefore, the main danger is that the United States will either squander its power in ill-chosen adventures or use its power in ways that reinforce the concerns of other states. Accordingly, the policy recommendations set forth below focus on ways that the United States can make its preponderance less worrisome to the rest of the international community.

### "Mailed Fist, Velvet Glove"

As just noted, U.S. preponderance makes other states more sensitive to the ways that U.S. power is used. As a result, the United States should take care to use its power judiciously, and especially where military force is concerned. Americans should worry when generally pro-U.S. publications such as the *Economist* describe the United States as "too easily excited; too easily distracted; too fond of throwing its weight around," or when knowledgeable foreign experts describe the United States as a "rogue superpower" or a "trigger-happy sheriff."<sup>51</sup>

Three specific recommendations follow. First, the United States should use force with forbearance, asking questions first and shooting later. Although it will occasionally be necessary to use force preemptively so as to minimize casualties or convey resolve, U.S. preponderance gives it the luxury of taking a more relaxed and deliberate view of many international developments. States whose existence might be endangered if they failed to act quickly may have to preempt threats and respond vigorously to highly ambiguous warnings. Because the United States is objectively so secure, however, it can usually rely on policies of deterrence and retaliation rather than preemption, and reserve the latter tactic for those rare circumstances when it faces a potentially lethal danger.<sup>52</sup> In general, the

<sup>51</sup> See *The Economist*, September 21, 1996; Heisbourg, "American Hegemony?" 10–15; and also Martin Walker, "What Europeans Think of America," *World Policy Journal* (summer 2000): 26–38.

<sup>52</sup> For example, although U.S. officials did have genuine grounds for launching cruise missile strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998, the decision to strike on the basis of ambiguous information ignored the larger geopolitical effects of appearing overly eager to use

United States should follow the prescription once expressed by President Woodrow Wilson, who declared that the United States "can afford to exercise the self-restraint of a truly great nation, which realizes its own strength and scorns to misuse it."<sup>53</sup>

Second, the United States can reduce the threat posed by its overawing power by giving other states some say over the circumstances in which it will use force. As Ikenberry has emphasized, confining the use of force to multilateral contexts is an effective way to assuage potential fears about the unilateral exercise of U.S. power. This point has been lost on conservative opponents of the United Nations and other international institutions, who fail to recognize that multilateral institutions help the United States exercise its power in a way that is less threatening (and therefore more acceptable) to others. Although exceptions will arise from time to time, the United States should for the most part rely on a "buddy system" to regulate the large-scale use of its military power. Specifically, if it cannot persuade one or more other major powers to join it, then the United States should refrain from using force.<sup>54</sup> This policy might also increase other states' incentives to maintain good relations with Washington, because close ties with the United States will give them a greater influence over how Washington chooses to use its power.<sup>55</sup>

Third, given that the United States now wants broad support for its war against terrorism, it would be wise to reciprocate the foreign support it has recently sought by making some concessions of its own. Committing itself to a serious effort to negotiate a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol on global warming would be an ideal first step, and would go a long way to defuse lingering fears of U.S. unilateralism. Similarly, the United States could accelerate preparations for a new global trade round and declare that it was especially interested in lowering its own barriers against exports from the developing world, even if this hurts some special interests

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*ministration's Sudan Policy, 1993-2000* (London: European-Sudanese Public Affairs Council, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in P. Edward Haley, *Revolution and Intervention: The Diplomacy of Taft and Wilson with Mexico, 1910-1917* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 100.

<sup>54</sup> This sort of "buddy system" serves two purposes. First, it legitimates U.S. dominance by making it part of a larger group. Second, it safeguards the U.S. against gross misjudgments: if we cannot persuade anyone else that the use of force is called for, U.S. leaders should probably reconsider the wisdom of this policy. Needless to say, support from Great Britain alone will normally not suffice to legitimize the use of force by the United States.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry argue that the norm of multilateral consultation regarding the use of force was a central element of the Western system that emerged during the Cold War. See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Realism, Structural Liberalism, and the Western Order," in *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War*, ed. Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999);

here at home. It is also an ideal time to improve relations with Russia, by making sure that issues like NATO expansion and missile defense are handled in a manner that is acceptable to Moscow.<sup>56</sup> The common element in these various initiatives is to show that the United States is willing to compromise with other countries, and willing to use its power in ways that advance others' interests as well as its own.

A final element of the "velvet glove" approach is that the United States should go easy on promoting democracy. Encouraging democracy is a worthy goal on normative grounds and U.S. policy can sometimes exert positive effects on occasion. Promoting democracy can also be extremely destabilizing (especially in multiethnic societies lacking well-established democratic traditions) and is likely to appear intrusive and self-congratulatory to foreign elites.<sup>57</sup> At the very least, the United States should not make exporting democracy the centerpiece of its foreign policy.

### Practice "Random Acts of Self-Abnegation"

U.S. preponderance allows it to impose its preference on other states in many circumstances, or to ignore the preferences of others and merely go its own way irrespective of what other states want.<sup>58</sup> This capacity is a great asset, of course, but it can easily tempt the United States into precisely the sort of unilateralist behavior that concerns even longstanding U.S. allies. The more that the United States insists on its own way, the more others are likely to resent U.S. power and search for ways to restrict it. Thus, unilateralist actions like the Helms-Burton Act (which sought to impose penalties on foreign firms conducting business in Cuba) or the recent decisions to reject a series of prominent international conventions carry symbolic costs that may ultimately outweigh the alleged benefits of rejection.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Russia is more likely to accept NATO expansion if the door to its own entry is opened wider, and it is clearly willing to accept missile defenses in the context of mutually agreed revision to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty.

<sup>57</sup> See Thomas Carothers, *Aid to Democracy: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000); and Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflicts* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). On the difficulty of creating truly liberal societies when the proper political culture is absent, see Markus Fischer, "Thoughts on the Liberal Peace," Discussion Paper 00-1, International Security Program, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University (March 2000).

<sup>58</sup> See Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Organizations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> As Canadian foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy commented in response to the Helms-Burton Act: "This is bullying. But in America, you call it 'global leadership.'" Quoted in "Talk Multilaterally, Hit Allies with a Stick," *New York Times*, July 21, 1993, E3. The United States stood apart when 178 other countries voted to implement the Kyoto Protocol in July



By the same logic, the United States would do well to offer genuine concessions when it can, simply to minimize others' concerns that it is indifferent to their interests and amour propre. In other words, recognizing that verbal statements of benign intent are little more than "cheap talk," the United States can best communicate its benevolence by making more credible signals to this effect. And to be credible, these gestures must entail some cost to the United States. Thus, the Clinton administration wisely abandoned its initial opposition to a German candidate for the position of managing director of the International Monetary Fund, thereby allaying concerns about U.S. dominance and avoiding a potentially costly dispute with its closest allies.<sup>60</sup> This approach also implies a willingness to accept less-than-perfect agreements that are still a net benefit to U.S. interests.<sup>61</sup>

A related tactic would be to "denationalize" international policy discussions by framing them in terms of a search for "best practices." Instead of viewing international collaboration as a bargaining process in which different national positions are openly negotiated, the United States should orient collaborative efforts around the exchange of technical expertise and professional advice. This approach has gained favor in a number of important areas, including environmental cooperation, commercial regulation, international law enforcement, and international antiterrorist efforts.<sup>62</sup> By conducting collaboration primarily via day-to-day consultations between the relevant bureaucrats, professional elites, and technical experts, this approach would diminish the sense that the United States was "imposing" its own preferences on its weaker partners. It also increases the likelihood that the United States might alter its own practices

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2001, single-handedly scuttled the verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention (which was supported by fifty-four other nations, including our NATO allies and Japan), and is aligned with strange bedfellows like China, Iraq, and Libya in opposing creation of an International Criminal Court.

<sup>60</sup> See James Blitz et al., "The Camdessus Succession," *Financial Times*, March 17, 2000, 14.

<sup>61</sup> For example, the Bush administration rejected the verification protocol to the Biological Weapons convention on the grounds that it was not perfectly verifiable and that its inspection provisions might expose U.S. pharmaceutical companies to industrial espionage. Yet the agreement would have had at most marginal effects on the level of U.S. transparency (which is already very high), and would have forced less open societies to provide far greater openness than they do at present. Although the protocol was not perfectly verifiable, it would have made it much riskier for states to try to evade their treaty commitments by developing biological weapons in secret.

<sup>62</sup> See Peter C. Haas, ed., *Knowledge, Power, and International Policy Coordination*, special issue, *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (winter 1992); Anne-Marie Slaughter, "The Real New World Order," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (September/October 1997): 183-97, and idem, "Governing the Global Economy through Government Networks," in *The Role of Law in International Politics: Essays in International Relations and International Law*, ed. Michael Byers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

in light of the experience of other actors. Ideally, the outcome could be the best of both worlds: the United States (and others) develop workable solutions on some area of common concern (such as terrorism or transnational crime), while the United States shows it is willing to engage in genuine give-and-take.

These prescriptions do not require the United States to abandon important interests and does not mean that the United States should not insist on its own way on occasion. Rather, it suggests that the United States should look for issues where letting weaker states win costs us something but not much. By visibly refraining from using the full extent of its power, and by not seeking every advantage that primacy might confer, the United States can reduce other states' concerns about its capabilities and reduce their incentive to join forces against us. The United States likes to think of itself as a "benevolent hegemon," but it needs to make sure its benevolence is apparent to others.

### Keep Clients under Control

The ability of the United States to keep the world "off-balance" rests in part on avoiding unnecessary quarrels with foreign powers. In addition to minimizing the direct threat that U.S. power poses to others, the United States must also ensure that its allies and clients do not act in ways that encourage third parties to see it as overly dangerous. If the United States allows its allies to behave in a bellicose or provocative fashion, they may drag it into conflicts that might otherwise have been avoided.

This problem will be especially acute when dealing with client states who enjoy high levels of domestic support in the United States, and it may actually be worse now that the Cold War is over. Because most U.S. citizens have been indifferent to foreign affairs, the *relative* impact of groups with strong and focused agendas has probably increased.<sup>63</sup> Domestic lobbies may exert even greater influence than they did before, simply because most Americans are indifferent. If U.S. politicians allow these domestic considerations to influence their policies, and especially if the desire to placate domestic lobbies dominates their strategic calculations, then the United States is in effect allowing its foreign policy to be made in Taipei, Miami, Jerusalem, or Warsaw rather than in Washington. Although America's present preponderance might lead some to conclude that there is little risk in backing these traditional clients, letting them determine

U.S. policy may lead to conflicts that might otherwise have been avoided. Thus, if client states want to rely on U.S. protection, the United States must insist that they not take actions that could exacerbate its relations with others.

### Do Not Treat Potential Adversaries as a Monolith

During the Cold War, the United States sometimes lumped leftist or Marxist regimes together and viewed them as part of an undifferentiated communist "monolith." Although some U.S. officials held more subtle views (and developed strategies that reflected this awareness), the general tendency to regard any leftist or socialist regime as a potential tool of the Kremlin often led to self-fulfilling spirals of hostility with these regimes.<sup>64</sup>

Because the United States has an important interest in discouraging other states from joining forces against us, it should guard against this tendency to lump states together and view them as part of some larger anti-American movement. To take the most obvious example, depicting North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Libya as a set of anti-American "rogue states"—let alone an "axis of evil"—ignores the important differences between these states, blinds us to the possibility of improving relations with some of them, and encourages them to cooperate with one another even more.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Samuel P. Huntington's forecast of a looming "clash of civilizations" could become a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy if it becomes the guiding framework for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>66</sup> If we assume that cultural differences make non-Western states inherently hostile to the United States, we are likely to behave in ways that will reinforce these differences and we will overlook opportunities to keep potentially hostile blocs divided. Even if there are significant obstacles to the formation of a strong anti-American coalition, does the United States really want to give other states a greater incentive to overcome them?

This lesson is especially pertinent in the aftermath of the September 11

<sup>64</sup> See Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987); Walter Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984); and W. Anthony Lake, "Wrestling with Third World Radical Regimes: Theory and Practice," in *U.S. Foreign Policy: Agenda 1985-86*, ed. John W. Sewell, Richard E. Feinberg and Valeriana Kallab (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> See Robert S. Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), and see also Stephen M. Walt, "Building Up New Bogeymen," *Foreign Policy* 106 (spring 1997): 176-89.

attacks. Although some U.S. officials favored a broad campaign against all terrorist groups (or suspected sponsors, such as Iraq), cooler heads have prevailed and the United States has thus far eschewed such a risky course. Broadening the war to countries like Iraq would jeopardize international support, divert U.S. assets away from the groups that actually struck the United States, and encourage various anti-American groups to support each other even more vigorously. Unless the United States has clear evidence that foreign powers are helping terrorists wage war against us, the proper strategy is "divide-and-conquer," keeping the terrorists isolated and giving their potential allies good reasons to cut them loose. Labeling regimes we do not like an "axis of evil," as President Bush did in his February 2002 State of the Union address, merely alarms potential allies, casts doubt on U.S. judgment, and limits our own flexibility in dealing with these very different countries.

### Emphasize Defense; Eschew Offense

Balance-of-threat theory implies that states will be more likely to balance against the United States if its military capabilities appear to be heavily oriented toward offense. By contrast, military forces that are designed to protect the U.S. or its allies will be less dangerous to others and less likely to provoke a balancing response.<sup>67</sup>

As critics of offense-defense theory have noted, distinguishing between offensive and defensive weapons and force postures can be extremely difficult, particularly at the level of individual weapons systems.<sup>68</sup> In general, however, force postures that protect territory without threatening others, and that lack the capacity to attack foreign territory, are likely to be less threatening than force postures that emphasize offensive conquest.<sup>69</sup>

From this perspective, the ideal U.S. posture would be the forward deployment of *defensively* oriented military forces. United States ground

<sup>67</sup> Theoretical support for this proposal may be found in Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (winter 1994-95): 50-90; and Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (winter 1997): 114-55.

<sup>68</sup> See Jack Levy, "The Offensive-Defensive Balance in Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1984): 219-38; John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 36, n. 61; and Jonathan Shimshoni, "Technology, Military Advantage, and World War I: A Case for Military Entrepreneurship," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (winter 1990-91): 187-215.

<sup>69</sup> Thus the military forces (and doctrines) of the former Soviet Union were explicitly oriented towards offensive action and helped provoke the countervailing coalition that subsequently encircled them.

troops and tactical aircraft could be deployed overseas to defend key allies, as they currently do in Japan, Germany, and South Korea. By eschewing large offensive capabilities (such as long-range bombers), the United States would appear less threatening to others and would be less likely to provoke defensive reactions.<sup>70</sup>

Unfortunately, such a sharp distinction would be difficult to maintain in practice. It would be impossible to remove all the offensive potential from current U.S. forces without significantly weakening overall U.S. capabilities and depriving the United States of options it would like to retain. And if the much-ballyhooed "revolution in military affairs" has real substance to it, it is likely to enhance the ability of the United States to project destructive military force throughout the globe. The war in Afghanistan suggests that U.S. power projection capabilities continue to improve, and other states are unlikely to find this a comforting trend.

How would such a development affect the geopolitical position of the United States and the attitudes of other countries? On the one hand, reverting to an "offshore balancing" strategy and relying on increased strategic mobility and power projection might eliminate the tensions caused by the presence of large U.S. forces in places like Okinawa. On the other hand, a force posture of large, highly offensive forces based in the continental United States would also provide less credible protection to other states (thereby removing the pacifying effects of the current U.S. presence), but it *would* still be seen as threatening by some other countries. It is entirely possible, therefore, that a radical restructuring of the U.S. military posture could increase the degree to which other states saw us as threatening and make it harder for the United States to attract allied support.<sup>71</sup>

Foreign reactions to U.S. plans to develop missile defenses suggest that this is not merely a theoretical possibility. Nuclear weapons are still the "trump cards" of international politics, and a combination of missile defenses and large, highly accurate offensive forces would look a lot like a first-strike capability to most other countries, especially those with small and relatively primitive arsenals. Thus, if missile defense can be made to work, it could give the United States the capacity to threaten other states with impunity. At the very least, it would make it more difficult for poten-

<sup>70</sup> See Shambaugh, "China's Military Views the World," 57-62.

<sup>71</sup> For analyses advocating greater reliance on air-based or sea-based power projection capabilities, see Karl Mueller, "Flexible Power Projection for a Dynamic World: Exploiting the Potential of Air Power," and Owen R. Coté Jr., "Buying . . . from the Sea": A Defense Budget for a Maritime Strategy," both in *Holding the Line: U.S. Defense Alternatives for the Early 21st Century*, ed. Cindy Williams (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001). Interestingly, neither Mueller nor Cote discuss how other states are likely to react to their proposed alternatives.

tial adversaries to deter the use of U.S. conventional forces by threatening nuclear escalation. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Russia, China, and several U.S. allies view this initiative with misgivings.<sup>72</sup> And it does little good to declare that the system is intended only as a defense against limited attacks by so-called rogue states, because other states cannot be sure that the United States will not try to expand the system at some point in the future.<sup>73</sup>

For all of these reasons, other states are likely to be alarmed by U.S. efforts to build even a "limited" version of NMD. Although such a policy is unlikely to trigger an anti-U.S. alliance all by itself, it would certainly make such a development more likely.

### Defend the Legitimacy of U.S. Preponderance

Balancing behavior will be less likely if foreign elites hold positive images of the United States, share similar outlooks on most global problems, and in general regard U.S. preponderance as benevolent, beneficial, and legitimate. Not surprisingly, other states seek to portray the U.S. position as unfair and illegitimate, both to raise doubts about U.S. motives and to convince each other that a more balanced world would be preferable. Thus, Chinese officials habitually warn about the dangers of U.S. "hegemonism," French elites complain about America's cultural impact, and

<sup>72</sup> As one Russian commentator puts it, "In the past ten years, the United States has enjoyed the position of being the only remaining world power. During this time, the idea of an overseas invasion in order to protect human rights and defend U.S. interests has gradually become an acceptable and even commonplace understanding among the American political and security elite. . . . [But] until recently, no member of the nuclear club has had to fear an external invasion. . . . Successful future deployment of a national missile defense could change this reality. . . . This is exactly the situation both Russia and China fear: an invasion to defend the independence of Georgia, or Taiwan, or to stop a 'genocide,' or whatever else the American president might take as evidence of a lack of 'peaceful intentions.' This is why the Russians fear missile defense." See Alexander Altounian, "Why Russians Fear Missile Defense," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2001, A19.

<sup>73</sup> Chinese and Russian officials have warned that U.S. development of NMD would force them to build additional weapons or develop countermeasures. The director-general for arms control at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sha Zukang, summarized China's position by admitting that "to defeat your defenses we'll have to spend a lot of money . . . but otherwise the United States will feel it can attack anyone at any time, and that isn't tolerable." U.S. assurances that the system was limited to attacks by rogue states have been unpersuasive; in Sha's words, "How can we base our own national security on your assurances of good will?" See Eric Eckholm, "China Says U.S. Missile Shield Could Force a Nuclear Buildup," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2000, A1, A6. Chinese President Jiang Zemin recently reaffirmed this position, telling U.S. reporters that U.S. deployment of defenses would lead China "to increase our defense capability in keeping with the development of the international situation." See "In Jiang's Words: 'I Hope the Western World Can Understand China Better,'" *New York*

the Iraqi government seeks to portray the United States as a heartless great power that is indifferent to the human sufferings that its far-flung foreign policy imposes on weaker states.

In addition to the normal sorts of geopolitical competition, therefore, the United States must also defend the legitimacy of its own position. And this means being aware of how U.S. policy appears to other countries. The Bush administration may have been correct to reject the Kyoto protocol, for example, but it was a diplomatic gaffe for the world's wealthiest country (and the largest producer of greenhouse gases) to declare that it was renouncing the treaty because it "was not in [our] economic best interests."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, other states will rarely be persuaded when the United States justifies unpopular policies by declaring that U.S. national security is at stake, given that the United States is easily the most secure great power in modern history.<sup>75</sup>

In particular, the United States needs to improve its capacity to communicate effectively in the Arab and Islamic world. The hatred that provoked the September 11 attacks is partly a reaction to U.S. policy in the region—and especially its reflexive support for Israel—but it is also fueled by a combination of myths and accusations promoted by anti-U.S. groups and governments.<sup>76</sup> To overcome these misperceptions, the United States should launch a broad-based public information campaign in the region, using every instrument and channel at its disposal. In addition to preparing diplomats to engage with local media outlets like Al Jazeera (the Qatar-based news network that reaches some 35 million Arabs), the United States should also increase its own Arabic-language broadcasts and develop Arabic-language websites to reach the growing Internet-savvy populations in these countries.

Fortunately, the United States possesses formidable assets in this sort of ideational competition. Not only is English increasingly the lingua franca of science and international business, but the American university system is now a potent means of co-opting and socializing foreign elites.<sup>77</sup> Stu-

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in "EU: Disgust over Bush's Kyoto Decision," *Agence France Presse*, March 29, 2001.

<sup>75</sup> Thus, U.S. allies in Europe are skeptical of U.S. missile defense plans in part because they do not see the threat as particularly serious. See Philip H. Gordon, "Bush, Missile Defense, and the Atlantic Alliance," *Survival* 43, no. 1 (spring 2001): 23–25.

<sup>76</sup> For example, many Arabs believe (incorrectly) that U.S. sanctions are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iraqi children, when the real cause is Saddam Hussein's refusal to use the UN "oil for food" program.

<sup>77</sup> There were nearly half a million foreign students at U.S. universities in 1997–98, while only 113,956 U.S. students were studying abroad. The disparity is even more striking when England is excluded; for example, there were 46,958 Chinese students and 47,073 Japanese students at U.S. universities in 1997–98, but only 2,116 and 2,285 American students in China and Japan respectively. See *Open Doors 1997–98* (New York: Institute for International Education, 1999).

dents studying in the United States become familiar with U.S. mores, while absorbing the prevailing U.S. attitudes about politics and economics.<sup>78</sup> Not all of them have positive experiences or end up adopting favorable attitudes toward the United States, but many of them do.

The effects of America's dominant role in global education are reinforced by the pervasiveness of U.S. mass media.<sup>79</sup> Although the shadow cast by American culture generates a hostile backlash on occasion, this element of America's "soft power" is probably a potent but relatively non-threatening weapon in the ideational struggle for the hearts and minds of foreign elites.<sup>80</sup>

Much of America's "soft power" rests on instruments and capabilities that are not (and should not be) subject to political control. "Cultural diplomacy" will be more effective when it is not part of an explicit propaganda campaign, and the socializing effects of being educated in the United States might vanish if the U.S. government tried to organize it for explicit purpose of co-optation. Nonetheless, the United States should probably consider ways to wage this war of legitimacy more effectively. One obvious strategy would be to adopt a more generous approach to foreign aid and other forms of financial assistance, although it would require a sea-change in public and congressional attitudes to implement such a policy.<sup>81</sup> And because we still know relatively little about how social and political values are transmitted from one country to another, the impact of (and proper role for) U.S. "soft power" is also a worthy topic for more sustained scholarly research.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> This tendency will be especially pronounced in U.S. business schools and public policy programs, because each tends to emphasize the U.S. commitment to free markets and liberal institutions.

<sup>79</sup> The top twenty-five highest grossing films of all time are all American productions, even if one omits U.S. ticket sales and looks solely at foreign revenues. Based on figures downloaded from <http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com> on May 9, 2000.

<sup>80</sup> On "soft power," see Nye, *Bound to Lead*, and G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization* 44, no. 3 (summer 1990): 283-315.

<sup>81</sup> The United States spent approximately 1% of GDP on its nonmilitary international affairs budget in 1962, but spends only 0.2% of GDP today. These are not the budgetary allocations of a country that is really serious about how it conducts diplomacy. See Robert J. Lieber, "Three Propositions About America's World Role," in *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lieber (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 10.

<sup>82</sup> See Frank Ninkovich, *U.S. Information Policy and Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1994); Juliet Antunes Sablosky, "Reinvention, Reorganization, Retreat: American Cultural Diplomacy at Century's End, 1978-1998," *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 29, no. 1 (spring 1999): 30-46; and Neil M. Rosendorf, "Socio-cultural Globalization: Concepts, History, and America's Role," in *Governance in a Globalizing World*, ed.



## Conclusion

The formation of a cohesive anti-American coalition is not inevitable, and may not even be likely.<sup>89</sup> But the likelihood that some states will try to balance against us (even if only a rather tentative and tacit fashion) will increase if the United States acts in ways that threaten their interests. When such actions would reduce U.S. security or jeopardize its ability to pursue particular interests, it behooves Americans to search for policies that could override or dampen these tendencies. In the preceding pages, I have tried to sketch what some of these policies could be.

In general, I have argued that a policy of self-restraint is most likely to keep the rest of the world "off-balance" and minimize the opposition that the United States will face in the future. The central theme of the recommendations set forth above is the need to make reassurance a constant concern of U.S. foreign policy. Throughout the Cold War, the United States repeatedly sought to remind its allies that its commitment to them was credible. To do this, the United States deployed military forces on foreign territory, conducted joint military exercises, sent top officials on innumerable visits, and made verbal commitments in hundreds of public speeches. Now that the Cold War is over and the United States is essentially unchecked, U.S. leaders have to make a similar effort to convince other states of their good will, good judgment, and sense of restraint. And U.S. leaders cannot just say it once and then act as they please: reassuring gestures have to be repeated and reassuring statements have to be reiterated. Needless to say, the more consistent its words and deeds, the more effective U.S. pledges are likely to be.

Unfortunately, it is hard to be optimistic about America's ability to implement such a strategy. Great power may or may not corrupt, but it certainly tempts; and self-restraint is not a cardinal U.S. virtue. Moreover, by requiring the United States to become even more actively engaged around the world, and especially in the Middle East and Central Asia, the current campaign against terrorism is likely to reinforce the fears and resentments that gave rise to Al Qaeda in the first place. The longer this effort takes, and more it requires the United States to interfere in other countries' business, the greater the chance of a hostile backlash later on. Thus, even if the current distribution of power calls for a policy of self-restraint, one suspects that the United States will end up meddling more than it should, building more than it should, and probably building the

<sup>89</sup> Here I differ from Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (spring 1993): 5-51.

wrong sorts of weapons. The Bush administration's first year in office does not afford much grounds for optimism, given their repeated insensitivity to the opinions of others and their willingness to chart a solo course on a range of different issues.<sup>84</sup> The administration appeared to be doing better in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, but it has reverted to its earlier unilateralism now that the initial challenge has been met.<sup>85</sup>

Even so, we should keep this warning in perspective. The United States is the most secure great power in history, and most states would be delighted to exchange their position for ours. Geography, history, and good fortune have conspired to give the United States a remarkable array of advantages and retaining those advantages does not require the genius of a Bismarck (or even a Kissinger). At a minimum, Americans can be grateful for that. But the United States still has an interest in retaining the good wishes of most other countries, if only because its ability to accomplish positive ends will decline if other states are resentful or fearful, and if they are looking for opportunities to throw dust in Uncle Sam's eyes. And if the United States ends up hastening the demise of its existing alliances and creating new ones that are opposed to it, we will have only ourselves to blame.

<sup>84</sup> According to Theo Sommer, former editor of *Die Zeit*, "[Bush] offers everyone consultations, partners and rivals alike; he promises to keep in touch; that is why he assures everyone, you cannot talk about an American go-it-alone attitude. Yet the conversations are aimed at conversion, not compromise." Quoted in Thom Shanker, "White House Says the U.S. Is Not a Loner, Just Choosy," *New York Times*, July 31, 2001, A1, A10.

<sup>85</sup> For a skeptical forecast on this point, see Steven E. Miller, "The End of Unilateralism? Or Unilateralism Redux?" *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (winter 2001-2): 15-29. Or as Republican foreign policy advisor Richard Perle told an international conference of defense officials in February 2002, "Never has the United States been more unified, never has it been more purposeful, never has it been more willing, if necessary, to act alone." Quoted in Colleen Barry, "U.S. Allies Express Reservations in Face of Washington's Resolve to Broaden War on Terrorism," *AP Online*, February 3, 2002.