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

Stephen M. Walt

What 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. Bush and Kerry turned out to be 90 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 Too 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.¹

¹I thank John Bremerly, Stephen Krasner, and the other contributors to this volume for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I have also profited from comments at seminars at Columbia University's Institute for War and Peace Studies and the International Security Program of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. Michelle van Raai and Kate Regnier provided research assistance and logistical support, for which I am also grateful.

Jux 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. 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. 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. 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.

Not surprisingly, most Americans regard this position of primacy as unassailable 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.


These favorable conditions are now changing. U.S. economic growth slowed dramatically in 2000-2001 and together with the tax cut vote in the spring of 2001, it 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.


This chapter examines an important part of this puzzle, focusing on whether U.S. containment 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 1950s, the United States was too weak and geographically isolated to provide 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—only when one state seemed about to establish a hegemonic position in Europe or Asia. Even when, because 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 large military presence overseas. Although there were occasional tension 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 accommodate 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 and when they emerge.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. Part I examines why states tend to balance against one another 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 considers 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 cautions 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., "realist") balance-of-power theory.\(^1\) According to structural theory, the condition of international anarchy gives states a powerful incentive tosubordinate 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. Where 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 power with their partners, or even initiate war in an attempt to shift the balance of power in their favor.\(^2\)

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 more hard to lead now that the Soviet Union is gone and the United States is overwhelming stronger than any other country.

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\(^2\) As Kenneth Waltz recently put it, "A nature abhors a vacuum in international politics almost unbalanced power. Powers with unbalanced power, hopes states try to increase their own strength so that they will be able to bring the international distribution of power into balance." See his "Structural Analysis after the Cold War," International Security 5, no. 1.
The theory also predicts that other major powers will be looking for ways to limit the unilateral exercise of 3/4 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 yet? 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.

"French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine has repeatedly complained about America's position as a 'superpower' 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.' 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. Take together, these developments herald a weakening of transatlantic ties and the emergence of a more forceful European voice in foreign policy.

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

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"U.S. Preponderance" with additional notes.
Stephen M. Walt

... by seeking to resolve existing points of friction and increasing other points 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." 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."

If one is looking for signs of balancing tendencies, in short, they are not difficult to find. 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 they have been no less significant 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 fell well short of formal defense arrangements and Russia seems equally interested in building close ties with the West. Resilient to U.S. preponderance, Saleh in comparison to the powerful coalition that formed to contain Wulfgarmin 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 and American alliance, despite the enormous dis-

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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.18

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.19 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 power, William C. Wohlforth argues that structural realism can provide a competing 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

"See Josef Joffe, "Who’s Afraid of Mr. Big?" The National Interest 62 (Summer 2001): 45-56.

18 In 1999, these states possessed a combined GDP of $394 billion. This figure is roughly 2% of U.S. GDP and less than twelfth the size of the U.S. defense budget. Similarly, their combined defense spending in 1999 was roughly $20.6 billion, compared to roughly $592 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, the second and, if one views it this way, the third of other states will not dare to challenge it. Potential rivals will not want to invite the "focused energy" of the United States, and the U.S. allies like Japan and Germany will prefer free ride on U.S. protection rather than trying to create stronger military forces of their own. Hegemonic wars are by definition preclusive, and great power competition will be correspondingly mild. Thus, Wohlstetters concludes that unipolarity is likely to both prolonged 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 Wohlstetters's judgment that no state (or group of states) would dare to challenge U.S. preponderance.

First, Wohlstetters 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 contest the United States (for fear of losing its protection or attracting its "focused energy") but there be a host of lower action they can still undertake 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 it 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 both Iraq and Serbia. Indeed, had Moscow been less eager to show Washington that ignoring Russian interests was not for the best, it might have joined the West in pressuring Baghdad and Belgrade and helped the United States avoid the collapse of the 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 role of nuclear technology to countries like Iraq and put a damper on the emerging Russian program. 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
Institutions and the Western Order

An alternative explanation for the absence of anti-American balancing might be the unique institutional arrangements binding the United States and its allies together. According to John Ikenberry, the Western Order has long rested upon the willingness of the United States to commit itself to a set of multilateral institutions that limit its ability to either thrust or abandon its major allies. The plausible nature of the U.S. po-


2At the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, a terrorist group hit the United States with force (in this case, a terrorist group that can improve outreach to the United States and hence to adjust to deployment practices).

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 institu- tions, networks, and norms have broadened and deepened over the past four decades, and Ikeberry now sees them as akin to a formal constitu- tion 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. But where Wohlsteth traces stability to the unipolar material structure of the current system, Ikeberry sees it as the historically contin- gent, path-dependent product of institutionalized arrangements made over the course of the past five decades.

Ikeberry’s account underscores the unusual durability of the U.S.-led alliance system, and the features he identifies account for some of its re- silence since the Soviet Union collapsed. 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 disappear- ance 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. 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 disagree- ments arose over out-of-area issues (e.g., Vietnam, Suez) or the fine de- tails of NATO’s military strategy (e.g., the debate on "flexible response" in the 1980s), 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 institu- tions 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 confi- dent about U.S. support, and creates a greater chance for serious conflicts of interest between the United States and its long-time partners. NATO

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5 Ikeberry also suggests that "most of the ongoing war or a global economic crisis, the American hegemonic order appears to be immune to the kind of challenges." See Ikeberry, "Domination, Strategic Revenue, and American Power Order," 28.
6 See also Robert McCullum, "NATO's Paranoia after the Cold War," International Organiza- tions 59, no. 3 (January 1995): 445-76; and "NATO, "Structural Realism after the Cold War.""
7 Waltz makes this point in "Structural Realism after the Cold War," 94-95. 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 Transfor- mations of NATO," Financial Times, August 9, 2001, 17; and "International As- sets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War," International Organization 54, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 795-95.
has persisted because Europeans still want the U.S. "policier" 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. 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. In the era of transatlantic {

divide over issues 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. 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 protocols to the Biological Weapons Convention. The September 11th 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.

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

— According to an unnamed U.S. defense official, "The assumption that our forces are better trained than NATO's Army in Kosovo or in any new war zone." Wall Street Journal, August 9, 2001, A7. That process will be accelerated if NATO enlargement is linked to closer ties between NATO and Russia, and if NATO comes out to be largely superfluous in the way on terrorism, as James Kast, "The New NATO: Building an American Communist of Nations," The National Interest, (Fall 2001): 99-106.

Some of the institutional elements that Kasten identifies are probably irrelevant to the question of security commitments. This, he argues that transnational bonds and government connections help stabilize relations within the American system, but is not clear why such values require or reinforce the U.S. commitment to fight and die for Europe on this.

European leaders emphasized that the U.S. response should be "proportional," and public opinion polls suggest that there are serious worries about the U.S. handling of the war in Afghanistan. See Steven Erlanger, "So Far, Europe's Response Easier over Five Hours Given the United States," New York Times, September 19, 2001, B6, B7; and "German Opinion Swings Against War," Inquirer Weekly, October 25, 2001.
Fears of U.S. Retreat

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 likely to prefer to use U.S. leadership in the hopes of keeping U.S. forces committed to their region. 59

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

60 See Neustaedter, Tragedy of Great Power Politics, chap. 10.
explaining how 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 re-
advent is likely, one would expect to see more energetic efforts to de-
tel hop their own defense capabilities, as opposed to the modest efforts seen to date.

To summarize: each of these explanations offers useful insights into how other states are not balancing against the United States, despite its historically unprecedented concentration of economic and military power. But each helps only part of the story and none offers detailed advice for how the United States can remain an active, 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 remains if we focus not on power but on threats. 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 pos-
session 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, off-
densive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. Other things being equal, an increase in any of these factors makes 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 protect-
ing 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-

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ern Europe did not balance vigilantly against Nazi Germany because they also faced threats from each other and from the Soviet Union. 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. Thus "backing up" 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 "soothing to "bandwagoning" with it. Bandwagoning is risky because it implies a threatening state requires trust in its continued benevolence. Because interoceanic 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 Wohlfarth, 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 actions 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 affect the propensity to balance, although it is not the one or 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. 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. By the same logic, a state could grow so powerful

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39 Emphasizing the prevalence of "back panning" in Mediterranean, Tragedy of Great Power Politics, chap. 6.
40 As Walt notes, states that balance act safe "provided that the coalition they join achieves enough defense or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking." See Theory of International Politics, 147. For a recent formal analysis of these issues, see Robert Powell, In the Service of Power: State and Strategy in International Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). I discuss Powell's arguments in more detail below.
41 In the words of Aaron Easterly Fox, "Instead of moving to the side of the less powerful and thereby helping to remake the balance, [small states] tended to comply with the de-
that other states might be reluctant to try to balance against it. The lead-
ing 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 Wolfth's claim that unipolar-
ity 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 corollary: 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 neoclassic claim that states tend to balance, it is not really a violation of the theory, as Walt has noted repeatedly, states in anarchy must adopt policies of self-help (or ex-
pect to suffer the consequences). So long as power is not too heavily skewed, back-pedaling and balancing are the most promising "self-help" strategies. If one state must become preponderant, however, bandwagon-
ning may be the rational response. Thus, the United States has long en-
joyed a hegemonic position in the Western Hemisphere, both because its immediate neighbors have been too weak to challenge it directly and be-
cause other great powers have been preoccupied by events in their own regions. 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.
Yet several caveats should be acknowledged as well. First, this prescrip-
tion 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 infection
(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 of states consider when de-
ciding 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.84 It makes sense not to balance a prepon-
derent 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 re-
spond 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 diplo-
many, sap its strength and resolve, maximize their own autonomy and reaf-
firm 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.85

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 willing-
ness 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.

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

84 See Francis Hegna, "American Hegemony? Perceptions of the U.S. Abroad," Na-
85 Similarly, private and other individuals with little material power or social status often
devise elaborate strategies to subvert or limit the predictions 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 Transmis-

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. 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 European states: its power ensures that its voice will be heard and its actions will be taken, 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 loser would be a hegemon. We can agree on U.S. leadership, but not on one of our own." 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. 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. Accordingly, other states are more

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8 The "tripping power of water," it is emphasized by John Mearsheimer in Triumph of Tragedy: Great Power Politics, 1509-1870. Although Mearsheimer explicitly rejects the idea of an "offense-defense" balance, he acknowledges that geographic features (such as large bodies of water) can make conflict more difficult.


12 This is a critical aspect of so-called defense-defense theory. For the most thorough statement of this argument, see Stephen Van Evera, Causes of War, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: The Structure of Power and the Risks of War (Oxford: 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 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 actively 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 defense capabilities.49

In a general sense, the physical presence of U.S. ground forces in Europe or Asia is a threat because of 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' deterrence capabilities) or the potential air capabilities demonstratable by the United States in the 1991 Gulf War, the 1990-1991 invasion 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 Capabilities States are more likely to balance when they believe others have especially aggressive intentions. The logic here is straight-forward.


50 Robert Powell has developed a formal model permitting adjustment decisions in a world of three states. In its simplest form, the model suggests that states will usually prefer to wait or bargain rather than balance, depending in part on the available "technology of conflict."
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 reduced 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 we 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 conquest 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 it otherwise daunting capabilities.45

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. 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 mediating 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.46

In 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 potential benefits. Powell's model is tested by the analysis of alignment decisions in warfare (the first move in the model) is a decision by one side to attack one or both of the other two and Powell admits that balancing may be more likely to occur in a situation. Powell also notes that the terms of the second balancing and bargaining stage if the attacker is more willing to use force than the other two states. This lowers the payoff to bargaining and makes balancing more likely. In other words, the incentive to balance or bargain is affected by the judgment that states make about the intentions of others. Although Powell claims that his results challenge balance-of-power theory, his conclusions are in fact not all that different. See In The Shadow of Power, Chap. 15, especially 198.

45 As noted earlier, this is a central theme in Kissinger's analysis of the Warsaw order.

46 China may be a particular exception to this generalization, with Russia in a potential second-tier candidate.

Impediments to Balancing

Balancing behavior is not automatic, and the main impediments to effective alliance formation help reinforce the U.S. position. First, potential balances may try to pass the buck to one another, hoping that their allies bear the brunt of the effort to deter, contain, or defeat as aggressors. 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 recriminations. 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, all must coordinate strategy and avoid the temptation to seek unilateral advantages when opportunities do arise.

Given these potential pitfalls, a clever great power can try to thwart efforts to form a balancing coalition. 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 induce opposition long enough to accomplish their aims.

Summary

Balance-of-threat theory provides a competing explanation for the absence of anti-American balancing both during and after the Cold War. Balance-of-threat theory highly 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

― Thus, Napoleon once remarked, "How many allies do you have? Five, ten, twenty. More is the better, but the less is better." (Quoted in Bert F. Halley, René Hugot, and Jacques H. Jean, editors, The Power of Absolutism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 197.)


― On Adlai Stevenson's efforts to promote the balancing process, see Walt, "Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy.

― Research on the causes of the March German revolution (1848, 1855, 1870) is a classic example of this sort of research. 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 preponderance in such an especially worrisome form. 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 have 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 toward 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 "decency respecting 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 it in 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 trusted; 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."

Three specific recommendations follow. First, the United States should use force with forbearance, asking questions first and shooting later. Although it is well occasionally 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 objectivistic to secure, however, it can usually rely on policies of deterrence and retaliation rather than preemption, and reserve the latter tactic for these rare circumstances when it faces a potentially lethal danger. In general, the 62 See The Economist, September 21, 1996; Heidbrink, "American Hegemony?" 495-51; and also Martin Walker, "What Europeans Think of America," World Policy Journal, Spring 1998, 46-58.

63 For example, although U.S. officials did have genuine grounds for launching cruise missile attacks 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 act.
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."

Second, the United States can reduce the threat posed by its overwhelming power by giving other states some say over the circumstances in which it will use force. As Blennerhassett has emphasized, confining the use of force to multilateral contexts is an effective way to amuse 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. 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.

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.
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. 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 have positive effects on occasion. Promoting democracy can also be extremely destabilizing (especially in multipolar societies lacking well-established democratic traditions) and is likely to appear inimical and self-congratulatory to foreign elites. At the very least, the United States should not make exporting democracy the centerpiece of its foreign policy.

Practice "Radical Acts of Self Abnegation"

U.S. preponderance allows it to impose its preferences on other states in many instances, or to ignore the preferences of others and merely go its own way irrespective of what other states want. This capacity is a great asset, of course, but it can easily tempt the United States into precisely the sort of unilateralistic behavior that concerns even long-standing U.S. allies. The more that the United States insists on its own way, the more others are likely in recent U.S. power and search for ways to restrict it. Thus, unilateral 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 promised international conventions carry symbolic costs that may ultimately outweigh the legitimate benefits of rejection.

Russia is more likely to accept NATO membership if the door to its own army is opened wider, and it is clearly willing to accept similarmoves in the context of mutually agreed revisions to the 1992 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.


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, Idle Allies with a Stick," New York Times, July 8, 1993, 14. The United States will not want to use its power to reassert its position in July.
Keeping the World "Off-Balance" 145

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. This approach also implies a willingness to accept less-than-perfect agreements that are still a net benefit to U.S. interests.

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. By conducting collaboration primarily via day-to-day consultations between the relevant business, professional, and technical experts, this approach would diminish the sense that the United States was "imposing" its own preferences on its weaker partners. I also increase the likelihood that the United States might alter its own practices

notes, single-handedly initiated the verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention (which was supported by fifty-four other nations, including one NATO ally and Japan), and is aligned with strange bedfellows like China, Iraq, and Libya in opposing re-election of an International Criminal Court.


3 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. Indeed, the agreement would have had at most marginal effects on the level of U.S. transparency (which is already very high), and would have focused too open societies to provide for greater openness than they do at present. Although the protocol was not perfectly verifiable, it would have made it much harder for states to try to evade their treaty commitments by developing biological weapons secret.

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 transna-
tional crime), while the United States shows it is willing to engage in genu-
ine give-and-take.

These prescriptions do not require the United States to abandon im-
portant interests and does not mean that the United States should not in-
sist on its own way on occasion. Rather, it suggests that the United States
should look for areas where setting weaker states win costs something
but not much. By visibly refraining from using the full extent of its power,
and by not seeking every advantage that primary might confers, the United
States can reduce other states’ concern 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 benevo-
lence is apparent to others.

Keep Clients under Control

The ability of the United States to keep the world’s “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 en-
courage third parties to see it as overly dangerous. If the United States al-
 lows its allies to behave in a bellicose or provocative fashion, they may
drag into conflicts that might otherwise have been avoided.

This problem will be especially acute when dealing with client states
who enjoy high level of domestic support in the United States, and it may
actually be worse now that the Cold War is over. Because most U.S. citi-
zens have been indifferent to foreign affairs, the “narrow impact of groups
with strong and focused agendas has probably increased.” Domestic lo-
bies not only seek to expand their powers, and especially if the desire to
participate in domestic lobbies dominates their strategic calculations.
then the United States is in effect allowing its foreign policy to be made in
Taipei, Moscow, 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, ifclient 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 Menace

During the Cold War, the United States sometimes lumped leftist or Marx-ist regimes together and viewed them as part of an undifferentiated com- munist "menace." Although some U.S. officials held more subtle views (and developed strategies that reflected this awareness), the general ten- dency 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.45

Because the United States has an important interest in discouraging other states from joining forces against us, it should guard against this ten- dency 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, blurs us the possibility of improving relations with some of them, and encourages them to cooperate with one another even more.46 Similarly, Samuel P. Huntington's forecast of a looming "clash of civiliza-tions" could become a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy if it becomes the guiding framework for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.47

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


attacks. Although some U.S. officials favored a broad campaign against all terrorist groups (or suspected sponsors, such as Iran), covert 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 attack 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 terrorism-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 as 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.

Endgame Defense: Escalate Offense

Balance of terror 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. at home will be less dangerous to others and less likely to provoke a balancing response. 67

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. 68 In general, however, force postures that protect territory without threatening others, and that lack the capability to attack foreign territory, are likely to be less threatening than force postures that emphasize offensive power. 69

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

69 Thus the military forces (and doctrines) of the former Soviet Union were explicitly oriented toward offensive action and helped provide the countervailing means that subsequently existed them.
troops and tactical aircraft could be deployed overseas to defend key al-
lies, as they currently do in Japan, Germany, and South Korea. By encro-
ching 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.59

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. ca-
pabilities and depriving the United States of options it would like to re-
tain. 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 Afghan-
istan 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, re-
verting 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 coun-
tries. 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.60

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 de-
fenses 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-

60 For analyses advocating grave reliance on air-based or mobile power projection ca-
pabilities, see Karl Mueller, "Flexible Power Projection for a Dynamic World: Exploiting the
Potential of Air Power," and Owen R. Cook Jr., "Buying... from the Sea": A Defense Budget
Mueller nor Cook 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. And it does little good to declare that the system is intended only as a defense against limited attacks by localized 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.*

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 foreigners hold positive images of the United States, share similar outlooks on m-gal problems, and in general regard U.S. preponderance as benevolent, beneficial, and legitimate. Not surprisingly, other states seek to position the U.S. posture 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

* 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 limited disaggregation in order to protect human rights and define U.S. interests has gradually become an acceptable and even commonplace assumption 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 that threatens the independence of Georgia, or Taiwan, or stop a "saratov," or whatever else the American president might take as evidence of a lack of "peaceful intentions." This is why the Russian fear missile defense." See Alexander Abusch, "Why Russian Fear Missile Defense," Washington Post, August 15, 2001, A13.

** Chinese and Russian officials have warned that U.S. development of NMD would force them to build additional weapons to develop countermeasures. The director-general for arms control at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sun Zhongkun, confirmed China's position by admitting that "to deter our defense we'll have to spend a lot of money.... but otherwise the United States will still be able to 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 unconvincing; in his words, "How can we have our own national security on your superpowers of good will?" See Eric Eckholm, "China Says U.S. Missile Shield Could Force a Nuclear Buildup," The New York Times, May 11, 2001, A1. Chief 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 Tian's Words: '1 Hour the Western World Can Understand China Better,'" New China.
the Iraqi government needs to portray the United States as a heartless great power that is indifferent to the human sufferings that in far-reaching foreign policy imposes on weaker states. In addition to the normal sorts of geopolitical competition, thereafter, the United States must also defend the legitimacy of its own position. And this means being aware of how U.S. policy appears to others overseas. 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 requesting the treaty because it was not in [our] economic best interests. 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 heavily the most secure great power in modern history. 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 reliance support for Israel—but it is also fueled by a combination of myths and accusations promoted by anti-U.S. groups and governments. 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 15 million Arab), 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 ideological 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 exporting and socializing foreign elites.13


14 Thus, U.S. officials in Kuwait are skeptical of the U.S. missile defense plan as a part because they do not see the threat as particularly serious. See Phillip M. Gordon, “Bush, Missile De-


16 For example, many state leaders believe that U.S. sanctions are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iraqi children, while the real issue is Saddam Hussein’s refusal to use the UN “safe” food program.

17 There were roughly half a million foreign students at U.S. universities in 1997-98, while only 115,957 U.S. students were studying abroad. The disparity is even more striking when England is included; for example, there were 85,000 Chinese students and 73,073 Japanese students at U.S. universities in 1997-98, but only 9,470 and 8,785 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. 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. Although the shadow cast by American culture generates a hostilic backlash on occasion, third-estate Americans' "soft power" is probably potent but relatively non-threatening weapon in the ideational struggle for the hearts and minds of foreign elites.

Much of America's "soft power" rests on instruments and capabilities that are rare (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 "effect of being educated in the United States might vanish if the U.S. government tried to organize it for explicit purpose of cooptation. 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.

And because we still 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.
Conclusion

The formation of a cohesive anti-American coalition is not infeasible, and may not even be likely. 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 unscheduled 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 if 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 resentment 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

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wrong sorts of weapons. The Bush administration's first year in office does not afford much ground 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.\textsuperscript{26} 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.\textsuperscript{27}

Even so, we should keep this warning in perspective. The United States is the most secure country 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 Kissinginger). At 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 it is capable of accomplishing 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.

\textsuperscript{26} According to Tom Summer, former editor of The Washington Post, 'Bush' offers everyone conditions, partners and friends: he promises to keep to none; that is why he sounds everywhere. You cannot talk about American policy alone.' Yet the conversations are signed at constraining, not compromising.' Quoted in Thom Shumaker, 'White House Says the U.S. Is Not a Loser, Just Changed,' New York Times, July 23, 2001, A1, A10.

\textsuperscript{27} For a sceptical forecast on this point, see Steven E. Miller, 'The End of Unilateralism? Or Unilateralism Redefined?' Washington Quarterly 13, no. 1 (winter 1991-92): 5-19. Or a Republican foreign policy advocate Richard Haass said an international conference of defense of finish in February 2001: '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 Colin M. Winter, U.S. Allies' Expanding Reservations about Washington's Resolve to End Korean War with Tension,' AP Online, February 9, 2001.