Preserving American Primacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1990 Charles Krauthammer predicted that the most important characteristic of the post-Cold War world then just emerging would be the extent to which the United States towered over all other members of the international system. Even before the Soviet Union had finally collapsed, Krauthammer anticipated that the era of bipolarity would give way, not to multipolarity, as many were then anticipating, but to an interval of unquestioned American dominance that Krauthammer dubbed the "unipolar moment".[1]

It took some time for this view to gain widespread acceptance. By the end of the 1990s, however, the reality of American preponderance seemed undeniable. Scholars began to turn their attention to speculating about the logic and likely dynamics of a system dominated by a single "hyper-power" and policy analysts began to wrestle with the question, as one put it, of "what to do with American primacy"?[2]

September 11, 2001 provided at least a temporary answer to that question. For the time being, the United States would have little choice but to invest a significant portion of its energy and resources in beating back the threat posed by Islamist terror groups and seeking to stem the further spread of weapons of mass destruction. The 9/11 attacks, and the initial US response to them, sent contradictory signals about the real meaning of American primacy. On the one hand, the attacks themselves showed that, despite its awe-inspiring advantages in every category of military power, the United States remained open to blows struck by unconventional means, including the possible use of covertly delivered nuclear or biological devices. At the same time, the rapid overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the subsequent swift defeat of Iraq's armed forces demonstrated that the United States could still project its military power in ways that no other nation could even begin to contemplate, and that it could do so anywhere in the world, with minimal assistance, on short notice and without major mobilization or even substantial initial combat casualties.

Perceptions of American power reached a peak in the interval between the rout of the Taliban and the collapse of organized resistance in Iraq. Even those who had in the past predicted imminent decline for the United States were moved to exclaim on the extraordinary extent of its advantages over all potential rivals. "Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power," wrote Paul Kennedy in February 2002, "nothing." [3] Comparisons to Britain and Rome were

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[1] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 70, no.1 (1991), pp. 23-33.

[2] Richard N. Haass, "What to Do With American Primacy?" *Foreign Affairs* vol. 78, no. 5 (September/October 1999), pp. 37-49. Regarding the dynamics of a unipolar system, see William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* vol. 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5-41.

[3] Paul Kennedy, "The Measure of American Power," *Middle East News Online.* Posted February 5, 2002.

deemed inadequate. With emotions ranging from enthusiasm to dread, observers proclaimed the birth of a new American empire of vast reach, overarching ambition and unchallenged power.[4]

The period since the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq has seen at least a partial deflation of the primacy "bubble" and a downgrading, in many quarters, of assessments of the true extent and likely future duration of American preponderance. Evident US difficulties in Iraq, the lingering aftereffects of the bruising diplomatic battles that preceded it, increased anti-American sentiment in many parts of the world, and Washington's inability to date to achieve its objectives in confrontations with North Korea and Iran have all contributed to this change in atmosphere. Meanwhile, widening US budget and trade deficits have revived talk of "imperial overstretch," and evidence of China's continuing rapid economic growth, increasing military power and expanding geopolitical ambitions have caused some to ask whether this will be "the Chinese century."

Reports of imminent American decline, like the proclamations of virtual omnipotence that preceded them, are no doubt greatly exaggerated. Still, after the dramatic events and emotional gyrations of the last several years, the time has come for a clear-eyed appraisal of the prospects for American primacy. The purpose of this paper is to offer such an assessment, with particular attention to the following question: over the course of the next several decades, what are likely to be the major threats to the current US position? Drawing both on history and on the recent writings of some theorists of international relations I will examine four main types of challenge to the status of preeminent powers: the rise of one or more "peer competitors"; the formation of a countervailing coalition; asymmetric threats from comparatively weak states or non-state actors and the possibility of domestic economic, social or political weakness. After examining the imminence and extent of each of these potential sources of danger, I will draw some general implications for American grand strategy over the course of the next several decades.

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[4] For a sampling see: Charles S. Maier, "An American Empire?" *Harvard Magazine* (November-December 2002); Stephen Peter Rosen, "An Empire, If You Can Keep It," *The National Interest* (Spring 2003); Max Boot, "American Imperialism? No need to run away from label," *USA Today* (May 5, 2003); Paul Johnson, "From the Evil Empire to the Empire for Liberty," *The New Criterion* vol. 21, no. 10 (June 2003).

A Peer Competitor

Dominant powers have always been challenged, and eventually displaced, by rising competitors. Nothing lasts forever. Why should the period of American preponderance be any different?

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, those scanning the horizon for potential peers focused first on the possibilities that seemed most familiar, and hence most plausible: a rapidly resurgent Russia, a reunified Germany and a fast-growing Japan.[5] The deep and continuing economic difficulties of all three during the 1990s, especially when contrasted to the surprisingly robust US performance of the same period, made clear what should probably have been obvious from the start: at least in terms of aggregate economic output, none of these twentieth century great powers has any hope of closing in on the United States, still less displacing it. Moreover, while their governments have shown varying degrees of discomfort with certain aspects of US policy (with Japan most content, Russia least and Germany somewhere in between), neither America's principal Cold War rival nor its major allies have shown any inclination to mount a direct challenge to its global preponderance.

Since the early 1990s, the search for peers has come to settle on two potential contenders: a united Europe and a rising China. Of these, the first now looks increasingly unlikely to pose a challenge to American primacy, while the second appears on track to become a far more serious competitor than many observers had anticipated only a few years ago.

United Europe?

The last few years have not been kind to those who have predicted that Europe was on the verge of becoming a global superpower and might soon be in a position to displace the United States as the world's preponderant power.[6] Before it could ever hope to challenge American primacy, "Europe" (meaning, for our purposes, the European Union) would need three things: a unifying strategic vision and the shared resolve necessary to implement it; a set of strong, state-like central political institutions capable of making tough decisions, extracting resources, creating the instruments of power and directing them toward common external objectives; and an economic base sufficient to support vigorous foreign and defense policies conducted independently of, and potentially in opposition to, those of the United States. Of these three components, only the third

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[5] See, for example, Jeffrey E. Garten, *A Cold Peace: America, Japan, Germany, and the Struggle for Supremacy* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Lester Thurow, *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle Among Japan, Europe, and America*, (New York: Wm. Morrow and Company, 1992).

[6] For recent examples see T. R. Reid, *The United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004); Mark Leonard, *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

is arguably present today. At least on paper, Europe has the wherewithal to become a true global power, but, at least for the moment, it lacks the political will, and the institutions, necessary to achieve such a goal. Moreover, even if it eventually grows the necessary political spine, Europe's economic muscles seem likely to atrophy in the coming decades. Today Europe has the "wallet" but not the "will" to become a superpower; in future the situation could be reversed.

Notwithstanding the musings of some French and German intellectuals and officials about the dangers of American *hyperpuissance* and the virtues of multipolarity, there is no sign of a continent-wide elite consensus on the desirability of building Europe into an active counter-weight to US power. Indeed, to the contrary, the recent trans-Atlantic unpleasantness over Iraq appears to have discredited the very idea of a frontal assault on American primacy. As Timothy Garten Ash explains, "the crisis of 2002-03 showed that the Chiracian version of Euro-Gaullism leads nowhere. An attempt to unite Europe around a rival policy to the United States ended up splitting Europe down the middle."[7] There is little likelihood that such an approach to forging European unity will be tried again any time soon, and, given the deeply-rooted divergences of interest and perspective within and between "old" and "new" Europe, even less chance that it will succeed.

Despite continuing expressions of dissatisfaction with American policies and attitudes, popular enthusiasm for taking on the United States is also virtually non-existent. According to one recent sounding of European opinion, while a slight majority say that they want the European Union to take a more independent role in world affairs, an overwhelming 80% indicate that they want to see it do so in cooperation with the United States. Only 13% favor an explicitly competitive stance. Perhaps most important, there is also no evidence of strong public backing for the kind of sacrifices and exertions that would be necessary to make the EU into a genuine global player, however that role might be defined. While some 70% of those questioned said they wanted to see Europe become a "superpower" like the United States, only 44% would continue to support such a goal if it required higher military spending. Similarly, while 55% favored the idea of creating a single EU army, only 39% said they would do so if it meant a loss of jobs (presumably in the form of cutbacks in national defense forces) in their home country.[8]

Europe today lacks the mechanisms it would need to formulate and execute a unified foreign and defense policy, and it is unlikely to acquire them any time soon. While they may like the notion of playing a larger world role, many Europeans are increasingly wary of creating the kind of strong, central governmental institutions that this would require. As suggested by the recent outcome of referenda in France and the Netherlands on the proposed EU constitution, the experience of "broadening" the Union by admitting more new, comparatively poor members from the east has diminished enthusiasm for "deepening" it by giving Brussels more power, at least in so far as the populations of some of the older, wealthier nations to the west are

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[7] Timothy Garten Ash, *Free World: America, Europe and the Surprising Future of the West* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 82.

[8] *TransAtlantic Trends: Key Findings 2005*, at http://www.transatlantictrends.org/doc/TTKeyFindings2005.pdf.

concerned. This story is far from over, of course, and the EU may eventually acquire more of the tools with which to conduct a more independent and assertive external policy. Even if it does so, however, the addition of more pro-American members from the former Soviet empire makes it far less plausible that it will proceed in ways that run sharply counter to US interests.

In the long run Europe will face major difficulties in generating the economic resources it would need to support more ambitious foreign and defense policies. A combination of rapidly aging populations and traditionally generous social welfare programs is putting the large, advanced economies of Western Europe in a bind from which there is no easy escape. Sustaining existing rates of growth, still less increasing them, will require either a greater openness to immigration or a painful overhaul of existing labor, pension and tax laws and probably both. The likelihood that Europe will deliberately open its borders to millions of new Muslim immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East is considerably lower now than it was at the turn of the century. Post-9/11 bombings in Spain and Britain, assassinations in the Netherlands and riots in France make such openness virtually unthinkable. Meanwhile, even comparatively modest attempts at reforming the welfare state have encountered fierce resistance in countries like France and Germany where change is needed most.

A recent CIA-sponsored study concludes that if the wealthier European countries do not "adapt their work forces, reform their social welfare, education, and tax systems, and accommodate growing immigrant populations (chiefly from Muslim countries)" they will face "a period of protracted economic stasis that could threaten the huge successes made in creating a more United Europe."[9] While the CIA describes the problems as "serious but not insurmountable," the daunting magnitude of the measures necessary to avoid it makes stasis seem like a good bet. Instead of venturing forth to challenge the United States and boldly reshape the world, an aging, stagnant Europe is far more likely to be preoccupied with its own internal problems and squabbles. Over the course of the next several decades Europe's weakness and its inability or unwillingness to participate vigorously in meeting shared security threats could pose a greater challenge to American strategists than its strength.

Instead of being poised for economic take off and an increasingly weighty world role, Europe appears to be on the brink of a long period of relative decline. Adam Posen of the Institute for International Economics estimates that the addition of ten new members in 2004 brought the EU to a position of rough equality, in terms of total output, with the United States. Absent major reforms, however, Posen calculates that Europe's aggregate growth rate will remain relatively low and its combined GDP will shrink in comparison to that of the United States and as a share of total world output.[10]

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[9] Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project, *Mapping the Global Future* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2004), p. 57.

[10] Adam S. Posen, "Fleeting Equality: The Relative Size of the US and EU Economies to 2020," Brookings Institution, *US-Europe Analysis Series* (September 2004) at http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cuse/analysis/index/htm.

RISING CHINA

China is clearly on a very different trajectory. Compared to the United States and, even more, to Europe, China's economy is growing extremely rapidly and its relative weight in the world is increasing accordingly. Depending on whether market exchange rates or purchasing power parity comparisons are employed, China is today either the seventh largest national economy or the second. Even using the more conservative basis for calculation, by 2015 China will likely have displaced Japan from the number two spot and by 2025 its economy will be larger than those of the four largest EU members combined (Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Italy). Sometime towards the middle of this century China's total economic output could exceed that of the United States.[11]

China's rapid overall growth has made it relatively easy for the central authorities to pay for a substantial, sustained military buildup. The fact that, even according to its own statistics, Beijing has boosted military budgets by more than 10% each year for over a decade, also suggests the seriousness of its commitment to seeing China play a larger geopolitical role. In contrast to their European counterparts, Chinese elites do not seem ambivalent on this point, nor, for the moment, do they lack the state mechanisms with which to mobilize the resources required to act on their ambitions.

Public opinion obviously does not exert the same influence on policy in authoritarian China as it does in democratic Europe. Nevertheless, the evident growth of popular nationalism in the past decade suggests that China's current rulers have the wind at their backs. Instead of having to cajole reluctant citizens for support and sacrifice, they are more likely in the years ahead to have to restrain those who demand an even tougher and more assertive stance towards their nation's rivals and traditional enemies. Unless they are very different from their counterparts in other fast-rising powers of the past, a substantial fraction of China's people will want to see their country's international role expand along with its wealth. Europeans may be chastened by experience, weary of the pursuit of national glory and longing only for the good, quiet life. But many Chinese still seem eager to see their nation win the respect and influence that they feel has long been denied it, and which they believe to be its due.

All of these factors taken together make China a much more plausible potential challenger to American primacy than Europe. Several caveats are in order, however. First, as many Chinese spokesmen (and US China experts) soothingly advise, a rising China does not necessarily have to be a direct competitor, still less an enemy, of the United States. Projecting recent trends into the future is also risky. China's economy may not continue to grow at anything like its recent rates and it could well encounter major setbacks and crises in the coming decades. The country's political system may also undergo significant, and possibly revolutionary, changes that could delay China's rise or radically alter its goals. Finally, even if the regime remains intact and the

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[11] See the estimates in Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming With BRICS: The Path to 2050," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper No. 99, October 1, 2003.

economy continues to expand, China's huge population means that for a long time to come it will remain relatively poor by comparison to the United States.

The last point may be true but strategically irrelevant. Japan's economy is estimated to have been only one seventh the size of the United States on the eve of World War Two, and the Soviet Union's was probably less than a third as large at the start of the Cold War.[12] With sufficient motivation, and a strong enough state, even countries that are relatively poor can still pose a potent challenge to better-off rivals.

Geography also gives China some significant strategic advantages that could offset, to a degree, a continuing American edge in overall national wealth and technological sophistication. Despite improvements in communications and transportation technology, the United States is still a very long way from Asia and it must exert considerable effort to project and maintain its power in the region. The United States is a Pacific power by virtue of its location, but it is an Asian power by invitation and because of its continuing close relationships with a relatively small number of regional friends and allies. China, on the other hand, enjoys interior lines of communication, is embedded in Asia and contiguous to all of its various sub-regions. China is at the short end of what is, for the United States, a very long "power gradient" and this gives it enduring advantages in any regional, Asia-focused strategic competition.

Beyond Asia, China's rapid growth is giving it the motive and the means to play a more active global role. As has become increasingly evident in the last few years, China's insatiable appetite for raw materials and natural resources and its desire for markets and investment opportunities are propelling it outward into the world. China now has substantial stakes in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Latin America as well as all parts of Asia and, of course, the United States. The fact that China has become South Korea's number one trading partner, a major importer of Australian natural gas and a significant investor in infrastructure development projects in Iran, Sudan and Venezuela means that it has interests, and also potential leverage, where it previously had none. Precisely how it will employ this leverage remains to be seen, but it would hardly be surprising if China tried to use its growing economic weight to influence the political behavior of other parties. Beijing might seek, for example, to gain increased support for a final resolution of the Taiwan issue, or it could seek to bolster others in their efforts to resist American pressures for political reform. In the long run, it might even hope to be able to persuade some traditional friends of the United States to reduce their strategic dependence on Washington and to pursue more "balanced" or neutral policies.

While it will take many decades to become a full-fledged peer, China today appears to have both the "will" and the "wallet" to compete actively with the United States for power and influence, not only in Asia, but around the world.

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[12] Estimates derived from tables in Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), pages 201 and 369.

A Countervailing Coalition

Throughout the history of the modern state system, the rise to preeminence of any one power has eventually led its weaker counterparts to band together, pooling their resources in order to balance against a force that no one of them could hope to counter on its own. The formation of countervailing coalitions is usually the step that intervenes between the decline of one preeminent power and the eventual rise of another. [13]

Since the era of bipolarity came to a sudden and unexpected end, many observers have anticipated the eventual emergence of a group of major powers drawn together by their desire to balance and constrain the awesome power of the United States.[14] Following 9/11, and especially after the controversy over American intervention in Iraq, these expectations grew stronger. To date, however, no overtly anti-US alliance or coalition has formed among the major powers, and none is on the horizon. While there is some evidence that other powers have sought to collaborate in constraining the United States in various indirect ways (so-called "soft balancing") this activity appears less consequential than it is sometimes made out to be.

Hard Balancing

Instead of grouping together to oppose American hegemony, the other major players in the international system have mostly been at pains to improve relations with the United States. In the past five years, Tokyo has taken steps to strengthen its alliance with Washington, and the United States and India have moved from an arms-length relationship to a tacit strategic alignment. Despite strains, the trans-Atlantic alliance remains intact and most European governments have been working hard to patch up the wounds opened by the debate over Iraq. Since 9/11 US-China relations have been marked by intensified efforts at cooperation and by a notable warming in the diplomatic climate. Washington and Moscow also appeared for a time to be headed toward a closer and more cordial relationship, but this trend has been derailed for the moment by American objections to anti-democratic developments inside Russia and by Russian suspicion of a US role in the "color revolutions" of 2003 and 2004.

Of the "main centers of global power" only China and Russia have been engaged in anything that remotely resembles traditional balancing behavior. Beijing and Moscow signed a "Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation" in June 2001. The leaders of both countries

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[13] See Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

[14] See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* vol. 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 44-79 and Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* vol. 17, no.4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5-51.

have spoken periodically of the dangers of a unipolar (i.e., US-dominated) world and of their desire to see a return to multipolarity. As it has done since the 1990s, Russia continues to supply China with a wide range of sophisticated arms and other high-end military systems, some of which are almost certainly targeted against American forces in the Western Pacific. Russia and China have entered into collaborative efforts to deal with the problems of instability and terrorism in their shared Central Asian backyard. In the summer of 2005, the two Eurasian powers engaged in a major joint military exercise, their first in over forty years.

Moscow and Beijing clearly share a concern with American power and intentions. For the moment, however, their *entente* remains well short of a formal alliance. So far as is known the two have not signed a mutual defense pact, nor have they made any other commitments that might risk damage to their relationship with the United States. Both countries also have motives that have little to do with countering American power. Russian arms sales may have an impact on the US-China military balance, but the driving force behind them appears to be more commercial than strategic. Similarly, while it could help to undercut a long-term American presence in the region, Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia is likely aimed more at its stated goal of dealing with terrorism than at dislodging the United States.[15]

Why have some or all of the major powers failed thus far to coalesce into a countervailing coalition and what (if anything) might cause them to do so in the future? Part of the answer may well be that, as William Wohlforth has suggested, the United States is now simply so dominant that no conceivable grouping of potential rivals can hope to match it.[16] Trying openly to oppose the United States would be a losing proposition, at least for the moment, and it could provoke responses that would impose considerable costs on the erstwhile balancers, including likely cuts in trade and investment with the United States and an accelerated American military build up. Unless at least one potential challenger can draw much closer to parity with the United States, a countervailing coalition will remain out of reach.

While it is doubtless true that balancing the United States would be a daunting task, it is also clear that many of the states that could conceivably contribute to such an effort are showing very little inclination to do so. Since the end of the Cold War, the nations of Europe, in particular, have cut back sharply on defense spending as a share of GDP, and even those that have been especially vociferous in their recent criticisms of the United States have done nothing to reverse the downward trend. Russia and China are, once again, exceptions to this rule, but despite increases in overall spending they continue to shoulder defense burdens that are lower than they

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[15] For an assessment of the Sino-Russian relationship see Stephen G. Brooks and William G. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security* vol. 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 83-88.

[16] See Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World."

were 15 or 20 years ago. If they felt an urgent need, the other major powers could certainly do a great deal more, individually and collectively, to counterbalance the United States.[17]

The absence of more vigorous balancing behavior is a result of assessments by foreign powers of America's intentions, as well as judgments about its capabilities. Alliances form in response to converging perceptions of threat. Despite worries about the extent of America's preponderance and complaints about its behavior, it seems clear that none of the other powers presently sees the United States posing a direct, imminent danger to its sovereignty or survival. Could this change in the future? Some commentators assert that the Bush administration's "aggressive unilateralism" has already set such a shift in motion by eroding "the United States' long-enjoyed reputation for benign intent and giving other major powers reason to fear its power."[18] This argument is doubly dubious. The non-democratic powers have clearly never regarded American intentions toward them as benign. China's rulers have long feared that the United States was out to undermine them by encouraging "peaceful evolution" and that it might someday challenge their sovereignty more directly by supporting Taiwan independence. Russia's present autocratic regime has similar worries about subversion. While the Kremlin probably does not fear direct American military intervention, it likely believes that the United States would oppose efforts to re-impose Russian dominance over its "near abroad." US criticism of Moscow's policies in Chechnya may also appear to be aimed at encouraging separatism, weakening Russia and further constricting its boundaries. Chinese and Russian wariness of American intentions predates the Bush administration, however, and will remain, even if the next US president renounces "aggressive unilateralism."

On the other hand, the notion that the major democratic power centers now feel threatened by the United States, or that the policies of the Bush administration have caused them to begin to think seriously about entering a countervailing coalition, is clearly an exaggeration. To the contrary, as has been noted, Japan and India have moved closer to the United States rather than recoiling from it. Even the more hysterical European critics of the alleged recklessness and belligerence of the Bush administration do not seriously believe that a trans-Atlantic war is in the offing or that a new alliance between the EU and Russia, or China, is necessary in order to prevent American aggression.

With the possible exception of more open and substantial strategic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, "hard balancing" against the United States is not on the cards. Nor are the prospects for a true Sino-Russian axis especially promising. China's rapid growth, its size and proximity mean that it is likely to be perceived as a greater long-term threat to all of its neighbors than the

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[17] See the discussion of this point in Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* vol. 30, no.1 (Summer 2005), pp. 115-119.

[18] Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," *International Security* vol. 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), p. 9.

United States, and this includes Russia as well as Japan and India. Just as it did during the Cold War, the United States is likely to end up backing the weaker of the two non-democratic Eurasian giants against the stronger, instead of having to oppose them in combination.

SOFT BALANCING

Short of forming a genuine alliance, other states could choose to cooperate in more subtle and indirect ways to constrain the application of American power. Among the possible techniques of "soft balancing" that analysts have identified are denial of access to bases and overflight rights needed to conduct military operations, provision of assistance to US adversaries, and coordinated diplomacy designed to block or slow US action or, at the very least, deny it international legitimacy.[19]

Those who believe in the concept argue that soft balancing against the United States is already underway, that it has been given a major impetus by US behavior since 9/11 and that, unless Washington changes its ways, soft balancing will soon give way to open hard balancing. Skeptics respond that there is, in fact, little evidence of systematic efforts on the part of other states to restrain US power. Most of the examples given to illustrate the supposed shift toward soft balancing are taken from the period leading up to and immediately following the US invasion of Iraq. In the longer sweep of history these events may well prove to be unique rather than representing a generalized trend. Finally, much of the behavior to which analysts point in an attempt to establish a new, overarching pattern of global politics can be better explained as the result of differences with the present US administration over specific policies, reactions in various capitols to domestic political pressures or the continuing pursuit of national economic advantage and private commercial gain.[20]

Is soft balancing an illusion or is it the wave of the future? The truth lies somewhere in between. Those who fear that they could someday be the targets of American might (i.e., the non-democratic major powers and a variety of lesser authoritarian regimes, including "rogue states" like Iran and North Korea) are evidently eager to see the United States restrained in whatever way possible. Given their present positions of relative weakness it comes as no surprise that they should try to find quiet ways of making common cause with one another or, when the opportunity arises, that they should seek to join forces with others, including some of the democratic powers who object to particular US policies or courses of action. French and German diplomatic cooperation with Russia in the run-up to the Iraq war is the most obvious illustration of this pattern. The parallel policies of China and South Korea in dealing with the North Korean nuclear stand-off and deflecting any possible US push for tougher policies is another.

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[19] For varying lists of techniques see Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," pp. 36-7; Lieber and Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing," p. 126; T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy," *International Security* vol. 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 58-9.

[20] These are well-summarized in the articles by Lieber and Alexander and Brooks and Wohlforth.

Indirect efforts to constrain American power are inevitable in some situations, no matter how attentive Washington tries to be to the wishes of others. Nor are they unique to a unipolar world. As Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander have pointed out, there are numerous examples of very similar behavior by US allies and nonaligned countries during the Cold War.[21] The notion that today's temporary and partial alignments of interest will soon congeal into a broad-based anti-US coalition is far less plausible, for reasons that have already been suggested.

Soft balancing is real, but in the larger scheme of things it will probably not turn out to be all that consequential. Even if other states band together on occasion to try to discourage the United States from acting, they are unlikely to be able to prevent it from doing so in cases where American leaders deem action to be essential. The invasion of Iraq is an example of the <u>failure</u> of soft balancing, not its success. As it gains experience in dealing with the strategies that others use to try to constrain it, Washington will develop more effective counter-strategies. These may include preemptive diplomacy designed to win over potential opponents and minimize the size of a blocking coalition or the simple avoidance of venues (like the United Nations Security Council) that maximize the influence of those who are certain to object to a particular course of action. In sum, soft balancing is more like sand in the gears than a monkey wrench in the works; it can drive up the costs to the United States of exercising its extraordinary power, but it will not bring the engine of American primacy to a grinding halt.

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[21] Lieber and Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing," p. 131.

ASYMMETRIC THREATS

Rome was ultimately laid low not by an imperial competitor of equivalent strength and sophistication, but by barbarian hordes. Could the United States suffer a similar fate at the hands of rogue states and terrorists?

Despite its evident advantages in virtually every category of military power, the United States faces a variety of challenges from nominally weaker opponents. A number of states clearly aspire to blunt America's conventional superiority by deploying weapons of mass destruction, while non-state terror groups aim to break its will with mass casualty attacks. At least in their current form, these asymmetric threats are not "existential;" they do not endanger national survival in the same way that massed Soviet ballistic missiles did during the Cold War, nor do they challenge in any direct way America's standing as the world's preeminent power. If not effectively countered however, proliferation and terrorism could result eventually in a substantial contraction of US global presence and influence.

PROLIFERATION

In the aftermath of 9/11, blocking the further spread of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, moved to the top of the list of American strategic priorities. As part of an intensified counter-proliferation campaign, the Bush administration chose to confront states thought to be at or near the nuclear "finish line" and moved to expose and dismantle a significant covert commercial procurement ring. These efforts have thus far met with mixed results. Libya and Iraq have been taken definitively out of the nuclear business and, so far as is publicly known, the A. Q. Khan network has ceased to function. On the other side of the ledger, Iran continues to move closer to acquiring an indigenous capacity to manufacture fissile material and North Korea, while promising eventually to dismantle what it has built, has declared itself a nuclear weapons state.

The outcome of these two standoffs will have a substantial impact on the prospects for future proliferation. If the United States succeeds in blocking and rolling back the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs it will close off two potential new sources of know-how and materials, discourage possible imitators and buy time for the construction of more effective non-proliferation policies and institutions. If the United States fails however, on one front or both, the likelihood of yet more proliferation will increase sharply. Other rogues (Syria? Burma?) will take inspiration from the fact that Pyongyang and Tehran succeeded despite concerted American attempts to stop them and will be able to turn to the new nuclear states for guidance and support. North Korea, in particular, will be in an excellent position to use its nuclear expertise, and its long experience as a covert exporter of drugs, missiles, small arms and counterfeit dollars, to fill the gap that A.Q. Khan left behind. Some US friends and allies (Japan? Egypt? Saudi Arabia? Turkey?), menaced by their new nuclear neighbors, will likely choose to acquire matching capabilities of their own. Already strained to its limits, the existing non-proliferation regime could collapse altogether. In the early 1960s, fifteen years into the Cold War, some analysts predicted wrongly that the world was about to experience a wave of

proliferation. Today, fifteen years into the post-Cold War era, those predictions may be about to come true.

In a more highly proliferated world the United States would still be the preponderant power, but its willingness to use its superior capabilities and its ability to influence events would be constrained. Washington's warnings that "all options remain on the table" in dealing with near-nuclear rogue regimes have already lost much of their credibility; what remains will evaporate once these states have clearly acquired nuclear weapons. Rulers faced with mounting international pressure, or the prospect of attack, could threaten to lash out if pushed to the wall or warn that their removal would result in a loss of control over WMD arsenals. Kim Jong-Il has already shown a remarkable capacity to extract rewards merely by threatening to acquire nuclear weapons. Demonstrating that he actually possessed them could provoke a backlash, but it might also lead to yet more concessions by his increasingly nervous neighbors. Because it will force others to treat them with caution, even deference, getting nuclear weapons will probably extend the life expectancy of rogue regimes, with unfortunate consequences for others in the international system, to say nothing of their own people.

States with a strong pre-existing penchant for aggression, rooted either in ideology or in the psychology of individual tyrants, seem likely to become more risk-acceptant once they are confident that they possess a reliable nuclear shield. Tehran already supports terror groups that conduct operations against Israel, but it is generally careful to maintain plausible deniability and to discourage provocations severe enough to risk direct retaliation. A nuclear-armed Iran would probably be less restrained in its undeclared war against Israel and perhaps also in its efforts to destabilize and dominate the Persian Gulf.

Even the more technically sophisticated near-nuclear states like Iran and North Korea do not yet possess intercontinental range ballistic missiles, but they are close to having the ability to marry warheads to missiles that could hit targets hundreds, or perhaps a few thousands, of miles away. With help, other potential proliferators in North Africa, the Middle East and East Asia might be able quickly to acquire similar capabilities. As this happens, local friends and US allies in Europe and Asia will find themselves increasingly in the nuclear crosshairs. A growing sense of vulnerability has stimulated Japan to strengthen its own defenses and to cooperate more closely with the United States. In the case of Europe, however, the consequences could be to reinforce tendencies toward strategic separation, conflict avoidance and even appeasement. The threat of nuclear retaliation would give European governments another reason to stand aside and perhaps to deny US forces access to bases and air space in a future confrontation between Washington and Tehran or an American effort to re-supply Israel in another Middle East war. The fear of being struck might also make regional governments reluctant to cooperate, even if they were reasonably confident that the United States could ultimately defeat a nearby aggressor. Seeing the mullahs removed from power would do little to comfort the people of Oman or Kuwait if their country had meanwhile been devastated by a handful of nuclear weapons.

America's relations with its traditional friends could be dramatically altered if some of them decide to acquire nuclear weapons, especially if they do so against Washington's wishes. If Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Turkey want their own nuclear force to counter Iran's, they are more likely to get help from Pakistan and China than they are from the United States. If they succeed

in acquiring their own deterrent capability, these states (and perhaps others, including South Korea and Japan) will become less dependent on the United States and less responsive to its wishes. In a more highly proliferated world the United States may find its military burdens lightened in certain respects but it could also find itself with less access and less influence in areas that continue to be of considerable strategic importance.

There is finally the question of the direct impact on American military operations and national strategy of having to face vastly weaker enemies who are nevertheless armed with weapons of mass destruction. States with small arsenals and limited range delivery systems might be tempted to strike first at US forces massing in their vicinity, whether because their leaders believed that this would give them their best chance at survival or in fulfillment of some apocalyptic, nihilistic vision. American commanders could not afford to ignore this possibility, as irrational and self-destructive as it might appear in narrowly military terms. To counter the threat of escalation against forward deployed forces, the United States will need some combination of better defenses, diverse basing options and improved long-range precision strike capabilities. Without them, American political leaders could find themselves with few appealing options in a crisis involving a WMD-capable rogue state and might even feel compelled to pull back or back down.

States with only a handful of long-range ballistic missiles might still be able to destroy an American city if they were able to get off a lucky shot. The risk of such a catastrophe would have to give US decision makers pause, even if did not ultimately deter them. More worrisome would be the prospect that an enemy might somehow manage to smuggle nuclear devices or bio-weapons into the United States, perhaps in anticipation of an eventual confrontation. A threat to unleash these weapons in retaliation for a US attack, or a well-timed demonstration of their existence, could provoke public panic and official indecision. Given the proven capacity of America's precision strike forces and its increasing ability to intercept ballistic missiles, a covert BW capability may already look like the best available second-strike deterrent option for fearful rogues on limited budgets. In a world where such capabilities are known (or merely suspected) to have spread, American leaders will have little choice but to become far more cautious about when and where they intervene.

TERRORISM

The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks may have hoped to make Americans recoil in horror from the world and, in particular, from the Middle East. Instead, at least for the moment, the experience of being struck at home has provoked precisely the opposite response. The United States has now launched itself into the very heart of the Arab world and has increased its presence and engagement on a variety of other fronts, from North Africa through the Middle East and into Central, South and Southeast Asia.

Fortunately, the four years since 9/11 have provided no new evidence with which to assess the long-term impact on American primacy of repeated terror attacks. It is possible, even likely, that another strike on US soil would stimulate an even more assertive response. Despite recent increases, spending on defense (including homeland security) is still relatively low as a share of GNP when compared with the Cold War (around four percent today vs. a Cold War average of

over seven percent), to say nothing of World War Two. The United States can certainly afford to build and deploy armed forces considerably larger than those it presently possesses. US military power could also be used more widely and with fewer constraints than has been the case to date. In the aftermath of a terrorist nuclear attack on New York or Washington, for example, American decision-makers might well decide to destroy known nuclear sites in Iran and North Korea; to deliver an ultimatum, backed by the threat of war, demanding that Pakistani nuclear sites be placed under some form of US or international control; to launch sizeable, near-simultaneous ground and air attacks to destroy suspected terrorist bases and safe havens across the broader Middle East or to stop and search large numbers of ships on the high seas. In short, the next phase in the war on terror could see an even more overwhelming display, and a further consolidation, of US military preponderance.

In the long run, however, failure to fend off further attacks could lead to a sweeping reassessment of strategy and an equally far-reaching reallocation of resources. The initial reaction to 9/11 was a product of several factors. Faced with a novel threat of uncertain dimensions, US leaders made a basic, largely intuitive judgment that a primarily defensive response would be ineffective and, in any event, too costly. Those in office at the time also happened to be strongly inclined, by experience and temperament, to believe that the best defense is a good offense. The Cold War legacy of forward bases and rapidly deployable forces made an aggressive response easier to contemplate and to carry out. Finally, what some have called the American "Jacksonian" tradition guaranteed strong, initial support for a policy that aimed to crush the nation's enemies with overwhelming force.[22]

A successful WMD attack, or a prolonged string of smaller, but seemingly random and unstoppable suicide bombings in buses, schools and shopping malls, could force a shift away from offensive measures towards a much more defensive posture and, perhaps ultimately, a greatly diminished US world role. The failure to prevent such catastrophes could strengthen the hand of those who argue that it is US policy which provokes terrorism and who therefore favor a substantial American disengagement from the broader Middle East. Even if such assertions do not carry the day, fear of further attacks will inevitably encourage increased investment in defensive measures. A great deal of money has certainly been spent since 9/11 to secure the nation's borders, ports, airspace and at least a portion of its industrial base, transport and communications networks. But, given inherent uncertainties about the threat, there is no way of knowing whether existing programs have reduced the likelihood of attack a great deal, very little or something in between. While, in theory, there should be some point at which additional investments in defenses will have a diminishing marginal return, in practice it may be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to know when that point has been reached. As hard as it was to deal with during the Cold War, the question of "how much is enough" could prove even more challenging during a protracted struggle against terrorism. There is no reason to believe that the

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[22] The term is taken from Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

answer given to date, in the form of existing and planned homeland defense programs, will be the final one.

Should current programs fail to prevent further attacks, homeland defense will become a virtually bottomless pit into which a great deal more money is poured in the years ahead. Additional funds could be demanded to pay for everything from an Israeli-style "wall" along the Mexican border, to government financed hardening of chemical plants and nuclear reactors, to serious nationwide civil defense preparations for evacuating (or sheltering) the residents of major cities in the event of nuclear or biological terror attack. While there is no necessary trade-off between them, the size and expense of such programs would put considerable downward pressure on spending for offensive, power projection capabilities.

Terrorists cannot defeat the United States. But if they are not themselves decisively defeated, they could cause Washington to call home its legions, thereby hastening the end of the era of clear-cut American global military preponderance.

INTERNAL WEAKNESS

In addition to facing external challenges, past hegemons have seen their power eaten away from within by intractable political divisions, a loss of social cohesion or an erosion of economic vitality. The fundamentals of American economic dynamism and political stability are not presently at risk. However, a protracted war on terrorism could impose substantial burdens and test the nation's resolve.

ECONOMIC

The combination of a newly assertive foreign policy, expanding defense budgets, a ballooning federal deficit and intensifying global economic competition has led some to speak again of "imperial overstretch," a notion first popularized in the 1980s by Paul Kennedy. The United States dodged the decline bullet once before, when the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed and Japan's bubble unexpectedly burst, but perhaps its luck is about to run out. Even if it did not do so during the Cold War, the diversion of resources to the conduct of a protracted geopolitical struggle may yet place the United States at a disadvantage relative to fast-rising commercial competitors. America may not be able forever to keep its position as the world's largest economy and leading source of technological innovation, but the burdens it has taken on in recent years could speed its relative decline.

Overstretch arguments generally come in two flavors: those that stress the fiscal consequences of a forward-leaning security posture and those that emphasize the deeper distortions that allegedly result from a prolonged mobilization of human talent and scientific resources for strategic rather than economic purposes. [23] As has already been noted, even after the post-9/11 buildup the burden of spending on homeland security and defense (including the extraordinary, and presumably temporary, costs of the war in Iraq) remains comparatively low and should be easily sustainable. As was true in the 1980s, the fiscal imbalances that have emerged in recent years are not an inevitable byproduct of bigger defense budgets. They are, instead, the end result of several sets of overlapping decisions about defense, taxes and federal non-defense programs, including extremely costly "entitlements," like Medicare and Social Security. The link between defense and deficits is a matter of political choice, not economic necessity, and a downsizing of strategic ambitions is not the only way to bring the nation's finances back into equilibrium. If the United States does not grow its way out of current imbalances (as it did, to a considerable extent, during the 1990s) they can be reduced through a variety of measures, including "revenue

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[23] For a critique of these arguments in their earlier form see Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Political Economy of American Strategy," *World Politics* vol. XLI, no. 3 (April 1989), pp. 325-358.

enhancements" and tighter controls on civilian spending as well as cut-backs in military programs.[24]

One aspect of the current fiscal situation is different, and potentially more worrisome, than the one that prevailed twenty years ago. Today, as during the 1980s, the federal government's ability to run big budget deficits is dependent on the continued willingness of foreign investors to buy its debt. In contrast to the eighties, however, the countries that hold the most US Treasury bills and other dollar-denominated assets are not all American allies and one of the biggest, China, is a strategic competitor and potential enemy. Twenty years ago, despite some anxious speculation, it was very different to imagine the circumstances under which the government of Japan would use its position as a major lender to put pressure on Washington. By selling (or refusing to buy) US Treasury bills, Tokyo could have caused the dollar to fall, American interest rates to rise and growth to slow. In the process it would also have hurt its own exporters and, more important, it would have done incalculable damage to the alliance on which it depended for its security. For Beijing, too, the economic and diplomatic consequences of dumping dollars would be huge, but given the nature of the Sino-American strategic relationship it is not so difficult to conjure up scenarios in which it might chose (or feel compelled) to do so.[25]

Fiscal issues aside, the argument that the needs of the "military-industrial complex" are once again threatening to divert people and capital from more productive uses, thereby undermining the nation's long-term prospects in global economic competition, also appears dubious at this point. American government and industry together spend more than twice as much on research and development as the next biggest spender (Japan), and more than the four largest EU member states combined. As has been true for a quarter of a century, industry, not government, continues to provide the majority of national R&D spending.[26] While some experts express concern about levels of government support for basic science (as compared to applied research and, in particular, work on defense and intelligence projects that are assumed to have limited potential for commercial "spin-off") such worries are not new. During the second half of the Cold War, critics warned that too much federally-funded research on weapons and space exploration would cause American companies to fall behind their counterparts in the other advanced industrial

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[24] For an analysis that emphasizes the difficulties of following any of these paths see Ferguson, *Colossus*, pp. 258-265.

[25] One possible trigger would be the imposition of US trade sanctions, perhaps in response to Chinese coercive action against Taiwan. Regarding the earlier arguments over the possible strategic implications of US indebtedness see Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Strategic Implications of Relative Economic Decline," *Political Science Quarterly* vol. 104, no. 3 (Fall 1989), pp. 408-409, 411-414. For an assessment of the current situation see Ferguson, *Colossus*, pp. 279-285. See also Andrew Higgins, "As China Surges, It Also Proves A Buttress to American Strength," *The Wall Street Journal* (January 30, 2004), p. 1.

[26] For a recent discussion see Adam Segal, "Is America Losing Its Edge?" *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2004), pp. 2-8.

democracies, who were presumably freer to focus on civilian applications. For the most part these worries appear in retrospect to have been unfounded, at least in part because there were, in fact, substantial spin-offs from defense-related research. Perhaps more important, the American tax, banking and regulatory systems remained highly conducive to investment and innovation. In contrast to its counterparts in Europe and Asia, the federal government also did not involve itself unduly in the business of picking commercial "winners and losers." Provided that it continues to get these fundamentals right, the United States should be able to hold its own, even as it wages a worldwide campaign to defeat terrorism and slow proliferation. Indeed, the breakthroughs in data processing and the biosciences that will be needed to meet these threats appear to have a better chance of yielding broad commercial benefits than those involved in developing and perfecting nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

All of this is not to say that the strategic challenges now confronting the United States might not, at some point, contribute to a relative decline in its economic vitality and overall national power. Government efforts to control or monitor research on topics with possible national security implications such as genetic engineering and data encryption could cause the locus of innovation in these fields to shift overseas. In recent years universities and scientific organizations have expressed concern that new, tighter visa restrictions are making it more difficult for foreign-born science and engineering students to train or settle in America. If justifiable concerns over terrorist penetration lead to permanent, substantial constraints on immigration, the United States could lose one of its most important and long-standing sources of competitive advantage.[27]

The impact of the 9/11 attacks, while substantial in sheer dollar terms, was limited in duration and geographic scope. Having absorbed a stunning blow, the US economy, New York City and the airline and insurance industries were able to shake it off and recover, albeit with varying degrees of alacrity. Although it is impossible to know with certainty, it is conceivable that the cumulative effect of repeated, small "conventional" terror attacks could be larger and more enduring. While they might do less damage with each individual blow, a wave of strikes by suicide bombers in buses, trains and shopping malls could disrupt established patterns of commerce, travel and tourism and drive up costs for insurance, transport and basic necessities. The American people would no doubt adapt to new, unpleasant realities, as Israelis have been forced to do, but the impact on the US economy and society of having to endure a state of siege could hardly be positive. At the extreme, it is possible that a seemingly unstoppable terrorist campaign could undermine America's image as a safe haven for foreign investment, reducing demand for dollar-denominated investments, driving up interest rates, depressing growth and hurting the nation's prospects in global economic competition.

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[27] The most recent evidence suggests that the problems of the last several years have begun to ease, at least in certain fields like physics. See American Institute of Physics, "Recent Data on US and Foreign Graduate Students," *FYI: The AIP Bulletin of Science Policy News* FYI Number 135, September 19, 2005.

Contemplating the effects of WMD terrorism takes us into the realm of the unknowable. The economic impact of even a single nuclear "event" could be almost unimaginably large. One study estimates that the detonation of a Hiroshima-sized nuclear device in a major port such as Los Angeles-Long Beach or New York-New Jersey would have direct costs of up to $700 billion and indirect costs, including lost trade, of $1.4 trillion in the first year alone, close to 10% of GNP.[28] A radiation dispersal device (or "dirty bomb") would do less direct damage but might still impose several hundred billion dollars in costs due to the necessity of port closure and clean-up.[29]

Beyond its more immediate effects, a terror attack in which a weapon of mass destruction was smuggled onto American soil could help to reverse prevailing trends toward greater integration of the United States into the world economy and might even lead to a worldwide depression and an end to the current era of globalization. In the aftermath of such a horrific event the federal government would face enormous pressure to impose draconian controls on the nation's borders, coasts and airspace, even if doing so meant accepting slower trade and less overall growth. In the short run, at least, all participants in the global economy would be harmed by such a development. Over time, however, the United States might find itself at a disadvantage relative to countries (China?) that were less fearful of being hit and remained more open to cross-border flows of goods and people.

POLITICAL

Primacy does not result from the mere possession of superior material resources; it is the product also of clear strategic purpose and the sustained exercise of political will. By the close of the nineteenth century, the United States already had the world's largest economy, but its government and people had yet to summon up the resolve necessary to mobilize more than a tiny fraction of its vast resources for external purposes, nor had they reached broad agreement on what those purposes should be.[30] America is likely to retain for some time its place as possessor of the biggest GNP, and the most capable armed forces, on the planet. But if its leaders fail to cement a new, post-9/11 strategic consensus, or if its people lose their appetite for far-flung responsibilities and entanglements, it will become a "unipolar power" in name only.

The period since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan has seen an increasingly heated debate over national strategy, the conduct of the war on terror and, above all, the wisdom of the war in Iraq. Despite a sharp rise in rhetorical temperature, however, the differences between the two main political parties on issues of defense and foreign policy remain relatively limited. As

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[28] Clark C. Abt, The Economic Impact of Nuclear Terrorist Attacks on Freight Transport Systems in an Age of Seaport Vulnerability, Executive Summary, Abt Associates Inc., April 30, 2003, p. 4.

[29] See Heather Rosoff and Detlof von Winterfeldt, *A Risk and Economic Analysis of Dirty Bomb Attacks on the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach*, Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events, University of Southern California, October 23, 2005.

[30] See Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Richard Betts puts it: there is not yet any "significant difference on the question of whether the United States should exploit its primacy in global power in the post-Cold War period . . . Democrats emphasize American 'soft power' as the best source of leadership and leverage, and the Republicans emphasize 'hard' military power; both, however, want to use US power to shape the world in the American image."[31]

This could change, of course. After Vietnam, many Democrats (and some Republicans) questioned both the morality and the efficacy of the active exercise of US power, rejected the notion that their country had much to offer the world by way of example, and rallied to the slogan "come home America." These ideas failed to win widespread support and the Democratic party has suffered ever since from its association with them and from the lingering suspicion of many voters that it is weak and irresolute. An especially ugly ending to the intervention in Iraq, and the apparent failure of US efforts to promote political reform across the broader Middle East, could give new life to concepts that appeared discredited a quarter century ago.

There are already a few worrisome signs. A recent Pew survey found that the percentage of those who favor the proposition that the United States should "mind its own business internationally" has now risen sharply to 42%, the highest level since the 1970s (or the early post-Cold War period) when it peaked at 41%. Over half (54%) of those under thirty agree with this statement, a possible indication that, after two generations, the post-World War Two internationalist consensus has begun to dissolve.[32] If these trends persist and deepen, they will provoke much sharper divisions within and between the political parties, leading either to major realignment and a new consensus in favor of disengagement, if not outright isolationism, or to a protracted period of deadlock, political warfare and strategic drift.

Since the end of the Second World the American people have been willing to support an active, engaged and forward-leaning global posture because they believed it was essential to the nation's security, just (because it was conducive to the defense and propagation of freedom) and welcomed by others. Because these beliefs were widely and strongly held, past predictions of a return to isolationism have been confounded by events. Even Vietnam produced only a temporary and partial retrenchment of US power. The next few years will test the domestic political foundations of American primacy. If a substantial portion of the public comes to believe that pulling back offers the best protection against terror, that the further spread of freedom is unachievable at acceptable cost or that the United States is universally unloved and unwanted, then support for its present global posture will begin rapidly to erode.

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[31] Richard K. Betts, "The Political Support System of American Primacy," *International Affairs* vol. 81, no. 1 (2005), p. 6.

[32] See *America's Place in the World 2005* Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, November 2005.

IMPLICATIONS

The preceding analysis has a number of implications for policy (summarized briefly below) and for further analysis (outlined in an appendix to this paper).

With the passage of time since 9/11, some critics have begun to argue that the US government has exaggerated the threats posed by terrorism and proliferation and that it should be devoting more attention and energy to preparing for the "real" challenge of a rising China. While the second statement is surely correct, the first one, unfortunately, is not. If it wishes to preserve something resembling its present position in the international system, the United States is going to have to deal effectively with immediate, asymmetric threats while not undermining, and preferably strengthening, its capacity to deal with the more traditional great power challenge that may loom in the longer term.

As regards the asymmetric threats themselves: even without the possibility of covert delivery by terrorists, the prospect of the further spread of WMD to rogue states will complicate, and could compromise, US efforts to do many of the things with which it has been preoccupied during the first decade and a half of the post-Cold War era: projecting military power, bolstering alliances, discouraging yet more countries from acquiring WMD, mobilizing others to apply pressure on governments that abuse their people and threaten their neighbors and, where necessary, organizing coalitions-of-the-willing to use force against such regimes. Proliferation will not, in itself, overturn American primacy, but it will make it that much more difficult for the United States to use its overwhelming advantages to achieve any of these outcomes.

The passage of time since 9/11 and the failure to find WMD in Iraq have encouraged some observers to conclude that the danger of covert nuclear or biological attack has been overstated and may, in fact, be chimerical. While it would be pleasant and reassuring to think so, there appears to be little basis for such a conclusion. Indeed, to the contrary, there are reasons to fear that the threat may actually increase in the years ahead, especially if Iran (an extremist theocracy with undeniable ties to terror networks) and North Korea (a totalitarian criminal state ruled by a man of voracious appetites and questionable psychological balance) succeed in getting safely across the nuclear finish line. Whatever their governments may intend, the existence of two more sources of potentially insecure fissile materials (along with Russia and Pakistan) can only increase the risk of "leakage" into the hands of criminals and terrorists. And this is to say nothing of the likelihood that malevolent observers have noticed that it is possible to attack the US government with biological weapons and escape undetected and unpunished. It would be ironic, and potentially tragic, if American vigilance against the threat of WMD terrorism declines as its actual probability begins to grow. As the most likely target of such attacks, the United States does not have the luxury of conserving its energies and focusing exclusively on long-term dangers.

A great deal of ink has been spilled in recent years over the claim that American unilateralism, aggressiveness and arrogance have provoked a soft balancing backlash that will soon solidify into something more overt and tougher to deal with. Liberal internationalists have made much of this possibility in large part because it is a diagnosis that points to their preferred cure for all

strategic ailments: more and stronger international institutions. The analysis presented here suggests, however, that concerns over anti-American balancing, whether soft or hard, are at this point overstated. Good diplomacy will no doubt reduce resistance to US policy and bad or inadequate diplomacy can clearly increase it. But the United States still has a good deal of leeway in pursuing what it regards as its essential objectives, and it should not be dissuaded from doing so by the fear of making others anxious or unhappy. Fostering a favorable diplomatic climate with friends and allies and, where possible, building more effective international institutions are laudable aims, but they should be regarded as means, or intermediate objectives, rather than ends in themselves. While, from Washington's perspective, it would be ideal if others welcomed with enthusiasm the indefinite extension of American primacy, it is probably sufficient (and more realistic) to seek to persuade them that they can live with it and, in any event, that they have no real alternative. Despite the understandable American desire to be well-liked, it is worth recalling that hegemons are seldom popular.

For reasons that have already been suggested, fiscal imbalances are another purported threat to American primacy that is less profound than it is sometimes made out to be. Nevertheless, the renewed prospect of budget deficits "as far as the eye can see" will impose constraints on defense spending which, together with the high continuing costs of current contingencies and the new burden of homeland security spending, could cut into investment, slow transformation and leave the US armed forces less well-prepared to deal with China ten or twenty years from now. This fact, plus growing US exposure to possible foreign financial leverage, provides ample strategic reasons for reducing the budget deficit as quickly as possible.

The United States has been a major world power for just over a century, a superpower for six decades and a unipolar power for fifteen years. To judge only by material measures it should be able to maintain its present position for at least another couple of decades, if not longer. Whether it does so or not, however, will ultimately depend at least as much on human factors that are difficult to weigh and predict. The evolution of broad public attitudes regarding America's role in the world are one, albeit imperfect, measure that deserves attention. Harder to track, but ultimately of equal importance will be the evolving attitudes of the nation's elites and, in particular, its future intellectual and political leaders. For the moment, the post-1945 elite consensus in favor of active international engagement appears to have survived both the end of the Cold War and the handoff from those who actually experienced the Second World War to those who did not. In the long run, maintaining this consensus will be critical to preserving American primacy.

APPENDIX: PRESERVING AMERICAN PRIMACY, SELECTED TOPICS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

PRIMACY

- Where did it come from? (history and foundations).
- How should we use it? (alternative grand strategies).
- How can we best preserve/extend it?

PEER COMPETITORS

China

- Possible alternative Chinese strategies for challenging US primacy; regionally and globally.
- Strategic implications of China's rapid economic growth.
- Strategic implications of China's rapidly increasing dependence on material imports.
- Downside scenarios for China (environmental disaster, economic setbacks, rising unrest, growth of religious and other dissident movements) and possible strategic implications. for United States.

Europe

- Early indicators of the possible emergence of a genuine European "counter-weight."
- Alternative US strategies for Europe.
- Downside scenarios for Europe (extensive civil unrest, rise of extreme nationalism, sharp internal divisions and fragmentation) and possible implications for US strategy.

India

- Could it become a peer competitor of the United States?

COUNTERVAILING COALITION

China-Russia

- Early indicators of a true emerging alliance.

- US strategies for promoting division.

China-EU

- Scenarios for, and possible implications of, closer cooperation.

Soft balancing

- Alternative US strategies for preventing or circumventing.

ASYMMETRIC THREATS

- The next wave of proliferation – assuming efforts to stop North Korea and Iran fail, who is most likely to be next? What are the likely implications for US alliances, deployments, strategy? What should we want to have happen in East Asia and the Middle East under these circumstances?

- Extended deterrence revisited – how to use US power to deter Iran and/or North Korea from overt aggression, blackmail, covert support for terror etc. once they clearly have nuclear weapons?

- Dynamics of a (more) highly proliferated world – regional? Global?

- How to assess the risk of terrorist attack with WMD – how imminent is it? How do we know when it is rising or falling? Given the likely costs, what level of risk is acceptable? How much should we be willing to pay to drive the risk closer to zero? In light of the nature of this threat, how do we answer the "How much is enough" question?

- Deterring WMD use by non-state actors.

- Possible impact of successful WMD terror attack – on CONUS? Other nations?

- Life on the high end of Shubik's Curve - How far are we from a "BW Unibomber (one man able to unleash a plague that could kill millions)? What are the indicators that would warn us we are approaching this point? What happens if/when we get there?

- What do we know about the economic, psychological and political impact of repeated "conventional" terror attacks on other democratic societies?

- Possible impact of such events on United States.

INTERNAL WEAKNESS

- What are the most serious near and longer-term challenges to the economic underpinnings of American primacy?

- How seriously should we take the possible threat of foreign financial leverage?

- Possible impact on US military posture of large increases in homeland security spending.

- Measuring trends in popular and elite attitudes toward American primacy.

- The post-WWII internationalist consensus: could it break down? How? With what impact?