Two features have defined the post–Cold War international political landscape: unipolarity—and the United States’ concomitant hegemony—and globalization. U.S. power has underpinned an ever-more connected world characterized by dramatic increases in the flow of goods, services, people, and ideas across international borders. Today, however, it is widely perceived that the international political system is in flux and that the post–Cold War era of American preeminence is winding down.

Over the next two decades, international politics will be shaped by whether the international system remains unipolar or becomes multipolar. Can the United States sustain its primacy, or will the emergence of new great powers reorder the distribution of power in the international system? If U.S. power is waning, will power transition dynamics result in security competitions and an
increased possibility of war? In particular, what are the implications of China’s rapid ascent to great power status? If the United States is unable to preserve its hegemonic role, what will happen to the security and economic frameworks that it took the lead in creating after the end of World War II and that have provided the foundation for the international order ever since? In a world no longer defined by U.S. hegemony, what would become of globalization and the open international economic system that the United States established after World War II and expanded after the Cold War ended? The publications reviewed in this essay all grapple with these questions.

America’s Long Unipolar Moment

Unipolarity has preoccupied American international relations scholars, policymakers, and foreign policy analysts since the Cold War ended and the “unipolar moment” was proclaimed.1 Unipolarity has two aspects. On the one hand, it describes the post-1991 international system in which U.S. military and economic power has dwarfed that of all other states. Unipolarity also has a policy dimension: since the Soviet Union’s downfall, the maintenance of the United States’ preeminence in a unipolar system has been the overriding grand strategic goal of every administration beginning with that of President George H.W. Bush.2 Early indications are that Barack Obama’s administration—the key foreign policy positions of which are largely staffed by veterans of the Bill Clinton administration—will be just as equally wedded to preserving U.S. hegemony.3

By removing the only real check on U.S. power and ambitions, the Soviet Union’s demise presented the United States with the opportunity to use its capabilities to exert more control over the international political system, and it

3. During her confirmation hearings, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the Obama administration’s overriding foreign policy aim will be to “strengthen America’s position of global leadership.” Quoted in Daniel Dombey, “Clinton Aims for Pragmatic Diplomacy,” Financial Times, January 14, 2009.
has taken full advantage to expand both its geopolitical and ideological reach. Successive rounds of NATO expansion have extended the alliance not only into East Central Europe, but also into the territory of the former Soviet Union itself. Moreover, challenging Moscow in its own backyard, the United States has projected its power into Central Asia. It invaded Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003 both to consolidate U.S. dominance in the Persian Gulf and to transform the Middle East by promoting the spread of democracy. The United States has declared that free-market democracy is the world’s only viable model for political and economic development, having fostered an open, globalized international economic system based on the “Washington consensus” and multilateral institutions. The crucial question addressed by the publications reviewed herein is whether the United States’ primacy is sustainable.

Is U.S. Hegemony Exceptional?

In retrospect, U.S. dominance of the unipolar world since the Soviet Union’s collapse seems like a foregone conclusion. Yet, almost from that moment, there has been a vigorous debate involving both the scholarly and policy communities about the following questions: How long can unipolarity last? Should U.S. grand strategy seek to maintain unipolarity and American hegemony? Will other states attempt to balance against the United States?

Some neorealist scholars warned that unipolarity would boomerang against the United States. They expected that unipolarity would be transitory. Drawing on balance of power theory and defensive realism, these scholars noted that in international politics there is an almost-ironclad rule that great powers balance—internally or externally, or both—against aspiring hegemons. They buttressed their forecasts by pointing to the historical record concerning the


fates of past contenders for hegemony: the attempts to gain hegemony in Europe by the Hapsburgs (under Charles V and Philip II), France (under Louis XIV and Napoleon), and Germany (under Wilhelm II and Adolph Hitler) were all defeated by the resistance of other great powers. The United States, they argued, would suffer the same fate by attempting to maintain its post–Cold War hegemony. As events transpired, however, the fate of earlier hegemons has not befallen the United States.7

Whether there has been balancing against U.S. hegemony since 1991 is an intensely debated issue.8 It is beyond dispute, however, that the United States still enjoys a commanding preponderance of power over its nearest rivals. Drawing on neorealism, hegemonic stability theory, balance of threat theory, and liberal international relations theory, a number of prominent American international relations theorists have advanced several explanations of why U.S. hegemony has endured for nearly two decades without any major challenges and have suggested that the United States can prolong its primacy far into the future. “Unipolar stability” realists have argued that the present unipolar distribution of capabilities in America’s favor is insurmountable and that other states will not counterbalance because they receive important security and economic benefits from U.S. hegemony.9 Invoking balance of threat theory, other realists claim that the United States has negated counterhegemonic balancing by adopting accommodative policies that allay others’ fears of American dominance.10 Liberal international relations theorists and balance of threat realists assert that the United States has been successful because it is a “benevolent” hegemon.11 Other states, they say, will acquiesce to U.S. hegemony if the

United States displays self-restraint by exercising its predominance multilaterally through international institutions. Moreover, the United States’ “soft power”—the purportedly singular attractiveness of its political and economic institutions, and its culture—draws other states into Washington’s orbit.

A World in Flux? Creeping Doubts about American Hegemony

Until the fall of 2007, most members of the American foreign policy establishment still took for granted that U.S. primacy would last far into the future. Indeed, U.S. foreign policy circles were still preoccupied with the “American Empire” debate that intensified following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S.-sponsored campaign to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan. By late 2007, however, whispers of American decline, doubts about the dollar’s long-term prospects as the international system’s reserve currency, and murmurings about incipient multipolarity began to creep into the foreign policy debate. As a result of the financial and economic meltdown


that hit with full force in the fall of 2008—plunging the U.S. and global economies into the worst downturn since the Great Depression—these sotto voce doubts have given way to open speculation that the era of U.S. hegemony is waning. The five works reviewed here examine whether the United States can maintain its dominant position in a unipolar world, as well as the potential implications for international politics if it cannot.

The Transformation of International Politics

For an overview of trends that could affect international politics over the next two decades, a good starting point is the National Intelligence Council’s (NIC’s) *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*.\(^{15}\) *Global Trends 2025* is not light reading, but it is significantly more insightful and intellectually courageous than typical government reports. Its key geopolitical conclusion is that the U.S.-dominated unipolar world will give way to multipolarity during the next two decades spurred by two causal mechanisms: the emergence of new great powers (and potentially important regional powers); and economic, financial, and domestic political constraints that may erode U.S. capabilities.

China, India, and possibly Russia are emerging great powers.\(^{16}\) As *Global Trends 2025* points out, the rise of China and India to great power status will restore each to “the positions they held two centuries ago when China produced approximately 30 percent and India 15 percent of the world’s wealth” (p. 7). Their ascent is being propelled by “the global shift in relative wealth and economic power” from North America and the Euro-Atlantic world to Asia—a shift “without precedent in modern history” (ibid.). By 2025, China figures to have the world’s second-largest economy (measured by gross domestic product [GDP]) and will be a first-rank military power (p. 30). India, buoyed by its strong economic growth rate, will “strive for a multipolar system with New Delhi as one of the poles” (ibid.). Although both states could encounter speed bumps that might slow—or even derail—their ascents to great power status, the NIC believes that the “chances are good that China and India will continue to rise” (p. 29).\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) In addition to the rising great powers, states such as Iran and Turkey could emerge as important regional actors. These are part of what Parag Khanna calls the “second world.” Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008).

\(^{17}\) For China, potential hurdles to great power emergence include environmental degradation,
Because of uncertainties about economics, energy prices, domestic governance issues, and especially demography, Russia’s great power trajectory is more problematic than China’s or India’s (pp. 31–32). Between 2009 and 2025, Russia’s population is forecast to drop from 141 million to below 130 million, affecting the availability of manpower for both the military and the labor pools (pp. 23–24, 30). If Russia overcomes its demographic challenge and continues its revival as a great power, however, the NIC believes it “will be a leading force in opposition to U.S. global dominance” (p. 32). Because its great power status is closely tied to its ability to control both the energy resources and pipelines of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia will also seek to reestablish its sphere of influence in the “near abroad” (pp. 32, 82).

According to the NIC, in addition to relative decline, the United States will confront other constraints on its international role. U.S. military supremacy will no longer be as dominant as it has been since the Cold War’s end (p. 93). The United States’ soft power may diminish as its liberal model of political and economic development is challenged by authoritarian/statist alternatives (pp. 3, 8–9, 13–14). At home, economic and political constraints may undermine U.S. hegemony.

Global Trends 2025 was published just before the full scope of the global financial and economic crisis became apparent. Nevertheless, the NIC did have an inkling of the meltdown’s potential long-term implications for U.S. power. In particular, Global Trends predicts that over the next two decades, the dollar’s role as the international economy’s preeminent reserve currency will erode. Although at the time this issue went to press, the dollar remained strong and will continue to be the reserve currency for some time to come, China’s spring 2009 call to replace the dollar with a new reserve currency signals that the NIC’s long-term worries may be justified.19

corruption, an inadequate social safety net, and growing income disparities (especially between the rural interior and the prosperous coastal regions). NIC, Global Trends 2025, pp. 29–30. Also, if China’s growth does not rebound quickly from the global economic downturn, massive unemployment could threaten domestic social and political stability. For India, impediments to great power status could include both economic factors (inadequate infrastructure and shortages of skilled labor) and political factors (domestic political fragmentation and regional and ethnic insurgencies). Ibid., pp. 30–31.

18. As the NIC points out, Russia could be a geopolitical winner from global climate change. At the same time, however, although “demography is not destiny,” the NIC notes that Russia faces demographic challenges, including an underpopulated Siberia, a rising percentage of Muslims in its population, and a sharp contraction in population (ibid., pp. 31–32, 52). Nevertheless, notwithstanding projected demographic decline, in 2025 Russia still will be the most populous state in Europe.

As the NIC observes, the financial privileges conferred on the United States by the dollar’s unchallenged reserve currency status have underpinned the preeminent role of the United States in international politics since the end of World War II. Thus, “the dollar’s decline may force the United States into difficult tradeoffs between achieving ambitious foreign policy goals and the high domestic costs of supporting those objectives” (pp. 12, 94, 97). Moreover, the growing dependence of the United States on foreign capital inflows “may curtail U.S. freedom of action in unanticipated ways” (p. 97). The NIC concludes that America’s “interest and willingness to play a leadership role may be more constrained as the economic, military, and opportunity costs of being the world’s leader are reassessed by American voters” (p. 93). Ultimately, although the United States will probably be primus inter pares in a multipolar international system twenty years from now, it will have less power—and foreign policy options—than it has been accustomed to having since 1945 (ibid.).

What will multipolarity mean? The NIC’s answer is equivocal. Although it predicts that, along with Europe, new great powers will oppose a continuation of a U.S.-dominated unipolar system, Global Trends 2025 does not anticipate that the emerging great powers will seek to radically alter the international system as Germany and Japan did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 84). Still, there are factors that could lead to a more fraught international environment, including: the declining credibility of U.S. extended deterrence security guarantees, which could fuel new regional arms races (p. 97); competition for control of natural resources—especially energy—which could drive great power competitions (pp. 63–66); and fallout from the financial and economic crisis, which could cause the international economic system to become more mercantilist (pp. 93–94). Finally, in a multipolar world, established international institutions may not be able to deal with the challenges posed by economic and financial turmoil, energy scarcity, and global climate change. In such a world, a nonhegemonic United States will lack the capability to revitalize them (p. 81). Although no one can be certain how events will unfold in coming decades, Global Trends 2025 makes a strong argument that a multipolar world will be fundamentally different than the post–Cold War era of U.S. preeminence.

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20. As the NIC states, “We anticipate that arms races, territorial expansion, and military rivalries that characterized the late 19th-century multipolarity will be less significant in the emerging one, but we cannot rule out such possibilities.” NIC, Global Trends 2025, p. 82.

21. The risk of great power competition to control energy resources is especially great in Central Asia. Ibid.
Asia Up—The United States Down

In *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria argues that both China and India are rising great powers and are destined to emerge as the number two and three economies in the world during the next several decades (p. 21). But, in an odd formulation, he says that his book is “not about the decline of America but rather about the rise of everyone else” (p. 1). Indeed, Zakaria’s view of the United States’ power trajectory is remarkably sanguine. Instead of mounting traditional geopolitical challenges, he argues, China and India are focusing on soft power challenges to U.S. primacy. Thus, China has adopted an “asymmetric” strategy comprising skillful diplomacy and economic statecraft, and highlighting its own model of political and economic development, to make itself “an attractive partner, especially in a world in which the United States is seen as an overbearing hegemon” (p. 127).

Although his book’s title is provocative, Zakaria engages in the literary equivalent of bait and switch, because he concludes that U.S. relative power, in fact, is not declining significantly. Although paying lip service to the notion that the post-1991 unipolar order is waning, Zakaria maintains that the United States can retain most of its international political dominance. Such decline as the United States is experiencing, he says, is economic—not geopolitical—and shallow, not steep (pp. 42–45).

Zakaria argues, moreover, that the problems besetting the U.S. economy—overconsumption, low savings, current account deficits, and reliance on foreign creditors—could be fixed except that a dysfunctional U.S. political system is incapable of undertaking needed reforms (pp. 210–214).

When Zakaria looks at U.S. “decline,” he sees a glass still nearly full rather than one half-empty and leaking. The world, he says, is moving America’s way with respect to modernization, globalization, human rights, and democ-

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22. Given that students of great power politics are concerned with the relative power positions of rival states, it is perplexing that Zakaria—author of a widely praised scholarly book about the United States’ rise to great power status—suggests that other states can rise without a corresponding decline in U.S. relative power.

23. Sometimes described as the “Beijing Consensus,” China’s socioeconomic model emphasizes state-directed, top-down economic development and subordinates political liberalization to economic reforms that stimulate growth and modernization. The term was coined in Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Center, 2004).

24. As Zakaria argues, “The United States does face larger, deeper, and broader challenges than it has ever faced in its history, and the rise of the rest does mean that it will lose some share of global GDP. But the process will look nothing like Britain’s slide in the twentieth century, when the country lost the lead in innovation, energy, and entrepreneurship. America will remain a vital, vibrant economy, at the forefront of the next revolutions in science technology, and industry—as long as it can embrace and adjust to the challenges confronting it.” Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), p. 182. In fairness, Zakaria completed his book before the magnitude of the current global economic and financial crisis was fully apparent.
racy (p. 218). The United States has the opportunity to “remain the pivotal player in a richer, more dynamic, more exciting world” (p. 219). All it must do is to renounce the unilateralism and blunderbuss diplomacy that characterized the George W. Bush administration, and revert to its tradition of working through multilateral institutions and relying on diplomacy and persuasion. Zakaria argues that the United States can remain at the center of the international system for a long time to come because there is “still a strong market for American power, for both geopolitical and economic reasons. But even more centrally, there remains a strong ideological demand for it” (p. 234). The United States can remain the pivot of international politics by assuaging the need of rising powers for validation of their status; avoiding the imposition of its preferences on the rest of the world; and engaging in “consultation, cooperation, and even compromise” (p. 233). For the United States, Zakaria argues, the way to retain preeminence in the emerging international system is through soft power, not hard power.

Kishore Mahbubani’s The New Asian Hemisphere: The Inevitable Shift of Global Power to the East shares a common starting point with Zakaria’s Post-American World: international politics is being transformed by the dramatic shift in power from the United States (and Europe) to East Asia—especially China and India. From here, however, Mahbubani goes in a different direction. He celebrates Asia’s rise and condemns the West for being trapped in the past, unable to accept that the age of Western global dominance is drawing to a close (pp. 1–4, 9). Given Mahbubani’s reputation as a cheerleader for “Asian values,” it is unsurprising that The New Asian Hemisphere delivers a series of roundhouse blows against the West, including its political and economic dominance and—interestingly—its claim to a monopoly on soft power.

As Mahbubani sees it, the West should welcome Asia’s rise because Asia represents a culture of peace (pp. 78–79). In particular, he asserts, China truly is committed to a “peaceful rise” (pp. 84, 173). In contrast to Zakaria, Mahbubani believes that Asia’s soft power has far more appeal than that of the United States because Asia enjoys more “true freedom” than the West. Ar-


26. As Kishore Mahbubani says, “The past twenty years have probably seen some of the greatest changes in world history. The biggest shift is that the 88 percent of the world’s populations who live outside the West have stopped being the objects of world history and have become its subjects. They have decided to take control of their own destinies and not have their destinies determined by Western-dominated global processes and institutions. They believe that the time has come for the West to cease its continuing domination of the globe.” Mahbubani, The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), p. 125.
guing that the West inappropriately defines freedom in absolute rather than relative terms, he defines human freedom as including freedom from want, freedom of security (i.e., the absence of political instability), freedom to choose one’s employment, and freedom to think (pp. 133–140).²⁷ Using China as an illustration, Mahbubani argues that today’s Asians enjoy these freedoms in far greater abundance than ever before in their history.²⁸

Mahbubani’s bottom line is that Asia is a juggernaut that the West should accommodate; otherwise it risks being steamrollered. “The time to restructure the world order has come,” he writes, “We should do it now” (p. 235). Given what he terms the “incompetence” of the United States and the European Union (EU) as global leaders, the West should start by democratizing global governance to accommodate Asia’s increased clout (pp. 235–237).²⁹ International institutions—the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank—should be revamped to reflect the emerging distribution of power in Asia’s favor. “The West knows,” Mahbubani claims, “that the amount of political and economic space it occupies in the world is shrinking. The logical consequence is that the Western domination of several global institutions will have to diminish—not a prospect that many Western countries will relish” (p. 242). Mahbubani, however, clearly relishes the West’s decline. Global leadership, he says, historically is provided by emerging powers—today, China—and the West had better adjust to this transition (pp. 237–238). Perhaps so. But whether the West should welcome Asia’s rise, as Mahbubani urges, is an open question.

A Clash of Empires?

Parag Khanna’s The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order argues that international politics in the coming decades will be shaped by two forces: (1) globalization and (2) the geopolitical competition among three empires—the United States, the EU, and China—for global leadership and the allegiance of the “second world.”³⁰ The second world comprises states straddling the first-world/third-world divide and is located in the geographic

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²⁷ Mahbubani believes that in Asia, China is beating the United States at the soft power game. Ibid., pp. 229–234.
²⁸ As Mahbubani states, although for the West the “idea that freedom can be relative and can indeed take many forms is alien,” for Asians, “if they compare their lives today with their lives a few decades ago—they have achieved much greater freedom.” Ibid., p. 134.
²⁹ Mahbubani argues that the “role and purpose” of the major multilateral international institutions “has been distorted by the Western powers.” Ibid., p. 114. For his critique of Western competence in managing the international system, see chap. 5.
³⁰ As Khanna sees the world, Russia, Japan, and India will be distinctly subordinate players in the great game of geopolitics. The Second World, p. xvi.
spaces where geopolitics and globalization collide—such as Russia, Ukraine, Southeast Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Central Asia. In contrast to Zakaria’s (purportedly) post-American world, Khanna thinks that the United States will need to adapt to a non-American world in which its influence is challenged and contained by the EU and China.\(^3\) The rise of these two entities renders international politics intensely competitive, because globalization facilitates the intrusion of each of the three empires into the spheres of influence of the others. Khanna declares, “Globalization was once thought to be synonymous with Americanization; instead it drastically accelerates the demise of Pax Americana” (p. xxiii).

The EU features importantly in Khanna’s story. Yet, the ultimate success of the EU as an empire remains an open question because whether Brussels has the institutional cohesion to maintain the thrust of expansion as it reaches into ever-more unstable areas remains unclear (pp. 60–61). Although ambivalent about the outcome of the EU’s imperial project, Khanna is bullish about China’s rising empire. China poses a double strategic threat because it can challenge the EU for control of the Eurasian heartland and the United States for control of the Pacific rimland.\(^3\) With a potent combination of economic and soft power—and growing military muscle—China is becoming preeminent in Asia. Indeed, throughout East and Southeast Asia, states are banking on the likelihood that U.S. primacy will soon be eclipsed by a rising China (pp. 261, 300–306). China’s emergence as an imperial power center in East Asia is, Khanna says, simply a matter of back to the future—China is regaining its historic Middle Kingdom status as the regional hegemon (p. 302).

Khanna paints a stark picture of an America in decline. The United States, China, and the EU are locked in an increasingly fierce competition for global dominance and the allegiance of the second world—a competition that the United States is unlikely to win (pp. 323–325). U.S. power, Khanna claims, is on a downward arc due to imperial overstretch, domestic political malfunction, economic weakness, and diminishing soft power (pp. 326–334). “With neither its hard power nor its soft power functioning effectively,” Khanna

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31. Khanna argues, “The world’s superpower map is being rebalanced—but without a single center. By challenging America’s position in the global hierarchy and securing allies and loyalty around the world, the EU and China have engineered a palpable shift toward three relatively equal centers of influence: Washington, Brussels, and Beijing.” Ibid., p. xv.

writes, “the United States is learning that history happens to everyone—even Americans” (p. 323).

What does it all mean? Here, Khanna waffles. On the one hand, if the United States, China, and the EU establish geopolitical equilibrium, there could be peace and stability (pp. 338–341). If they cannot, there are plenty of sparks that could trigger armed conflict among them. As to which outcome will prevail, Khanna says the “answer remains unknown” (p. 341).

**America Uber Alles**

The four works discussed above are linked by several common themes: the distribution of global power is shifting from the United States and Europe to Asia; China and India are rising powers, and the United States is a declining one; the world is multipolar (or fast becoming so); and the United States’ ability to shape international politics is diminishing. In *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth vigorously contest these claims.

The—apparent—crux of the Brooks/Wohlforth argument is that the world will remain unipolar for a long time. Consequently, there are no structural constraints that impinge seriously on U.S. power. Although they attack multiple international relations theory perspectives, the authors’ main target—somewhat ironically given that Wohlforth himself is a realist—is neorealist balance of power theory. Contrary to neorealist predictions, they note, other states have not formed a counterhegemonic coalition to balance U.S. unipolar power, nor have other states engaged in internal balancing by undertaking major military buildups aimed at countering U.S. military preponderance (p. 23). Neorealist balance of power theory—which is about how states respond to rising hegemons—is inapplicable to international systems dominated by an extant hegemon (pp. 4, 7, 22–23). Indeed, where hegemony prevails, they argue, neorealist balance of power theory is flipped on its head: once a state attains hegemony, “it has passed a threshold, and the effect of increasing power is reversed: the stronger the leading state and the more entrenched its dominance, the more unlikely and thus less constraining are counterbalancing dynamics” (pp. 23, 35).

Because it uniquely combines overwhelming economic and military power,

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33. As the authors state, “Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, no other power—not Japan, China, India, or Russia, nor any European country, nor the EU—has increased its capabilities sufficiently to transform itself into a pole.” Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, p. 13.
34. For the authors’ definition of “structural constraints,” see ibid., pp. 13–15.
the United States enjoys unchallenged preeminence in the international system (pp. 34–35). Its huge military edge over potential challengers dissuades others from competing against it. Moreover, combined with collective-action problems, U.S. hard power advantages pose an insuperable barrier to states that might want to engage in external balancing against the United States (pp. 35–37). Also, Brooks and Wohlforth say, other states will not balance against the United States because the “threat” posed by a hegemonic—but geographically distant—United States pales in comparison to the regional security threats that they confront in their own neighborhoods (pp. 39, 40–41). Brooks and Wohlforth also argue that there is no structurally induced soft balancing against the United States. Although other states may favor “multipolarity” rhetorically, they simultaneously want to enjoy the benefits of cooperation with the United States and, hence, will not balance against it (pp. 62–63, 71).35

Additionally, because there are no systemic constraints on the exercise of its power, the United States, Brooks and Wohlforth argue, has both the opportunity and the incentive to use its hegemony to change the international system by reshaping “international institutions, standards of legitimacy, and economic globalization” (p. 209).36 In a unipolar world, the United States can change the international system without fearing a counterhegemonic backlash from other states (p. 216).37 Invoking E.H. Carr, they argue that the United States should take advantage of the “twenty years’ opportunity” it now has to reshape the international system to advance its security interests (p. 218).

**Polarity, U.S. Power, and International Relations Theory**

The five works reviewed here raise issues about the structure of the international system in coming years, the role of the United States in world politics, and the validity of contending theories of international politics. To some degree, each of these works addresses three specific questions. First, during the next several decades, will the international system change from unipolarity to multipolarity or bipolarity? Second is U.S. power in decline, and, if so, why?

35. As Brooks and Wohlforth describe it, theirs is an argument based on opportunity costs: “After all, hemming in the United States is not the only motivation of other states. They seek economic growth, local security, and other objectives that may be compromised by attempts to constrain the United States, especially if they provoke retaliation.” Ibid., p. 63.
37. As Brooks and Wohlforth state, “The unprecedented concentration of power resources in the United States generally renders inoperative the constraining effects of the systemic properties long central to research in international relations. Given the likely longevity of American primacy, this general finding has important repercussions for thinking about international relations scholarship and U.S. foreign policy.” Ibid., p. 3.
Third, if U.S. hegemony ends, what are the implications for globalization and international economic openness?

**The Emerging Structure of the International System**

Unipolarity remains the focus of intense debate among international relations scholars. As noted above, on this issue realists are split into three camps: the unipolar stability school (of whom Brooks and Wohlforth are the chief examples); the balance of power realist school; and balance of threat realists (who are closely allied with liberal institutionalists and soft power proponents).

Unipolar Stability? Superficially, Brooks and Wohlforth make a strong case for unipolar stability. But there is less to their argument than meets the eye. Their case is based on a freeze-frame view of the distribution of capabilities in the international system; they do not engage the argument that, like all hegemonic systems, the American era of unipolarity contains the seeds of its own demise. Hegemons sprint to the front of the great power pack because of economic leadership based on productivity and technological innovation. Over time, however, know-how, technology, and managerial skills diffuse throughout the international economic system, which allows other states to catch up. Similarly, leadership costs sap the hegemon’s power and push it into decline. A key question is whether the early decades of the twenty-first century will witness the decline of U.S. hegemony. In this respect, the debate about unipolar stability is misleading. After all, despite their claim at the be-


40. Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion”; and Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics.”


42. Their argument is actually tautological: in a unipolar world, they say, the lopsided concentration of power in the unipole’s favor makes counterbalancing impossible. In other words, the world will remain unipolar because it is unipolar. John Owen noted this flaw several years ago. See Owen, “Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy,” p. 118 n. 3.

beginning of *World Out of Balance* that unipolarity is robust and that U.S. hegemony will endure well into the future, Brooks and Wohlforth actually concede that unipolarity is not likely to last more than another twenty years, which is not very long at all. Not only is this a weak case for unipolarity; it is also an implicit admission that—although it has yet to bear fruit—other states are engaged in counterbalancing the United States, and this is spurring an ongoing process of multipolarization.

**Toward Multipolarity?** The ascent of new great powers would be the strongest evidence of multipolarization, and the two most important indicators of whether this is happening are relative growth rates and shares of world GDP. Here, there is evidence that as the NIC, Khanna, Mahbubani, and, to a point, Zakaria contend, global economic power is flowing from the United States and Europe to Asia. The shift of economic clout to East Asia is important because it could propel China’s ascent—thus hastening the relative decline of U.S. power—and also because emerging regional multipolarity could trigger future major power war.

China, of course, is the poster child for Asia’s rise, and many analysts—including the NIC, Khanna, and (implicitly) Mahbubani and Zakaria—agree that China is the rising power most likely to challenge U.S. hegemony. Unsurprisingly, Brooks and Wohlforth are skeptical about China’s rise, and they dismiss the idea that China could become a viable counterweight to a hegemonic United States within any meaningful time frame. Their analysis, how-

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44. Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, pp. 17, 218. In a recent piece, Wohlforth and his coauthors admit that “unipolarity will not last indefinitely.” G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 4. In light of this admission, Brooks and Wohlforth’s failure to provide signposts that would enable scholars and policymakers to recognize the key transition points from unipolarity to multipolarity is a glaring omission.

45. Brooks and Wohlforth conflate a systemic outcome (the lack of a balance of power in a unipolar world) with unit-level behavior (ongoing balancing by states). See Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited.”


48. Space constraints do not permit discussion of the great power prospects for India, Japan, Russia, and the EU. I focus on China because it is closest to becoming a new pole of power; there is increasing speculation about whether China’s rise will lead to Sino-American conflict; and, in contrast to the doubts about great power prospects of the others, there is widespread agreement that China is close to becoming a peer competitor of the United States.

ever, is static. For sure, the United States still has an impressive lead in the
categories they measure.\textsuperscript{50} Looking ahead, however, the trend lines appear to
favor China, which already has overtaken the United States as the world’s
leading manufacturer—a crown the United States wore for more than a cen-
tury.\textsuperscript{51} China also may overtake the United States in GDP in the next ten to fif-
teen years. In 2003 Goldman Sachs predicted that China would pass the
United States in GDP by 2041, but in 2008 it revised the time frame to 2028.\textsuperscript{52}
And, in early 2009, the Economist Intelligence Unit predicted that China’s
GDP would surpass the United States’ in 2021.\textsuperscript{53} Empirically, then, there are
indications that the unipolar era is drawing to a close, and that the coming de-
cades could witness a power transition.\textsuperscript{54}

These trends, however, do not conclusively demonstrate that the interna-
tional system is becoming multipolar. Projections of future GDP alone do not
mean that states such as China (or India, Russia, Japan, or the EU) will become
new poles of power in the international system. International relations theory
still has not produced a unified theory of great power emergence, notwith-
standing that some scholars have made important contributions that enhance
understanding of this geopolitical phenomenon.\textsuperscript{55} We do know, however, that
great power emergence results from the complex interplay of structural con-
straints (concern for security) and unit-level decisions (rising states must de-
cide to convert their increasing wealth into hard power and geopolitical

\textsuperscript{50} These include defense spending; defense spending as a percentage of total great power de-
fense expenditures; defense research and development spending; defense spending as a percent-
age of GDP; GDP; GDP per capita; and GDP as a percentage of great power GDP. See Brooks and

\textsuperscript{51} Geoff Dyer, “China Moves Up Economic League Table,” \textit{Financial Times}, January 15, 2009; and
Peter Marsh, “China Reverting to Form as the World’s Workshop,” \textit{Financial Times}, August 11,
2008.

\textsuperscript{52} See Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, “Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050,”
Goldman Sachs. Global Economics Paper, No. 99 (New York: Goldman Sachs, October 1, 2003),
pp. 3, 10. See Jim O’Neill, head of Global Economic Research, Goldman Sachs, video interview,

products.html.

\textsuperscript{54} On power transition theory, see A.F.K. Organski, \textit{World Politics} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
1968); A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, \textit{The War Ledger} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1980); and Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., \textit{Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the

\textsuperscript{55} See Gilpin, \textit{War and Change in World Politics}; Kennedy, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers};
Zakaria, \textit{From Wealth to Power}; and Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion.”
influence). Moreover, merely aspiring to great power status does not assure success. Mobilizing and converting economic and social resources into military power and diplomatic influence is not easy, and states often are plagued by what David Baldwin called the “paradox of unrealized power.” Here, the issue of state capacity—the effectiveness of the state’s administrative and political machinery, and quality of its leaders—comes to the forefront.

Assessing the prospects for multipolarity or bipolarity is further complicated because measuring state power is hard. Consider, for example, the spectacularly wrong widespread belief in the 1970s and 1980s that Japan would overtake the United States as the world’s dominant economic power and possibly become a full-fledged superpower. Proponents of this view missed the important factors that ultimately held Japan back, including the Japanese economic bubble; insufficient state capacity and political corruption; and adverse demographic trends.

The “rise of China” school could be wrong for similar reasons. Although China experienced annual growth rates in the double digits from the mid-1980s through 2006, this does not necessarily mean that it can sustain similar growth over the next two decades. Straight-line projections of present growth rates into the future may be wrong. Moreover, the long-term effects of the current global financial and economic crisis are an important wild card, and it is unclear how the relative growth rates of the United States and China will be affected. Opinion is divided on the question of which country is more likely to gain relative advantage. Finally, other factors—for example, domestic political instability, environmental degradation, public health issues, and demographic trends—could derail China’s ascent to great power status.

57. Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*.
60. Although its leaders insist that China’s economy will grow by at least 8 percent in 2009, independent forecasts suggest a figure of about 6 percent.
61. For the view that the global economic and financial crisis will work to China’s relative advantage, see Roger C. Altman, “The Great Credit Crash, 2008: A Geopolitical Setback for the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (January/February 2009), pp. 2–14. As Altman says (p. 12), “Although China, too, has been hurt by the crisis, its economic and financial power have been strengthened relative to those of the West. China’s global influence will thus increase, and Beijing will be able to undertake initiatives to increase it further.”
62. For analysis of the factors that could side-track China, see Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Super-
However, China remains on track (as all the publications reviewed herein except for *World Out of Balance* predict), it soon will be both a potent military and economic force in the international system. In that event, based on what history and offensive realist theory tell us, we should expect to see an increasingly wealthy China convert its economic strength into military muscle and to seek hegemony in Asia.63

**Preservation of American Hegemony with Soft Power.** Like many U.S. international relations scholars and foreign policy analysts, Zakaria believes that by using its soft power the United States can preserve its “pivotal” status in international politics.64 As the NIC and Mahbubani argue, however, soft power may be significantly less potent a force for bolstering U.S. preponderance than Zakaria (and others believe). This is so for two reasons.

First, the global financial and economic crisis has discredited one of the pillars of U.S. soft power: American free-market capitalism and, more generally, liberalism itself (economically and institutionally). As former U.S. Deputy Treasury Secretary Roger Altman puts it, the meltdown has “put the American model of free market capitalism under a cloud.”65 Second, as Mahbubani rightly notes, the United States is not the only country that possesses soft power. China, especially, has become increasingly adept in this regard.66 If China weathers the economic storm better than the United States, it will be in a position to expand its role in the developing world.67 Even before the meltdown, China was taking advantage of the United States’ preoccupation with the “war on terror” to project its soft power into East and Southeast Asia.68 China also is making inroads in Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia, by providing development assistance without strings and increasing its weapons sales.69 Similarly, China is using its financial clout to buy up huge quantities of...
raw materials and natural resources worldwide, thereby bringing states into its political orbit.\textsuperscript{70}

**American Hegemony and International Institutions.** Brooks and Wohlforth, and Zakaria, believe that international institutions can help perpetuate U.S. dominance. By strengthening these institutions, the United States can “lock in” the hegemonic order that it built after World War II and thereby ensure that it persists after unipolarity ends.\textsuperscript{71} Brooks and Wohlforth also maintain that unipolarity affords the United States a twenty-year window of opportunity to recast the international system in ways that will bolster the legitimacy of its power and advance its security interests.\textsuperscript{72} Ironically, however, it is in the very arena of international institutions where a truly post-American world may be taking shape, and where multipolarization’s effects are first being felt.

Although a consensus exists that international institutions need to be overhauled, pressures for reform are pushing in the opposite direction than the one prescribed by Brooks and Wohlforth, because the impetus for change is coming from China and the other emerging powers. This became evident during the lead-up to the April 2009 London meeting of the Group of 20, when China and other rising powers argued that international institutions need to be revamped to give them a greater voice, and also that the international privileges enjoyed by the United States and Europe need to be rolled back. These developments highlight a weakness in the institutional “lock in” and “twenty years’ opportunity” arguments: if they perceive that the United States is in decline, rising powers such as China need to wait only a decade or two to reshape the international system themselves. Moreover, because of the perception that the United States’ hard power is declining, and because of the hit its soft power has taken as a result of the meltdown, there is a real question about whether the U.S. hegemon retains the credibility and legitimacy to take the lead in institutional reform.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{70} Unlike the United States and the EU, China now is in a “position to assist other nations financially and make key investments in, for example, natural resources at a time when the West cannot.” Altman, “The Great Crash,” p. 3.


\textsuperscript{73} Financial Times columnist Martin Wolf observes, “The ability of the west in general and the U.S. in particular to influence the course of events will also be damaged. The collapse of the western financial system, while China’s flourishes, marks a humiliating end to the ‘unipolar moment.’ As western policy makers struggle, their credibility lies broken. Who still trusts the teachers?” Wolf, “Seeds of Its Own Destruction,” Financial Times, March 8, 2008.
THE UNITED STATES IN DECLINE?

The publications reviewed in this essay examine whether the United States is in (or is headed for) relative decline. Brooks and Wohlforth purport to deny the possibility that America is in relative decline, but a growing number of analysts disagree. The long-term impact of the current economic crisis largely will determine who is right (and to be fair, Brooks and Wohlforth wrote their book before its effects became evident). Yet, even before the meltdown, long-term structural weaknesses that have been accumulating for more than three decades were causing U.S. economic power to wane.

The warning signs with respect to U.S. decline are a looming fiscal crisis and doubts about the future of the dollar as the reserve currency, both of which are linked to the fear that after recovery, the United States will face a serious inflationary threat. Optimists contend that once the United States recovers,
fears of a fiscal crisis will fade: the country faced a larger debt to GDP ratio after World War II, and yet embarked on a sustained era of growth. The postwar era, however, was a golden age of U.S. industrial and financial dominance, trade surpluses, and sustained high growth rates. The United States of 2009 is far different from the United States of 1945, however, which is why many economists believe that even in the best case, it will emerge from the current crisis with serious macroeconomic handicaps.78 Chief among these handicaps are the increase in the money supply (caused by the massive amount of dollars the Federal Reserve and Treasury have pumped into circulation to rescue the economy), and the $1 trillion plus budget deficits that the Brookings Institution and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) project the United States will incur for at least a decade.79 When the projected deficits are bundled with the persistent U.S. current account deficit, the entitlements overhang, and the cost of two ongoing wars, there is reason to worry about the United States’ long-term fiscal stability.80 The CBO states, “Even if the recovery occurs as projected and the stimulus bill is allowed to expire, the country will face the highest debt/GDP ratio in 50 years and an increasingly urgent and unsustainable fiscal problem.”81 If the Congressional Budget Office is right, it spells trouble ahead for the dollar.

As Jonathan Kirshner noted on the eve of the meltdown, the dollar’s vulnerability “presents potentially significant and underappreciated restraints upon contemporary American political and military predominance.”82 The dollar’s loss of reserve currency status would undermine U.S. dominance, and recent events have magnified concerns that predated the financial and economic crisis.83 First, the other big players in the international economy now are either

78. The worst case is that a “recovery” simply puts the United States back in the same unsustainable position it was in before the meltdown: too dependent on consumption; not enough production; too much in debt; and too dependent on other countries to lend it money. See Paul Krugman, “Erin Go Broke,” New York Times, April 19, 2009; and David Ignatius, “Back to the Bubble?” Washington Post, March 15, 2009.


81. CBO, “Preliminary Analysis of the President’s Budget and an Update of CBO’s Budget and Economic Outlook,” p. 13.


military rivals (China) or ambiguous “allies” (Europe) that have their own ambitions and no longer require U.S. protection from the Soviet threat. Second, the dollar faces an uncertain future because of concerns that its value will diminish over time. Because of these two factors, as Eric Helleiner notes, if the dollar experiences dramatic depreciation in the future, there is a “risk of defections generating a herd-like momentum” away from it.84

To defend the dollar, in coming years the United States will be under increasing pressure to prevent runaway inflation through some combination of budget cuts, tax increases, and interest-rate hikes.85 Given that the last two options could choke off renewed growth, there is likely to be strong pressure to slash the federal budget. For several reasons, it will be almost impossible to make meaningful cuts in federal spending without deep reductions in defense expenditures. First, discretionary nondefense spending accounts for only about 20 percent of annual federal outlays.86 Second, there are obvious “guns or butter” choices. As Kirshner points out, with U.S. defense spending at such high absolute levels, domestic political pressure to make steep cuts in defense spending is likely to increase greatly.87 If this analysis is correct, the United States may be compelled to retract its overseas military commitments.88

GLOBALIZATION’S FUTURE

Globalization has been made possible by America’s military and economic dominance of the post-1991 unipolar system. Indeed, it has been suggested that, in many respects, globalization is really Americanization (and liberaliza-

87. As Kirshner states, the absolute size of U.S. defense expenditures is “more likely to be decisive in the future when the U.S. is under pressure to make real choices about taxes and spending in the future. When borrowing becomes more difficult, and adjustment more difficult to postpone, choices must be made between raising taxes, cutting non-defense spending, and cutting defense spending.” Kirshner, “Dollar Primacy and American Power,” p. 431.
88. U.S. strategic retrenchment would enable rising powers to significantly narrow the current military gap between them and the United States. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the rise of a single peer competitor capable of challenging the United States globally is unlikely. They overlook, however, other geopolitical mechanisms that can bring U.S. primacy to an end. At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain’s hegemony ended because London lacked the resources to cope with the simultaneous challenges mounted by regional great powers to its interests in Europe, Asia, and North America and also to deal with wars of empire such as the Boer War—not because it was challenged by a single great power globally. In coming years, there is a good chance that an increasingly overstretched United States could see its hegemony overthrown by a similar process. On Britain’s decline, see Aaron Friedberg, Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery; C.J. Lowe and M.L. Dockrill, The Mirage of Power, Vol. 1: British Foreign Policy, 1902–1914 (London: Routledge, 1972); and Correlli Barnett, The Collapse of British Power (New York: William Morrow, 1972).
As Jonathan Kirshner has written, however, “globalization is neither irresistible nor irreversible.” To the extent that globalization rests on the foundations of American power (and preferences), therefore, the coming years could put hegemonic stability theory to the test.

Hegemonic stability theory holds that an open international economic system requires a single hegemonic power that performs critical military and economic tasks. Militarily, the hegemon is responsible for stabilizing key regions and for guarding the global commons. Economically, the hegemon provides public goods by opening its domestic market to other states, supplying liquidity for the global economy, and providing a reserve currency.

Whether the United States will be able to continue to act as a hegemonic stabilizer is an open question, because the looming fiscal crisis could compel it to retrench strategically. Economically, it already is doubtful that the United States is still a hegemon. At the April 2009 Group of 20 meeting in London, President Barack Obama acknowledged that the United States no longer is able to play this role, and the world increasingly is looking to China (and India and other emerging market states) to be the locomotives of global recovery. Additionally, the United States’ liberal preferences have suffered a setback. Institutions have failed to produce a coordinated response to the financial and economic crisis: through the actions of national governments, the state has been brought back in to regulate economic policy; and states have responded to the crisis by adopting nationalist policies rather than through increasing international cooperation.

As President Barack Obama said, “If there is going to be renewed growth it can’t just be the United States as the engine, everybody is going to have to pick up the pace.” He also observed that “in some ways the world has become accustomed to the United States being a voracious consumer market and the engine that drives a lot of economic growth worldwide. And I think that in the wake of this crisis, even as we’re doing stimulus, we have to take into account our own deficits.”

In particular, recent developments in the EU suggest that global meltdown has dealt liberalism a blow. The EU’s key members (Britain, France, and Germany) are seeking economic security by

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93. In particular, recent developments in the EU suggest that global meltdown has dealt liberalism a blow. The EU’s key members (Britain, France, and Germany) are seeking economic security by
be seen. Suffice it to say, Robert Keohane’s “after hegemony” thesis and the institutional “lock in” theory will undergo real-world tests.\(^4\) It is unclear if international trade will contract in a deglobalized world, and whether states will revert to mercantilist policies, and, if so, whether less economic openness would lead to an increase in geopolitical turbulence. One way or another, however, we are certain to find out.

**Conclusion**

Against the backdrop of the economic and financial meltdown, the five works reviewed in this essay help to define a research agenda for international relations scholars and diplomatic historians that focuses on timeless questions that are more relevant than ever. What factors would drive a shift to multipolarity? What does power transition theory imply about evolving U.S.-China relations? Why do great powers rise—and why do they decline? What causes great power security competition and war?\(^5\) What do the pre–World War I and the 1929–39 periods tell us about the coming era of international politics? What is the connection between international political economy and great power politics? What grand strategic options are available to declining hegemons? What is the relation between U.S. power and the international system’s current insti-

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\(^4\) Ikenberry, *After Victory*; and Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

tutional structure? If the present institutional architecture cannot be main-
tained or reformed, what will come next—and which states will have the most
to say about the creation of a new international order?

As Yogi Berra said, “Making predictions is hard—especially about the fu-
ture.” Whether unipolarity and U.S. hegemony will end during the next two
decades is a topic of contention. If they do, however, international politics
could look very different—especially if the end of U.S. hegemony triggers
deglobalization. In that case, liberal constraints against great power war could
diminish, and the coming decades could be an era of rising nationalism and
ercantilism, geopolitical instability, and great power competition. In other
words, having enjoyed a long holiday from history under the Pax Americana,
international politics could be headed back to the future. If that, indeed, is
the direction we are headed, the United States will need to rethink its own
world role and grand strategic posture.

96. On how “commercial” liberalism purportedly constraints war, see Arthur A. Stein, “Govern-
ments, Economic Interdependence, and Cooperation,” in Philip E. Tetlock, Charles Tilly, Jo L. Hus-
bands, Robert Jervis, and Paul C. Stern, eds., Behavior, Society, and International Conflict (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 241–324; and John R. Oneal and Bruce M. Russett, “The Classi-
cal Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Conflict, 1950–1985,” Inter-
national Studies Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 267–294. Some realists believe that even
in a world shorn of liberal constraints on great power conflict, nuclear weapons will prevent war.
Coupled with the technological and doctrinal innovations associated with the “revolution in mili-
tary affairs,” however, the nuclear “stability/instability paradox” may actually make great power
war more—not less—thinkable in the early twenty-first century. On the stability/instability para-
dox, see Glenn H. Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury, ed.,
The Balance of Power (San Francisco, Calif.: Chandler, 1965), pp. 185–201; and Robert Jervis, The
Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell