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Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth. *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy.* Princeton University Press, 2008.

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Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

Since the time of Thucydides historians and policymakers have often invoked the concept of the balance of power to explain the basic contours of international relations. While international relations theorists have developed many different versions of balance of power theory, and statesmen have long used or abused the concept to pursue policies aimed at everything from equilibrium to preponderance, the essence of BOP theory is fairly simple. States that are perceived as becoming too powerful or threatening to others will eventually find themselves opposed in a variety of ways by either a single state or a coalition of states. A Napoleon Bonaparte or an Adolf Hitler may have great success in subverting the system for a period of time, but states that amass too much power inevitably generate resistance from the international system and a balance of power is restored. As Kenneth Waltz suggests, “Hegemony leads to balance, which is easy to see historically and to understand theoretically.”¹

Of course, the abrupt and unexpected end of the Cold War raised some novel theoretical issues for Waltz and other international relation theorists. Waltz himself argued that the structure of the international system had changed only once in history with the emergence of a bipolar world in 1945. The collapse of the Soviet Union clearly transformed the bipolar structure of the system into something different, but hardly anyone accepted the idea that the new world order could properly be described as multipolar given America’s commanding structural position. Within a few years many international relations theorists came to use the term “unipolar” to describe the unique distribution of power that emerged after 1989, but few theorists believed that this configuration of power would be enduring. Like other great powers before it, the United States would be unable to escape for long the consequences of the balance of power. No matter how benign its intentions, which were unlikely to be seen as benign by the rest of the world, most international relations theorists believed that the United States would increasingly find its preponderant power checked by the emergence of new great powers.

In their outstanding new book, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth provide a thorough and compelling analysis of the unique systems dynamics of the unipolar era. When diplomatic historians look back at the twenty-year period after the end of the Cold War they will surely have to grapple with the seeming absence of systemic constraints on overwhelming American power. As Brooks and Wohlforth demonstrate, despite the valiant efforts of many international relations theorists to fit almost any example of opposition to the United States as a type of balancing behavior, there is very little evidence to suggest that the rest of the world has been strongly motivated by the goal of countering American hegemony in the international system. While the authors are by no

¹ Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* (Fall 1993), 77. For a more recent discussion of unipolarity from a variety of theoretical approaches, see the excellent set of essays in the January 2009 issue of *World Politics*.

means neoconservative and have been highly critical of the policies and diplomacy of the Bush administration, the central message of *World Out of Balance* is that the United States does not face strong systemic constraints and that it has the ability to engage in a strategy of what they call “systemic activism.” In their view, “the United States can push hard and even unilaterally for revisions to the international system without sparking counterbalancing, risking the erosion of its ability to cooperate within international systems, jeopardizing the gains of globalization, or undermining the overall legitimacy of its role (217).” Needless to say, in putting forward this assessment, Brooks and Wohlforth are explicitly challenging virtually every major theoretical tradition in the field.

All of the reviewers in the roundtable strongly agree that Brooks and Wohlforth have made a major theoretical contribution that deserves to be widely read and debated. As Randall Schweller argues, *World Out of Balance* “accomplishes what few works in the field have achieved: it takes an array of top-shelf theories, clarifies their logic, gathers evidence that directly bears on the validity of their arguments, and judicially weighs the evidence to see if their claims hold any water.” However, while all of the reviewers have a great deal of praise for *World Out of Balance*, it is also clear that they have significant reservations. There are two major themes of caution and criticism that are worth noting.

First, while all of the reviewers accept the idea that the current system remains unipolar, some of them are far less optimistic than Brooks and Wohlforth about the durability of this system. In different ways, both Schweller and Marc Lynch raise the point that the authors do not adequately address the question of how and when the unipolar era might end. In light of the disastrous American experience in Iraq and the ongoing global financial crisis, Marc Lynch believes that the “unassailability of American material primacy” is no longer as certain as Brooks and Wohlforth tend to suggest in their book. While the authors reject Lynch’s implication that they ever argued that American primacy was unassailable, it is less than clear from *World Out of Balance* as well as in their response to their critics, how long they actually believe the era of unipolarity will last. The overwhelming thrust of the book suggests that American primacy can and will last for a very long time, but the authors also complicate their argument in the final pages by suggesting that America only has a “twenty year opportunity” to reshape the international system. However, the consequences of an American failure to seize this opportunity, and what it would mean for the future evolution of the international system, are less than obvious.

Much of the previous scholarly debate over unipolarity has been driven by the desire to come up with a theoretical framework to justify specific policy preferences and strategies. A large part of the reason why *World Out of Balance* will make a lasting contribution to the literature is that it deals with fundamental theoretical issues that will be relevant long after the current crises of interest for scholars and policymakers. Even so, while all of the reviewers praise Brooks and Wohlforth for their theoretical efforts, it is clear from their comments that they would have welcomed a more explicit examination of the policy-relevant implications of their own argument. The authors call for a strategy of greater

“systemic activism,” but as both Jeff Legro and Colin Dueck suggest, many scholars would argue that the Bush administration did exactly that without a record of great success. While Brooks and Wohlforth clearly want a different type of systemic activism than the one largely pursued by the Bush administration, one more focused on diplomacy and institutional reform, the specifics of what they want to see in a different kind of activist policy are noticeably lacking. As Stacie Goddard suggests in her review, even if their perception is false, future American policymakers might be better off pretending that they are highly constrained by the international system since adopting conservative policy might be wiser than the risks involved in an activist policy. Without an explicit discussion of the costs and benefits associated with systemic activism vis-à-vis the status quo or a policy of retrenchment, it is far from obvious that their alternative strategy is preferable to the more conservative course suggested by Goddard.²

Notwithstanding these criticisms, there is no doubt that Stephen Brooks and Bill Wohlforth should be praised for offering a provocative and important challenge to the accepted wisdom within the field of international relations theory.

Participants:

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Colin Dueck is an Associate Professor in the Department of Public and International Affairs at George Mason University. He is the author of *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton University Press, 2006), as well as articles in *International Security*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Review of International Studies*, *Security Studies*, and *World Policy Journal*. He is currently working on a book about Republican party politics and U.S. foreign policy.

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² In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* the authors begin to flesh out their argument about systemic activism. It provides a useful supplement to their book and addresses some of the concerns raised by the reviewers. See Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, “Reshaping the World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2009), 49-63.

International Security, International Theory, and the European Journal of International Relations.

Jeffrey W. Legro is Compton Professor of World Politics, Chair of the Politics Department, and faculty associate of the Miller Center at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (2005) and *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint during World War II* (1995) and co-editor of *To Lead the World: U.S. Strategy after the Bush Doctrine* (2008).

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Randall L. Schweller (Ph.D., Columbia, 1993) is Professor of Political Science at The Ohio State University. He is the author of *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2006), and *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (Columbia University Press, 1998); as well as articles in journals such as *World Politics, International Studies Quarterly, International Security, American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Review of International Studies, and Security Studies*. He is currently a member of the editorial boards of *International Security* and *Security Studies*.

William Wohlforth is the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth College and the Chair of the Department of Government. His most recent books are *The Balance of Power in World History* (2007; co-editor, with Stuart Kaufman and Richard Little) and *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (2008; co-author, with Stephen Brooks). He has published numerous articles on international and strategic affairs, most recently "Re-Shaping the World Order" in the March/April issue of *Foreign Affairs* (with Stephen Brooks) and "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great

Power War” in the January issue of *World Politics*. He is currently the editor in chief of the journal *Security Studies*.

Since the end of the Cold War, a surprising consensus has emerged among scholars of international relations: namely, that America's unipolar moment in the world will be short-lived, and that the United States must avoid self-defeating policies of hegemony and global preponderance or be punished for it. This consensus is surprising in the sense that it is shared by realists, liberals, and constructivists who otherwise disagree on just about everything. U.S. frustrations in Iraq have only reinforced the conviction that America's power in the world is very limited, and that the George W. Bush administration in particular has seriously eroded the foundations of that power through policies of aggressive unilateralism. This at least is the scholarly consensus.

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth provide a much-needed correction to that consensus in their new book, *World Out of Balance*. The book is hardly a defense of the Bush administration, but is meant instead to clarify the extent to which U.S. security policies are in fact constrained by strictly international systemic pressures. The authors address several prominent theoretical arguments, each of which contends that the United States is strongly constrained by systemic pressures. Balance-of-power theory contends that any would-be hegemon such as the United States will be counterbalanced by military and political alliances among opposing coalitions of major powers. Balance-of-threat theory contends that the same counterbalancing will occur through more subtle forms of soft balancing. Liberal interdependence theory contends that global economic interdependence will constrain America's ability to act as a hegemon without sustaining prohibitive economic costs. Liberal institutionalist theory contends that the United States must maintain a general reputation for multilateralism or lose its current position. Finally, constructivist theory contends that the United States must act according to international norms of legitimacy or lose the foundations of its power.

Brooks and Wohlforth devote a chapter to each of these theoretical arguments, and use both meticulous reasoning and carefully chosen examples to demonstrate that the international constraints on American power are generally overstated. International legitimacy is as much a product of material power as vice-versa; the United States is capable of changing international rules and norms through its hegemonic influence. Reputations for cooperation can be maintained with regard to some regimes and treaties, and not others; general reputations for multilateralism do not really exist as powerful forces in world politics. The American economy is so much larger than any other that its interdependence with other economies is highly asymmetrical: foreign powers depend on the United States more than it depends on them. Consequently other countries are generally much more vulnerable to external economic pressure than is the United States. Great power balancing against the United States has become so prohibitively costly for other powers that none of them have actually done it. The United States is so far ahead of any other major power, in terms of military and economic capabilities, that traditional balance of power logic has become inoperative. Nor does soft balancing provide much of a substitute. In most of the cases commonly cited as leading examples of soft balancing,

such as French resistance to the Iraq War in 2003 or Russian arms sales to China, the motives at work seem to have been either domestic, economic, regional, or simply part of the normal give and take of diplomacy – annoying to Washington, to be sure, but hardly rising to the level of self-conscious balancing against a rival great power.

The basic insight of Brooks and Wohlforth is that theories of international relations have failed to keep pace with the unprecedented concentration of power inside the current world system, in the hands of a single country. There is no historical parallel for today's lopsided configuration of global power. Theories that were first invented, for example, in periods of multipolarity, may be irrelevant today. The United States is no longer a contender for global hegemony; it has already reached that point. We simply do not have a wide range of theories to understand how other states react under such circumstances.

If all of this sounds like a defense of the Bush administration and its foreign policies, it is anything but. The authors take pains to clarify that they consider much Bush-era diplomacy to be ham-handed and incompetent. A central point of theirs, however, is that many of the easy criticisms commonly leveled against Bush's foreign policy have little basis in reality. There is simply no reason to believe that the United States must necessarily pay a heavy price for acting unilaterally in certain cases, breaking specific international norms, or pursuing policies of international preponderance. Such foreign policy behavior may go against the normative preferences of most academics, but in the interest of intellectual honesty such normative preferences must be distinguished from well-established causal claims. Brooks and Wohlforth do not come down for or against any specific national security policy. They only point out that policies of unilateralism or hegemony are not ruled out by international systemic pressures.

There are few criticisms to be made of such a well-constructed and carefully argued book, but one potential flaw is in its fairly quick dismissal of China as a peer great power rival. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that estimates of China's gross domestic product and military spending should be based upon international market exchange rates rather than purchasing power parity. Naturally this leads to an image of Chinese power as modest compared to America's. But while the authors discuss the reasons for their method of net assessment, some readers will no doubt be unconvinced, and continue to think of China as a rapidly growing economic powerhouse second only to the United States.

The last question regarding Brooks and Wohlforth's argument is its implications for the security policies the United States should follow. For the most part they are agnostic on this point, and appropriately so given the main purpose of their book, but toward the end they suggest that we would all be well served by policies of systemic activism on the part of the United States. Such activism would attempt to remake international institutions, transform legitimacy standards, and reshape globalization in accordance with American values and interests. The authors are rather vague on exactly how all this would work, and have little to say about Bush's recorded attempts to engage in such a revolutionary project other than that he did not take it seriously enough. Yet the Bush administration

took such transformational visions very seriously indeed after 9/11, even if not in a manner to the liking of most IR scholars. Surely one lesson of the past eight years is not that U.S. security policy has been insufficiently revolutionary, but that it has been excessively so. Greater realism in foreign policy would certainly correspond with much of what Brooks and Wohlforth say; it would also include toning down transformational or revolutionary visions for a while, whether offered from left or right.

With the Soviet collapse in 1991, the United States emerged as the sole superpower. The world not only became unipolar, it became so to a degree most scholars would argue is unprecedented in modern history.¹ Despite this impressive dominance, most scholars insisted that the United States faced as many constraints—if not more—than it had in the Cold War world. America would be as much constrained by its power as emboldened by it. In *World out of Balance*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth hope to shatter this consensus. Far from constraining the United States, they argue unipolarity has left Gulliver unbound: structural constraints such as the balance of power, economic interdependence, institutions, and norms are weak, if not obsolete, in a unipolar system.²

This is an outstanding book. Clearly written and persuasively argued, Wohlforth and Brooks have thrown down a major theoretical gauntlet. Neorealist, liberal, and constructivist theories about systemic constraints are not wrong, yet while they may explain dynamics in multipolar and bipolar systems, they are entirely irrelevant when one state maintains dominance over the international system. While structural theories might make for good historical analysis, then, they no longer provide sound foreign policy guidance. The book is ambitious and largely convincing, yet I was left with three major questions, which I will address in this review: whether balancing constraints are really inoperative; whether legitimacy effectively binds U.S. policy; and whether or not “imperial overstretch” is the true threat to American hegemony.

II. The end of balancing?

Most neorealists suggest that the unipolar moment will not last. “The unipolar moment,” Christopher Layne argued, “is just that, a geopolitical interlude that will give way to multipolarity between 2000-2010.”³ Clearly such predictions have not come to pass. No state has attempted a significant military buildup, nor have states formed a military

¹ See e.g., Paul Kennedy, “The Eagle Has Landed: The new U.S. Global Military Position,” *Financial Times*, February 1, 2002.

² On the balance of power, see Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why Great Powers will Rise.” *International Security* 17.4: 5-51; Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18.2: 44-79; Stephen M. Walt 2009, “Alliances in a Unipolar World.” *World Politics* 61.1: 104. On economic interdependence and constraints, see e.g., Michael Mastanduno, “System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy,” *World Politics* 61.1: 121-154. On unipolarity and institutions, see e.g., Lisa Martin, “Multilateral Organizations after the U.S.-Iraq War, in *The Iraq War and Its Consequences: Thoughts of Nobel Peace Laureates and Eminent Scholars*,” ed. Irwin Abrams and Wang Gungwui (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co, 2003), 359-374; John Ikenberry, “Is American Multilateralism in Decline?” *Perspectives on Politics* 1.3: 533-50. On legitimacy and the unipolar world, see Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power and World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); and Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why being a Unipole is Not All It’s Cracked up to be.” *World Politics* 61.1: 58-85.

³ Layne 1993, 7.

alliance to counter U.S. hegemony. For Wohlforth and Brooks, this “absence of counterbalancing emphasizes a simple point: counterbalancing is and will long remain prohibitively costly for the other major powers” (23). No state wants to—or perhaps even could—bear the domestic burden of arming itself to match U.S. capabilities. And while a coalition would allow states to share the costs of balancing, it would also create massive collective action problems: states would be tempted to “free-ride” on others efforts, in hopes of reaping the benefits of balancing without the costs.

So persuasive are these arguments that many neorealists agree that hard balancing is unlikely. Instead, they argue states will turn to “soft balancing,” forming diplomatic coalitions and using other, non-military measures to thwart the United States.⁴ But Brooks and Wohlforth contend that what neorealists suggest are instances of soft balancing—Russia and China’s participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia’s willingness to sell Iran nuclear technology, or France and Germany’s opposition to the war in Iraq—are not cases of balancing American threat at all. Instead, in each of these cases, states took action out of economic interests, regional security concerns, or because of domestic politics—American power had little, if anything, to do with these decisions.

These are powerful arguments. Indeed, the authors maintain that if their “argument is right, then *all* theories of balancing constraints are irrelevant for the United States in today’s unipolar world” (64). Yet ultimately I was confused as to *which* theories of balancing Brooks and Wohlforth believe are most fatally flawed. Are they more interested in demonstrating that the unipolar world is likely to persist, and thus that predictions of an imminent bipolar or multipolar world are not only overstated, but highly unlikely? Or are they arguing balancing behavior of any sort is unlikely to prove costly to the United States, now or in the future?

In my opinion, they fare much better critiquing the first question than the second. It is doubtful, I agree, that the United States will face a peer competitor any time in the near future, or that states will form an alliance to directly counter American military capability. To this extent, the strongest versions of balance-of-power theory prove problematic. But the argument that all balancing constraints are irrelevant is predicated on three problematic assumptions. The first is that if balancing really exists, then it must be motivated by a desire to counter the American threat. It is true that if balancing is not a response to threat, then this casts doubt on neorealists’ causal mechanisms. What it does not do, however, is undermine the argument that the United States will be balanced by this behavior. Brooks and Wohlforth might claim that if balancing is not the intended policy, then it is not balancing at all. But this, as Robert Art recently argued, conflates

⁴See e.g., Walt 2009; Robert Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States,” *International Security* 30.1: 7-45; T.V. Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 30.1: 46-71.

balancing as a foreign policy with balancing as an outcome: regardless of the cause of the behavior, it is balancing, and it places limits on U.S. foreign policy.⁵

Perhaps more importantly, historical cases suggest that most if not all cases of balancing are actually fueled by mixed motives. Germany's acquisition of dreadnoughts in the late 19th century might be classified as an attempt to balance Britain, but domestic issues, bureaucratic pathologies, and prestige motivated German actions as well. Regardless, Britain certainly perceived itself as constrained. Likewise, we classify the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894 as an attempt to balance German power; it was, but it was also designed to constrain Britain. Even the cases Brooks and Wohlforth name as attempts to counterbalance Britain—the Seven Years' War, Russia's expansion into the Near East—involved mixed motives. This does not make these cases any less convincing examples of balancing, or any less constraining of British policy.

A second questionable assumption relates to the *cost* of balancing against the United States. Again the authors persuasively argue that the strongest versions of balance-of-power theory are suspect in a unipolar world. It does not seem likely, or even possible, that China, Russia, or the EU want to bear the costs of becoming a peer competitor to the United States. But must states aim to be peer competitors in order to effectively balance American power? It depends on one's definition of 'balance.' If we define balancing as "countering hegemony," then yes, achieving peer competitor status is necessary. But if we define balancing broadly, as any attempt to constrain United States' security policy, then attempting to become a peer competitor is only one of many options—and it might be the most foolish.

For example, we could imagine a world in which China balances the United States by seeking peer competitor status. To do so would mean investing in the tools of military power projection—aircraft carriers, sophisticated fighter aircraft, long-range bombers, overseas bases—all of which are likely to prove prohibitively expensive. Alternatively, China could balance the United States by gearing its military towards a regional denial strategy: developing mine warfare technology, expanding its submarine patrols, and preparing for information warfare.⁶ These investments would not allow China to act as a peer-competitor, but it would give it ample capabilities to challenge the United States' hegemony in East Asia, or at the very least, place significant constraints on U.S. security policy in the region.

Brooks and Wohlforth might counter if any state threatens to limit U.S. security policy, then surely the hegemon can increase its spending to overcome these constraints. But this raises a third problematic assumption. *World out of Balance* takes it for granted that

⁵ Robert J. Art, "Correspondence: Striking the Balance," *International Security* 30.3: 177-196.

⁶ On China's investment in mine warfare, submarines, and counter-intelligence see e.g., The Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2008." http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Report_o8.pdf

the United States is both willing and able to make the investments necessary to maintain its dominance. At first glance, this seems a reasonable assumption: at the moment, America spends a meager 4.5% of its GDP to maintain its position as the unipole. But there are two problems with this assumption. One has to do with whether the American public would allow an increase in spending, but since the authors are addressing systemic, and not domestic constraints I will not deal with this here. A second problem is that maintaining military dominance has become more expensive over time. We cannot assume that a 3% increase in spending in 2009 gets the United States as much military might as a 3% increase did in 1985. The next generation of naval destroyers, of fighter aircraft, of bombers—the tools of power projection—is proving exponentially more expensive than in the past. All of this suggests that it might be more costly to maintain dominance than it was to achieve it. Whether or not that game is worth the candle is yet to be seen.

Beyond balancing: legitimacy and the unipolar system

Balancing is not the only way in which American power is limited. Scholars suggest economic interdependence, reputation, and legitimacy all place constraints on U.S. security policy. It is the last of these—legitimacy—that I want to touch on here. Constructivists maintain that if the U.S. is to maintain its hegemony, then its actions must be seen as legitimate, that is, consistent with the rules and norms governing the international system.⁷ Despite American preponderance, behaving illegitimately will exact a heavy price, a fact made clear in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. By flouting UN rules, as well as general norms of sovereignty and warfare, the U.S. has placed its hegemony at risk.

Brooks and Wohlforth concede that states care about legitimacy, and that U.S. dominance has not caused the hegemon to shun international rules entirely. Yet legitimacy, they argue, places only weakly conditional constraints on security policy. In fact in a unipolar system, the United States is free to recreate the rules of the game, and thus frame most of its foreign policy decisions as legitimate. For example, while U.S. action in Kosovo violated UN Security Council demands, the United States maintained its legitimacy by invoking norms of humanitarian intervention. In appealing to human rights, the U.S. broke the rules, but did so legitimately.

I found portions of Brook's and Wohlforth's critique convincing. Some constructivists have overstated the constraining effects of rules, particularly in claiming that states "internalize" rules and become deeply "socialized" into international norms. This view of legitimacy, the authors rightly point out, underestimates states' agency and capacity for strategic action. At the same time, I question whether most constructivists see legitimacy

⁷ See e.g., Ian Clark, *Legitimacy and the International System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Reus-Smit, *American Power*; Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity."

as Brooks and Wohlforth portray, as an unconditional structural constraint.⁸ Yes, many constructivists were quick to condemn the U.S. invasion in Iraq as illegitimate, and predict that it would cost the U.S. dearly. But this does not mean constructivists believe that rules are always constraining, Kosovo being a case in point. In essence, they would agree with Brook's and Wohlforth that the important question is not *whether* rules constrain states, but *under what conditions*.

The real disagreement between constructivists and *World out of Balance*, I would suggest, concerns the extent to which the U.S. can create new standards of legitimacy, and the cost involved in doing so. Yes, the U.S. can attempt to legitimate its foreign policy, and in the process, introduce new rules and norms. Yet it cannot do so as it pleases—to be persuasive, U.S. appeals must still resonate with existing standards of legitimacy. This was, in part, why Kosovo was so successful: it invoked existing symbols of human rights, introducing a “Responsibility to Protect” that legitimated intervention. Furthermore, introducing new rules is not without costs. As Brooks and Wohlforth note, successfully breaking the rules might require providing public goods, or supporting new institutions, policies which place new burdens on American power. In these ways, legitimacy continues to constrain American power, even if it does not dictate foreign policy.

Interestingly, these questions about the conditions and costs of legitimation are central to Brook's and Wohlforth's own policy recommendations in a unipolar world. Given that the U.S. faces few if any structural constraints, there is no reason to shy away from revisionism: America should not be conservative; it should seek to remake the world in its image. But as Robert Jervis notes, if other states believe America's “values or behavior are unappealing” it will find its influence reduced.⁹ In other words, the revisionist project depends almost entirely on whether the U.S. can legitimate its policies, and at what cost. What Brooks and Wohlforth thus suggest is only a weakly conditional constraint might prove to be a critical one.

Death by a thousand cuts? Overstretch and the end of unipolarity

Brooks and Wohlforth make the strongest possible argument that the United States now faces a world without systemic constraints. What is less clear is what this means for the stability of the unipolar world. On this question, Brooks and Wohlforth seem generally optimistic, predicting that without systemic constraints, the U.S. is likely to maintain its position as the sole first-rate power for as long as it chooses. But this ignores the question of what mechanisms, if any are likely to bring about unipolarity's demise. More specifically, I found it strange that in a book devoted to unipolarity, there are only two pages on the concept of imperial overstretch. Brooks and Wohlforth seem somewhat dismissive of this phenomenon, in part because they see it as another argument about

⁸ See e.g, Ian Hurd, “Breaking and Making Norms: American Revisionism and Crises of Legitimacy,” *International Politics* 44: 194-213.

⁹ Robert L. Jervis, “Unipolarity: a Structural Perspective,” 188-213.

counterbalancing and systemic constraints (p. 211). In reality, however, the overstretch argument suggests that the U.S. might falter, not because it faces systemic constraints, but precisely because it is unconstrained. As Jervis argues, in a bipolar or multipolar world, a major power is unlikely to deal with minor security threats—a small, but hostile chemical weapons program or a violent but impotent tyrant. In a unipolar world, unfettered by power balances, such relatively minor threats become clear and present dangers.¹⁰

It is not simply that a unipole expends resources taking on minor security threats. It is that by getting involved, a great power produces unanticipated costs and consequences. In the 19th century, British activity created “peripheral pulls,” producing new security threats that required overwhelming investment in empire.¹¹ Likewise, what began in Iraq as a mission to eliminate weapons of mass destruction has now incurred the costs of nation-building, of attempting to stave off civil war, of countering an emboldened Iran. Even as the United States draws down its military presence, the costs of U.S. security policies will continue to mount.

The point is that in a bipolar and multipolar system the constraints on security policies might be more tangible, but so too are the costs of action more clear, and easier for great powers to assess. And it is perhaps these unintended consequences—and not structural constraints—that most threaten the stability of the unipolar system. Brooks and Wohlforth might be right that the United States is not constrained, but perhaps the wisest course for American policy is to pretend that it is. Doing so would encourage the U.S. to embrace a conservative policy of preserving, not overturning, the status quo. Such a policy might not be revolutionary, but it may prove best for the international system, and for America’s hegemonic position.

¹⁰ Jervis, “The Compulsive Empire,” *Foreign Policy* 137: 83-87; Jervis, “Unipolarity: a Structural Perspective.”

¹¹ Paul K. MacDonald, “Peripheral Pulls: Great Power Expansion and Lessons for the American Empire.” Unpublished Manuscript.

“The Ties that Bind the United States: A Recount”

The United States is sweltering under the greatest economic meltdown since the great depression. Historian Paul Kennedy is back in the press preaching once again, as he did in 1988, that America is plagued by fiscal mismanagement, military overstretch, and faces inevitable relative decline.¹ Things look bleak indeed for the Obama team.

Many scholars and pundits have argued the United States is a superpower increasingly bound by the webs of world politics – i.e., the reactions of other states that are fearful of U.S. power or intentions, globalization, and international institutions or norms. Hegemony hardly seems fetching.

“Bunk,” say Dartmouth Professors Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth. Well, they do not actually use that word, but that is the message of their wonderful book, *World out of Balance*. They assert that the U.S. today has unprecedented power, that there are relatively few systemic constraints on global primacy, and that rather than clipping its talons, the American eagle should take wing and remake the international system, lo these many years after 9/11. They advocate a strategy of “primacy” and reject engagement and off-shore balancing. The encouraging message for Obama’s more ambitious global plans is clear – “Yes, you can!”

This is a big, important, and provocative argument, a delight to read, and largely persuasive. My lingering doubts relate to two key questions. If there are few systemic constraints and international activism would serve U.S. interests, why has the U.S. hegemon done so little to revise international institutions since 1991, and when has it tried to do so, why has it achieved so little success?

One possible explanation is that Brooks and Wohlforth undervalue or overlook systemic brakes that have checked U.S. international activism. Might a recount be in order? A brief audit of *six systemic constraints* suggests the challenges for U.S. activism and possible answers for its absence.

Three constraints are offered or hinted at by Brooks and Wohlforth themselves. Theirs is more of a “no” book than a “yes’ book: they mostly expose the weaknesses of other arguments rather than explain the logic and test the implications of their own argument. The heart of their book is a negative claim: a hegemon in a unipolar world will *not* be subject to significant systemic constraints. Their positive argument -- which only takes shape slowly as the chapters unfold -- is complex, multi-causal, and reveals more ties that bind the eagle than the simple thesis suggests.

¹ Paul Kennedy, “American Power is on the Wane,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2009.

First, while the authors do an excellent job of debunking the notion that balancing is constraining the United States today, they acknowledge that balancing is possible if states view their security as sufficiently challenged. At the extreme, if the United States tried to “run the table” with a strategy of global aggression and domination, they expect balancing. So balancing does operate under some circumstances.

What is less explicit is how the absence of balancing may depend not just on unipolarity but on how the dominant power is perceived and accepted in the world. A hegemon that is not respected or trusted or seen as benevolent is likely to encounter balancing behavior short of “running the table” because others will fear that it may indeed attempt aggression in the future. A hegemon that is trusted or seen as benevolent, is less likely to encounter balancing unless it takes actions that change opinion about its intentions. The United States, with a reputation for geopolitical restraint (even if diminished in recent years), provokes less reaction than would a Napoleonic France or Fascist Germany with the same power advantages. And it suggests that a United States that (via primacy) seeks revision of the international system could provoke more significant offsetting reactions because of the impact of such actions on how others perceive the United States.

Second, states will also constrain the United States if they have other important opposing interests not related to security. Brooks and Wohlforth count this as part of their argument as long as it does not involve the security concerns central to balancing theory. Thus if other countries resist the United States due to economic interests, regional security concerns, disagreements over non-security issues, or domestic policy issues, the authors treat this as evidence in favor of their argument.

In this view, the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not about offsetting the United States, but is instead about arms sales and fighting terrorism in their region. Likewise, Russia’s ties to Tehran have commercial and regional security roots. And opposition to the Iraq war in places like Germany and Turkey is seen as a product of “long term domestic political dynamics” rather than a reaction to the concentration of U.S. power.

Brooks and Wohlforth’s argument is not that other countries won’t constrain the unipole, it is that they will not do so simply because of the unipole’s extraordinary power. This implies that international order is dependent not just on unipolarity but also on the distribution of interests. Hence any theory of hegemonic behavior or international order must heed the distribution of interests as well as power. The structure of interests among major countries is a constraint on U.S. actions. Strategies, security or otherwise, that do not attend to those interests will suffer.

Third, Brooks and Wohlforth’s analysis of legitimacy adds further caveats to their argument. As with the other systemic constraints, they find that the need for legitimacy does not provide a strong check on U.S. policy. They do however conclude that

legitimacy is a “weakly conditional” constraint. They insightfully explore how dominant powers have many tools to shape what constitutes legitimacy and paper over the instances where they prefer to ignore the rules. But ultimately hegemons “want and need rules and the legitimation that they bring.” Hence those rules for that very reason must have some integrity. Hegemons, it might be said, can shape the rules of order, but not always exactly as they please, and sometimes at significant cost.

This concession has further consequences for a positive argument about unipolarity and international relations. It means that the strategy of hegemons and the orders that take shape are affected not only by the unequal distribution of power and standing of the hegemon, not only by the distribution of interests among states, but also by the rules that define order.

These different elements, however, are typically associated with theoretical schools (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) that are seen as mutually exclusive. Brooks and Wohlforth are to be congratulated for ignoring such paradigmatic blinders in sorting out what matters from what does not. But it does leave us in a bit of a fog on what exactly the nature of this synthetic argument looks like, how power, interests, and norms relate to one another, what common assumptions bind them, and what are the boundaries of the argument. The positive argument they point us to deserves more attention. Most important for the critique here, it suggests that the cumulative or interactive effect of these three constraints may add up to something greater than merely an asterisk to the thesis ‘constraints are not binding.’

The *fourth* systemic constraint that deserves more weight involves factors associated with neoliberal institutionalism. As Brooks and Wohlforth present it, one would think that theory was all about reputation. However, an important strand in institutionalist thinking concerns transactions costs, focal points, and increasing returns. For example, many institutionalists believe that reduced transactions costs are what drive cooperative agreements and institutions are maintained by those lower costs and the greater burden involved in change. One of the reasons the United States has not attempted a redesign of international architecture may indeed be the heavy costs involved. For example, NATO endures not because it is optimal to deal with the new threats beyond Europe, but instead because it already exists and is too expensive to reinvent. Other institutions that fit this vein include the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the United Nations. Relative transactions (or sunk) costs contain Goliath.

The *fifth* systemic constraint is timing. It is easier for the top dog of international politics to work its will in the international arena at some times versus others. For example, it is often argued that major crises or wars present opportunities for systemic transformation with little pushback. Thus the Concert of Europe came out of the Napoleonic Wars, the League of Nations from WWI, the United Nations from WWII, and so on. Such times involve conditions that facilitate change including not only an altered balance of power, but also war or economic weariness, the desire to avoid prior problems, and the

emergence of new domestic coalitions and policy ideas. Timing has arguably not been favorable to unipolar revisionism with the possible exception of post 9/11 – an opportunity neutralized by subsequent failed efforts. It is not clear if the economic crisis today will become so severe that it has similar effects. The general point is that the hegemon will be more or less likely to get pushback on its efforts to redo the international system depending on whether extraordinary events are an icebreaker on political inertia.

The *sixth* constraint involves domestic politics. Brooks and Wohlforth do note that domestic resistance, not systemic constraints, might limit resources to pursue activism. Their thesis, however, is about the lack of systemic constraints. What they pay less attention to is whether factors in world politics inspire U.S. domestic opposition to primacy. It seems that systemic effects – perhaps other states opposing the United States, a loss of trading privileges, or anti-American sentiment, arguably do mold U.S. domestic resistance to global projects. Perhaps part of the turn of domestic opinion against the Bush policy activism correlated to the decline in U.S. international standing. Americans thought less of President Bush and his agenda because the reaction abroad was so negative. The external-internal connection is one that deserves more attention in understanding the limits of a unipolar policy.

So let us return to the puzzle of why there has been so little successful primacy style global activism as advocated by Brooks and Wohlforth's argument. In terms of the general lack of activism since 1991 there is no clear answer within their framework—though domestic politics or poor strategy are two fallbacks. In terms of the failure of the Bush efforts after 9/11, their answer is the Bush administration did it badly. Instead of pursuing systemic activism based on military force, it should have pursued a policy that aimed at the global economy or international standards that define legitimacy. Moreover, Bush did it with an inept diplomacy that paid too little attention to the ways power can be used to leverage legitimacy and the rules of the global economy. Instead, the Bush team disavowed itself of the need to reshape institutions and focused too narrowly on justifying policies to the American public.

They may indeed be right but “bad policy” is a residual category for their argument – it is not part of either the main negative argument or even the opaque positive argument. It also would have been more effective if they had used counterfactual reasoning to show how different tactics of a primacy strategy would have led to a different outcome for the Bush administration.

Perhaps, however, systemic constraints did play a role in checking a more assertive U.S. primacy strategy. While Bush's policy did exacerbate the situation it is unclear if any policy that stirred doubts about U.S. intentions, did not take into account the interest of other key players, did not respect most core international rules and norms, could not justify why new versus existing institutions are needed, was not wisely timed, and did not heed the domestic consequences of international developments could have succeeded.

All said, however, Brooks and Wohlforth's sophisticated argument is the best to date as to why the United States, even after the recent economic crisis, is well-positioned to take the lead in reinvigorating international rules and institutions. In practice the Brooks and Wohlforth program would likely embrace significant multilateralism (not unilateralism) and heed the interests of others (not roll over them) even at the short term expense of some U.S. interests in order to get deals done. It would probably look more like engagement than primacy – the result not of U.S. relative power or overt efforts to balance it, but of the residual constraints even that significant power faces in the contemporary international system .

Reading *World Out of Balance* in April 2009 is a disorienting experience. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth's outstanding book builds a powerful case for the durability of American primacy, rooted in the distinctive logic of unipolarity, the unassailability of America's material power advantage, and the difficulty of locating evidence for the operation of the mechanisms underpinning expectations of challenges to its primacy. But in the midst of a global financial crisis which has ravaged the American economy and deeply undermined confidence in its leadership, is the unassailability of American material primacy still so obvious? The terms of the global debate seem to have suddenly and profoundly shifted, leaving the impression of two crafty and battle-hardened knights defending the ramparts of an abandoned fortress. Their laudable efforts to unpack the mechanisms which might bring about challenges to U.S. primacy already seem like the stuff of antiquity. Unchallengeable American material primacy? Why not theorize the durability of the Pope's authority over the Holy Roman Empire?

This is of course not entirely fair. The intellectual trajectory of *World Out of Balance* long predates the current tectonic shifts, and the long-term significance of the global economic crisis is far from clear. The economic crisis has hurt other potential competitors as badly as it has the United States, so that even massive absolute losses may not harm America's relative position of power. But like a master-work explaining why bipolarity could never end published in the late 1980s, *World Out of Balance* may be doomed to defend itself from against a sudden, dramatic change in fortunes whose effects may not be fully felt for decades. The enormous material power advantage enjoyed by the United States upon which their argument hinges looks far less unassailable today than it did five years ago. Amidst the staggering collapse of the American-led global economic order, the end of the dollar as a global reserve currency and the American consumer as the engine of global economic growth are no longer a purely theoretical possibility. Add in the prospect of uncontrollable nuclear proliferation, which could erode the utility of American military command of the commons, and the foundations for America's hegemonic position suddenly look uncomfortably assailable.

The events of the last two years aside, many of the authors' arguments are persuasive, and their empirical precision offers a useful social scientific corrective to conventional wisdom about the challenges to American preponderance. Brooks and Wohlforth are correct to note the absence of clear great power balancing against the United States, and the relatively low observable impact of "soft balancing" or of behavioral changes driven by anti-American attitudes expressed in opinion surveys. It makes theoretical sense that unipolarity would generate a different logic than would any other distribution of power, whether that logic is the Realist one of bandwagoning, an institutionalist one of path dependence and sunk costs, or an imperial one of hubs-and-spokes and divide-and-rule. And they raise important questions as to why, even by institutionalist logic, the Bush administration should have avoided attempting to create new institutions at the moment of its peak of power.

The chosen method in *World Out of Balance*, in line with recent trends in the field of International Relations, is to focus in tightly on specific causal mechanisms underpinning the assumed constraints on a unipolar power rather than on broader macro-level arguments. The field is clearly the better for their valiant efforts to unpack the mechanisms driving great power strategies in a world of unipolarity. This allows for a much more precise and specific analysis than is usually seen.

At the same time, mechanisms-focused research sometimes risks losing the forest for the trees, zeroing in on one causal mechanism when in fact the true work may be done by a combination of mechanisms interacting in a complex system.

Take the China question, so central to Realist questions about balancing and unipolarity. Brooks and Wohlforth do a fine job in debunking expectations of an immediate systemic challenge by China to American primacy. China remains a vast but poor country, which benefits disproportionately from its participation in the U.S. designed international order and which shows few signs of developing the military capabilities to challenge American primacy. But 'balancing' alone may not capture what matters about China's strategic portfolio. China has developed a growing array of economic relationships and zones of cultural and political influence ("soft power") without regard to the American security umbrella. Its voracious appetite for energy is bringing China into the Gulf – and judging by my conversations with Gulf officials over the last two years, the day when China may see the need for a more robust diplomatic and even military presence to protect those energy interests may be closer than many people believe. And to return to the challenge posed by the current global economic crisis, many have argued that China's decision to not challenge the American-led international order over the last two decades was driven by the fact they it enjoyed disproportionately high benefits from that system. As the American-led international economic order stops paying such high dividends to China (and to other potential powers), the disincentive to challenge its rules will likely dissipate quickly.

Take their analysis of institutionalism. Brooks and Wohlforth operationalize that tradition by focusing on a single mechanism: reputation. While their conclusions on the generalizability of reputation are debatable, they only briefly grapple with the most influential actual institutionalist arguments currently on offer. For instance, John Ikenberry's claim (in *After Victory*) that leading powers create institutions which lock in their power at its peak by demonstrating strategic restraint and offering voice opportunities does not rest only generalizable reputation costs. It instead focuses on how states perceive the leading power's willingness to continue to stick to its side of the bargain when given the temptation to defect. The interaction of mechanisms, as opposed to a tight focus on a single mechanism, could well produce different outcomes.

Brooks and Wohlforth also short-change the constructivist critique. Their treatment of legitimacy costs focuses on a set of methods for avoiding or minimizing such costs.

While they make a valiant effort, such measurement is beset with methodological difficulties. Foot-dragging, shirking, work to rule – these passive strategies of hindering the efforts of the leader are difficult to quantify, since they rely on counter-factual reasoning about what a more enthusiastic partner might have accomplished or contributed, yet it is plausible that they can have a great effect in the aggregate. Take the case of Iraq. That war did not end with the invasion, and it makes sense to look at how American unilateralism led it to shoulder virtually the entire burden of the occupation of Iraq – other than the UK, few of the ‘coalition of the willing’ made substantive contributions, leaving the U.S. to sink into its quagmire alone.

Constructivist arguments might also be taken in a number of less materialist directions, to consider the interpretive dimension of America’s role in the world. As Martha Finnemore points out in a recent essay in *World Politics*, ‘unipolarity’ is a social as well as a material position. The distance from unipolarity to hegemony to empire is not simply an analytical question, it is a deeply political one with far-ranging implications for the reception of American claims and priorities. For instance, Americans often propose that its primacy is legitimated by its defense of global public goods. But to many outside America, those look less like public goods than like American self-interest wrapped up in narcissistic regard. The U.S. positioning of troops in the Gulf, for instance, may look to Americans like a public service of defending the free flow of oil, but it looks to many others like imperialism. Such views of the American presence as imperial and malign have spread dramatically over the last half-decade in line with the invasion of Iraq and the more unilateralist foreign policy. Can this really not matter?

In that regard, it is curious that Brooks and Wohlforth largely ignore al-Qaeda and the “global war on terror” in its calculation of costs. The attack on America on 9/11 was almost certainly driven at least in part by opposition to American hegemony – its support for Israel, occupation of Iraq, military presence in the Gulf, support for corrupt dictators in the Muslim world, and cultural imperialism were all routinely cited by bin Laden and other theorists of the jihad. The “GWOT” has drawn the U.S. into a massively expensive venture into the Islamic world. Whether that involves primarily the military focus on al-Qaeda or the more ‘progressive’ approach of trying to reform Muslim cultures, politics and societies, it involves a major expenditure of American resources which by any measure has alienated wide swathes of the Muslim world. This may not be state balancing, but it is certainly a significant cost.

World Out of Balance makes a major contribution to the field of International Relations, and deserves to be widely read and discussed. But the confidence about the durability of American primacy which pervades the book is not fully persuasive. Americans seem to have a peculiar difficulty imagining a world which can function without their leadership. Others seem less constrained. As Barack Obama remarked during his first Presidential trip to Europe, the British thought they were pretty exceptional back in their day as well, and could hardly imagine a world where the sun would set on their Empire. It did.

The United States became the most powerful country in the world in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the past twenty years, this dominance has grown to the point where the U.S. is stronger than any likely combination of nations, a structural-systemic condition known as unipolarity. Such unrivaled power is unparalleled in modern history. In their majestic new book, *World Out of Balance*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth examine the unique properties of this international system, which they argue has been poorly understood because of its unprecedented nature, as it relates to constraints on U.S. security policy. They make a simple but bold claim: systemic constraints under unipolarity are largely inoperative with respect to the security policies of the unipole or hegemon, in this case, the United States.

Let me say at the outset that this is an extraordinary book, truly breathtaking in its scope, theoretical elegance, and analytical rigor. It accomplishes what few works in the field have achieved: it takes on an array of top-shelf theories, clarifies their logic, gathers evidence that directly bears on the validity of their arguments, and judiciously weighs the evidence to see if their claims hold any water. Moreover, the central thesis can be placed on a bumper sticker: systemic constraints under unipolarity are largely inoperative with respect to the hegemon's security policies. Given the ambitiousness of the project and the scope of the analysis, there is much food for thought here and the insights gained are worth all the chewing. The following are my thoughts and reflections about the larger meaning of the work. Some readers will quite rightly accuse me of being unfair at points because my criticisms are mostly of the type that suggest: "you should have written the book I wanted you to write." I plead guilty as charged.

What is a Systemic Constraint?

Brooks and Wohlforth's conceptualization of systemic constraints, which is central to their thesis, seems to imply both "freedom of action" and "costs attached to policy options." When they say that systemic constraints on U.S. security policies are largely inoperative, they mean that the U.S. can do virtually anything without suffering costs. In their words, "U.S. foreign policy is a realm of choice, rather than necessity" (19). Here, I think they are mistakenly conflating freedom of action or policy autonomy with costs and constraints. Waltz himself says that states can do any fool thing they desire, but the system will punish bad policies and reward good ones. In other words, great powers always enjoy a large amount of freedom of action but they cannot escape system constraints: when they conform their policies to systemic realities they do well; when they do not do so, they fare poorly. In the 1930s, for instance, Nazi Germany was a polar power in a multipolar system, and yet it possessed a great deal of freedom of action in its security policies. Hitler set Germany on a ruthless course of expansion at a time when France and Britain preferred wishful thinking and appeasement to confrontation, the United States was unarmed and unwilling to fight another European war, and Stalin had just decapitated the Red Army. In 1939, Germany remained unbalanced and, in this

sense, unconstrained. Yet, the system ultimately pushed back, and Germany suffered not only huge losses in blood and treasure but also its political autonomy and territorial integrity. While this case did not emerge under a unipolar system, it makes the point that constraints should not be equated with freedom of action but rather with the costs and benefits attached to policy choices.

States with lots of freedom of action are not free from systemic constraints; they cannot escape the costs that the international system imposes on unwise policies. Indeed, if a unipolar power could escape such costs—If its policies were essentially costless—then it would be meaningless to speak of its pursuing wise or unwise policies: all policies would be equally good and bad, for there would be no yardstick to evaluate policy options. This is not to suggest that Nazi Germany and the United States today are comparable cases; surely they are not. Brooks and Wohlforth are correct to say that the U.S. has unprecedented freedom of action and, given its unprecedented dominance, incurs fewer costs for unwise foreign policies than have past great powers. I think that they overstate their case, however, when they say that systemic constraints are *largely inoperative* with respect to U.S. security policies. The British said much the same thing as late as the 1890s. A little over a decade later, Britain was a second-rate power. Many Americans today believe as the British did then: “History is unpleasant and always happens to other people.” Will history happen for the United States in the next twenty years? The jury is still out.

Does Unipolarity Constrain any Actors?

The book’s basic argument is that, under unipolarity, the relative power advantage of the lone pole is too great to be counterbalanced, and therefore the U.S. is relatively immune from traditional balance-of-power constraints. The unprecedented quantitative and qualitative material advantages held by the U.S. mean that any effort to compete directly with it is futile, so no one tries. Beyond the futility of balancing, Brooks and Wohlforth outline several reasons for the missing balance. First, the logic of collective action undercuts the formation of balances of power. System equilibrium suffers from the same free-rider problem as all public goods, so we can expect its under-provision. Second, balance-of-power politics, like all politics, is local. States are more concerned about their neighbors and shifts in the regional balance than they are about the global balance of power. Finally, the geography of the current system favors its durability. The United States is separated from the other major powers by two oceans, while all its peer competitors find themselves tightly embedded within regional subsystems. Thus, U.S. capabilities appear less threatening and salient than those held by geographically proximate major powers, who are much more likely to have aspirations and gripes regarding each other than regarding the distant unipolar power.

Brooks and Wohlforth nicely point out the absence of systemic constraints for the dominant power under unipolarity. They ignore, however, the other side of the coin: the lack of system constraints on the rest of the world under unipolarity. Does unipolarity

exert meaningful structural effects on any state? Indeed, one can reasonably argue that the unipole has less power to influence the behavior of others than the more normalized two poles (or superpowers) under bipolarity. Did not the U.S. have more influence over more actors in more issue areas under bipolarity than it currently does in its more dominant position? Freedom of action is not the same as influence, authority, and the ability to coerce others to do things they otherwise would not do. The U.S. may indeed have more autonomy and less costs attached to its policies under unipolarity than under bipolarity. This statement, however, does not invalidate the claim that it also has less power and influence over others. You cannot have a leader without followers, and this is arguably the strange fate of a unipolar power.

Balancing as Revisionist Behavior under Unipolarity

The book's main thesis—that the U.S. is virtually immune from systemic constraints—begs the question: how, then, does unipolarity end? Brooks and Wohlforth do not consider this question. It is an important one, however, and it points to a flaw in the book, namely, it does not offer a general theory about the properties of unipolarity and how they affect not just the U.S. but everyone else. Let me, therefore, briefly point out a unique characteristic of unipolarity, which Brooks and Wohlforth overlook, that constrains the behavior of a rising power and also suggests how unipolarity might end.

In their discussion of constructivism, Brooks and Wohlforth focus on U.S. legitimacy to rule. They concede that this is an important consideration, though not a strong constraint on U.S. security policies. In their discussion of legitimacy, they, like everyone else, ignore a crucial obstacle to balancing behavior—one that could be used to connect their discussion of traditional realist balancing with their concern about legitimacy as a possible systemic constraint. Under unipolarity and *only unipolarity*, balancing is the policy of revision and not the status quo. This ideational hurdle along with the huge power disparity inherent in unipolarity have been the main obstacles to balancing behavior. Any state or coalition seeking to restore a balance is, by definition, revisionist in an essential way: it seeks to overthrow the established order of unbalanced power and replace it with a balance-of-power system. The goal is a change *of* system, not a change *within* the system, and so it will alter the very structure of international politics from unipolarity to bipolarity or multipolarity. Because balancing under unipolarity is revisionist, any state intent on restoring system equilibrium will be labeled an aggressor.

What this implies is that, for balancing to occur under unipolarity, it has to be preceded by a delegitimation phase. Delegitimation is similar to what others have called “soft balancing,” but it is more encompassing. It includes not just practices of resistance, which impose costs on the hegemon short of balancing against it, but also a discourse of resistance; that is, criticism of the existing order and a blueprint for a new order. States must first come to see U.S. hegemony as so incompetent and dangerous that its rule must be overturned. Otherwise, the risks and high costs of attempting to restore a global balance will be prohibitive. Thus, unipolarity requires both delegitimation and

deconcentration to move in lockstep with each other, occurring simultaneously as one phase. Delegitimation provides the prerequisite reasons (embodied in a discourse and practice of resistance) for internal and external balancing practices; whereas deconcentration, by dispersing power more evenly throughout the system, lowers the barriers to both the discourse and actual practice of resistance to hegemonic rule. In other words, delegitimation affects the will to pursue costly balancing strategies, while deconcentration affects the ability to do so.

What is being undermined and then challenged is the legitimacy of the hegemon's right to rule and its established order—the system's institutions, governance structures, and principles that guide, among other things, the use of force. The question is why would states want to delegitimize the existing order? The standard story is that rising powers and unequal growth among states disrupt system equilibrium by creating a disjuncture between actual power and prestige (the reputation for power). An overlooked cause might be hegemonic incompetence. Nobody wants to follow an incompetent leader—one that is incapable of managing the international system. Along these lines, the latest cascading stock-market crash and economic downturn is, in the eyes of many, the result of American incompetence: deregulation, and the lack of transparency caused the spread of its “toxic assets” to the rest of the world. As such, the recent economic meltdown may portend not only the beginning of the end of American unipolarity but also momentous global political change. Just as the Great Depression ushered in fascism, Stalinism, and, of course, World War II, the current financial crisis is of sufficient proportions that we might expect deep and far-reaching political repercussions.

One of these political repercussions may be to strengthen a trend that already exists: the rise of authoritarian or state capitalism. The West's old Cold-War rivals, China and Russia, are now economically successful authoritarian-capitalist great powers. Such states have been absent since the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945, but they seem poised to make a comeback—a big comeback. Russia and China are much larger in terms of population, territory, and resources than Imperial and Fascist Germany and Imperial Japan ever were or could have hoped to become. The return of authoritarian-capitalist great powers, therefore, represents not only a viable alternative path to modernity but, more important, the likely re-creation of a new nondemocratic Second World—one that will directly confront the First World and compete with it in the Third World. But there is a fundamental difference this time around. Whereas the old Second World operated outside the global capitalist system, the new Second World is now fully integrated within the global economy with its members participating on their own terms, just as their nondemocratic-capitalist predecessors did prior to 1945.

This development raises two important questions. Will Beijing, Moscow, and their future followers be antagonistic toward the democratic-capitalist countries, raising the specter of a new Cold War? And will the current global economic turndown, which is subjecting many recently democratized countries to increasing social and economic pressures, undermine liberal institutions, weakening the hegemonic grip of liberal democracy and

increasing the appeal of authoritarian-capitalism? Either of these two possibilities would delegitimize the current global order and, thereby, encourage real balancing against the United States.

Finally, unipolarity might end not by others catching up but by the U.S. falling back to earth. The current economic crisis exposed the highly leveraged nature of the U.S. economy. Whenever the recession (depression?) ends, we will not see a return to the pre-crisis practices that, while obviously unsound, produced consistently high rates of economic growth over the past several decades. This raises several important questions. To what extent has U.S. growth over the past twenty years been the result of an essentially phony economy—one driven first by the stock market “dot com” bubble, then the housing bubble and absurd levels of consumer debt accumulated by easy credit (e.g., unlimited access to credit cards and home equity loans)? Can the U.S. maintain its economic edge and continue to grow with a de-leveraged domestic economy? If the U.S. cannot continue to borrow massively abroad to finance its current consumption and military spending, how will the U.S. or the global economy grow? If the answer is that China and the other emerging economies will replace the U.S. as the engines of global growth, how long can unipolarity last?

None of this is to suggest that *World Out of Balance* is anything less than a master work of logical and rigorous argumentation backed by copious and judiciously presented evidence. It is to suggest, however, that all good things come to end. This is especially true in the realm of politics, where bad policies can swiftly thwart certain destiny and awaken those under the mistaken belief that history does not apply to them. In the end, states, like firms, must remain solvent over the long term. Their commitments and liabilities must not far exceed their assets. When commitments expand and resources contract, there comes a point at which the government is going to have a check returned marked “insufficient funds.” The most obvious way that a balance of power will emerge is by the U.S. recklessly frittering away both its relative power advantage and its will to exercise that power. Thus, the crucial task for U.S. foreign policy, as both Brooks and Wohlforth acknowledge, is to strike a healthy balance between hegemonic abdication and hegemonic absolutism.

Author's Response by Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, Dartmouth

This symposium is one of the most rewarding and productive intellectual exchanges either of us has ever had. For that, we have to thank Williams College and H-Diplo for providing the venue, and our distinguished colleagues for writing such penetrating and fair-minded reviews. Given reviewers of this caliber, it's no surprise that they all get our book's point: that American primacy in the inter-state scales of power renders the systemic constraints featured in all the main international relations theories largely inoperative with respect to U.S. security policy. When the United States seeks to translate its power capabilities into enhanced security, the international system does not push back against it the way it did against leading powers in the past, and the way it still does against other powers today. As it ponders potential security policies, Washington does not confront the prospect that other great powers will construct a counter-balance through alliances or internal efforts. It need not fear escalating "soft balancing" measures on the part of other powers that would rein it in and eventually morph into conventional hard balancing. It does not need to worry that other states are in a strong position to use America's links to the global economy strategically to force it to toe their line. It does not need to be apprehensive that failure to cooperate in a given international institution might spoil its general reputation for cooperation and thus deny it all the benefits it gets from the institutional order. It need not worry that if it breaks some international rule or norm its overall legitimacy will necessarily be strongly reduced and its leadership role will come crashing down.

In different combinations, these constraints powerfully shaped the security policies of great powers in the bi- and multipolar systems of the past, and many continue to shape the policies of other powers in the unipolar one of today. Systemic IR theory, developed by hundreds of scholars over five decades, is not a naked emperor. These theories are often powerful tools for explaining the contours of state behavior. They just do not apply to the contemporary United States. This matters a great deal.

The book is thus largely about important things that are not happening, which makes it easy to point out, as our reviewers all do, the nasty and nettlesome things that are happening, from the financial crisis to Al Qaeda, to the seemingly intractable counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It takes a bit of mental effort to realize that, as challenging as the world may seem, it would be a whole lot more challenging if the United States had to tackle all these problems while also confronting systemic constraints. One way to escape the pervasive "presentism" of debates about U.S. foreign policy and get a sense of the importance of these constraints is to perform two mental tasks that American IR scholars often seem reluctant to undertake: think historically and think cross-nationally.

Our book provides short case studies of previous leading powers with international positions roughly comparable to the United States' today, except that they were in multi- and bipolar international systems: Britain at its 19th century peak and the United States in

the latter Cold War. These cases remind readers what it's like to run a great power's foreign policy in the face of systemic constraints like counter-balancing. The peak Cold War years found the United States devoting some 7-12% of GDP to the military and sacrificing the lives of some 90,000 soldiers in two Asian wars. Increases in U.S. military capabilities were predictably and reliably countered—one way or another—by a Soviet superpower with the means and the motive to check America. And during the latter Cold War, U.S. policy makers considering any major undertaking in most of the world's regions had to reckon the probability that the Soviet Union's formidable military machine might lend its weight to the other side of the scale. Today, by contrast, the U.S. spends 4.5% of GDP on defense, increased capabilities are not counterbalanced (the combined share of the other major powers' GDP devoted to defense has shrunk since the 1990s), and overseas interventions, while costly, are on a smaller scale entirely (4,800 KIA in Iraq) in part because other major powers do not put their military power at the disposal of U.S. adversaries.

Schweller highlights “the lack of system constraints on the rest of the world under unipolarity.” Wrong. The flip side of the lack of systemic constraints on the U.S. is their presence for other powers. The system constrains other powers from counterbalancing and contending for global leadership, for example, as most major powers have done in the past and at least two—Russia and China—would likely do now if they could. Citing the work of Avery Goldstein and other prominent China scholars, we note how Beijing's experience in the 1990s was completely consistent with our argument. China's efforts in the mid-1990s to translate rising capabilities quickly into a larger role generated pushback as regional powers moved closer to the United States, which itself focused more on the potential need to contain China, with the result being China's shift to its celebrated “peaceful rise” strategy. China is not doing something (seeking to become a peer competitor) which is very consequential (and something the U.S. does not want it do to) because of the international system's structure. And that is not the only constraint that affects others. The global economy constrains smaller powers far, far more than the U.S. While other powers are constrained by America's outsized role in the global economy from using economic statecraft (e.g., sanctions) against the U.S., Washington uses them with impunity against others (albeit not always effectively). Because other powers lack the material capacity to help redefine rules and provide public goods, international rules and norms constrain them far more than Washington.

That is what the book says. In a way, Schweller helps make this clear when he seeks to reckon U.S. power as the ability to get others to do what they would not otherwise do. Our response is that power is also the ability to get others not to do what they would otherwise do. Unipolarity conveys a lot of such power on the U.S. Yet another way to be quite clear about what the book says is to point out the very few cases where reviewers think we say things that we do not say. We certainly do not say that “history only happens to others.” Nor do we say that “the U.S. can do virtually anything without suffering costs.” Of course, any policy may have costs. What's missing today are costs imposed by system constraints: Iraq has been very costly because insurgents in Iraq have

pushed back, not the system. We also do not say that “the U.S. is likely to maintain its position as the sole first-rate power for as long as it chooses.” We say that the U.S. will not be replaced as the leading superpower anytime in the next twenty years. That is why we concluded the book by noting that the U.S. has a “twenty years opportunity” to reshape the international system.

With the core claim of the book and its implications thus clarified, three major topics from the reviews remain: whether recent events show that the U.S. has already lost the capacity to lead (mainly raised by Marc Lynch); the hoary issue of balancing (mainly raised by Stacie Goddard); and where research should go from here, especially concerning elusive but important issues of legitimacy and other hard-to-analyze ideational processes (raised by all the reviewers, but especially Legro and Schweller).

Has America Lost the Capacity to Lead?

Lynch expresses what has become a common refrain in recent months: the global financial crisis has compromised America’s prospects for leading the international system. “The global financial crisis...has ravaged the American economy and deeply undermined confidence in its leadership,” Lynch writes. “The enormous material power advantage enjoyed by the United States upon which their argument hinges looks far less unassailable today than it did five years ago. Amidst the staggering collapse of the American-led global economic order, the end of the dollar as the global reserve currency and the American consumer as the engine of global economic growth are no longer a purely theoretical possibility.” No one knows how rapidly the U.S. will recover from this crisis and what its economic prospects will be over the next decade. America might spiral downward for many years – like Japan in the 1990s. Or it muddle along with lackluster growth – like Europe in the 1990s. Finally America could rebound and achieve impressive economic growth – like the United States itself in the 1990s. It is unclear which of these three pathways America will follow, but given America’s past 150 years of impressive economic performance, its penchant for remaking itself, and its tendency to put in place more appropriate policies and regulations following previous crises, it would seem premature – and unwise – to assume that America will founder economically in the years ahead.

We certainly have no reason to assume that America will founder while its major competitors prosper, particularly as this crisis has revealed that the U.S. remains central enough in the global economy to reinforce the saying “when America coughs, the world gets a cold.” What we know for certain is that America’s lead over its competitors is very, very large. The financial crisis does not change this. Relative power is the bread and butter of international politics, and it shifts slowly. Indeed, the economic crisis has already harmed one would-be competitor — Russia, whose economy, state budget, stock market, and massive foreign currency reserve have all taken major hits — far, far harder than the United States.

China is generally seen as the country best positioned to emerge as a superpower challenger to the United States. Yet given where China is now relative to the United States – somewhere between a little more than 20% the size of the U.S. economy (if you measure GDP using market exchange rates) or a little more than 40% of the size of the economy (if you measure GDP using purchasing power parity) – it still has a very long way to go before it can come close to equaling America in economic terms, let alone military and technological capacity. Of course, China in recent decades has been growing at around 10% per year. But no country in history has been able to sustain anywhere near this kind of growth rate on a sustained basis once it becomes wealthy (right now, China's GDP per capita is less than 10% of the U.S. level now matter how you measure China's GDP). China will not be in position to be a peer competitor of the U.S. if it does not become wealthy (and thus lags in terms of technological capacity). But if China does eventually become rich, it is hard to see how it will not grow much more slowly than it does now – even if all goes well. And whether all goes well over the next decades in China is hardly a given. China faces many daunting challenges, some of which can't be "fixed" – most notably its rapidly aging population (in comparison, the United States is the best positioned of all the leading states on the demographic front). The bottom line is that absent a 1930s-style depression in the United States that somehow spares China, the United States will not be replaced as the sole superpower for a very long time.

Our bottom line conclusion is that the financial crisis notwithstanding, America is still in a position to act as the leader of the system and this will not change for the foreseeable future. Although Lynch may disagree, it is hardly insignificant that President Obama concurs with our position. As Obama stressed in a recent news conference, "We remain the largest economy in the world by a pretty significant margin. We remain the most powerful military on Earth. Our production of culture, our politics, our media still have ... enormous influence. And so I do not buy into the notion that America can't lead in the world." Obama then noted further that although America should not dictate to the world, that it "can continue to show leadership for a very long time."

Hard Times for Balancing

Balance-of-power theory has a very long pedigree and its central proposition – that states will develop and mobilize military capabilities sufficient to constrain the most powerful among them – is one that is recognized broadly within the academy and also by policymakers themselves. For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that of all the arguments and evidence presented in our book, none has met with more resistance than our finding that the counterbalancing constraint does not apply to the United States under unipolarity. Stacie Goddard's review is a strong case in point. She advances two main arguments about our treatment of balancing. First, she argues that if we define balancing as "countering hegemony" then balancing is unlikely to occur for exactly the reasons we suggest: she stresses "it does not seem likely, or even possible, that China, Russia, or the EU want to bear the costs of becoming a peer competitor to the United States." But she argues that if we "define balancing broadly, as any attempt to constrain

the United States' security policy" then balancing may well be present in the near future. She then uses the example of China to make this point, noting that China "could balance the United States by gearing its military towards a regional denial strategy" and thereby could certainly "place significant constraints on U.S. security policy in the region."

Our response to this line of argument is outlined in a short piece of ours that appeared in the Winter 2005/06 issue of *International Security* in which we replied to a critique of our work written by Robert Art. We stressed there that if we define balancing too loosely, then the concept is likely to become unfalsifiable. Balancing has traditionally been defined as "countering hegemony" both because such behavior has such great import for global politics and also because defining the concept in this way makes the balancing hypothesis falsifiable. That is, to be useful, a proposed definition of balancing must be able to say what is *not* balancing. But Goddard's definition encompasses nearly any state action. If China merely makes it harder — but not impossible — for the U.S. to defend Taiwan, it's balancing by that definition. Even if China's actions only make a little bit harder to defend Taiwan, it's also balancing. And if China would be augmenting its capabilities in the exact same manner even if the U.S. were half of its current size, or had a military that was far less able to project power in Asia, or if America decided to disengage from Asia altogether, it's *still* balancing by Goddard's definition. There has to be an analytical category of "not balancing" for the concept of balancing to have any utility.

Second, Goddard argues that a balance may emerge for reasons having nothing to do with balancing as we define it—that is, state actions taken to redress the concentration of power in the U.S. Lynch makes a similar point when he argues that China's search for oil may lead it to take actions that have the effect of constraining the U.S. A balance is a balance, to be sure. Goddard is right that states' pursuit of a variety of local interests unrelated to U.S. power may someday be seen to have contributed to the reemergence of a more even distribution of capabilities. But as pp. 95-97 of our book emphasizes, it matters greatly whether we have reason to expect a balance to be restored *in response* to U.S. power or as a result of processes having nothing to do with the concentration of power in the U.S. If the latter is the case, then the rebalancing processes Goddard discusses are not systemic constraints. That is, there is no reason to expect these actions to escalate in tandem with growth or use of U.S. power to pursue its security.

The significance of this point becomes especially clear when we discuss the policy advice many scholars have drawn from balance of power theory and its close relative balance of threat theory: that the U.S. must be restrained lest it provoke balancing. What these scholars are saying is that an activist U.S. security policy is likely to push the world back toward balancing more quickly, so Washington had better act with restraint. Be restrained, they argued, or face the systemic constraint of balancing. *World out of Balance* shows that there is no reason to believe that argument. And our reviewers here actually agree. The rebalancing processes Goddard refers to—the myriad actions states take to pursue their interests that are unconnected to the concentration of power in the

U.S. but that may contribute to the dispersion of power—are interesting and may ultimately be important but they are not system constraints and nothing to do with the core balance-of-power restraint argument. Indeed, a less active U.S. stance might accelerate those processes. U.S. withdrawal from the security affairs of East Asia, for example, might result in regional powers increasing defense outlays and military programs.

Goddard also raises the prospect of imperial overstretch, noting that it may be precisely because the U.S. is so powerful and does not face systemic constraints that its foreign policy may soon outstrip its material resources. Lacking the traditional constraints facing a major power, she argues that the U.S. may be tempted to intervene far too much in the rest of the world and uses the case of Iraq to buttress this argument. This is a bit like arguing that a person will dramatically increase his spending priorities if he garners a windfall—e.g. he goes from having \$1 million in assets to having \$10 million in assets—and will be more likely to become bankrupt as a result. Yet how much a consumer spends is not structurally determined by income, just as how much a state takes on its foreign policy is not structurally determined by how much power it has. A wealthy individual can go bankrupt, to be sure, but it requires poorer choices to do so than if they had fewer resources.

Balanced power is no guarantee against bad choices—think of the Vietnam War. Having a peer competitor not only did not induce prudence in Washington, it clearly fed into a whole series of costly and dangerous interventions in the third world. Invading Iraq was a choice the Bush administration made—a poor choice, to be sure—but not a requirement of the United States' position. America may well exhaust itself, but because it does not face systemic constraints the margin or error is actually much greater: it will require a longer series of bad choices to reach overstretch than if the external environment did powerfully constrain the U.S.

Legitimacy and other Good Ideas for More Research

Jeffrey Legro's review exposes a weakness of the book: we did not examine some potentially important constraints because it was simply too hard. That is, the mechanisms themselves were elusive and hard to analyze and, partly for that reason, there was no existing scholarship to examine. As Legro and Schweller note, ours is a book that focuses on examining existing theories, not writing brand new theories of complex phenomena. We found the task of interpreting and testing a large number of complex propositions from five different research traditions daunting enough.

Legro's review is in essence a guide to important questions for further research. What's the relationship between social trust and balancing? We can be pretty sure that distrust would have to be extreme to overcome the material obstacles to balancing we analyze, but, beyond that, we simply do not know. What is the relationship between the distribution of interests and the speed with which the world will move back to balance?

We agree that a complete “theory of hegemonic behavior or international order must heed the distribution of interests as well as power.” The theory remains to be written, but power affects the ability of states to pursue interests, so our more ‘material’ analysis will be a key part of that complete theory.

Legro and especially Goddard stress that we ultimately accept that rules do have a (relatively weak) potential to constrain the U.S. If so, then the logical question becomes when do rules act as significant constraints? Bear in mind here that the purpose of our chapter on legitimacy (Chapter 6) was to examine a prominent argument advanced by constructivist scholars such as Reus-Smit, Cronin, and Lebow: the U.S. will lose legitimacy if it does not follow the current formal and informal rules of the institutional order. It is an argument that we felt “clearly commands attention” (179) because it is important, plausible, and relevant; indeed, it resonated with what many policy makers and pundits were noting in their own analyses. In addressing this argument, one important point we stressed is that the U.S. could potentially alter the rules of the institutional order – something existing constructivist treatments had neglected. As we noted (180), “If the historical record is any guide, the United States has the potential to use its power advantages to revise the order in at least some ways to its benefit without facing legitimacy costs.”

Having the potential to alter rules does not mean that the U.S. is free to change them at will: we did not say, as Goddard claims, that “the United States is free to recreate the rules of the game.” We were simply providing a correction to an argument that had overlooked that the U.S. could try to change the rules and might succeed. Significantly, Ian Hurd’s recent constructivist treatments of legitimacy as applied to U.S. foreign policy – which reacts to our critique of the previous constructivist literature – agrees with our correction. If other constructivists follow Hurd’s lead, then this would shift the terms of the debate to address the question Goddard feels should be analyzed: “the extent to which the U.S. can create new standards of legitimacy, and the cost involved in doing so.” We agree that this is the key question that scholars should now be addressing, but it was not originally the one that constructivists posed with respect to the United States.

Schweller intriguingly suggests that the politics of legitimacy may well end up being an important pathway by which unipolarity ends and the world returns to bi- or multipolarity. We did not compose a theory of how unipolarity ends. Countries grow at different rates, and, over the long haul, as thinkers as diverse as Lenin, Weber, and Gilpin have stressed, these uneven growth rates lead to change in world politics. Given that our book highlights the interaction between material capabilities and legitimacy, it’s fair to say that we would bet that this venerable “law of uneven growth” is going to cast a long shadow on the issues Schweller discusses. While the question of how the politics of delegitimation may play out against the backdrop of the United States’ continued primacy remains to be answered, our bet is that the conventional rise and decline of powers will remain central to the story of unipolarity’s end.

Legro's two related points about timing and path dependence are also potentially important areas for inquiry. The assumption underlying much institutionalist scholarship, notably John Ikenberry's *After Victory*, is that making institutions is especially easy after a major upheaval wipes the slate clean by destroying or undermining existing institutions. Legro suggests that in the absence of some upheaval even greater than 9/11, the costs sunk into the existing institutional architecture are a formidable barrier to revision. But it also happens to be the case that the U.S. was the main force behind the creation of much of the current institutional order in the first place. Hence, on balance, sunk costs and path dependence may well be working for the U.S.

As we note in the book, domestic politics in the U.S. and abroad represent another constraint crying out for more scholarly attention. We found that existing studies do not suggest that domestic politics will act as a systemic constraint that rises in tandem with U.S. power. Rather, everything we know suggests that these effects will be extremely complex, mediated by a host of case specific factors. That said, we have a lot to learn about these dynamics.

The biggest question Legro raises is whether these potential constraints, in combination, explain why the U.S. has not been more active in seeking to refashion the international institutional order over the past two decades. Our admittedly initial look at the evidence from the Clinton and Bush administrations did not yield much direct evidence that this was so. Indeed, the Clinton years saw a lot of successful systemic activism on economic matters, which is where that administration thought the real action was during the 1990s. The prime focus of U.S. foreign policy was squarely on the security issues under the Bush administration during the 2000s, and it is true that it attempted few changes to the global security architecture. Yet we do not believe that experience is a definitive lesson concerning the prospects for leadership. The Bush administration's lack of willingness to seek change may have less to do with the potential constraints on systemic activism that Legro points to and more to do with the fact that it came into office with a notably skeptical view of the value that international institutions have for the U.S. By all accounts, the Obama administration intends a different approach. It may well constitute a more probative test of our and Legro's conjecture. Stay tuned.

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