

Why unipolarity doesn't matter (much)

Charles L Glaser
The George Washington University

Abstract *This article first argues that states have not balanced against US unipolar power because the potential balancers do not view the United States as a major threat, because they believe it has benign security-seeking motives, at least with regard to other major powers. This explanation runs counter to the Brooks–Wohlforth argument, which holds that states are not balancing because the magnitude of the United States' power advantage makes balancing essentially infeasible. The second part of the paper challenges the conventional wisdom on the benefits of unipolarity, arguing that the benefits the United States derives from unipolarity are generally overrated. More specifically, US security need not be significantly reduced by growth in China's economy that supports a return to bipolarity.*

Introduction

Understanding the implications of unipolarity has generated growing interest over the past decade.¹ The reasons are obvious. The United States has been the unipolar power since the end of the Cold War, providing what is widely viewed as an enviable position from which to direct its foreign policy. Renewed debate is beginning about how long US unipolarity will last. Contrary to some early predictions that US unipolarity would be short lived, it has remained essentially unchallenged for a couple of decades.² Now there is rising concern that China's continuing economic growth will soon enable it to eclipse America's power dominance. But there remains a strong case that America's overall power advantage will last for at least a few more decades.³ US material preponderance is simply so large that no other major power comes close to matching the United States across the range of the key determinants of power, which are usually envisioned as including population, territory, economic capacity, military forces and political competence.⁴

¹ See, for example, the series of articles in the special issue (2009) of *World Politics*, 62:1.

² Arguing persuasively that predictions of early decline were ill founded was Wohlforth (1999).

³ For a recent statement see Joffe (2009).

⁴ This is a standard list of components of power; see Waltz (1979, 131). Although not central to points that I address in the text, I would take issue with including military forces/capabilities. A country that had the potential to build forces that were much larger than any other country's, but chose not to, would still be the unipolar power. Military forces are endogenous to structure and, therefore, should not be used to define it.

In their ambitious book, *World out of balance* (2008), Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth provide a thorough exploration of the implications of unipolarity, focusing on how other states will react to US power. They argue that the US unipolar advantage is now so great that it prevents other states from counterbalancing; according to their analysis, US unipolarity essentially eliminates the external constraints on the US ability to exercise its power. As a result, unipolarity provides the United States with tremendous leeway to pursue its international interests. In their words, 'counterbalancing is and will long remain prohibitively costly for the other major powers' and 'the variables that drive balance-of-power theory itself are now configured so as to render the balancing constraint so improbable as to render it inoperative' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 23, 27). Brooks and Wohlforth contend that the lack of current balancing against the United States reflects the logic of their central argument. Regarding the policy implications, they conclude that due to the lack of counterbalancing, 'there is no reason to expect that for the next two decades external constraints will meaningfully impede U.S. efforts to revise the international system' (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 17–18).

This article addresses two questions about unipolarity. First, is counterbalancing in fact prevented by the current distribution of power? Second, and much broader, is unipolarity really so wonderful? More specifically, how valuable is unipolarity to the United States? For example, would the United States be much worse off in a bipolar world in which China's economic growth made it the second pole? Contrary to what I believe is the conventional wisdom, I argue that unipolarity is much overrated.⁵

Is counterbalancing essentially impossible?

The realist core of the Brooks and Wohlforth argument is that counterbalancing is now beyond the means of the other major powers. US power is now so great that it has crossed a threshold beyond which other states simply cannot respond effectively. Consequently, they are not even trying to counterbalance US power.

US power is certainly impressive. According to their figures from 2006, the United States possessed 46 per cent of major-power gross domestic product (GDP). Roughly matching US GDP would therefore require most of the other major powers to join together. Further, as Brooks and Wohlforth argue, there are significant barriers to external balancing (that is, alliance formation), including collective action problems, in which states hope to free ride on others' investments in military capabilities.

Nevertheless, the lack of counterbalancing is not best explained by America's large advantage in power. Instead, the key reason states are not energetically balancing against the United States is because they do not believe that the United States poses a large threat to their vital interests. Other states' beliefs about US motives explain why. Although the United States has both tremendous raw power and military forces that are far larger and more capable than any other country's, the belief that the United States is likely a primarily security-seeking state that is uninterested in conquering or coercing major powers makes it relatively

⁵The title of my article may exaggerate the extent of this judgement, but I could not resist the parallel to Jervis' (1979/1980) influential article on nuclear strategy.

unthreatening. Consequently, states do not see a large need to balance against the United States⁶ and, therefore, are unwilling to make the massive investments that effective systemic counterbalancing would require.

This argument is supported by the existence of a potential balancer that is not balancing—the European Union (EU) has a combined GDP that is larger than America's and its population is sufficiently large and its technological capabilities sufficiently advanced to enable it to compete. Brooks and Wohlforth correctly note that European defence spending has dropped relative to US defence spending since the end of the Cold War and identify barriers to effective EU balancing, including its inability to act decisively on military and foreign policy (2008, 23, 31–32).⁷ However, this tells us relatively little because the EU does not today face a serious threat to its security from the United States. As Robert Art (2004, 180) argues, Europe has not balanced against the United States 'because the United States does not represent a direct threat to Europe. The United States is, after all, Europe's ally and protector'.

If this were to change, with Europeans coming to believe that the United States was an enemy determined to coerce Europe on questions of vital interest, Europe would almost certainly act quite differently. Countries would likely increase their defence spending and the pressures created by insecurity would likely lead to improved coordination of the acquisition of military forces and of strategic planning for their use. My point is not that all of sudden the problems of free riding and short time horizons would be overcome, but rather the more limited observation that a hostile unipolar power would fuel significant changes in European defence policies.

It is possible that the EU would fail to achieve the necessary political–military integration and resource extraction—recent research has highlighted states that have under-balanced (Schweller 2008). But even in this event, we would expect to see very different European politics and policies—states recognizing the large threat posed by the United States, and influential leaders trying to increase defence spending and expressing much greater determination to coordinate and integrate European defence policies—even if they do not succeed. These expectations are consistent with recent research that finds crippling flaws in balance-of-power theory—arguing that systemic outcomes have been consistently inconsistent with the theory—but also finding that 'States did engage in internal and external balancing to try to oppose the rise of almost every hegemon. But in almost all cases behavior predicted by the theory of collective goods and new institutional theory undermined the effectiveness of balancing' (Wohlforth et al 2007, 176, 178).

In addition, it is important to note that Europe is not the only region whose overall potential could be at least as large as America's. Northeast Asia already has this potential and it will increase as China's economy continues to grow. But again political relations are key. Although China is not confident of benign US motives, especially regarding Taiwan, and therefore has invested somewhat to offset US capabilities,⁸ it does not see US goals requiring it

⁶ On the basic logic of this argument see Walt (1987).

⁷ For analysis of EU policy, see Posen (2006).

⁸ On China's increased ability to undermine US capabilities for defending Taiwan, see Christensen (2001). Although slow to modernize its nuclear force, China has also begun to improve its strategic nuclear forces.

to launch a full-scale military build-up.⁹ Japan and South Korea are US allies; they are worried about a possible threat from China, but not from the United States.

Moreover, a second consideration suggests that the lack of global balancing is not best explained by states' lack of capability: opposing alliances would not need to match US power or forces to gain valuable deterrent and defence capabilities. Even if nuclear weapons did not exist, distance and oceans would provide alliances defending a far away continent with significant military advantages. This defence advantage significantly raises the power threshold that the United States would have to cross to make counterbalancing futile. Nuclear weapons raise this threshold even further. And on the flipside, US power is less threatening because its military potential—that is, its potential to perform specific military missions—is not entirely commensurate with its power, but is instead reduced by these same defensive advantages.

In short, we have little reason to believe that if the major powers of Europe or Asia believed the United States posed a serious threat to their vital security interests that their military and alliance policies would resemble their current policies. Moreover, these states would see effective balancing as more feasible than is suggested by simply looking at power due to the advantages of defence.

How valuable is unipolarity anyway?

The conventional wisdom seems to be that unipolarity is quite valuable.¹⁰ Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) are explicit in arguing that it will enable the United States to change the international system in ways that much better serve US national security interests. Many other arguments imply the value of unipolarity by focusing on the importance of the United States retaining it, but do not spell out its benefits. This is understandable, as the value of being the system's most powerful state may seem self-evident. Certainly, there are few if any advocates of speeding the return to bipolarity.¹¹ Nevertheless, close inspection demonstrates that the value of unipolarity is generally overrated. In fact, being the unipolar power is not always very valuable. More specifically, US security need not be significantly reduced by Chinese economic growth that supports a return to bipolarity.

Although a full analysis is beyond the scope of this short article, the following sections provide categories for comparing unipolarity and bipolarity, and provide a first-cut at this analysis. I begin by comparing the implications of US unipolarity for major-power war, then turn to terrorism and non-proliferation.

⁹In addition, China has exercised restraint because it has been sensitive to the importance of not appearing provocative as its power increases; see Goldstein (2005).

¹⁰See, however, Finnemore (2009), who provides a constructivist analysis that emphasizes the limits the unipolar power faces.

¹¹There are, however, arguments that point to dangers that accompany unipolarity: see Monteiro (2009), who argues that nuclear proliferation is more likely under unipolarity, which then creates incentives for preventive war. More common are arguments about unipolar overreach, which I discuss briefly in the text below.

Major power war

Polarity is defined relative to the power of other states and its most direct implications concern its implications for war between major powers and, closely related, their alliance behaviour.¹² Nevertheless, there has been extensive debate over whether war is more likely in bipolar systems or multipolar systems.¹³

To assess the impact of unipolarity on US security I consider two different, albeit somewhat related, types of threats to US security—to its homeland and to its allies—and compare unipolarity to bipolarity. This analysis requires us to posit a counterfactual in which instead of unipolarity the United States is a pole in a bipolar or multipolar system. For simplicity, I will assume bipolarity. To make a strong case for the benefits of unipolarity, I project that China becomes the second pole. Imagining the EU as the second pole is both a less challenging test and a less likely case: less challenging due to the lack of security concerns and geopolitical conflicts between the United States and the EU; less likely because the EU does not face a foreseeable security threat that would press it into the further integration required for it to qualify as a pole.

Territorial security. The United States' most basic security requirement is protecting its homeland from invasion and damage, and remaining free from coercion that could reflect its vulnerability to these threats. Unipolarity might initially appear to increase territorial security, because the unipole would be able to build military forces that far exceed those of any other power.

Under a range of conditions, however, this perspective exaggerates the value of unipolarity, because a country's ability to defend depends on more than simply its power. A key variable here is the offence–defence balance, which captures the difficulty of attacking relative to defending. More precisely, the offence–defence balance is the ratio of the cost of forces an attacker requires to take territory to the cost of the forces the defender has deployed (Glaser and Kaufmann 1998). When defence has a large advantage, a state can defend and/or deter for far less than it would cost its adversary to attack. Consequently, defence advantage tends to balance out differences in power.

The offence–defence balance between the United States and China heavily favours defence. As noted above for the case of Europe, this reflects the combined effects of distance and oceans, and nuclear weapons. Attacking across great distances and water is much more expensive than defending one's home territory; and, attempting to deny the United States an effective nuclear retaliatory capability would cost China orders of magnitude more than the cost to the United States to maintain one.

This large defence advantage greatly reduces the security value of unipolarity. It means that the United States would be able confidently to meet its requirements of deterrence for protecting its homeland in a bipolar world. Unipolarity adds little or nothing to this ability. In fact, the United States would be able to meet its requirements of deterrence even if it were the weaker major power facing a unipolar power.

¹² On the lack of clarity in the ways the term bipolarity is used, see Wagner (1993); for related confusion over how the term balance-of-power is used, see Nexon (2009).

¹³ See for example Waltz (1979, chapter 8), Deutsch and Singer (1964) and John J Mearsheimer (2001, chapter 9).

Extended deterrence and grand strategy. The above analysis of the United States' ability to protect its homeland provides only a partial analysis of the value of unipolarity. Meeting US security requirements may require not only this ability, but also the ability to defend US allies. Whether it does depends on conclusions about US grand strategy. As Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 16) argue, unipolarity is compatible with a wide spectrum of US grand strategies, ranging from neo-isolation to primacy.

Neo-isolationists have presented a powerful argument that US security is best achieved by cutting alliance commitments to Europe and Asia. Defence advantages insulate the United States from even large-scale conflicts in these regions, and make them unlikely to occur in the first place; the best way for the United States to stay out of such conflicts if they do occur is simply to stay out of conflicted regions.¹⁴ Given this grand strategy, US security depends only on defending its homeland, which as sketched above is relatively easy.

In contrast, even given the large advantage of defence, selective engagement strategies call for the United States to contribute to maintaining peace in Europe and Asia, and to do this by maintaining key alliances in these regions (Art 2003). Can the United States provide this extended deterrence much more effectively as the unipolar power than it would be able to as a pole in US–China bipolarity? Maybe surprisingly, the answer is no, except under what are likely to be rare conditions. Again, defence advantage reduces the value of a power advantage for protecting key US allies. China would find invading Japan to be difficult because a few hundred miles of water separate the two countries. In the bipolar world we are imagining, however, China could have many times Japan's GDP, possibly leaving Japan unable to defend itself, or at least lacking confidence in its ability. The US extended deterrent could largely fill this gap: under bipolarity, US conventional capabilities in the Pacific could remain quite substantial; and its nuclear commitment would make the risks of invading Japan extremely large. Questions about the effectiveness of the US extended deterrence would not focus on US capabilities—which would remain capable of inflicting catastrophic nuclear damage—but instead on the credibility of US commitments to escalate to nuclear use. The forward deployment of US forces would play a central role in communicating the extent of the US commitment, greatly increasing the probability of full US involvement if China attacked Japan. The parallel to the United States' extended deterrence for Western Europe during the bipolar Cold War, and its doctrine of flexible response, is clear. The effectiveness of this US deterrent was debated throughout the Cold War; the stronger arguments held that even a small probability of massive nuclear damage provided the United States with excellent prospects for deterring a Soviet attack.¹⁵

A second key variable influencing the adequacy of the US extended deterrent is US information about China's motives and goals, which should be significantly influenced by China's actual motives.¹⁶ US requirements for deterring China will

¹⁴For a clear statement of these arguments see Gholz et al (1977); for a comparison of the key grand strategic alternatives, see Posen and Ross (1996/1997).

¹⁵On the debate over the effectiveness of extending nuclear deterrence, see Jervis (1984) and Glaser (1990).

¹⁶For a rational theory that includes this variable, as well as the material variables already discussed, see Glaser (2010).

depend on the probability that China is an expansionist/greedy state and how expansionist it is. Even if facing a very greedy China the United States would be able to meet its requirements for defending the US homeland with high confidence. However, extending deterrence to Japan and South Korea could become more difficult than I suggested in the previous paragraph. A highly expansionist China would be more willing to probe the US commitment and to run large risks in a major conflict. Possibly the most worrisome scenario posits a China willing to fight a large conventional war, gambling that the United States would be unwilling to escalate to nuclear use because China could retaliate against both the United States and its allies. This scenario requires an exceptionally greedy China because the risks entailed would clearly be enormous. The argument that extended deterrence can be highly effective in a world of mutual assured destruction (MAD) capabilities is based upon the enormity of the risks of escalation, even when its probability is small. If however we posit a sufficiently greedy China, then it is possible that US credibility would be too low for deterrence to succeed, or at least that the United States would lack confidence in the adequacy of its deterrent. Such a highly expansionist China would parallel the Soviet Union that American hardliners believed the United States faced during the Cold War. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 16) note that such a dangerous adversary is quite unlikely, arguing that 'plausible arguments for the utility of widespread conquest in an age of nuclear weapons and low economic benefits of holding territory are hard to imagine'. I agree that such an extremely expansionist and risk-taking China is exceedingly unlikely.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the parallel with hardline Cold War arguments suggests that some analysts could worry that once China gains power comparable to US power it would be this difficult to deter.

In short, it is only in this case—a very greedy, revisionist China—that US unipolarity would have significant value for deterrence of major power war. Extended deterrence would hinge heavily on the effectiveness of the alliance's conventional forces; the US power advantage would enable it to make relatively larger investments in conventional forces, which could contribute to deterrence of a Chinese conventional attack. However, in the far more likely cases, unipolarity would not be much safer than bipolarity.

Regional stability, counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism

The preceding analysis addresses what we might consider the standard issues raised by questions of polarity—the quality and nature of relations between poles and other major powers. These are the questions that structural theories have typically been designed to address and for which they have the most direct leverage. The fact that we even need to consider other security concerns is an indication that unipolarity has lost some of its importance.

In the world the United States currently faces, the key threats to its security may not come from major powers, but instead from regional instability that could disrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, the proliferation of nuclear weapons

¹⁷ China's motives could change as its power matched or exceeded US power, so current evaluations of China's motives may not be a good guide to the future; this said, for useful current assessments, see Johnston (2003) and Fravel (2007/2008).

to smaller powers and terrorism. An assessment of the benefits of unipolarity therefore needs to consider its implications for these potential threats.

Control of the military commons. Although unipolarity is not required to protect the US homeland and its key allies (except under extreme and unlikely circumstances), unipolarity plays a more important role in enabling the United States to maintain the military capabilities required to support a more activist grand strategy—one that adds a variety of lesser and/or more controversial interests to the vital interests that lie at the centre of neo-isolationist grand strategies and narrow versions of selective engagement grand strategies. The US ability to project power to distant regions of the globe is facilitated by what Posen (2003) terms ‘command of the commons’—command of the sea, air and space. Command of the commons enables the United States to protect forces that are transiting to distant regions, and to maintain superior reconnaissance, communication and targeting capabilities. It also enables the United States to deny these capabilities to other states. Command of the commons played an important role in enabling the United States to wage war quickly in distant regions in which it had not forward deployed large forces, including the 1991 Gulf War, the 2001 operation in Afghanistan and the 2003 Iraq War (Posen 2003, 8–9).

Maintaining confidence in its ability to command the commons will require the United States to retain its unipolar position. According to Posen (2003, 19), ‘In the very long term, if a country comes to rival the United States in economic and technological capability, it will be difficult to prevent a challenge, though it may be possible to out-compete the challenger’.

The value of maintaining command of the commons, and therefore of the unipolarity that is required to confidently support it, depends on conclusions about grand strategy: it will have little to no value for neo-isolationism; moderate to little value for selective engagement, depending partly on how expansive the scope of the selective interests in question; and large value for a grand strategy of primacy.

The one qualification to this assessment concerns the US ability to protect the production, sale and flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. All of the grand strategies identify this as a vital interest. Consequently, to the extent that maintaining control of the commons contributes significantly to this set of US capabilities, unipolarity does provide significant security value. We should also note, however, that the United States was able to achieve these objectives during the bipolarity of the Cold War. A full military and political net assessment is therefore required to separate out the extent of unipolarity’s contribution.¹⁸

The value of both command of the commons and unipolarity will also depend on the US political relations with the other pole in the projected bipolarity. If the other pole does not strongly object to the US regional intervention, then its ability to disrupt US military operations becomes far less important. There is a natural inclination to envision future bipolarity as closing resembling the US–Soviet bipolarity of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet

¹⁸There is another possible exception that I do not have space to address in this short article—the importance of controlling the sea lanes of communication from the Persian Gulf to Northeast Asia, and across the Pacific. Both the United States and China have potentially vital interests in controlling them and the extent of the US ability to do this could depend on unipolarity.

Union competed for influence around the globe, which led both countries to see threats in the other's use of force virtually anywhere, which in turn created the possibility of direct or indirect superpower opposition. Under the logic of this Cold War bipolarity, Soviet power constrained the United States' freedom of action. The first Gulf War (1991) is frequently identified as an example of the leeway that the end of the Soviet Union created for US foreign policy.

But bipolarity need not be so constraining because political relations are not determined entirely by the distribution of power. If the EU emerged as a pole, its interests would likely be sufficiently in line with America's that it would not oppose US intervention in distant theatres. This is not to say that the United States would enjoy full endorsement and support, but instead the more limited claim that US freedom of action would not be greatly reduced. The implications of bipolarity involving China are less clear, but we should not simply assume that China would oppose, and therefore severely constrain, most US interventions. As I argue below, when considering counter-proliferation and preventive war, China might not oppose at least some of the key goals of a more activist US grand strategy. In contrast, if US relations with the other pole are politically strained and militarily competitive, then the loss of unipolarity is more likely to result in constraints across a range of military missions.

Nuclear proliferation. There is an ongoing debate about whether nuclear proliferation poses a large danger to the United States, which I am not going to engage here (Sagan and Waltz 2003; Kapur 2007). If we assume that proliferation by at least certain countries does reduce US security, then we need to consider whether unipolarity helps the United States to prevent this proliferation. Unipolarity might contribute significantly to the most direct military means—preventive war, which can require the ability to launch massive air strikes or, even more demanding, to invade a country and impose a new regime. But even this is far from clear. Fighting a successful preventive war does not require the United States to be the unipolar power. Whether the United States could invade Iraq (putting aside that it did not have a nuclear program) or destroy Iran's nuclear facilities does not depend, at least directly, on the United States being far more powerful than all other major powers. Rather, the United States' ability depends on how its capabilities compare to the proliferating state's capabilities.

Therefore, the question becomes whether under bipolarity the other polar power would oppose these preventive wars, making them too risky for the United States to launch. As I noted above, the key issue here is the quality of political relations between the poles and extent of their geopolitical competition. For example, China might prefer that Iran not acquire nuclear weapons, in which case it might not try to pose a major barrier to a US preventive war, especially if the United States did not plan to invade and occupy Iran.

A second set of possibilities for preventing proliferation focuses on international cooperation and regimes designed to stop states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Does unipolarity increase the prospects for improving these types of cooperative non-proliferation efforts? A standard argument is that a unipolar or hegemonic state increases the prospects for broad cooperation. This kind of state has the potential to lead, reflecting its power and also possibly its legitimacy. For example, Brooks and Wohlforth (2009) argue that the United States should use its unipolar position to take the lead in redesigning the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), establishing a new ban on most states' rights to

produce fissile material. In a similar vein, the Proliferation Security Initiative is sometimes described as a product of the United States effectively wielding its unipolar position.

These arguments, however, are too quick to assert that unipolar leadership is essential for this type of cooperation. If the regime is providing a public good, then unipolarity does not necessarily increase the prospects for cooperation. A relatively small number of states can be as likely to find that cooperation is sufficiently in their interests to overcome the temptation to free ride and to take responsibility for creating a broad regime, which other states will then also join (Snidal 1985). We should not forget that the NPT was created during the bipolar Cold War.

A possible rejoinder is that instead of using its power advantage to support and generate cooperation, the unipole can use its advantages in military capabilities to threaten states and coerce them into participating in the regime. Although this might be an option in certain situations characterized by highly asymmetric power, the logic does not fit the current case of US unipolarity. The risks of a major power war are too high for the United States to threaten the use of force to coerce major powers to accept and support these revised regimes. The United States' inability to get Russia and China to support harsh economic sanctions against Iran provides a current example of the unipole's inability to form coalitions of the unwilling.

More generally, although analysts frequently point to the international influence that unipolarity supposedly provides, if the United States cannot credibly threaten to use large-scale force against major powers, then the military dimension of unipolarity provides far less influence than is generally assumed. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 209) argue that unipolarity enables the United States to revise the international system in ways that will increase US security, including 'using US hegemony to reshape international institutions'. But there is a puzzle here: if the United States is not going to achieve these revisions by threatening the use of force to compel other major powers, what are the mechanisms for system change that rely on the United States' military advantages?

Terrorism. Similar considerations are raised by the possibility that the United States will need to launch large-scale military interventions to protect itself from terrorism, as it now is in Afghanistan. Paralleling the analysis of proliferation, there is debate over how large a threat terrorism poses to the United States and, in addition, whether intervention can be effective (Mueller 2009). Assuming that intervention is required to protect US security, we need to ask whether the United States would be much more constrained in a bipolar world than in a unipolar one. Again, the extent to which the poles' interests align will be key. The extent of opposition will depend on the poles' political relations—if relations are relatively good, geopolitical competition will be relatively mild; interventions will pose a smaller threat and therefore generate less opposition. In addition, interventions that require occupation are likely to generate greater opposition from the other pole than are more surgical counter-terrorism attacks, because they bring the opportunity for territorial control.

Analysis of the prospects for cooperative regimes to support counter-terrorism also parallel the arguments applied to proliferation and are even more obvious. For example, the sharing of intelligence can be the key to successful counter-terrorism efforts. There is no clear reason, however, why this type of cooperative

effort requires the unipole's guidance, subsidy or coercion. The cooperation is not costly (although delicate issues about sources and secrecy may arise) and is clearly in the interest of all states that face a common terrorist threat.

The unipole's expanding goals

A still different type of argument holds that unipolar powers tend to adopt expanded interests and associated goals that unipolarity then enables them to achieve. To the extent that these goals are actually in the unipole's true interest, unipolarity is good for the unipole. In broad terms, this argument follows the claim that states' interests and goals grow with their power.¹⁹

These expanded goals can be attributed to three different types of factors.²⁰ The first is a permissive structure, which allows the state to pursue more ambitious goals. The state's interests do not change, but its increased ability to pursue them results in a redefinition of its goals. A state could have goals that were previously unachievable at acceptable cost; by lowering the costs, unipolarity places these goals within reach, enabling the state to make itself better off. A unipole's desire for a higher degree of security can be an example of this type of expanded goal, reflecting the means that it can wield. Second, the state can acquire new interests, which are generated by the unipole's greater territorial and institutional reach. For example, a state that controls more territory may face new threats and, as a result, conclude that it needs to control still more territory, acquire still more power, and/or restructure international institutions to further protect its interests. Third, the unipole's goals can be influenced by what is commonly described as human nature and by psychology. A unipolar state will be inclined to lose track of how secure it is and consequently pursue inappropriate policies that are designed to increase its security but turn out to be too costly and/or to have a high probability of backfiring. One variant of this type of argument expects unipolar powers to conclude that they need to spread their type of governance or political ideology to be secure. These dangers can be reinforced by a tendency for a unipolar power to see its new interests, which are optional, as necessary ones.

The first two types of expanded interests and goals can make the unipole better off. The question here is whether the interests the United States might find within its reach due to its unipolar position are very valuable. With respect to security, the answer is 'no'. For the reasons summarized above, the United States can be very secure in bipolarity, and unipolarity is important only in an extreme and unlikely case. Other US goals, for example, spreading democracy and free markets, do not depend on unipolarity, at least not its military dimension. Instead, whether these liberal systems spread will depend most heavily on their own effectiveness.

Regarding the down side, there does not appear to be an overwhelming reason that the United States cannot avoid the dangers of unipolar overreach. The Bush

¹⁹ This argument is frequently associated with realism. However, it does not match well with structural realism, which takes states' fundamental goals as exogenous and separate from the international situation states face, including their power. It can be compatible with classical/neoclassical realism, depending on how the theory's understanding of states' interests is formulated.

²⁰ See Jervis (2009) for a review of many of these arguments.

administration certainly proved itself vulnerable to these dangers and the United States is continuing to pay for its flawed judgments. Arguably, strands of overreach can be traced back to the Clinton administration's emphasis on democratic enlargement, although the means that it chose were much more in line with US interests.²¹ And the Obama administration's decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan may well be an example of striving for too much security. Nevertheless, none of the basic arguments about unipolarity explain why these errors are unavoidable. The overreach claim is more an observation about the past than a well-supported prediction about the future. We do not have strong reasons for concluding that the United States will be unable to benefit from analyses of its grand strategy options, learning to both appreciate how very secure it is and at the same time to respect the limits of its power.

In sum, then, under current conditions, unipolarity does little to enable the United States to increase its security. Given the limited benefits of unipolarity and the not insignificant dangers of unipolar overreach, the United States will have to choose its policies wisely if it is going to be better off in a unipolar world than a bipolar one.

Notes on contributor

Charles L Glaser is professor in the Elliott School of International Affairs and the Department of Political Science at the George Washington University and is the director of the Elliott School's Institute for Security and Conflict Studies. He is the author most recently of *Rational Theory of International Politics* (Princeton 2010).

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²¹ On the development of this focus, see Chollet and Goldgeier (2008).

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