

The US vs. the East Asian rising powers: Can the US stay on top?

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Presented at the 22nd IPSA World Congress, Madrid, July 8-12, 2012

Introduction

"Simply put, the United States is now a declining power. This new reality has tremendous implications for the future of American grand strategy."¹ Twenty years after the Cold War had ended and the United States became a sole superpower, it seems increasingly unequivocal to many scholars and practitioners that American unipolarity is over. The scholarly literature is divided between arguments that unipolarity never really existed, others that it was short lived and warn of the consequences of losing it, and still other arguments that it is stable and can persist for many years to come. This paper will take as a starting point that at the end of the Cold War the United States held power that not only gave it unprecedented advantage over the rest of the great powers but that it can be considered a position of primacy (which is a necessary but insufficient condition for unipolarity), but not necessarily hegemony.²

Assuming that the U.S. possesses the material power to maintain its primacy, even if at a considerably lesser level than at the initial stages of the post-Cold War era, and given that China is steadily rising as number two in the system (and in some aspects it is number one),

¹ Robert A. Pape. "Empire Fall". *The National Interest*, January/February 2009, p. 24.

² Primacy and hegemony are not synonymous, although many tend to see them as such. The term primacy means being first, while hegemony means leading. Primacy is a measurable material situation, in comparison of hard power among states, whereas hegemony is a political situation, which is related to the balance of power, but is not necessarily its direct outcome. It might be said that primacy is for a state to take, while hegemony is for a state to receive (from other states that would be willing to follow). In other words, hegemony is a question of consent, while primacy is a question of competition for power. See Ian Clark. "Bringing Hegemony Back In: The United States and International Order". *International Affairs* 85 (1), 2009, pp. 23-36; idem. "How Hierarchical Can International Society Be?" *International Relations* 23 (3), 2009, pp. 464-480. In other words, primacy is a realist term based on measuring material assets, while hegemony is a non-measurable constructivist term that reflects the willingness of countries to allow another country to lead them. This paper will stick to the material-realist term of primacy, which can be measured.

is primacy really over? Is unipolarity over? And if both questions are answered positively, what is the substitute order in the international system and how will it develop onwards? Would it be wise for the U.S. to struggle to preserve its primacy (if it is possible at all)? Or should the U.S. change its grand strategy to fit into its new, more modest status as a superpower in bi-/multi-polarity? These questions are not easy to answer, especially when there is a profound disagreement on the current balance in the international system. Although there is agreement that the margin in America's favor had narrowed, there is no agreement whether this means that American primacy is at risk (in the most substantial aspects of hard power) and to what extent.³

The decline of American primacy that is discussed above and throughout the paper is not limited to a specific region, but is global. However, East Asia is the region of the most important rising power – China – therefore the paper will discuss the issue of American decline (whether or not it is real) in the global perspective but will look more specifically at East Asia. The literature referred to in this paper focuses on China's rise,⁴ although it mostly sees this in the global context rather than the regional one. The distinction between East Asia and the rest of the world is somewhat artificial, especially in a globalizing world in which regional developments can have dramatic effects elsewhere. However, the regional dynamics of East Asia can be discussed as a sub-system, perhaps as a "micro cosmos" of the international system. The region includes China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, Mongolia, Macao, Hong Kong, and with Russia, the Philippines, Indonesia, India and Australia on the geographic margins and the U.S. as a remote power that seemed until recently the regional hegemon and is (and will remain) deeply involved due to its vital interests (military and economic).⁵

The literature on the rise of China and of other countries – for some time Japan was considered rising, at times it was the European Union, and in recent years scholars are detecting Russia, Brazil, India and South Africa as new rising powers alongside China (known together as the BRICS) – is vast and has been with us for two decades already. There is scarcely an aspect that was not analyzed. Traditional facets of power – military and economic strengths – are most obviously discussed, and during the first decade of the 21st century there were quite a few studies that dealt with soft power facets (namely, soft balancing⁶) and argued that they signaled the relative decline of American primacy, and

³ The vast majority of scholarly literature argues that the U.S. is in decline. One recent (but by no means sole) "dissident" argument is Robert J. Lieber. *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012.

⁴ Warren I. Cohen. "China's Rise in Historical Perspective". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (4), 2007, pp. 683-704.

⁵ There are various definitions for East Asia – geographic, political, economic and cultural. I prefer expanding the region and include in it at least the major countries of South-East Asia and Asia-Pacific since the regional developments in the more minimal region spill over to the adjacent regions.

⁶ Pros and cons on soft balancing include: Matthew Kroenig, Melissa McAdam and Steven Weber. "Taking Soft Power Seriously". *Comparative Strategy* 29 (5), 2010, pp. 412-431; Robert A. Pape. "Soft Balancing against the United States". *International Security* 30 (1), 2005, pp. 7-45; T.V. Paul. "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy". *International Security* 30 (1), 2005, pp. 46-71; Monti Narayan Datta. "The Decline of America's Soft Power in the United Nations". *International Studies Perspectives* 10 (3), 2009, pp. 265-284; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth. "Hard Times for Soft Balancing". *International Security* 30 (1), 2005, pp. 72-108; Jolyon Howorth and Anand Menon. "Still Not Pushing Back: Why the European Union Is Not Balancing the

would bring down the unipolar system all together. However, this study wishes to turn the spotlight to the "elephant in the room" that is not considered enough: the geography and geopolitics of the international system and their influence on its future directions. It is not that this aspect is completely ignored. In fact, there are several studies that consider geopolitical factors. However, they do not rely on classical geopolitical theories as suggested in this paper, therefore they tend to lose some of the perspective that is essential in assessing future international political trends (even if their policy-oriented conclusions seem to match those that will be offered here).⁷

But with the vast literature on the rise of China, there are two fundamental questions to review: "What does China want?" and "Is China a status-quo power?"⁸ The replies will have tremendous impact on the structure of the international system and consequently, on American strategy. If China is not a revisionist power but prefers to remain in the shadow of the United States (specifically in the military arena, which means that China will not develop military power that will really challenge American military primacy),⁹ then the system will not change much compared with its current (or recent) situation. But if China will rise and reveal revisionist orientations, this will force the U.S. to change its attitude. If China is rising economically merely to fill its pockets while it can and before its population gets old (hence, China just wants to prepare for years of financing its aging elders, "getting rich before getting old"¹⁰) then its investment in the military seems confusing.¹¹

This paper deals with the issue on a conventional level, and leaves non-conventional power aside, without disregarding it. The reason is that nuclear weapons held by the U.S. and most of the rising powers are actually left out of the daily power game. It exists, but it is mostly ignored. Nuclear weapons, once gained by the major players in the great-power game, reassure their possessors that they will not be occupied by their adversaries, but these weapons do not paralyze the superpowers or the great powers from using force. True, they do not use force against one another – mostly out of fear of nuclear exchanges down the road – but in order to gain hegemony a great power does not necessarily need to defeat its competitors in a major war. Besides, international norms that were anchored in international agreements and treaties decreased the fear of nuclear wars, and that freed the hands of policymakers to use conventional power.

United States". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (5), 2009, pp. 727-744; Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander. "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is not Pushing Back". *International Security* 30 (1), 2005, pp. 109-139.

⁷ This paper does not intend to suggest grand strategies to the U.S., but merely analyze the prospects of the major strategies that are offered, based on geopolitical analysis.

⁸ Timothy R. Heath. "What Does China Want? Discerning the PRC's National Strategy". *Asian Security* 8 (1), 2012, pp. 54-72; Alastair Iain Johnston. "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security* 27 (4), 2003, pp. 5-56.

⁹ Andrew Erickson and Lyle Goldstein. "Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst: China's Response to US Hegemony". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29 (6), 2006, pp. 955-986.

¹⁰ See data on China's aging population in: Dong Xiaoli. *China's Population Aging and the Development of Social Security System for the Elderly*. Report presented at the 10th EU-China Round Table, 1-2 December 2011, Munich, pp. 2-3. Available online: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/cesc--aging--dong-xiaoli.pdf> (accessed 22.5.2012)

¹¹ Sean Chen and John Feffer. "China's Military Spending: Soft Rise or Hard Threat?" *Asian Perspective* 33 (4), 2009, pp. 47-67.

This paper will proceed as follows: First, it will review some of the main arguments on American declining unipolarity and assess their validity. Second, it will briefly review the grand strategies that are suggested in response to the international conditions. Third, the paper will address the major geopolitical theories that apply to these conditions, and will explore the international circumstances that seem most significant to predicting the system's future posture. Finally, the paper will suggest how the U.S. could maintain its primacy and how it might behave as part of a bipolar or multipolar system. Founded on geopolitical factors, this study shall assert that although the gap between the United States and the rising powers (the BRICS, and the European Union until recently) had narrowed in many aspects and the U.S. had mostly projected weakness in recent years, it is still in the best geopolitical position to maintain its superpower status unlike its potential competitors whose geopolitical position invites regional rivalries more than regional (and later global) hegemony. Hence, this paper will suggest that the United States can remain on top if it plays its cards wisely and cautiously. Naturally, following such advice is never easy. However, as the following analysis will show, acting differently might only accelerate the erosion of American unipolarity with dire consequences at the end of the road.

The Argument

This paper views the international system with geographical and geopolitical eyes. For this reason, it uses geographical facts as factors in analyzing the current global system and its future prospects. The argument this paper will promote is that the U.S. physical location and geopolitical position are the cornerstones of its foreign policy and serve as a "safety net" from foreign powers' assaults (not perfect, obviously, as became painfully clear on September 11, 2001). The U.S., unlike any other great or superpower – now or anytime – can decide whether or not and to what extent will it be involved in international affairs. Isolationism was a practical policy (regardless of its success) for approximately twenty years since the end of World War I until Pearl Harbor (1941). Even though since the end of World War II the United States is conducting an opposite strategy, theoretically and hypothetically it can be resumed, perhaps not to the extent it was in the 1920s-1930s, but a sort of isolationism is possible. No other country can afford such a policy because all other powers are on the same continent and cannot disregard one another.

Moreover, the U.S. is still – and will remain in the foreseeable future – the naval superpower with the most powerful navy that has the best power-projection capabilities. It can afford to leave the continent and become an offshore balancer. True, it will lose some of its influence, but it can preserve its power on the sea and project it restrictedly whenever needed. So, very briefly, the U.S. has a much wider room for maneuver than is presumed, and with the most powerful military with no parallel in the foreseeable future, the U.S. still has a wide spectrum of policies it can use, hence it is in the best position for the coming hegemonic competition.

Literature Review

It is important to note that most of the literature is American, which is expected and logical, but also somewhat problematic due to obvious biases. One of these is the obsession with China, as it is the focus of most studies but seems more frightening than in reality. The obsession with China leaves out analyses of the rise of other great powers, therefore the literature cannot really establish that the alternative to unipolarity is multipolarity. The studies that focus on China seem to implement that the next system will be bipolar. To its credit, though, it seems that there is no power that is emerging as much as China does, hence it is correct to focus on it. But then, will other powers be entitled to be regarded as poles? This is an extra-regional question with significant implications to East Asia in a global context. The literature regarding the structure of the international system can be divided into two major types:

A. By the source of threat to the U.S. primacy (future structure): 1. The China alarmists (bipolarity); 2. The BRICS are emerging (multipolarity); 3. Who cares? The American advance is too large to catch up (unipolarity).

B. By the effect on U.S. behavior: 1. Fight to preserve primacy – preemption or prevention; 2. Get used to it – selective engagement or offshore balancing.

Within the Realist paradigm there are two competing theories that prescribe conflicting advice that is based on contradictory readings of reality.¹² Whereas offensive realism suggests securing material power that will guarantee a given country's security, and securing regional and global primacy even by force,¹³ defensive realism suggests possessing sufficient material power and prefers some sort of power sharing to enhance mutual trust among the great powers, which enhances – they believe – the security of each power.¹⁴ In the American case, defensive realism suggests offshore balancing or selective engagement, while offensive realism would prefer domination and engagement with potential rivals. This does not mean that there cannot be agreement among all realists concerning American actions, such as the consensus among many realists that the war against Iraq in 2003 was unnecessary

¹² Many have discussed the differences between the two major realist sub-paradigms. For instance see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro. "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited". *International Security* 25 (3), 2000/01, pp. 128-161. Also see the following studies, some of which suggest different variations in realist thinking: Stephen G. Brooks. "Dueling Realisms". *International Organization* 51 (3), 1997, pp. 445-477; Brian C. Schmidt. "Competing Realist Conceptions of Power". *Millennium* 33 (3), 2005, pp. 523-549; Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik. "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24 (2), 1999, pp. 5-55; Peter D. Feaver et al. "Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare Me a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)" *International Security* 25 (1), 2000, pp. 165-193.

¹³ John J. Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton, New York, 2001.

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz. *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley Publications, Reading, Mass., 1979; Robert Jervis. "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma". *World Politics* 30 (2), 1978, pp. 167-214; Charles L. Glaser. "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help". *International Security* 19 (3), 1994/95 pp. 50-90.

and even damaging.¹⁵ The disagreements grow and are much more acute regarding other great powers. How should the U.S. treat China and other emerging or reemerging powers? Should they be engaged? Should the U.S. prevent the foreseen competition by striking first, or should the U.S. allow them to emerge as regional hegemony and then divide the world into spheres of influence with them?

The question everyone asks is whether or not American hegemony is over or when will it happen. Ian Clark suggests that the term hegemony is misused, and prefers questioning the future of American primacy.¹⁶ This paper will follow Clark in terminology and substance.

Schweller and Pu say that "If a great transformation is coming, it is not one that heralds a radically altered world politics based on legalism, constitutionalism, or global civic activism. Rather, it is a structural transformation from unipolarity to multipolarity that most realists believe promises a return to the familiar history of great powers struggling for power and prestige."¹⁷ There definitely seems to be a transition, but is it to multipolarity or bipolarity, and in any case – will it resemble past experiences? This is highly uncertain. The power that the U.S. had obtained in the last several decades places it in a different category than any other great power in the foreseeable future, therefore even if the U.S. is less dominant compared to other great powers, it is far fetching to argue for similar status as in any previous system. This is not to say that later in the future such a system might emerge, but in the near future it is unlikely.¹⁸

Robert Art argued in 2010 that the U.S. is the most powerful state in the world in economic and military assets and will remain the most powerful military power "for some time to come," but inevitably its edge relative to other great powers will diminish in the coming decades. China is the greatest potential rival, provided that its economy will continue to grow in the coming two decades as it did in the last two decades (then it will surpass the U.S. in its GDP, but not in its GDP per capita). For now, China had already changed the balance of power in East Asia. It is already the region's dominant military land power. Art assesses that if China invests in its military forces for several decades, and is determined to project naval and air power, it will be able to deploy a naval force that "could contest the

¹⁵ See Mearsheimer's and Walt's series of publications against going to war with Iraq: John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. "An Unnecessary War". *Foreign Policy* 134, January/February 2003, pp. 50-59; "Iraq in a Box" (Correspondence)." *Foreign Policy* 136, May/June 2003, pp. 4-10; idem. "'Realists' Are Not Alone in Opposing War With Iraq". In: *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 15, 2002 (Available on-line: http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/2002/iraq_che_111502.htm); and idem. "Keeping Saddam in a Box". *New York Times*, February 2, 2003 (Available on-line: http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/2003/walt_saddam_box_nyt_020203.htm).

¹⁶ Clark, 2009.

¹⁷ Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu. "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline". *International Security* 36 (1), 2011, p. 42; and they mention Mearsheimer, 2001, ch. 10.

¹⁸ For supporting data see William C. Wohlforth. "The Stability of a Unipolar World". *International Security* 24 (1), 1999, pp. 5-41; Lieber, *ibid*; Robert Kagan. *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2008.

American supremacy at sea in East Asia."¹⁹ Some conflict seems inevitable, including arms race, but there can be more cooperation than is assumed by most scholars.

Art correctly argues that as long as China's emerging hegemony in East Asia does not include Japan and the U.S. maintains strongholds in the region (Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia), the geopolitical threat from China will not be of similar extent as that of the Soviet Union. China cannot jeopardize the global balance of power as long as Europe, the Persian Gulf, India, Japan and Russia are independent or under U.S. influence.²⁰ China cannot threaten the U.S. as the Soviet Union did due to its relative size. His conclusion: be smart; let China grow but draw a line in the sand, accept that it is growing but make sure China knows the U.S. is stronger.

This seems as good advice, but one need only to see China's increasing defense budget to understand why apparently following it is a difficult job. China had increased the defense budget by 11.2% in 2012, following two decades of annual two-figure percents increases (since 1989, except for 2009 – only 7.5%).²¹ There are always questions on the purpose of this steady increase: in preparation for a global conflict with the U.S. over resources and political interests (i.e., preparing China to become a rival pole); a regional conflict with any of its neighbors – and China indeed has issues with all of them, be it territorial, historical, economic, etc.; or domestic, preparing to crush separatists or rebels.

In 2001, Mearsheimer wrote that "American policy [on China] has sought to integrate China into the world economy and facilitate its rapid economic development, so that it becomes wealthy and, one would hope, content with its present position in the international system. This U.S. policy is misguided. A wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony.... Although it is certainly in China's interest to be the hegemon in Northeast Asia, it is clearly not in America's interest to have that happen.... It is not too late for the United States to reverse course and do what it can to slow the rise of China."²²

A decade after Mearsheimer's warning, it seems that he was partly correct and partly wrong. A steadily increasing share of China's wealth is turned into military power, and recently, it is reported, Chinese strategists apparently began calling their government to fit China's foreign policy to its capabilities, which means replacing the "peaceful rise" and the "low profile policy" with a much more ambitious policy.²³ But China's economic rise will first need to finance its aging population. Nevertheless, China's goals are unclear to American

¹⁹ Robert J. Art. "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul". *Political Science Quarterly* 125 (3), 2010, pp. 359-360.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 371. On Japan's strategy towards the rise of China see Mike M. Mochizuki. "Japan's Shifting Strategy toward the Rise of China". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (4), 2007, pp. 739-776.

²¹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-03-04/china-says-defense-spending-will-increase-11-2-to-106-4-billion-in-2012.html>

²² Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 402. Quoted by Art, 2010, p. 362.

²³ Tania Branigan. "China's foreign policy is playing catch-up with its new status". *The Guardian*, March 22, 2012. In a more general view on Chinese views of American hegemony, see Samantha Blum. "Chinese Views of US Hegemony". *Journal of Contemporary China* 12 (35), pp. 239-264.

and western analysts and policymakers, although there are official Chinese documents that allow assessing their true aims.²⁴

It is interesting to follow China's rise to hegemony in East Asia and the reaction of its neighbors. They were expected to act to balance China, but according to Chan's study, they don't. The defense burden is not rising and trade with China is increasing – contrary to the theoretical expectations.²⁵ This can indicate either that China succeeded in splitting among its regional rivals, or that the U.S. is no longer functioning as a regional hegemon, therefore they have no one to turn to against China.

Michael Beckley provides a detailed analysis of the rise of China and of the U.S. decline or non-decline.²⁶ Most declinists, as Beckley labels them, argue that the U.S. is in economic decline, not in military decline.²⁷ This is an important point – in military terms the U.S. is still the sole superpower, and it is hard to see circumstances under which the U.S. would lose this status. The American spending on defense is still higher than that of all its potential rivals combined, and even if the tipping point is coming closer and China will surpass the U.S. in defense expenditure, it will take many years for China to close the gap – qualitative and quantitative. Unlike money, military assets do not vanish (it is hard to imagine an aircraft carrier simply disappear or being given or sold to China). Therefore, even if the U.S. expenditure on defense decreases, it does not affect American military primacy, at least in the short run. Nevertheless, the bond between economy and military affairs is very strong. For instance, in April 2012 senior U.S. officials admitted that there is no budget to strike Syria, therefore the solution of the turmoil would have to be diplomatic.²⁸

Mario Carranza mentions that those who argue that the U.S. hegemony is not in decline claim that neither China nor Europe can shape events on the basis of their material power, but he also argues that they underestimate China's (and to lesser extent, Europe's) ability to take control over markets in the Global South (South America and South Asia), and mentions that China increased dramatically its economic relations with key South American countries such as Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil.²⁹

²⁴ Heath, 2012, *ibid.*

²⁵ Steve Chan. "An Odd Thing Happened on the Way to Balancing: East Asian States' Reactions to China's Rise". *International Studies Review* 12 (3), 2010, pp. 387-412.

²⁶ Michael Beckley. "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure". *International Security* 36 (3), 2011-12, pp. 41-78 (fn. 2, p. 41)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁸ "The Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Howard "Buck" McKeon, and the committee's ranking Democratic member, Adam Smith, said they are opposed to U.S. military intervention in Syria at this time. 'On the other hand, there is much we do not know about the opposition. Syria also maintains robust air defenses that limit military options. Therefore, I am not recommending U.S. military intervention, particularly in light of our grave budget situation, unless the national security threat was clear and present,' McKeon said." Cindy Saine, "Pentagon Ready to Help Protect Syrian People, Panetta Says". Voice of America news, April 19, 2012. <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/usa/US-Defense-Secretary-Pentagon-Ready-to-Help-Protect-Syrian-People-148143755.html> Accessed online 26.4.2012.

²⁹ Mario E. Carranza. "Reality Check: America's Continuing Pursuit of Regional Hegemony". *Contemporary Security Policy* 31 (3), 2010, p. 441. See also Pádraig R. Carmody and Francis Y. Owusu. "Competing Hegemons? Chinese versus American Geo-economic Strategies in Africa". *Political Geography* 26 (5), 2007, pp. 504-524; Francisco De Santibanes. "An End to U.S. Hegemony? The Strategic Implications of China's

Daniel Drezner presents the economic aspect of China's rise, and focuses on its new status as the U.S.'s greatest debt holder.³⁰ This issue is political no less and probably more than economic. But part of being proof that in the age of globalization that the U.S. promoted so powerfully it lost the economic primacy (and there are counterarguments on this), does it make a real difference? After all, had the U.S. lost any military asset due to its economic decline? Had any such asset been sold to China? Of course not. Hence, the balance in hard power is quite clear: China possesses the major part of American dollars in the world and is America's largest creditor and debt holder, but the U.S. had not lost any of its military power, and it is still superior to any other power, especially China.

Hart and Jones assert that the U.S. economy is still three times larger than the Chinese one.³¹ But still, there is change in the degree of influence each power has in the system. "China, for instance, has long been a 'sovereignty hawk', generally opposing the notion that interventions for humanitarian purposes are legitimate. Its model of authoritarian capitalism has also increasingly become an ideological export, challenging the United States' liberal model."³² Russia is perhaps misplaced in the list of emerging powers. Its economic data are not really improving and its population is declining annually by 4%, and with this rate it might drop to less than 120 million by 2050 compared to 140 million today.³³

This sample of scholarly literature of the last decade demonstrates the confusion regarding the current situation, although in recent years it is clearer that there is a significant decline in American economic primacy. However, it seems clear to all that the U.S. still holds military primacy and in this aspect primacy does not seem to be jeopardized for many years to come.³⁴

Growing Presence in Latin America". *Comparative Strategy* 28 (1), 2009, pp. 17-36; He Li. "China's Growing Interest in Latin America and Its Implications". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (4), 2007, pp. 833-862; Greg Pollock. "Back to the Future: Understanding China's Return to Africa and its Implications for U.S. Policy". *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 2007, pp. 55-79; Marcus Power and Giles Mohan. "Towards a Critical Geopolitics of China's Engagement with African Development". *Geopolitics* 15 (3), 2010, pp. 462-495.

³⁰ Daniel W. Drezner. "Bad Debts: Assessing China's Financial Influence in Great Power Politics". *International Security* 34 (2), 2009, pp. 7-45. See also Aaron L. Friedberg. "Implications of the Financial Crisis for the US-China Rivalry". *Survival* 52 (4), 2010, pp. 31-54.

³¹ Andrew F. Hart and Bruce D. Jones. "How Do Rising Powers Rise?" *Survival* 52 (6), 2010, pp. 63.

³² *Ibid*, p. 66.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 67.

³⁴ On the strategic planning in the unipolar era see Alexandra Homolar. "How to Last Alone at the Top: US Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34 (2), 2011, pp. 189-217. It is worth mentioning that China in recent years focuses on developing "anti-access" capabilities. This sounds defensive in nature, but it raises concerns in the U.S. Marshall Hoyler. "China's 'Antiaccess' Ballistic Missiles and U.S. Active Defense". *Naval War College Review* 63 (4), 2010, pp. 84-105; Thomas G. Mahnken. "China's Anti-Access Strategy in Historical and Theoretical Perspective". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34 (3), 2011, pp. 299-323; and also Thomas J. Christensen. "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy". *International Security* 25 (4), 2001, pp. 5-40; M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros. "China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure". *International Security* 35 (2), 2010 pp. 48-87; James R. Holmes. "China's Way of Naval War: Mahan's Logic, Mao's Grammar". *Comparative Strategy* 28 (3), 2009, pp. 217-243; Vitaliy O. Pradun. "From Bottle Rockets to Lightning Bolts: China's Missile Revolution and PLA Strategy against U.S. Military Intervention". *Naval War College Review* 64 (2), 2011, pp. 7-38; Robert S. Ross. "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response". *International Security* 34 (2), 2009, pp. 46-81.

The Current Polarity and Its Future

Once the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, the United States remained the sole superpower. The most striking evidence of this new reality was the Gulf War of 1991, in which the U.S. managed to assemble an international coalition and the demising Soviet Union was part of it. This was a salient start of a new period in international affairs, but it was not clear to scholars whether it was a "moment" or an "era".³⁵ Is structural change around the corner? And what comes next – bipolarity or multipolarity? Or perhaps it will be unstable unipolarity? If it is bipolarity with China, will it be stable as Waltz argued concerning bipolar systems?³⁶ How long should a system hold until it is considered stable? Layne's argument is very problematic in this sense. He (and Krauthammer, in fact) contends that unipolarity will be undermined within several decades. That is a very long time. The bipolar system was gone after 45 years, and no one called it in retrospect a "bipolar moment".

Defensive and offensive realism agree that the state (their unit of analysis) seeks security to guarantee its survival, but they disagree on the means to achieve it. Defensive realism argues that a state seeks relative security; hence it wishes to maintain its position in the global balance of power and does not wish for primacy vis-à-vis other states. Accordingly, states would not aspire to possess too much power, as to not threaten other states in a way that will lead to a security dilemma that might end in war. In principle, defensive realism would recommend using force only as a last resort. In contrast, offensive realism argues that a state seeks absolute security; therefore it will sense threat easily. Consequently, it will be more willing to use force against such threats.

Since this paper surrounds the American response to the changing structure of the system, this analysis means that if the U.S. acts according to the offensive realist approach, it will be more willing to use force because any move will be comprehended as a threat; however, if the U.S. acts according to the defensive realist approach, it will be less willing to use force. Generally speaking, defensive realism offers the U.S. strategies in the spectrum between isolationism and selective engagement, while offensive realism offers primacy.

Another way of perceiving the differences between the two realist approaches is to divide them on the issue of status quo or revisionist behavior vis-à-vis the rising competition. Accordingly, any strategy the U.S. might prefer that accepts the rise of the others as a fact is a

³⁵ Unipolar momentalists include Charles Krauthammer. "The Unipolar Moment". *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1), 1990/91, pp. 23-33; Christopher Layne. "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers will Rise". *International Security* 17 (4), 1993, pp. 5-51; Christopher Layne. "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment". *International Security* 31 (2), 2006, pp. 7-41; Kenneth N. Waltz. "The Emerging Structure of International Politics". *International Security* 18 (2), 1993, pp. 44-79. Unipolar eraists include Wohlforth, 1999; Barry R. Posen. "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony". *International Security* 28 (1), 2003, pp. 5-46. On the debate see Mark S. Sheetz and Michael Mastanduno. "Debating the Unipolar Moment". *International Security* 22 (3), 1997/98, pp. 168-174.

³⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz. "The Stability of a Bipolar World". *Daedalus* 93 (3), 1964, pp. 881-909.

status quo behavior. Offshore balancing – the result of reducing commitments around the world (due to the rising powers' pressures and American inability to hold the commitments in the long run) – and the current policy that seems to accept the decline are status quo oriented. The alternative would be that the U.S. becomes revisionist in the sense that it will use its power to change the rules of the game in its favor.³⁷

Scholars who study the United States' position in the current international system are divided between those who believe it is a sole superpower that will maintain its preponderant position for a long time (believers that unipolarity is stable and peaceful³⁸) and those who insist that the U.S. was a sole superpower for a short while after the Soviet Union collapsed, or that it is still a hegemon, but not for long (unstable unipolarity or renewed multipolarity). Kenneth Waltz, Christopher Layne and others argue that unipolarity is temporary. They predict the emergence of competitors to the U.S. in the near future; and they suggest strategies that would moderate the decline of American hegemony or would increase its cooperation with the potential competitors in order to preserve American status in the system.³⁹ In contrast, William Wohlforth, Barry Posen and others argue that the unipolar system is stable because the power margin the U.S. has is too large to change the system in the foreseeable future, thus they suggest strategies that would preserve American status as hegemon.⁴⁰ The debate is yet to be resolved, as is evident from a recent symposium in *International Studies Quarterly*.⁴¹

Dobbin et al. (of the RAND Corporation) state that China's "GDP and defense budget could grow to exceed those of the U.S., allowing it to become a true peer competitor." However, they argue that China's security interests and military capabilities will remain in its immediate periphery. They believe that China might face crises with its neighbors in the coming decades; therefore its focus will remain regional.⁴²

Fettweis argued that "At the end of 2003, the unipolar moment (Krauthammer 1990) is demonstrating a staying power that few neorealists would have anticipated. To this point,

³⁷ Robert Gilpin. "The Theory of Hegemonic War". *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (4), 1988, pp. 591-613; idem. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth. "Assessing the Balance". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24 (2), 2011, pp. 201-219; William C. Wohlforth. "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War". *World Politics* 61 (1), 2009, pp. 28-57.

³⁸ The assumption of peacefulness of the unipolar system is challenged in Nuno P. Monteiro. "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful". *International Security* 36 (3), 2011-12, pp. 9-40.

³⁹ Waltz, 1993; Christopher Layne. "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy". *International Security* 22 (1), 1997, pp. 86-124.

⁴⁰ Wohlforth, 1999; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005; Posen, 2003; Lieber 2012; Kagan, 2008, p. 86. See also Lieber and Alexander, 2005; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko. "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy". *International Security* 34 (4), 2010, pp. 63-95; William C. Wohlforth. "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War". *World Politics* 61 (1), 2009, pp. 28-57; Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35 (1), 2010, pp. 7-43.

⁴¹ Christopher Layne. "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana", Joseph S. Nye, Jr. "The Twenty-First Century Will Not Be a 'Post-American' World", William C. Wohlforth. "How Not to Evaluate Theories". *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (1), 2012, pp. 203-222.

⁴² James Dobbin et al. *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence*. RAND OP344, 2011; and see sources in footnote 34, above.

the world is still in most measurable and unmeasurable senses unipolar. The United States towers over the rest of the world militarily, economically, politically, technologically, and even culturally; its influence is without peer in any of these spheres. The declinists that began to predict the demise of the United States in the late 1980s have been proven very wrong, for today unipolarity is stronger than ever."⁴³ "[The U.S.] is the only participant in the ongoing and controversial 'revolution in military affairs'. The United States maintains the only military whose reach is truly global and has clear advantages over the combined armed forces of the rest of the world."⁴⁴ Since Fettweis's article was published in 2004, as mentioned earlier, China began playing in the technological arena, a worrying fact for the U.S.⁴⁵

Another issue that should raise concerns regarding the future of the system is that China and Russia are the leaders of the Westphalian State "camp", in the sense of non-intervention in domestic affairs. The most recent example was China's and Russia's veto on condemning Syria's regime in the UN Security Council. The reason is obviously their fear that permitting intervention (according to the logic of the R2P concept⁴⁶) would be used against them later on. This is not a minor issue, and it can make both China and Russia attractive for non-liberal and non-democratic states that would ask for their protection while abusing their populations by any means. Although democracy flourished in the last twenty years, there are enough countries that might consider giving up the American patronage for a Chinese substitute, which in time might make China a rival pole. In other words, countries might defect from the American camp, favoring China that can provide them with financial aid and political protection. This could polarize almost any region of the world, a step that might be considered the starting point of a new cold war.

International relations literature focuses almost entirely on the Chinese threat to American unipolarity, and disregards the other emerging great powers that might turn into poles in a multipolar system. India, Brazil, Russia and the EU are rarely considered as potential rivals. They are shadowed by China. However, the theoretical analyses more often suggest multipolarity. So what type of system does the U.S. need to prepare for? Would the system resemble the heydays of bipolarity (the early years of the Cold War) or would it resemble the semi-multipolar days of the 1970s-1980s, during which the U.S. and the Soviet Union were the leading powers but did not control their camps as in the early days? It is only rational to predict that the new system would resemble the latter model, with the U.S. and China as the major powers in a multipolar system.

Given the balance of power that evolved (and is changing continuously), it is logical to assess that whatever system emerges instead of the demising unipolarity (assuming that this is indeed happening) will not be identical to previous forms. Thus, American-Chinese

⁴³ Christopher J. Fettweis. "Evaluating IR's Crystal Balls: How Predictions of the Future Have Withstood Fourteen Years of Unipolarity". *International Studies Review* 6 (1), 2004, p. 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid, ibid. References to John Arquilla and David F. Ronfeldt. In *Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1997; C.T. Sandars. *America's Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴⁵ See sources in footnote 34.

⁴⁶ See <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/ICISS%20Report.pdf>; Gareth Evans. *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2009, etc.

bipolarity will not be identical to the American-Soviet one, neither in the balance of capabilities nor in the balance of influence. There is also no ideological rivalry similar to the Soviet-American one. The same is true with multipolarity. Whereas in the pre-World War II multipolarity the great powers were of similar status, this time it seems unlikely that all great powers would be treated the same. The U.S. has a huge advantage over all other powers (perhaps except China) in technology, military power, economy and so on. It is more likely that the U.S. and China would be the unequivocal leaders of the system, with second-tier great powers with some regional and extra-regional responsibilities on their sides. It is also doubtful that the new system will divide into alliances like the pre-World War I ones.

Would there be a new Concert, or spheres of influence? And would such a system be spread globally or would be limited to the geographic region surrounding each great power? Would such a system provoke a renewed competition on under-developed countries? Would such a system be more stable since all countries would regain domestic control? These questions and others of the kind are yet to be answered, but the replies might suggest how the U.S. and China would prefer the system to operate. In this sense, "we miss the Cold War"⁴⁷ might be answered with a return to the "clear order" of those days.

So what should the U.S. do? The scholarly literature is filled with designs for a grand strategy for the U.S., each of which is based on a different reading of the direction the U.S. is heading – stable primacy or declining unipolarity. Most of the studies are prescriptive. The grand strategies that are on the table are primacy, selective engagement and offshore balancing.⁴⁸

Kai He suggests conditions under which the U.S. policymakers should determine their grand strategy. He argues that if the U.S. sees itself as a rising hegemon, selective engagement should be its preference; if it is a stable hegemon, hegemonic dominion is the strategy; and if the U.S. is a declining hegemon, it should prefer offshore balancing or multilateralism.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Paraphrase of the title of John J. Mearsheimer. "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War". *The Atlantic*, August 1990, pp. 35-50.

⁴⁸ Robert J. Art. *A Grand Strategy for America*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 2003; Thomas P.M. Barnett. *Blueprint for Action: A Future Worth Creating*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 2005; idem. *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*. Berkley Books, New York, 2004; Eugene Gholtz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky. "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation". *International Security* 21 (4), 1997, pp. 5-48; Josef Joffe. "'Bismarck' or 'Britain'? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity". *International Security* 19 (4), 1995, pp. 94-117; Christopher Layne. *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategies from 1940 to the Present*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 2006; Joseph S. Nye, Jr. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Basic Books, New York, 1991; Posen, 2003; Dennis Ross. *Statecraft: and How to Restore America's Standing in the World*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2007; John Gerard Ruggie. *Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era*. The Twentieth Century Fund and Columbia University Press, New York, 1996; James Steinberg. "Preventive Force in US National Security Strategy". *Survival* 47 (4), 2005-06, pp. 55-72; Stephen M. Walt. "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance': Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy". In: G. John Ikenberry (ed.). *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 2002, pp. 121-154; idem. *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*. W.W. Norton, New York, 2005.

⁴⁹ Kia He. "The Hegemon's Choice between Power and Security: Explaining US Policy toward Asia after the Cold War". *Review of International Studies* 36 (4), 2010, pp. 1121-1143.

In an article with Huiyun Feng, He suggests an important insight: one power's rise does not necessarily imply another power's decline. More specifically, they contend that American decline is not necessarily a result of China's rise.⁵⁰ In other words, it is not a zero-sum game between the U.S. and China. This is a very important insight since it gives the U.S. space to operate without sensing that its primacy is in immediate peril. Nevertheless, they say that if the U.S. eventually declines while China rises, the power gap would narrow to a level that will be dangerous to the U.S. because other powers might try balancing against the U.S. with hard power (while so far the attempts – scarcely successful – are with soft means).

Brzezinski suggests enlarging the West by extending it beyond North America and Europe, into "Russia and Turkey, all the way to Japan and South Korea". This will be the world's most stable and democratic zone, which then could "enhance the appeal of the West's core principles for other cultures..." At the same time, he continues, the U.S. should engage the East. "If the United States and China can accommodate each other on a broad range of issues, the prospects for stability in Asia will be greatly increased."⁵¹ Brzezinski calls for a dual role for the U.S.: a promoter of enlarging the West, and a balancer between the Eastern powers. But can China feel secure and practice its regional hegemony while the U.S. is there as "balancer"? Does Russia fit into the West, and how democratic is it considered? Such an extension of the West – if it happened – would resemble the American Cold War alliances that included non-democratic regimes just because they were anti-Communist. But Brzezinski's suggestion – by any means – is a new sort of Cold War and an attempt to encircle China in a Kennan-style containment strategy.⁵²

Many scholars identify America's strategic goal regarding China as an attempt to change it (i.e., democratize it) and not stop its rise.⁵³ It seems as if the U.S. does not care if China overpasses it, as long as China is a liberal democracy. At the same time, scholars deal with strategies of balancing China's rise, such as engaging China's neighbors in security alliances or enhancing American deployment in East Asia to deter China.⁵⁴ Such thinking is in fact geopolitical by nature.

A Geopolitical View: Some Optimism for the U.S.?

⁵⁰ Kia He and Huiyun Feng. "If Not Soft Balancing, Then What? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and U.S. Policy toward China". *Security Studies* 17 (2), 2008, p. 384.

⁵¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski. "Balancing the East, Upgrading the West: U.S. Grand Strategy in an Age of Upheaval". *Foreign Affairs* 91 (1), 2012, p. 97.

⁵² See John W. Garver and Fei-Ling Wang. "China's Anti-Encirclement Struggle". *Asian Security* 6 (3), 2010, pp. 238-261.

⁵³ See Aaron L. Friedberg. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*. W.W. Norton, New York, 2011, p. 42-45, 49-52, 183 [inter alia]; Bruce Gilley. *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2004.

⁵⁴ Garver and Wang, *ibid*.

In this section, the study offers a geopolitical explanation for the international system and its future. Geography is important to any political entity.⁵⁵ The main theme of this paper is based on geopolitical theories. The heydays of these theories were the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The most important ones were the theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman. Following is a very brief presentation of their theories that influenced the American thinking once it became a superpower. Although the theories are very old, they conceptualize the unchanging geographical setting in strategic language of conventional military affairs. As mentioned in the introduction, putting aside the nuclear weapons (due to its uniqueness, the taboo on using it but as a threat against attempts to annihilate a state that possesses it), great powers think in conventional terms, even in comparing with one another. Geopolitics serves well under these circumstances, because geopolitical theories have been at the core of assumptions in designing military power of all countries. The core logic of these theories had survived the introduction of airpower into the military arena.

Mahan was the prominent advocate of sea-power.⁵⁶ He wrote of the use of navies of offshore powers to control the seas for commercial and military uses.⁵⁷ The great powers started competing in establishing their naval powers, some (especially the U.S. and Imperial Germany) influenced directly by his writings. Mahan's study was publicized when the United States prospered. This prosperity allowed the U.S. to invest in the navy. The political figure that was most influenced by Mahan was Theodore Roosevelt, well before becoming president; and once he became president, he created the "Great White Fleet" that was sent around the world to present American power.⁵⁸

Mackinder focused on the land powers and their emerging power that could peril the sea-powers' leadership. He talked in 1904 of the centrality of the Heartland on world history. The sea-powers' concern, he argued, was to prevent the land-powers from taking control over the Heartland, fearing that from that region the great land-power could project power all across the "world island" that would allow it to dominate the world.⁵⁹ He called for an Atlantic (British-American) alliance to stop the land powers.

⁵⁵ Walter A. McDougall. "Why Geography Matters... But Is So Little Learned". *Orbis* 47 (2). 2003, pp. 217-233; Harm de Blij. *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America: Climate Change, the Rise of China, and Global Terrorism*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

⁵⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. University Paperbacks, Methuen, London, 1965 [1890].

⁵⁷ Jon Sumida. "Alfred Thayer Mahan, Geopolitician". In Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey Sloan (eds.). *Geopolitics: Geography and Strategy*. Frank Cass, London, 1999, pp. 39-61; James R. Holmes. "Mahan, a 'Place in the Sun', and Germany's Quest for Sea Power". *Comparative Strategy* 23 (1), 2004, pp. 27-61.

⁵⁸ Richard W. Turk. *The Ambiguous Relationship: Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan*. Greenwood Press, New York, 1987; James R. Reckner. *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Md., 1988.

⁵⁹ Halford J. Mackinder. "The Geographical Pivot of History". *Geographical Journal* 23 (4), 1904, pp. 421-444; idem. *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Study of Reconstruction*. Constable, London and Holt, New York, 1919; idem. "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace". *Foreign Affairs* 21 (4), 1943, pp. 595-605.

Spykman focused on the Rimland, the margins of the Heartland. He argued that this was the region over which there will be the clash between the sea and land powers, once it became clear that it was impossible to take over the Heartland.⁶⁰

In recent years, as part of the renaissance of the geopolitics, many studies reexamined or reevaluated the classical theories.⁶¹ Some theoretical concerns never changed in American foreign policy thinking, especially the fear of domination of the Euro-Asian continent by a rival power.⁶² This led the U.S. to contain the Soviet Union once it emerged as the land superpower by forming alliances across Euro-Asia that encircled the Soviet Union and its East-European satellites. In the current situation, it is hard to see a single great power taking over the industrial and military centers of Euro-Asia, but the U.S. would probably do well if it separates these centers from one another and by preserving as many of them as possible under its influence.

Aaron Friedberg notes that "realist optimists such as Robert Ross and Michael McDevitt believe that geography will greatly enhance the stability of the emerging U.S.-China relationship. The United States, in this view, is a maritime power. Its interests and sphere of influence are, and likely will remain, centered offshore in Northeast and maritime Southeast Asia. China, by contrast, is and has historically been primarily a land power. Its "natural" sphere of influence will include Central Asia and continental Southeast Asia. Ross maintains that these spheres of influence do not overlap, with the possible exceptions of the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and the Spratly Islands. Provided that the issues relating to these

⁶⁰ Nicholas John Spykman. *The Geography of the Peace*. Archon Books, Hamden Conn., 1944 [1969]. Henry C. Bartlett and G. Paul Holman. "Force Planning for the Post-Cold War World: What Can We Learn from Geopolitics?" *Strategic Review* 19 (1), 1991, p. 30. An unconventional essay on the relations between Mackinder and Spykman with regard to the Containment theory: Michael P. Gerace. "Between Mackinder and Spykman: Geopolitics, Containment, and After". *Comparative Strategy* 10 (4), 1991, pp. 347-364.

⁶¹ Robert J. Art. "The United States, the Balance of Power, and World War II: Was Spykman Right?" *Security Studies* 14 (3), 2005, pp. 365-406; Mark Bassin and Konstantin E. Aksenov. "Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse". *Geopolitics* 11 (1), 2006, pp. 99-118; Brian W. Blouet. "Halford Mackinder and the Pivotal Heartland". In Brian W. Blouet (ed.). *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West*. Frank Cass, London, 2005, pp. 1-16; Saul B. Cohen. "Geopolitics in the New World Era: A New Perspective on an Old Discipline". In: George J. Demko and William B. Wood (eds.). *Reordering the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the 21st Century, Second Edition*. Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1999, pp. 40-68; Klaus Dodds and James D. Sidway. "Halford Mackinder and the 'Geographical Pivot of History': A Centennial Retrospective". *Geographical Journal* 170 (4), 2004, pp. 292-297; Klaus Dodds. "Halford Mackinder and the Geographical Pivot of History: A Brief Assessment". In Brian W. Blouet (ed.). *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West*. Frank Cass, London, 2005, pp. 137-141; Christopher J. Fettweis. "Sir Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century". *Parameters* 30 (2), 2000, pp. 58-71; Colin S. Gray. "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On". *Comparative Strategy* 23 (1), 2004, pp. 9-25; David Hooson. "The Heartland – Then and Now". In Brian W. Blouet (ed.). *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West*. Frank Cass, London, 2005, pp. 165-172; Jennifer Hyndman. "Revisiting Mackinder 1904-2004". *Geographical Journal* 170 (4), 2004, pp. 380-383; Gerry Kearns. "Naturalising Empire: Echoes of Mackinder for the Next American Century?" *Geopolitics* 11 (1), 2006, pp. 74-98; Geoffrey Sloan. "Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland Theory Then and Now". In: Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey Sloan (eds.). *Geopolitics: Geography and Strategy*. Frank Cass, London, 1999, pp. 15-38.

⁶² Stephen Van Evera suggested that between 1917 and 1991 American national security policy was aimed at one goal: keeping industrial Eurasia divided, i.e., preventing any of the land-powers from gaining control over the entire continent. Stephen Van Evera. "A Farewell to Geopolitics". In Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (eds.). *To Lead the World: American Strategy After the Bush Doctrine*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 12-14. See also Friedberg, 2011, pp. 6-7.

three areas can be properly managed, there should be little reason or occasion for the United States and China to come into direct conflict. These circumstances stand in marked contrast to those that prevailed during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union had overlapping, physically contiguous spheres of influence in Central Europe, a situation that produced much tension and considerable danger, especially during the initial stages of the superpower competition."⁶³

Robert Ross wrote, "The East Asian experience also supports the traditional understanding of the role of geography in threat perception and secondary state behavior. Geographic proximity contributes to threat perception and alignment decisions. The result of great-power proximity and heightened threat perception is not secondary-state balancing, however, but rather accommodation of great power capabilities. Indeed, throughout history great powers have been most successful in establishing spheres of influence over their immediate neighbors."⁶⁴

The U.S. maintains its regional commands that were established during the Cold War. Barry Posen argues that it reflects a consensus that the system of commands is still necessary.⁶⁵ It is. No other great power has such a global setting, thus any great power that might peril vital American interests would face American forces rather quickly. The United States can strike anywhere on earth with long-distance missiles and bombers, but it cannot fight in-land as effectively as in littoral regions.⁶⁶ Therefore, in principle, the United States' geopolitical characteristics suggest that it would be wise to exercise a strategy of offshore balancing, which is a leading defensive realist prescription.

Stephen Walt explains offshore balancing as follows: "Offshore balancing assumes that only a few areas of the globe are of strategic importance to the United States (i.e., worth fighting and dying for). Specifically, the vital areas are the regions where there are substantial concentrations of power and wealth or critical natural resources: Europe, industrialized Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Offshore balancing further recognizes that the United States does not need to control these areas directly; it merely needs to ensure that they do not fall under the control of a so-called peer competitor. To prevent rival Great Powers from doing this, offshore balancing prefers to rely primarily on local actors to uphold the regional balance of

⁶³ On the impact of geography, see Robert S. Ross. "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century." *International Security* 23 (4), 1999, pp. 81–118; and Michael McDevitt. "Roundtable: Net Assessment—Objective Conditions versus the U.S. Strategic Tradition." in Paul D. Taylor (ed.). *Asia and the Pacific: U.S. Strategic Traditions and Regional Realities*. Naval War College Press, Newport, R.I., 2001, pp. 101–105. Quoted in Aaron L. Friedberg. "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30 (2), 2005, pp. 28-29.

⁶⁴ Robert S. Ross. "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia". *Security Studies* 15 (3), 2006, p. 392.

⁶⁵ Posen, 2003, p. 19; Ronald H. Cole, Walter S. Poole, James F. Schnabel, Robert J. Watson, and Willard J. Webb, *The History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–1993*. Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, D.C., 1995. <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA313508> (Accessed 1.3.2012)

⁶⁶ Ziv Rubinovitz. *The Stopping Power of Land: The Geopolitics of American Use of Force in the International Arena Since 1898*. A thesis submitted for the degree 'Doctor of Philosophy', University of Haifa, 2010 [Hebrew]. Black raises a similar argument: Jeremy Black. "War and International Relations: A Military-Historical Perspective on Force and Legitimacy". *Review of International Studies* 31 (Supplement S1), 2005, pp. 134-137.

power. Under this strategy, the United States would intervene with its own forces only when regional powers were unable to uphold the balance of power on their own."⁶⁷ In fact, this strategy limits the use of force only to the most vital regions for the U.S., and would view any intervention elsewhere as damaging and wasting resources.

America and geography

American foreign policy is founded on one geographical fact: the United States is remote from the rest of the world, separated from the "Old World" – the World Island in Mackinder's language – by two huge bodies of water. It is also bordered by two countries so weak not to be considered as serious threats. This means that the U.S. did not need to form an army in its early years. It had established a powerful navy, and later an air force in order to project its power around the globe.

The geographical distance from the rest of the world's power-centers was the basis of America's relations with the international system, and this made geography a central dimension in its leaders' perspective.⁶⁸ The geographical setting not only protects the U.S. on day-to-day basis from the moment it could rid itself of the British military presence (the evacuation day was November 25, 1783 – with the exception of the 1812 war), but more importantly for the matter discussed here, it allowed the U.S. to **decide** whether or not and how to get involved in the global affairs.

In an era of airpower and intercontinental missiles that are capable of carrying nuclear warheads, many scholars argue that distances matter very little, hence the oceans no longer protect the U.S. The terror attacks of September 11, 2001, seem to prove what extensive damage can be done from afar. This is true, and the U.S. had suffered the worst attack on its soil since the War of 1812. However, there was no peril to American territorial integrity since there was no question of invading and occupying American soil. Few if any other countries in the world are in such a position. All of the potential rivals for hegemony or primacy border on other regional powers that are sure to resist any attempt to force them into becoming subordinates of the emerging powers: Europe borders Russia; Russia borders Europe and China; China borders Russia and India; India borders China and Pakistan;⁶⁹ Brazil borders Argentina. This list leaves out the non-continental borders – that is naval borders: China-Japan, Russia-Japan. Incursions, invasions and wars are historical shares of all these powers.

Such history does not dictate that such events will reoccur, but they might. The only time when the U.S. was invaded was in 1812-1814, when it fought over Canada against Great Britain whose army was much stronger than the American one. The British invaded in retaliation of American invasion to Canada. The current and foreseeable state of affairs is

⁶⁷ Walt, 2005, p. 222. See also Layne, 1997.

⁶⁸ Alan K. Henrikson. "Mental Maps". In: Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (eds.). *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 182-184.

⁶⁹ On the China-India rivalry and Great Game politics see David Scott. "The Great Power 'Great Game' between India and China: The Logic of Geography". *Geopolitics* 13 (1), 2008, pp. 1-26.

very different. Not only does the U.S. have the most powerful military in the world, it also has the greatest power gap in its advance compared with its immediate neighbors and given the physical distance from its potential rivals and the nature of the dividing body – ocean on the east, ocean on the west – it is hard to see any great power that can threaten the U.S. similar to the threats it faces itself. The U.S. had built a huge sophisticated military (all of its branches are the best in their arena) that can quite easily reach any of the potential rivals and attack it.

The argument might be summarized as follows: It doesn't matter – at the end of the day – how powerful the U.S. is compared to its potential or real adversary (or adversaries) because its first line of defense is not the assets it possesses (economic, military) but its surroundings, i.e. its geographic and geopolitical position. It is a natural advantage. John Mearsheimer's "stopping power of water" argument works nicely in America's defense, since the U.S. is protected by the oceans from any other power's invasion.⁷⁰ It does not, however, work from the opposite aspect, i.e., when the U.S. projects power on a remote target, the seas are not barriers but accelerators for American forces, and if the target is landlocked, there is a "stopping power of land" logic.⁷¹

But American soil being protected is only part of the story, obviously the most vital one from the perspective of a state's survival. The other part of the story is America's primacy or hegemony on the Euro-Asian continent. Based on the same geographic factor, it seems that the U.S. has a huge advantage over China and other Euro-Asian great powers. First and foremost, all of these great powers are neighbors of one another; hence any great power that rises and threatens to become a regional hegemon is subject to enmity of its regional neighbors/rivals. This can evolve into regional arms races (security dilemma) or into alliances either among the regional powers or with other powers, in this case the U.S. In other words, even though the U.S. has lost some relative power to its potential rivals, each and every one of them faces imminent problems on its borders. In the aftermath, they will have to deal first with their continental problems before dealing with the offshore problems. This gives the U.S. "air supply". However, it is not a permanent guarantee, and the U.S. would need to do two things: first, make sure the geographical setting keeps working in its advantage by not allowing rivals to peril its soil; second, decide how to preserve its relative advantage on Euro-Asia, hence concentrating sufficient forces to protect American interests on the Euro-Asian continent but also to deploy them in a way that will not escalate tensions unnecessarily. Hence, the U.S. should act as an offshore balancer, securing its vital interests by preventing a hostile takeover of the continent by a single power.

Ross concludes that "If the United States remains committed to maintaining its forward presence in East Asia, it can be assured of maritime supremacy, the ability to handle the rise of China at manageable costs, and a stable East Asian balance-of-power."⁷²

⁷⁰ Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 114-128.

⁷¹ Rubinovitz, 2010.

⁷² Ross, 2006, p. 395.

Conclusions: Is the "Unipolar Moment" over?⁷³

A very important question is what Jervis phrased as "Change in or of the system?"⁷⁴ Is the change so dramatic that it alters the structure of the system, or is it only a different balance of power that is forming?

Mearsheimer is probably correct in assessing that the U.S. would lose its preponderant status in the Asia-Pacific region due to China's rise, but it will actually increase its physical presence in the region in response to China's rise.⁷⁵ He argues that China's rise will create an arms race with the U.S. with considerable potential for war. All of China's neighbors will join forces with the U.S. to contain the Chinese power, hence China's rise will not be peaceful.⁷⁶

The new rule of rising powers is summarized nicely by Rosecrance: "Under these likely-to-be-continuing circumstances, intensive development through economic growth is generally preferable to military and extensive expansion. With new investments, a country can transform its position through industrial expansion at home and sustain it through international trade. Access to the economies of other nations is sufficient; a rising nation does not need territorial control of them. Peaceful development can thus take the place of aggressive expansion. Since World War II, a number of economies have adopted this principle, including Germany, Japan, China, and other East Asian nations. They have prospered as a result."⁷⁷

Can one draw lessons from the U.S.-Soviet bipolar system to the emerging U.S.-China bipolarity (perhaps the most likely development for the near future)? Kissinger warns against it, especially because of the very different role the Soviets then and China now have in global economy. China can bring the economy down as the Soviets could never imagine.⁷⁸ Kissinger reminds the U.S. a critically important fact: "Americans would do well to remember that even when China's GDP is equal to that of the United States, it will need to be distributed over a population that is four times as large, aging, and engaged in complex domestic transformations occasioned by China's growth and urbanization. The practical consequence is that a great deal of China's energy will still be devoted to domestic needs."⁷⁹ In other words, there is place for some optimism for the United States.

It is now twenty years since the Cold War ended. There are contradicting signs regarding the duration of the unipolar era. On the one hand, there is no question that the U.S.

⁷³ Krauthammer, 1990.

⁷⁴ Robert Jervis. "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective". *World Politics* 61 (1), 2009, p. 210.

⁷⁵ John J. Mearsheimer. "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia". *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, 2010, p. 381. In June 2012 the Secretary of Defense announced a major concentration of the American fleet in the Asia-Pacific region. Jim Garamone. "Panetta Says Strategy Puts Dream of 21st Century in Reach". <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116647> (Accesses June 7, 2012)

⁷⁶ Mearsheimer, 2010, p. 382.

⁷⁷ Richard N. Rosecrance. "Power and International Relations: The Rise of China and Its Effects". *International Studies Perspectives* 7 (1), 2006, p. 33.

⁷⁸ Henry A. Kissinger. "The Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations". *Foreign Affairs* 91 (2), March/April 2012.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

is the leading military power, but on the other hand, the economic basis of its hegemony eroded while the economies of China, India, other South-East Asian countries ("Tigers"), Russia (thanks to the prices of oil) and the European Union grew.⁸⁰ It is hard to predict when, if at all, the international system would turn against the U.S., but this issue has practical meaning for American strategy because of the question whether or not the U.S. should attempt to stop the rise of the others by preemptive or preventive strikes (offensive realism), or should the U.S. accept their rise and cooperate with them to prevent them from becoming real threats (defensive realism).

Any rising power is revisionist because it wants to change the existing order to reflect its new power, and any power that is weakening compared to other powers is a status quo state since it wants to preserve its status.⁸¹ In the late 19th century, the U.S. was rising, and it was revisionist by definition because it wanted to prove that it was entitled to great power status. Once it gained the status, it wanted to preserve it and played as an offshore balancer of the European balance of power. World War II weakened all the European powers and the U.S. emerged as a superpower. At that stage it only acted to maintain its status (and at times it acted to weaken the Soviet Union), therefore it was a status quo actor. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the U.S. status changed to sole superpower (and even hyper-power), and since then it wanted to preserve its primacy.

Following this logic, the U.S. would see any state that undermines the current order as a revisionist, and it might strike to prevent the revisionist from becoming a greater challenge. However, operating as an offshore balancer might work better for the U.S. It will preserve its power better from eroding in conflicts with China and perhaps other rising powers, and will force some of these rising powers to take care of their own security in a manner that will slow their rise. Preserving the military power only for vital interests in Euro-Asia, while maintaining its credibility, can lower tensions and promote stability with the U.S. still in the lead on its competitors. With dire economic circumstances that are not expected to change sometime soon,⁸² this outcome seems worth to pursue.

⁸⁰ Many of the prospering countries in recent years have devoted resources to rearming. This can signal that in the near future the U.S. will be challenged, although it is obvious that it will be very hard to catch up with the U.S. The 2008 crisis harmed all the powers (China and India apparently only slowed down rather than went into recession as most great powers), and it had probably weakened them to a degree that would make it hard for them to recover on American expense sometime soon. The crisis might even strengthen the dependence on the U.S. since everyone depends on the American recovery. In other words, even if the American economic hegemony weakened (the dollar's weakening vis-à-vis the Euro and other currencies is only one symptom of this), the U.S. is still the most important factor in the market. Robert D. Blackwill. *The Geopolitical Consequences of the World Economic Recession – A Caution* (OP275). RAND, Santa Monica, Calif., 2009; Benn Steil. *Lessons of the Financial Crisis*. Council Special Report no. 45, Center for Geostategic Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 2009; Anup Shah. "Global Financial Crisis". <http://www.globalissues.org/print/article/768> (20.7.2010)

⁸¹ Jason W. Davidson. *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States*. Palgrave, New York, 2006.

⁸² A compelling challenge to the common notion that the current crisis is different than previous stances can be found in Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff. *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2009.