

## Occasional Paper Series, No. 41

### Transatlantic Relations in a Unipolar World

**William C. Wohlforth**  
Associate Professor of Government,  
Dartmouth College

The state of transatlantic relations is normal - arguably in crisis, arguably not; poised for fundamental change, or for basic continuity. The usual question for conferences on transatlantic relations is whether this situation will continue. My purpose in this paper is to set forth a perspective on the future of the transatlantic relationship based on the central realist proposition that the distribution of capabilities among states is an important background influence on their behaviour. Major changes in international relations often arise from changes in the distribution of power.<sup>1</sup> Important features of the Cold War resulted from the great concentration of power in the United States and the Soviet Union - a condition that came to be called "bipolarity."<sup>2</sup> The Cold War ended in significant measure owing to changes in the distribution of power - namely, the decline and fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> As a result of Soviet and Russian decline, a new unipolar distribution has emerged with new consequences for international politics in general and the transatlantic relationship in particular.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While self-described realists may differ on many questions, they all accept this basic proposition. Cf. Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Winter 2000) and Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravscik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5-55.

<sup>2</sup> See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2000/2001).

<sup>4</sup> I make the empirical case that the great-power subsystem is unipolar in William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 1-36. Here, I endeavor to apply the

The presumption behind such an analysis is that absent major change in underlying material conditions, major change in patterns of behaviour is unlikely. Any historian can name instances when this presumption was unfounded. But the point is that it is very often right. I contend that key features of the transatlantic relationship - including US engagement in Europe, European preference for such engagement, as well as endless disagreements arising from clashing visions of world order - are all rooted in the distribution of capabilities. Change in this underlying structure is likely to be slow and subtle, but the best bet is that for the next 10-20 years changes will augur for an increase in the nettlesome aspects of the relations rather than a fundamental alteration in its character.

Of course, no social structure is determinate. Any structure in any social realm may be overwhelmed by other causes. Europe and America may drift apart as a consequence of causes having nothing to do with the distribution of power in world politics. Scholars disagree strongly over the causal importance of mainly material structures, such as the distribution of power, as opposed to mainly non-material social relationships and factors emanating from within the domestic politics of states. One way to test the veracity and strength of structural theories is to make predictions derived from such theories and monitor the results. That is the spirit that informs this paper.

I proceed in four sections. First, I describe the distribution of capabilities, especially as it relates to US-EU relations. Second, I derive the implications of this material setting for the transatlantic relationship. Third, I analyse perceptions and behaviour to determine whether they are consistent with the argument. Fourth, I suggest why the underlying structure is likely to change only marginally over the policy-relevant future. I conclude by offering an explanation for why my analysis seems so unpersuasive to policy practitioners and experts.

---

arguments developed in that article to the European-American relationship.

## **The Distribution of Capabilities: US Unipolarity and US-EU Incommensurability**

Policymakers, pundits and scholars now increasingly agree that no system of sovereign states has contained a leading state with the across-the-board material preponderance the United States enjoys today. Hence the recent popularity of (misleading) comparisons to Rome at its peak. It is this asymmetry of power that gives rise to concerns about the stability of US-European relations. Less often noted than the asymmetry of power is the *incommensurability* of power between the US and the EU. Europe is and will remain militarily inferior to the US, but it matches in aggregate economic potential. It is this mix of global unipolarity and bilateral incommensurability that provides the material setting for the transatlantic relationship.

### ***Unipolarity***

Clarity is critical when using a concept as elusive as polarity.<sup>5</sup> I use the term “unipolarity” to denote a distribution of capabilities that is unique in modern international history according to three influential theories. First is Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism, which defines polarity as the concentration of power among major states. Waltz measures polarity by counting as “poles” those states with unusually large concentrations of all underlying elements of power. The United States is the only state today - and, indeed, the only state in modern international history - that excels markedly and measurably in all the relevant power capabilities: military, economic, technological, and geopolitical. And the overall gap in material capabilities separating the United States from all contenders for polar status is larger than any analogous gap in modern international history. U.S. power is not unlimited, but it is unprecedented. The United States accounts for 60% of all defence spending among the world’s major powers. It also accounts for 40% of economic production, 40% of high-technology production, and 50% of total research and development expenditures. No state in history could do this. Leading states tended to be

---

<sup>5</sup> See R. Harrison Wagner, “What was Bipolarity?,” *International Organization*, Vol. 47 (Winter 1993), pp. 77-106.

either great commercial and naval powers or great land powers - never both. In short, as Waltz puts it, “upon the demise of the Soviet Union, the international political system became unipolar.”<sup>6</sup>

Second is traditional balance-of-power theory in which unipolarity is a system in which one state is too powerful to be counterbalanced. In other words, unipolarity is the very state of affairs balance-of-power policies are supposed to prevent. Arguably just such a situation emerged from a unique combination of historical circumstances. Rapid Soviet decline left the United States the sole superpower lying far offshore from a Eurasian continent populated by far less capable states in close proximity to each other. The result is that local balance-of-power dynamics subvert efforts to create a counterpoise to the United States globally. Efforts by other major powers to balance the United States are likely to produce local counterbalancing long before they substantially constrain Washington. Moreover, a key legacy of the Cold War is a history of American engagement in the security affairs of Eurasia. Thus, traditional balance of power theory - which explains the balancing behaviour of great powers against a rising revisionist state seeking hegemony - is turned on its head. U.S. unipolarity *is* the status quo; restoring equilibrium is a revisionist project.<sup>7</sup> Again, this is the first such system in modern international history.

Third is hegemonic stability theory, in which unipolarity is best described as “unambiguous primacy.” Leading states foster international arrangements that are stable to the degree that the

---

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), p. 27. I have explored the measurement of power and comparisons to past distributions in more detail in Wohlforth “The Stability of a Unipolar World;” and “U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World,” in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *After Pax Americana* (Book MS under review).

<sup>7</sup> In the traditional balance-of-power literature, the term “hegemony” generally is reserved for a situation in which one state is capable of conquering a coalition of all other major powers. See citations in Wagner, “What was Bipolarity?” Owing to its distance offshore from Eurasia, the United States does not possess this capability. Yet it possesses a concentration of capabilities the other major powers cannot match. Hence, balancing dynamics are suspended. The term “unipolarity” captures this power distribution - which, because it is historically unprecedented, was never considered in the traditional literature - as well or better as any other term in political science.

leader is dominant.<sup>8</sup> The United States enjoys a preeminence in nearly all the component elements of power that is unprecedented in modern international history. As one Russian commentator put it: "The United States emerges as the uncontested world leader in all respects in the foreseeable future."<sup>9</sup> As a result, its leadership of the international system is less subject to challenge than that of any past system leader, including Britain at its peak and the United States itself in the early Cold War. The institutions and practices it prefers are therefore supported by an unusually large margin of material resources.

These theories - structural realism, classical realism, and hegemonic stability theory - all predict that a unipolar distribution of capabilities decreases the likelihood of military conflict among the major powers for two reasons. First, the magnitude of America's lead over the other major powers makes it highly unlikely that the world will be plunged into conflict by a challenge to U.S. leadership. There is always a leader in world politics. If the United States were far weaker than it now is, it would still be number one. And if it wasn't, some other country would be. The question is not whether there will be a leader, but how secure that leadership is. At the dawn of this century, a militarily powerful Germany challenged Britain's leadership. The result was World War I. In the middle of this century, American leadership seemed under challenge by a militarily and (at times) ideologically strong Soviet Union. The result was the Cold War. What explains these conflicts and many others was the fact that the leader led in one kind of power but not others, and thus seemed simultaneously threatening and vulnerable. Given that leadership is inevitable, secure leaders are better than insecure ones.

Second, unipolarity also removes the danger that leaders will miscalculate as they ponder the complex diplomatic and military chessboards of balance-of-power politics. Such miscalculations and the security competition they foster are an important cause of conflict in both classical and structural realist versions of balance-of-power theory. Because the United States is simply too

powerful to counterbalance, there is no need or possibility to calibrate alliances to produce an equilibrium among the major powers. The default grand strategy for most major powers is to maintain a working relationship with the Americans - at most to bandwagon with the United States (EU, Japan) or at least to be careful not to provoke it (China, Russia). Moreover, American engagement in the security arrangements in the eastern and western reaches of Eurasia helps dampen competition for security of prestige among the other major powers themselves. Owing to its power advantages and offshore location, the United States finds it easy to pursue a Bismarckian "hub-and spokes" system of alliances.<sup>10</sup> Balance-of-power politics make great diplomatic history precisely because they are pregnant with potential disaster - a few miscalculations can produce an arms race or a war. Pundits often lament the absence of a post-Cold War Bismarck to fashion a grand strategy for great-power peace. Luckily, as long as unipolarity lasts, we don't need one.

### *US-EU Incommensurability*

The EU is America's economic peer. If the EU were a state, the world would be bipolar in economic terms. But the EU is not a state. On some matters - trade, antitrust - the EU speaks with one voice. On others, notably finance, the Union's institutional arrangements remain complex. The adoption of the Euro creates classic spillover pressure for policy coordination on finance, pressure that will magnify if the UK adopts the Euro. The overall trend is thus for more policy coordination on international economic matters. Still, even if that trend continued, Europe's economic muscle cannot be wielded effectively as a political tool until the ESDP advances dramatically. Currently, the political impact of Europe's massive economic resources remains diffused.

US-EU power incommensurability matters because it creates the classic preconditions for what sociologists call *status dissonance*: the inability of actors to sort out their rank in a prestige hierarchy owing to the fact that on some dimensions of status they are peers but not on

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Chernega "Russia's Chances in the 21st Century," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal*, No. 2, 2000.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Josef Joffe, "'Bismarck' or 'Britain'? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1995), pp. 94-117.

others. When actors' capabilities are incommensurate on some dimensions, they experience ambiguity about their relative status and have increased difficulty reaching agreements. The reason is that all actors tend to be biased in favour of higher status. Put simply, the status inferior actor (in this case, the EU) that achieves parity on one dimension of power (economic) is likely to expect greater deference from the status superior (US). But the status superior actor that retains dominance on at least some dimension is unlikely to treat the status inferior as a peer.

US-EU status politics are unlike those of earlier times, and not only because the principal actors are democracies. US-EU incommensurability is the opposite of the standard pattern of the past that featured status inferiors with outsized *military* power. This is the classic Russia-Prussia-Germany-Japan-Soviet Union problem. The EU, if it continues to develop as an economic superpower while remaining militarily weak outside its region, and it unifies enough really to be considered an international actor, will reverse this pattern.

## **Implications for the US-European Partnership**

Let us first consider the general implications of this analysis for status politics; and then turn to the more traditional security realm.

First, America's unprecedented global dominance is an existential threat to the status (but not the existential security) of other traditional great powers. To the extent that they prize status above material rewards, policy making elites in other states may be willing to forego potentially beneficial cooperation with the United States if it comes at the expense of their collective self-esteem.

Second, unipolarity - in addition to nuclear deterrence, democracy, new norms, globalisation, and a host of other factors - substantially ameliorates the security problem among great powers. In the past, considerations of status and security were in general inextricably intertwined. Now, status politics may assume a more independent role. But absent the security threat,

they are unlikely to assume the deadly form they did in the past.

Third, the incommensurability of their power portfolios make US and the EU candidates for status rivalry. Many of the issues that divide them are complicated by status considerations. And one of main impulses for further EU integration is the desire for international prestige.

Fourth, unipolarity and incommensurability help explain divergent US and European worldviews and preferred strategies. Given its power and position, it is hardly surprising that the United States resists further development of international regimes and institutions in ways that might constrain it in the exercise of its military power. Its military prowess also inclines its elite towards placing high value on military means in addressing security threats. Given its mix of resources, Europe not surprisingly has a vision of the future of the world order that starkly contrasts with the Americans'. It favours multilateral institution building on a variety of fronts. Europeans also not surprisingly tend to place greater emphasis on strategies that highlight capabilities in which they are strong. Naturally, similar incommensurability exists among European states, and so, for example, Britain's views tend to be closer to Washington's than those of less militarily potent European states.

In security matters, however, U.S.-European partnership is still the default option under unipolarity. While it is not mechanistically necessitated by the system's structure, it does represent the path of least resistance, and, for many of the states concerned, the optimal strategy. American grand strategy is to prevent the reemergence of competitive multipolar regions in Europe and Asia by maintaining a substantial forward presence in both regions. The idea is to preserve the stability that American policymakers perceive is in their own best interest while retaining Washington's substantial influence in the affairs of both regions. Most officials believe U.S. leadership and engagement are necessary conditions of order. Many note that the United States uses the leverage it obtains by its leadership role to advance its commercial and ideological interests in promoting trade, globalisation, and democracy. The merits of the strategy can be debated, but the set of beliefs that undergirds it is hardly surprising for a state with the extraordinary power advantage the U.S.

enjoys. Great power usually leads to expansive definitions of interest.

What is in it for Europe? To a greater or lesser degree, European states receive the following strategic benefits from a continuance of the partnership:

- A hedge against the return of great-power competition within Europe.<sup>11</sup> As long as the United States is engaged, the return of competitive security policies is foreclosed. Many, if not most, Europeans believe their cooperative enterprise could survive a U.S. withdrawal, but not all do.
- A hedge against the reemergence of leadership struggles in Europe. Many Europeans believe that the project of integration has reached the point where state-centric struggles for prestige or primacy can be subsumed and dissipated within all-Europe institutions; but many others do not. As one senior European diplomat put it, “it is not acceptable that the lead nation be European. A European power broker is a hegemonic power. We can agree on U.S. leadership, but not on one of our own.”<sup>12</sup> Until integration of foreign and defence matters proceeds to the point where a critical mass of key European policy-makers are indifferent about the prospect of one European government’s hegemony, there will be a continued demand for U.S. involvement.
- A hedge against a renewed external threat (e.g., a revisionist Russia).<sup>13</sup> Again, this is a low-probability event, but one which prudent policy-makers must consider.
- Insurance against an internal or borderland crisis whose resolution requires the military and command capabilities of NATO. ESDP and the rapid reaction force may someday be able to handle any plausible contingency,

but until that day, the U.S. presence is a valuable strategic asset.

- Side benefits from America’s global role. U.S. forward deployment in Europe is not only for Europe. As the Persian Gulf War and subsequent operations against Iraq showed, America’s ability to project force is enhanced by its presence in Europe. Many Europeans oppose various U.S. policies at various times. Others sometimes see the benefits of Washington’s global role. Most recognize that - individually or collectively - European states will not match U.S. force projection and strategic leadership capabilities for some time.

Given unipolarity, unless and until the EU begins to acquire the material and decision-making capabilities of a superpower, a critical mass of European governments will prefer to bandwagon with the United States. And for their part, the Americans *could* choose to “come home” and still remain secure, but given the temptations of the U.S. power advantage and the manifold external demands for involvement that flow inevitably from its unipolar position they are unlikely to do so.

## Evidence: Perceptions and Behaviour

In short, the impulses for cooperation and some discord are to some degree rooted in material capabilities. Of course, capabilities are endogenous to policy choices. In particular, the EU could choose to increase its military power or, more likely, to build the institutions necessary to wield its economic power more effectively. The question is, what are the key actors likely to do? In Europe’s case, this comes down to resolving trade offs among welfare, security and international status. In the past, security and status (prestige/honour) were inextricably intertwined. Now, they are substantially independent. The question is, will Europe pay for prestige, even if it is essentially secure? The same question also applies to the other great powers: Russia, China, and Japan. All face strong budget constraints, and all, so far, have been unwilling to pay much for enhanced status. The most they

---

<sup>11</sup> For a strong argument to this effect, see Robert J. Art, “Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (1996).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> On this concern, see Robert J. Lieber, “No Transatlantic Divorce in the Offing,” *Orbis*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer 2000), pp. 571-584.

have been able to muster is rather weak “prestige balancing.”

Unipolarity implies neither the absence of all politics among great powers nor the absence of all power balancing among lesser powers nor certainly the resolution of all global problems. It does not mechanistically determine a specific strategy on the part of the major powers. It simply creates incentives for strategies that diminish if not eliminate two major problems that bedeviled international systems of the past: struggles for global primacy and competitive balancing among the major powers. Behaviour over the decade since the dissolution of the Soviet Union is consistent with these expectations. The United States continues to follow a strategy of maintaining a preponderance of power globally and deep engagement in the security affairs of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. It has adapted rather than abandoned the central institutions and practices it fostered during the bipolar era, expanded NATO to Central Europe, strengthened its military alliance with Japan, and taken on a great many other less heralded new security commitments in areas formally under Moscow’s sway. To support this strategy, the United States continues to maintain a military establishment on a scale comparable in absolute terms to the peacetime years of the Cold War.

The response on the part of the other major states has been to accommodate this American strategy. The absence of balancing among the great powers is a fact. Rhetoric aside, there has been no alliance or alignment among great powers to counter U.S. capabilities. Instead, states have sporadically engaged in what might be called “prestige balancing,” the technique of using relatively low cost gestures to distance oneself politically from Washington. The most widely touted “strategic alignment” against the United States - that between Moscow and Beijing - boils down to a rhetorical shield for Russian arms sales to China. It entails no costly commitment or policy coordination against Washington that might risk a genuine confrontation.<sup>14</sup> At most, the

---

<sup>14</sup> See Gilbert Rozman, Mikhail G. Nosov, and Koji Watanabe, eds., Russia and East Asia: The 21st Century Security Environment. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1999; Alastair Iain Johnston, “Realism(s) and Chinese Security in the Post-Cold War Period,” in Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War, Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno eds., (New York: Columbia

Sino-Russian partnership occasionally succeeds in frustrating U.S. policy initiatives when the expected costs of doing so remain conveniently low. At the same time, both Beijing and Moscow periodically demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with the Americans on economic and strategic matters.

Translating prestige balancing into the real thing involves paying real economic and political costs, which no great power has shown any willingness to do. Since 1995 military spending by the major powers has remained at historical levels, generally declining as a share of economic output. By any reasonable benchmark, the current international system is one in which both external and internal balancing among great powers is at a historical low.

Moreover, perceptions are consistent with the description of unipolarity I outlined above. To be sure, there is a great deal of rhetoric emanating from all over the world that suggests disagreement with the analysis I have sketched here.<sup>15</sup> But in interpreting this language it is crucial to make three distinctions that are very often glossed over. First is the distinction between the *relations* of states and their *capabilities*. Relations among states are always multilateral and thus appear “multipolar.” The idea of polarity is to *explain* patterns of relations by reference to power. Thus, polarity must be measured by states’ capabilities rather than their relations.<sup>16</sup> But policymakers and many policy analysts quite naturally focus on policy. When they speak of multipolarity, they refer to such matters as the fact that Russia, China and France have different policies toward Iraq and Iran, for example, than does the United States.

When Chirac and Jiang say they do not “accept the logic of a unipolar world,” they mean that they refuse to let the United States dictate all policies of importance to them. They are rejecting a unipolarity of relations, not denying the reality of the unipolar distribution of capabilities. It is critical to stress that the former does not flow from the latter. Indeed, the multipolarity of relationships Paris and Beijing

---

University Press, 1999); and J. L. Black, Russia Faces NATO Expansion: Bearing Gifts or Bearing Arms? New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> For a review, see Peter W. Rodman, Uneasy Giant: The Challenges to American Predominance (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Waltz makes this argument in Theory, chap. 7.

and Moscow advocate has little to do with my analysis of unipolarity; nor does it bear anything other than a rhetorical connection to a genuine policy of counterbalancing U.S. power. Rather, these policymakers and analysts are discussing or fostering coalitions on various international issues, some of which are directed against US policy. This *is* politics, to be sure, but it is *not* counterbalancing, geopolitical competition, or a struggle for global primacy. Indeed, much of the bickering over smaller matters is enabled by the fact that the major issues that threaten major-power wars are largely off the table. What used to be considered low politics has become high politics because the unipolar distribution has helped clear the *old* high politics - arms races, brinkmanship crises, and wars among great powers - off the international agenda. France, in particular, can engage in prestige balancing against Washington with even greater abandon than in the Cold War because the high stakes - that is, the Soviet challenge to the Eurasian balance - are absent.

The second crucial distinction is that between unipolarity and empire. For many analysts, the system is not unipolar because there are important regional dynamics that are independent of the United States. To capture this seeming contradiction, Samuel P. Huntington coined the ungainly term “uni-multipolarity.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, many regional dynamics are measurably less constrained by great-power politics than they were in the Cold War, and many regional powers have the means and the motive to defy U.S. policy. In other words, the current international structure is *looser* than Cold-War bipolarity, even though it is more unequal. The gap between the most powerful state and the rest is much larger now than under bipolarity, but the system is less constraining on many important regions. This comparative looseness does not mean the system is not unipolar. On the contrary, it is a result of the fact that unipolarity limits the very intense great-power contradictions that tend to force lesser powers to choose sides.

The final crucial distinction that is often missed in assessing public statements about unipolarity is that between trends and existing conditions. Most commentators accept that unipolarity exists, but do not expect it to last long. Thus, many

---

<sup>17</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (March/April 1999).

assume that though unipolar, the international system is “incipiently multipolar.”<sup>18</sup> According to Richard Haass, “as power diffuses around the world, America’s position relative to others will inevitably erode.”<sup>19</sup> Charles Kupchan agrees, seeing “a global landscape in which power and influence are more equally distributed” as a “near term” prospect that will bring “the return of competitive balancing” among great powers.<sup>20</sup> The same goes for many policymakers, who see the creation of a multipolar world as a project for the near term (though, as noted, no one is willing to devote major resources to the project). Expectations are harder to test than perceptions of existing conditions, and thus are always more volatile. Expectations reflect wishes and hopes as well as different theories about how the world works. Whether we should expect a quick return to multipolarity is a question I address below.

Overall, the experience from Kosovo through 9/11 and the Afghan campaign suggests that even prestige and policy balancing by major powers is quite limited. Before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, many analysts argued that this U.S. grand strategy of global engagement would precipitate counterbalancing by other major powers. Given that the initial American response to the attack was an intensified engagement policy that entailed even greater involvement in the security affairs of Eurasia and heightened demands on the policies of other states, counterbalancing would appear to be an even greater concern.

Yet the global response to the U.S. counter-terrorism campaign was consistent with this analysis. Most dramatically, Russian President Vladimir Putin substantially reoriented his country toward the West, sought a new accommodation with NATO, cooperated closely with the United States, and facilitated American access to Central Asia. China carefully calibrated its policy in a direction favourable to Washington, and India continued its rapprochement with the United States despite

---

<sup>18</sup> The phrase is Glen Snyder’s, *Alliance Politics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997): p.18.

<sup>19</sup> Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall 1998), p. 20.

American support for Pakistan. If Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organisation hoped to exploit rifts among the great powers, as might have been possible in a multipolar world, they hoped in vain. If they expected to spark a clash between the United States and Islamic countries, their expectation was unfounded, for no major Islamic state wishes to be the next Soviet Union or Iraq - that is, to invite the focused enmity of the United States.

For Europe, the whole post-9/11 experience has rammed home the lessons of unipolarity's first decade. It closed ranks with the United States after September 11, but real policy coordination took place on a government-to-government basis. And it wasn't just the Americans choosing to work with states rather than the EU; London, Paris and Berlin eagerly offered cooperation as states, rather than as members of the EU. Moreover, on the larger global scene, Putin's decision to bandwagon with the U.S. dealt a major blow to many Europeans' efforts to balance the United States politically, especially on ABM, but prospectively also on Iraq.

### **Will the Material Setting Endure?**

The underlying power configuration favours a prolongation of the historic U.S.-European partnership, complete with its historical chafe, resentment and discord. But how stable is the underlying power configuration? It is impossible to predict the rise and fall of great powers with any precision, but the preponderance of evidence suggests that those who expect the re-emergence of multipolarity to occur in the next decade are underestimating the stability of unipolarity. For one thing, the United States is not making it easy to catch up. For example, each year it spends 80% as much on defence research and development as all the other major powers combined. But there are several larger arguments - all grounded in long-term trends and well-understood relationships - for the durability of the current essential power configuration.

First, the gap separating the United States is very large, so closing it will take a long time. Any countervailing change will have to be strong and sustained to produce a polarity shift.

Second, the United States is both big and rich, while all other states are either one or the other. It

will take at least a generation for today's poor big countries (China, India, Russia) to become rich. Given declining birth rates, the other rich countries (Germany, France, UK, Italy, Japan) cannot get big.

Third, rates of economic growth tend to converge as states approach U.S. levels of per capita GDP. Based on what we know of long-term growth patterns, it is unlikely that the more wealthy countries of Europe and Asia will be able to grow substantially faster than the United States over prolonged periods as they approach the U.S. level of per capita wealth.

Fourth, the end of the Cold War and other recent events suggest that it has become harder now than it was in the past for relatively backward or autarkic states to compete with the wealthiest states in military technology.<sup>21</sup> Based on what we now know of the prerequisites for producing the most modern military capabilities, poor states whose elites aspire to larger international roles will have a much harder time quickly ramping up military capabilities in order to stake a claim on the international system. Today's potentially dissatisfied states, such as China and Russia, find that they must integrate into the global economy in order to compete technologically, but, in so doing, they reduce their autonomy.

Fifth, the geography of today's unipolar structure means that any effort by one major power to ramp up its military capability would only nudge its neighbours closer to Washington and thereby reinforce unipolarity.

Thus, taken individually, European states will in all likelihood never be capable of assuming a polar position. Only by pooling strategic resources will Europe gather the strength necessary to help resurrect a multipolar world. That will require increased military spending, extraordinarily difficult military restructuring in fifteen countries, and, most important and difficult, the creation of a unified defence industry, centralized staffing, command, and strategic decision making capabilities. Creating such state-like capabilities goes to the heart of state sovereignty and inevitably is, at best, a grindingly slow and contradictory process. Many European states have been very reluctant to relinquish sovereign power in the area of defence

---

<sup>21</sup> For more, see Brooks and Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War."



and foreign policy. It is hard to square such concerns with the occasionally stated goal of counterbalancing U.S. power. While they do not rule out the possibility of major progress along these lines, most students of European politics do not expect state-like foreign and defence capabilities to emerge any time soon. Absent some major external shock (such as a precipitous U.S. withdrawal), a European 'pole' is a project for a generation.

Meanwhile, over here the whole argument that the U.S. would disengage either from Europe or more widely appears weaker than ever, many analysts accept that under unipolarity engagement is the preferred strategy for both the United States and Europe but assume that it is simply unsustainable in American domestic politics.<sup>22</sup> The evidence for this assumption may not be as strong as the elite thinks. Polls show Americans to be far more cosmopolitan and internationalist than the elite realises.<sup>23</sup> A strategy of disengagement is not on the political radar screen. In the 2000 election, no serious candidate for president perceived any political advantage in advocating such a policy. The major effort to create an isolationist political party sputtered precisely because political entrepreneurs in the party saw that isolationism was a dead end.

Hence the most persuasive argument was that Washington would disengage from Europe as part of a global swing toward Asia, especially China. But China hype is on the wane. The whole Pentagon contingent that was pushing China as the object for a new American grand strategy has retreated or reoriented towards the war on terror.

## Conclusion

True multipolarity is not on the horizon. The most likely scenario is a steady, marginal increase in the EU's capability to act on the world scene as a single economic actor coupled with an even slower deepening of ESDP. To be

sure, the prospects for ESDP remain uncertain. From this side of the Atlantic, however, the medium-term trajectory looks flat. Euroskepticism appears to be no longer a British phenomenon; rather it is pan-European. Given the strong Atlanticist orientation of prospective new members, as well as the institution building challenges it entails, enlargement will slow any prospective deepening of ESDP. The French project for Europe as a counterweight to the U.S. seems dead. The right is on the rise across Europe.

If this projection turns out to be accurate, then the prognosis for U.S.-EU relations is status quo plus. That is, relations will resemble the post-Cold War norm, with a marginal increase in status competition. This analysis is based on the assumption that once shorn of the security dimension, status politics take a back seat to welfare. This assumption appears to be borne out by the experience of unipolarity's first decade.

So, to the extent that structures of power shape and shove states in particular directions, one can be relatively optimistic about the future of transatlantic relations under unipolarity. To be sure, the analysis developed here is unlikely to be persuasive to people who deal with the details of policy on a daily basis. From that perspective, American power seems terribly limited. After all, the United States is routinely defied by the likes of Iraq, Libya and Cuba. Its interventions in Haiti and Somalia backfired. Its Balkans policy is a tarnished and qualified success at best. And notwithstanding its dominance of the traditional indices of state power, the United States proved unable to prevent suicidal terrorists armed with box cutters from murdering over 4,000 citizens on its territory. Moreover, from a policy perspective, the Euro-American partnership seemed deeply troubled, if not in crisis, before the attacks. And not long after 11 September, many analysis and journalists continue to highlight the strains in the alliance.

What accounts for this contradiction between the sanguine prognosis offered here and the rising chorus of concern among policy makers and policy analysts? From a historical and theoretical perspective, two reasons are evident. First is the standard gap that divides the worlds of policy and scholarship. Policy makers and experts must focus on details; the trees are their business, not the forest. Scholars frequently deal in long-term

---

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Charles A. Kupchan, "Life After Pax Americana," *World Policy Journal*, (Fall 1999), pp. 20-27; and Fareed Zakaria, "The New American Consensus: Our Hollow Hegemony," *New York Times Magazine*, November 1, 1998, p. 40+.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999).

processes over which policy has little control. Policy advocates who are deeply familiar with a given area are likely to believe that changes are necessary. To attract the attention of distracted politicians, however, policy advocates often face incentives to overemphasize the elements of instability in any area. Something of this nature might be occurring presently regarding transatlantic relations. Changes *are* clearly necessary to manage the U.S.-European relationship; and they won't occur if policymakers believe that "under unipolarity everything is taken care of." Thus, theoretically inclined scholars may make terrible policymakers. But policy advocates and experts may face professional disincentives to see underlying and structural causes of continuity in important international relationships.

There is a second and arguably more important cause of the gap between current policy "discourse of instability" and the analysis presented here. Policy makers, analysts and commentators have dramatically raised the standards by which they measure American power and the state of the U.S.-European relationship. Under bi- or multipolarity, the prolonged absence of a major power war was considered a historical achievement. In those systems, even the temporary abeyance of geopolitical competition among great powers was a striking puzzle that scholars laboured long to try to explain. Under unipolarity, scholars appear to take comparatively amicable relations among all the great powers for granted, and suddenly the *sine qua non* of polar status is the ability to impose solutions to intractable regional conflicts or civil wars within distant states of little or no strategic importance. This is a demanding standard, to say the least.

Exactly the same shifting of the goal posts occurs in discussions of transatlantic relations. In the Cold War, allies squabbled even when faced with very severe security threats. Now any sign of discord is taken as potentially fatal even when it is largely symbolic. More importantly, politicians and diplomats in Europe and the United States are freer to argue over smaller matters because the fundamentals are assured. The "low" politics of trade, environment, the death penalty in the United States, and the like assume a new salience because the high politics of state security are taken care of. The freedom to squabble over each other's domestic arrangements makes the Euro-American relationship seem more contentious than it really is.