

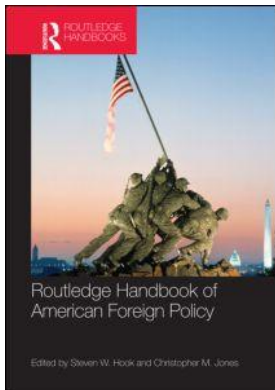
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 03 Oct 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy**

Steven W. Hook, Christopher M. Jones

### **The Balance of Power**

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203878637.ch31>

R. William Ayres

**Published online on: 31 Aug 2011**

**How to cite :-** R. William Ayres. 31 Aug 2011, *The Balance of Power from:* Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy Routledge

Accessed on: 03 Oct 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203878637.ch31>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

---

# 31

## The Balance of Power

R. William Ayres

---

Balance of power is one of the most enduring concepts in international relations theory. Books have been penned on the subject, articles written, debates held. Scholars foundational to the field have argued that the balance of power is *the* fundamental dynamic of global affairs (Morgenthau 1985). Some have argued for the superiority of a particular balance of power over others (Waltz 1979). Still others have called into question whether there really is a balance of power at all, or whether the concept has any power to help understand world affairs (Nogee 1975; Rosecrance 2003). Despite the ongoing debates about scope conditions and definitions, there is widespread acceptance of the notion that the balance of power in the international system has significant effects on a state's foreign policy.

The impact of the balance of power on American foreign policy has been significant, but in many ways particularly American. The balance of power in the international system has not determined American foreign policy choices absolutely, but shifts in the balance have always created new opportunities and new challenges for American foreign policy makers. At the same time, because of America's role in the world system since World War II, the choices of U.S. policy makers have had a significant impact on the nature of the international system. This chapter aims to outline that interaction, focusing on the major debates about balances of power and the international system, and how those debates match up or contrast with American foreign policy and its impact on the world.

Classically, balance-of-power arguments have focused on the *structure* of the international system. In its most basic form, this refers to three things: the essential rules of international relations, the nature of the units that make up the system, and the distribution of capabilities among those units (Waltz 1979). For our purposes (and for most foreign policy and international relations literature of the last fifty years), the first two are constants. The basic units of the system are sovereign states, and the fundamental rule of the international system is formal anarchy among those states (Morgenthau 1985). Arguments about the balance of power and the structure of the international system therefore focus largely on the third element: the distribution of power among the states.

With some interesting variations, the debate over the impact of the balance of power has tended to revolve around three categories of polarity, each focused on the number of great powers or "poles" in the system at any given time. *Multipolar* systems are those in which there are at least three great powers, and usually more. *Bipolar* systems are those defined by two great powers. And *unipolar* or *hegemonic* systems are those in which one state has a preponderance

of power in the system. Theoretical debates among scholars have tended to focus on which of these types is most or least likely to produce major wars, while empirical debates have concentrated on how system polarity is measured and when transitions are taking place.

Conveniently for the study of American foreign policy, the nation's experience over the last 100 years in foreign affairs has roughly mirrored these three categories. Up through World War II, the world was multipolar, with the major centers of power in Europe (as well as rising powers in America and Japan). From the end of World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world was widely seen as bipolar, although as we will see below there were significant debates over whether that was the case, and if so when it started changing. Finally, the post-Cold War era is seen as a period of unipolarity. Current debates often focus on whether unipolarity will remain or give way to a new bi- or multipolar world. This chapter is organized around these three periods, contrasting the theoretical debates about the effects of the balance of power with American foreign policy choices and the awareness of U.S. decision makers of the larger system within which they made those choices.

In doing so, it is important to try to keep separate the theoretical concept of the balance of power and its supposed systemic effects from the use of the balance of power as a foreign policy justification. Waltz famously argued that his theory of international politics was *not* a theory of foreign policy (Waltz 1979: 121–122), while Morgenthau argued that the complexities involved in predicting foreign policy made broader systemic-level theory impossible (Morgenthau, 1970: 253–258). Morgenthau also pointed out the tendency of states to use the balance of power as an ideology—a justification for whatever they want to do at the time, particularly if the state aims to preserve the status quo (Morgenthau, 1985: 231–232). The term “balance of power” applies in both arenas, so we must carefully keep in mind when we are considering systemic effects and placing them in the context of foreign policy decision making.

## U.S. Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World

Classical realism focused on the interplay of great powers early in the life of the Westphalian interstate system. While there were periods of relative preponderance and varying numbers of great powers, by and large the international system from 1648 onwards was a multipolar one dominated by European states. Classical realists focused on the tendency of such systems to produce shifting alliances and various attempts to gain an upper hand, or to balance against a state that threatened to do so. The balance of power systems described by Morgenthau and others were not particularly stable, in that war always remained a possibility. But multipolarity was viewed as preferable to the alternative of bipolarity, which “made the preservation of world peace extremely difficult” (Morgenthau 1985: 26).

Multipolar politics, classical realists argued, is a function of the basic tendencies of states to pursue power in their own self-interest, to seek to ensure their survival against actual or potential adversaries, and to do so in the absence of significant restraints in terms of rules or laws.<sup>1</sup> Because peace is likeliest in situations where power is relatively evenly matched—where no actor can be reasonably sure of gaining an advantage by launching a war—it was thought that multipolarity provided the best opportunities for such conditions. In a multipolar system, especially one with five or more actors, the great powers could align with each other as the situation dictated. For this to work, alliances had to remain flexible, so that states could “switch sides” in response to changing distributions among them. The most successful such system was held to be the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century, in which Great Britain played the role of “grand balancer,” lending its weight to one side or another as the need arose. Such a system had produced over four decades of relative peace among the great powers of the day, a feat not replicated until the Cold War a century later (Gaddis 1986).

Classical realism thus equates stability and the lack of war, not with the polarity of the system itself (although that is a contributing or enabling factor) but with the existence of states which actively pursue a balance-of-power *policy*—that is, making it a central foreign policy goal to adjust alliances and political and military postures to maintain a roughly even balance. This is not a role that the United States ever actively pursued, although it was forced to make its own foreign policy decisions for its first 150 years in the context of a multipolar world.

The United States was founded on the periphery of the empire of one of the European great powers. In advancing the interests of a relatively minor power in a world of great powers bent on colonial expansion, early American foreign policy aimed primarily to put as much distance between itself and European great power conflicts as it could. President George Washington's (1796) farewell address calling for no "entangling alliances" remained a rallying cry for decades. The logic was very explicit regarding the balance of power of the day: "an attachment of a small or weak toward a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be a satellite of the latter." In general, small states will often try to stay away from the balancing games of great powers if they can, preferring to focus their policies on local sub-systems where their own capabilities are meaningful (Morgenthau 1985: 220–221).

American foreign policy in the nineteenth century, from the Monroe Doctrine to the Mexican-American War to the foreign policy maneuvering surrounding the Civil War, thus focused almost exclusively on the Western Hemisphere, and largely on the North American continent where American power was preponderant. Even the War of 1812 with Britain was fought almost entirely on North American soil and involved, from the American perspective, a move against Britain's Canadian possessions. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Industrial Revolution (which had substantially shaken up the European power balance) had brought the United States to the brink of great-power status itself. The system didn't change, but America's place in it did—and so, too, did American foreign policy.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American foreign policy responded to its ascendant great-power status in two very different ways. First, it did precisely what classical realism would predict: it joined in the great-power game of the day, which was overseas empire. It went to war against one of the dying European great powers of the previous century, Spain, and acquired far-flung possessions from Cuba (which was already well within the American sphere of interest) to the Philippines (which was not). Turn of the century American foreign policy thus looked very much like that of the other great powers of the day, especially those (like Germany) which had only recently acquired great power status: a scramble to catch up and get in on the game of overseas empire in which Britain, France, Spain and others had engaged for so long.

In the early part of the twentieth century, America then took the next logical step towards joining the European balance of power system: it involved itself in a major land war on the European continent among the great powers. In the aftermath of that war, however, U.S. foreign policy under Woodrow Wilson sought not to play the balance-of-power game but to upend it by imposing an entirely new set of rules on the international system. This was a very new state of affairs: a great power in a multipolar system (and by no means obviously the most powerful one of the day) attempting to do what hegemonic powers usually do, which is institute a new set of rules more to its liking (Gilpin 1981). Wilson's preferred rules—his Fourteen Points and the provisions he negotiated into the Charter of the League of Nations—rested entirely on the *repudiation* of balance-of-power-politics and attempted to replace the influence of power with the rule of law on an international scale.

Wilson's argument for getting involved in the war in the first place was based on his rejection of the balance of power. He argued that in going to war, "[o]ur motive will not

be ... the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right.... [T]he world must be made safe for democracy” (Wilson 1917). After the war, the crowning victory of Wilson’s idealism was, of course, the League of Nations based on Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Those arguments, laid out in a January 1918 speech before World War I had ended, were in large part an explicit rejection of balance-of-power politics. The various territorial demands that Wilson made—for the restoration of Belgium, the evacuation of Alsace–Lorraine, the readjustment of Italian borders, and so on—were presented solely because these were things Wilson judged to be “right,” not because they were in accordance with the existing or foreseeable balance of power. At the end of his speech, Wilson made the argument explicitly: the purpose of his proposed League was to be to advance “the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, *whether they be strong or weak*” (Wilson 1918, emphasis added). He later underscored this point in criticizing the “old system” of power politics, in which “the *strong had all the rights* and need pay no attention to the rights of the weak; that if a great powerful nation saw what it wanted, it had the right to go and take it; that the weak nations could cry out and cry out as they pleased and there would be no harkening ear anywhere to their rights” (Wilson 1919, emphasis added).

Under Wilson, it was not the case that foreign policy was ignorant of the balance of power. Wilson, himself a scholar of international affairs, understood the role that the balance of power had historically played in the world. But Wilson was interested in American power only insofar as it could be used to fundamentally rewrite the rules of international affairs, to overturn outcomes based on power balances and replace them with outcomes based on justice and rights. In this sense, American foreign policy under the multipolar system of the early twentieth century presented a rarity: a great power that, rather than using the balance of power as a justifying ideology wanted to reject it altogether, not only for itself but for the entire system. A great many scholars have painted the history of American foreign policy in precisely these “exceptionalist” terms (e.g., Smith 1994; Brands 1998; Hook and Spanier 2010).

Whatever their interaction with the balance of power, or their ability to influence events in the immediate post-war period, Wilson’s ideas had a lasting impact on U.S. foreign policy. His ideals of collective security eventually became enshrined in the United Nations Charter, and his notion of the self-determination of national groups remains a strong norm in international affairs into the twenty-first century. His rhetoric retains a strong pull in American foreign policy, such that leaders and politicians contradict it at their domestic political peril. The lasting legacy of the Wilson period, therefore, has been to introduce a significant thread of anti-balance of power thinking into U.S. foreign policy—a thread that continues to make itself felt through the twentieth century and into the current era.

The interaction between American foreign policy and the nineteenth and early twentieth century multipolar balance of power was thus not definitive for either, but it did have effects that have lasted through systemic changes over the last 100 years. American involvement in the European balance system was certainly not overwhelming—that system collapsed in crisis and war two decades after Wilson introduced his Fourteen Points, and while his cherished League of Nations did not prevent the interwar crisis, it likely didn’t contribute much to it either. The effects on the United States of becoming a great power under a multipolar system are more complex. Coming out of this period, the United States inherited most of the characteristics of modern great powers, including a powerful military and global possessions and interests—just as classical realists would predict. The nation had also staked out a set of principles that, for better or worse, would embed themselves in American foreign policy through the next major systemic change.

## Bipolarity and the Cold War

The modern development of classical realism coincided with the beginning of the post-World War II period and the advent of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union as *the* defining feature of the international system. As such, there was a touch of nostalgia in the early writings of Morgenthau and other classical realists as well as significant trepidation about the new world in which most of the great powers of the last few hundred years had been replaced by two relatively new—but extremely powerful and antagonistic—upstarts. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was significant concern—among scholars no less than policy makers—that an even more catastrophic World War III would follow closely on the heels of the second world war.

As the Cold War continued into its third decade, and as scholarship in international affairs began to mature and seek new explanations for what was by the 1970s an apparently stable situation, a new perspective rose in challenge to the earlier belief that multipolar systems were the most stable systems in an unstable world. The school of thought called structural realism or neorealism made a very different argument—that *bipolarity*, systems defined by only two great powers, were inherently more stable than multipolar ones.

The chief proponent of this view was Kenneth Waltz. In his highly influential *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz (1979) argued that bipolar systems are more stable—less likely to produce war among great powers—than multipolar ones. Waltz (1979: 165, 168) pointed out that “[w]ith more than two states, the politics of power turn on the diplomacy by which alliances are made, maintained, and disrupted.... Flexibility of alignment narrows one’s choice of policies.” In bipolar systems, he observed, the two leading powers have very little interdependence—each relies primarily on itself, and therefore has more control over its own condition. By contrast, “In multipolar systems there are too many powers to permit any of them to draw clear and fixed lines between allies and adversaries and too few to keep the effects of defection low.”

Waltz’s theory of bipolarity promised to explain one of the most vexing questions of international scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s: why the Soviet Union and the United States had managed to avoid war with each other, despite apparent hostility, a long-running arms race, and a host of crises from Europe to the Middle East to Asia. This was precisely the conclusion reached by John Lewis Gaddis (1986, 1987), who argued that the bipolar structure of the world was the leading cause of what he termed “the long peace” among great powers from 1945 into the 1980s. This conclusion was widely shared throughout the late Cold War, during which Waltz’s “neorealism” largely eclipsed classical realism as an explanation of interstate behavior and outcomes.

The end of World War II did indeed rearrange the balance of power to a greater degree than any event in the previous few centuries. Nearly all of the previous great powers—Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan—lost their top-tier status. In their place were two relative newcomers, the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which had been minor powers 100 years earlier and both of which had been relatively late to industrialize. This thrust the United States into a new position twice over. While it had been a significant player on the world stage for some fifty years, it had never been a bloc leader in the sense of having a preeminent voice. No one in the late 1940s, inside the United States or elsewhere, fully understood the ramifications of a genuinely bipolar world.

The impact of this situation on American foreign policy was much as Waltz predicted: the United States began to pay much more attention to balance-of-power concerns than it had previously. Even before the war was over, American leaders could see the potential for a major shift in the balance of power. As early as 1942, in the midst of the war, General George Marshall (emphasis added) articulated this goal: “We are determined that before the sun sets

on this terrible struggle, our flag will be recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on the one hand and of *overwhelming force on the other*.”<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of World War II, U.S. foreign policy quickly found itself organized around the new realities of power. Even in public discourse, American leaders began to speak in classic balance-of-power-terms. In arguing for funds in support of Greece and Turkey (and in outlining the logic that became the Truman Doctrine), Truman argued that “[t]he world is not static, and the *status quo* is not sacred. But we cannot allow changes in the *status quo* in violation of the Charter of the United Nations by ... coercion” (Truman 1947). Here was a classical realist response: using the balance of power as a justification for what the United States wanted to do in post-war foreign policy.

If balance-of-power language was finding its way into American leaders’ speeches in public, it was in full force inside the policy-making apparatus. The defining policy document of the early Cold War period, National Security Council (NSC)-68 (1950), served as a guide for future U.S. foreign policy decisions. The internal memorandum began with a blunt statement of this reality: “[d]uring the span of one generation, the international distribution of power has been fundamentally altered” (NSC-68 1950). It went on to explain the precise nature of this shift:

Two complex sets of factors basically altered this historical distribution of power. First, the defeat of Germany and Japan and the decline of the British and French Empires have interacted with the development of the United States and the Soviet Union in such a way that power has increasingly gravitated to these two centers. Second, the Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world. Conflict has, therefore, become endemic ... (NSC-68: 1)

Here was a recognition of Waltz’s bipolarity—a new situation that would require new responses. The policy conclusion drawn by NSC-68 applied directly to the Soviet Union, which would have to be “contained” in order to block further expansion of Soviet power and allow time for the contradictions within the Soviet System to reveal themselves. For the first time in its history, the balance of power itself became a fundamental object of American foreign policy. Preponderance had become the official goal of U.S. foreign policy, exactly as Waltz predicted that it must under bipolarity. This goal drove a host of new foreign policy initiatives, including a massive conventional and nuclear arms buildup, involvement in far-flung corners of the world from the Taiwan Straits to the Middle East to Southeast Asia, and a host of new alliance agreements around the world. Far from Washington’s warnings about “entangling alliances,” the United States created multiple alliances to encircle the Soviet Union with “like-minded nations.” These eventually pulled the United States into military standoffs and crises in Berlin, with China, the Middle East, and ultimately into a long and costly war in Southeast Asia. This, too, was in accord with Waltz’s theory of bipolarity which specified that “[i]n a bipolar world there are no peripheries” (Waltz 1979: 171).

Interestingly, these efforts at supremacy existed alongside the legacy of Wilson’s anti-balance of power idealism: the United Nations (UN). Fashioned as a collective security organization along the lines of Article X of the League of Nations Charter, the UN enshrined two of Wilson’s most important principles: the sovereign equality of all nations, large or small, and the right of all to be protected from aggression, regardless of their place in the global pecking order. These ideals rejected the balance of power as the ordering principle of international affairs, and potentially conflicted with the American Cold War strategy of gaining and maintaining global power supremacy. Indeed, hegemony is antithetical to collective security, since the existence of a hegemon—a state with a preponderance of the world’s power—precludes collective action against it, even by the rest of the world together. The American answer to this dilemma was to cast the bipolar contest between the United States and the Soviet Union as one between a

defensive power and an aggressive one—that is, to frame the Cold War as a classic aggressor-defender conflict (Jervis 1976). This allowed American policy makers to tap into the language of “aggression” enshrined in the UN Charter from Wilsonian principles and square it with the foreign policy goal of maintaining a preponderance of power.

## The Unipolar Era

Just as Waltz was codifying what became the dominant explanation for the relative stability of the Cold War, others were challenging that explanation on both theoretical and empirical grounds. With the rise of China as a major player, the New International Economic Order movement in the UN, the loss of Vietnam by the United States, and a host of other events in the 1970s, scholars in the 1980s began to question whether the world really was bipolar anymore or not. Some began to explore whether stability could in fact take place even under conditions of multipolarity (Niou and Ordeshook 1986; Goldstein and Freeman 1990). Some (e.g., Keohane 1984) wondered whether the advent of international institutions had fundamentally done away with the traditional impact of the balance of power entirely. And most interestingly, some (e.g., Gilpin 1981) argued that the Cold War had never really been truly bipolar at all—that it was a case of unipolarity, with a dominant hegemonic actor (the United States) and a challenger (the Soviet Union).<sup>3</sup>

Gilpin began his book with an explicit reference to the “dramatic events” of the 1970s and early 1980s that signaled “significant upheaval” in international affairs. This suggested that the stability promised by Waltzian bipolarity, which had held since World War II, might be coming to an end. This posed a real problem for theory, because structural realism was determinative based on the polarity of the system. So long as the system remained bipolar, it should remain stable. The events of the 1970s raised a significant question: “How and under what circumstances does change take place at the level of international relations?” (Gilpin 1981: 2). The answer had to come from beyond bipolarity.

For Gilpin, the answer required both a reformulation of theory and a reexamination of the Cold War and America’s role in it. Theoretically, he held to many of the same realist assumptions that Waltz and Morgenthau shared. But he focused his theory on the question of stability, rather than starting with polarity and reasoning outward. Thus for Gilpin (1981: 10), an “international system is stable ... if no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system.” This can happen under two circumstances: if the major powers are “satisfied with the existing territorial, political, and economic arrangements” of the day, or if no great power believes that attempting to change the system “would yield additional benefits commensurate with the anticipated costs” (Gilpin 1981: 11). Stability for Gilpin is thus a function of satisfaction or, more importantly, power *imbalances*. A bipolar system with two closely matched superpowers should yield *instability*, especially if one of them doesn’t like the existing arrangements of the world.

What would explain stability, therefore, was either a situation in which all great powers were satisfied with the state of the world (clearly not the case post-World War II), or a condition in which one of those great powers was sufficiently dominant to convince challengers that they had no chance to transform the system. Gilpin (1975) had previously argued that post-war stability was not the product of Waltzian bipolarity but a product of a *unipolar* United States dominating the world system. In short, Gilpin argued that the goal of supremacy laid out in NSC-68 wasn’t just an objective; America had actually succeeded.

Gilpin’s theory promised a better explanation for changes in the world system, as relative power shifted between the major powers. It also helped explain why so much of the structure of the post-war world seemed to have been created by the United States, or according to



American principles. Not only the United Nations, but the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—nearly all of the major international structures were organized along American lines, and frequently gave pride of place to American leaders and citizens. While much Cold War American foreign policy was focused on containing the Soviet Union, a great deal of effort and resources were poured into these institutions—partly as a part of the containment strategy, but partly also as a continuation of the Wilsonian vision of rewriting world affairs with classical liberal principles. Even theorists who argued that international institutions could take on a life of their own and override old balance-of-power considerations admitted that having a dominant hegemonic power is the likeliest scenario for setting up such institutions in the first place.

There was thus a significant empirical debate between those who thought the Cold War world a bipolar one and those who thought it a unipolar one, with the Soviet Union playing the role of a challenger to American hegemony. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s this debate became moot, and both scholars and policy makers were immediately confronted with a largely uncontested American hegemony. As the Cold War system was falling apart, some in the Waltzian bipolar camp assumed that the natural next step for the system would be a return to multipolarity, which they assumed would bring about greater instability (Mearsheimer 1990a, 1990b). When those conditions failed to materialize, most came to a consensus that America was the “sole remaining superpower.” The first question then was, for how long? The second question was, to what effect?

Some theorists continued to argue that the balance of power, as traditionally understood, no longer mattered, and that the United States was operating in a post-hegemonic environment in which “complex interdependence” meant that outcomes in world affairs were no longer determined by a single hierarchy of power (Keohane and Nye 2001). In the face of such arguments, American foreign policy in the 1990s continued much as it had before, focused on consolidating and extending its power. The 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, its involvement in the various civil wars of Yugoslavia, and the pressing expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe seemed to suggest a state more interested in the policy prescriptions of NSC-68 than one that wanted to concede to complex multilateralism. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, America’s national security strategy was still being written in the language of power—albeit with a recognition that U.S. power was largely unchallenged and should remain that way (Bush 2002).

The coming of the twenty-first century also brought the trauma of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to the United States. Among a host of scholars, this focused attention on the apparent American policy of ongoing power expansion, the relative unpopularity of its hegemony around the world, and the extent to which the rest of the world might or might not try to balance against it (see Betts 2002; Hertsgaard 2002; Ikenberry 2002; Jervis 2002; Lieber 2002; Nye 2002; Walt 2002; Skidmore 2005; and Kegley and Raymond 2007). The American foreign policy response was to launch two additional wars, one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq. Both were unified under the justification of a broad “Global War on Terror.”

In many ways, these wars were not unlike those undertaken during the Cold War period, when the United States engaged in armed conflicts for varying lengths of time across a broad range of geographically peripheral areas (Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and by proxy on nearly every continent). That America had, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, poured as many resources into these conventional wars as it had belied the arguments that the nature of power had changed, however often and from however many directions those arguments came (Nye 2004). And the justifications given continued to mix balance of power logic with Wilsonian idealism. Thus the Bush administration’s call for “a balance of power that favors human freedom” paralleled the Clinton administration’s efforts to expand and promote democratic “enlargement” (Clinton 1996) and even the earlier Bush administration’s goal of a “New World Order” (Bush 1991).

## Constancy Over Change in the Balance of Power

American foreign policy has had an interesting relationship with the balance of power over the past century. At particular times, American actions and rhetoric have been at odds with what balance of power theorists would predict a great power should do. At other times, those theories seem to have fit American actions very well. Indeed, a portion of the debate among both political scientists and historians over interpretations of American foreign policy in the twentieth century have turned on this very question of motives: was the United States driven, like so many other great powers, by the self-aggrandizing aims that balance-of-power theories describe? Or is America truly an “exceptional” nation, living up to its promise to overturn the old ways in favor of the revolutionary idea of putting principle ahead of power? Indeed, a great many American foreign policy textbooks turn on precisely this tension as an explanatory framework (e.g., McCormick 2009; Hook and Spanier 2010; Hook 2011).

Looking broadly over time, however, the outlines of American foreign policy have largely coincided with the demands and expectations of balance-of-power theories. In the context of a multipolar system, the United States kept itself out of the affairs of major states until it had amassed enough power to engage them. When it did so, it sought to use such leverage as it had—being on the winning side of a major great-power war—to rewrite the rules of the world system more to its liking. When it finally gained power supremacy some thirty years later, it did exactly that, and then spent its efforts in maintaining the system it had built against a determined challenger. When that challenger fell by the wayside and American power remained clearly unopposed, it announced to the world that its policy goals would be, in essence, to make the world over in its own image.

Realists of nearly all stripes have recognized that states seek to accumulate as much power as they can, and will use that power to reorder the world to their own preferences unless checked by opposing power. Up through the 1970s, most theorists believed that the balance of power meant that while great power states would try to achieve hegemony, none would ever succeed, because they would always be opposed sooner or later by countervailing power. A few recognized that hegemonic states *will* sometimes succeed, at least for a time, although others postulated that eventually they too would fall to a challenging state through a combination of overstretch and the costs of maintaining the systems they had built (see Snyder 2003).

The debate between structural realist Waltz and hegemonic stability theorists turned largely on which power balance currently prevailed. Both predicted relative stability among great powers and both expected the U.S. government to conduct its foreign policy largely as it has done—extend and maximize its power and use that power to structure the international system to its own liking and advantage. This debate becomes more significant as the United States enters its third decade of largely unquestioned system supremacy. American foreign policy has remained remarkably stable in the post-Cold War period, with successive administrations of Democrats and Republicans seeking to impose American power on troublesome parts of the world (particularly the Middle East), and trying to foster an expansion of states and governance systems amenable to American interests and principles. Indeed, that policy has changed relatively little since the early days of the Cold War in the 1950s, suggesting that the differences between a bipolar world and a unipolar one are not very significant for American foreign policy.

But these debates may become very significant in the future. Should China rise in power enough to challenge the United States for control of the global balance of power, different theories come to very different conclusions. For structural realists like Waltz, a return to bipolarity would mean simply a return to stability, with the United States perhaps forced to recognize parts of the world as part of the Chinese “sphere of influence” much as it recognized a Soviet sphere during the Cold War. For hegemonic stability theorists, on the other hand,

the rise of a serious challenger would be prelude to a period of renewed instability, with very real potential for major clashes between the great powers. And should China's rise be accompanied by the rise of other significant centers of power not naturally aligned with America's interests (India, Latin America, even perhaps Europe), the result could be a new multipolarity—reigniting the old bipolar–multipolar debate and raising the importance of the balance of power (as opposed to the preponderance of power) as an active policy goal for American foreign policy.

Balance of power theory leads us to expect American foreign policy to continue for the foreseeable future to try to maintain its position of systemic preponderance. Whether the United States will succeed or not—and how effective its attempts will be—are questions that are hotly contested among advocates of different theories regarding international order. It seems likely that a period of significant challenge to American preponderance is upon us and that the U.S. government's responses to this challenge will shed light on the predictive capacities of these theories. Despite their differences, however, there is widespread agreement that a major shift in the international system—one that includes a significant and protracted decline of American preponderance—would almost certainly produce a radically new American foreign policy in its wake.

## Notes

- 1 Morgenthau (1985: 233–240) argued that “moral consensus” could impose significant restraints on the foreign policy of great powers, even if not in exactly the same way as legal systems would. But he saw the shift away from a European-centric system to one with poles in very different parts of the world as heralding the weakening of this force, and therefore as the prelude to a more dangerous kind of anarchy, whatever the number of great powers.
- 2 This quote is inscribed in marble on the recently created World War II monument in Washington, D.C., demonstrating that more than half a century after the war American policy elites recognize the tremendous significance of Marshall's words.
- 3 Others suggested theoretical and empirical evidence that unipolarity would indeed be more stable than bipolarity (see Maoz 1984).

## Bibliography

- Betts, Richard. 2002. “The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy.” *Political Science Quarterly* 117(1): 19–36.
- Brands, H. W. 1998. *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bush, George H. W. 1991. “March 6 Speech to Congress.” <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3430>.
- Bush, George W. 2002. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office.
- Clinton, William J. 1996. *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. 1986. “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System.” *International Security* 10(4): 99–142.
- . 1987. *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gilpin, Robert. 1975. *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- . 1981. *War & Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldstein, Joshua, and John Freeman. 1990. *Three-Way Street: Strategic Reciprocity in World Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Hertsgaard, Mark. 2002. *The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World*. New York: Picador.
- Hook, Steven. 2011. *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Hook, Steven, and John Spanier. 2010. *American Foreign Policy since World War II*, 18th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Ikenberry, G. John. 2002. "America's Imperial Ambition." *Foreign Affairs* 81(5): 44–60.
- Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2002. "An Interim Assessment of September 11: What Has Changed and What Has Not?" *Political Science Quarterly* 117(1): 37–54.
- Kegley, Charles, and Gregory Raymond. 2007. *After Iraq: The Imperiled American Imperium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keohane, Robert. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Keohane, Robert, and Joseph Nye. 2001. *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed. New York: Longman.
- Krauthammer, Charles. 1990. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs* 70(1): 22–23.
- Lieber, Robert, ed. 2002. *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the Twenty-First Century*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Maoz, Zeev. 1984. "Peace By Empire? Conflict Outcomes and International Stability." *Journal of Peace Research* 21(3): 227–241.
- Marshall, George. 1942. "Statement, May 29." In *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, Vol 3, Larry I. Bland and Sharon Ritenour Stevens, eds. 1991. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- McCormick, James. 2009. *American Foreign Policy and Process*. Boston: Wadsworth.
- Mearsheimer, John. 1990a. "Back to the Future." *International Security* 15(4): 5–56.
- . 1990b. "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War." *Atlantic Monthly* 266: 35–50.
- Morgenthau, Hans. 1970. *Truth and Power*. New York: Praeger.
- . 1985. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- "National Security Council Paper No. 68. 1950." 2000. Reproduced in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: From 1914*, 5th ed., Dennis Merrill and Thomas Paterson, eds., 223–226. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Niou, Emerson, and Peter Ordeshook. 1986. "A Theory of the Balance of Power in International Systems." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30(4): 685–715.
- Nogee, Joseph. 1975. "Polarity: An Ambiguous Concept." *Orbis* 18 (Winter): 1193–1224.
- Nye, Joseph. 2002. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2004. "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy." *Political Science Quarterly* 119(2): 255–270.
- Rosecrance, Richard. 2003. "Is There a Balance of Power?" In *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, John Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., 154–165. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Skidmore, David. 2005. "Understanding the Unilateralist Turn in U.S. Foreign Policy." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1(2): 207–228.
- Smith, Tony. 1994. *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Snyder, Jack. 2003. "Imperial Temptations." *National Interest* 71 (Spring): 29–40.
- Truman, Harry. 1947. "March 12 Speech to the United States Congress." Reproduced in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: From 1914*, 5th ed., Dennis Merrill and Thomas Patterson, eds., 220–222. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Walt, Stephen. 2002. *Taming American Power: The Global Response to US Primacy*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Washington, George. 1796. "Farewell Address." In *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume I: To 1920*, 5th ed., Dennis Merrill and Thomas Patterson, eds., 74–77. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

- Wilson, Woodrow. 1913. "Speech on Latin American Policy." Reproduced in *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy, Volume I: To 1914*, 3rd ed. Thomas Patterson, ed., 505–506. Lexington, MA: DC Heath, 1989.
- . 1917. "April 2 Speech to the United States Congress." In *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume I: To 1920*, 5th ed., Dennis Merrill and Thomas Patterson, eds., 498–500. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . 1918. "January 8 Speech to the United States Congress." In *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume I: To 1920*, 5th ed., Dennis Merrill and Thomas Patterson, eds., 501–502. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . 1919. "September 17 Speech in San Francisco." In *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume I: To 1920*, 5th ed., Dennis Merrill and Thomas Patterson, eds., 504–508. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

