Rethinking American Grand Strategy
Hegemony or Balance of Power in the Twenty-First Century?
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In something of a belated reaction to the Cold War's end, a debate about America's future grand strategy is beginning to pick up steam. \(^1\) "Grand strategy" is an important-sounding term but the concept is simple: it is the process by which a state matches ends and means in the pursuit of security. In peacetime, grand strategy encompasses the following: defining the state's security interests; identifying the threats to those interests; and allocating military, diplomatic, and economic resources to defend the state's interests.

Thus the debate about U.S. grand strategy touches on the following questions: What regions of the world are important to U.S. security? Will new great powers rise to threaten American interests? What alliance commitments should the United States undertake? Does the United States have a stake in regional "stability" (and, if so, in which regions), and in economic interdependence? What military forces does the United States need to defend its interests? What is the proper balance between America's external commitments and its domestic needs?

In concrete terms, the debate over U.S. grand strategy is being played out almost daily with respect to NATO enlargement, China, U.S.-Japan relations, Bosnia, U.S. policy with respect to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trade policy, and the defense budget. These are not discrete issues. The function of a grand strategy is to weave them into a coherent framework.

It is an apparent paradox that analysts only now, eight years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, are beginning to reexamine American grand strategy. After all, since the end of the Second World War, U.S. strategy ostensibly was shaped by the need to contain the Soviet Union. The Cold War's imperatives imbued U.S. foreign policy with a clarity of purpose. With the Cold War's end, it was possible to rethink the first principles of U.S. foreign policy and, in a sense, to reconceptualize America's world role from scratch.

With the disappearance of its superpower rival, the United States, had it so chosen, could have reconsidered the various international obligations it had assumed during the Cold War. After all, the Soviet threat had been the impetus for the U.S. commitment to NATO, and for the American military presence in East Asia. Similarly, American interventions in the Third World had been animated by the geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union. Having prevailed in the Cold War, the United States could have withdrawn from its costly external commitments and focused its energies on addressing a too long neglected agenda of domestic economic and social issues. This did not happen, however.

Thus, American grand strategy today presents a seeming puzzle: the Soviet Union's collapse transformed the international system dramatically, but there has been no corresponding change in U.S. grand strategy. In terms of ambitions, interests, and alliances, the United States today is following the same grand strategy that it pursued from 1945 until 1991, the strategy of preponderance.\(^2\)
There is a very simple answer to this grand strategic puzzle: the Soviet Union was a much less central factor in shaping U.S. policy than is commonly supposed. In fact, after the Second World War American policymakers sought to create a U.S.-led world order based on preeminent U.S. political, military, and economic power, and on American values. That was—and remains—the essence of the strategy of preponderance.

To be sure, America’s post–Cold War grand strategy evolved in stages. During the Second World War, Washington’s postwar planning envisioned that preponderance would rest primarily on America’s overwhelming financial and economic power (expressed in the Bretton Woods international economic system) and on its political and diplomatic influence exercised through multilateral international organizations (especially the United Nations). Although America’s monopoly on atomic weapons was the strategic backdrop to U.S. foreign policy during the period from 1945 through 1948, military power was not the primary instrument of Washington’s policy. It was not until 1949–50 (which saw the Communist victory in China’s civil war, the Soviet Union’s detonation of its first atomic weapon, and the outbreak of the Korean War), that U.S. foreign policy became “militarized.”

Nevertheless, well before the bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union took shape, Washington was aiming for global preeminence. As the diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis observes, the United States “expected to lead the new world order” after 1945: “Few historians would deny, today, that the United States did expect to dominate the international scene after World War II, and that it did so well before the Soviet Union emerged as a clear and present antagonist.”

Even after the Cold War’s onset, American preeminence, not containment of the Soviet Union, was the driving force behind U.S. grand strategy. This was made clear in 1950, in the important National Security Council paper, NSC–68, which laid the intellectual groundwork for a policy of “militarized” and “globalized” containment. NSC–68 stated that: (1) the purpose of American power was “to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish” and (2) the strategy of preponderance was “a policy which [the United States] would probably pursue even if there were no Soviet Union.” The role of the Soviet Union in American grand strategy thus was somewhat curious. On the one hand, the Soviet threat was really quite incidental to U.S. strategy because America’s international ambitions existed independently of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Soviet Union was crucial to the attainment of U.S. strategic objectives because, both at home and abroad, the Cold War legitimized the extension of American power. Absent the Cold War, U.S. policymakers might have lacked an argument to justify America’s pursuit of global preponderance.

Given that America’s underlying postwar grand strategic aims were essentially unconnected to the superpower rivalry, it is not surprising that although the Soviet Union has disappeared, U.S. grand strategy remains unchanged. As was the case after the Second World War, today the strategy of preponderance seeks to maximize U.S. control over the international system by preventing the emergence of rival great powers in Europe and East Asia. As was the case after the Second World War, the strategy reflects the belief that economic interdependence is a vital U.S. security interest.

Today, as it was after the Second World War, the strategy is based on a three-step logic: interdependence is the paramount interest the strategy promotes; instability is the threat to interdependence; and extended deterrence is the means by which the strategy deals with this threat.

The Strategy of Preponderance
Preponderance—hegemony—is a realist strategy that aims to perpetuate America’s
post–Cold War geopolitical dominance. Advocates of preponderance believe that because international politics is highly competitive, the United States should attempt to maximize its relative power (that is, its power compared to that of other states). The strategy of preponderance rests on the assumption that states gain security not through a balance of power, but by creating a power imbalance in their favor (that is, by seeking hegemony). In a harsh, competitive world, security rests on “hard” power (military power and its economic underpinnings) and it is best to be Number One. For the strategy’s proponents, systemic stability (the absence of war, security competitions, and proliferation) is a function of U.S. military power.

The strategy of preponderance assumes that the United States has a vital interest in maintaining “stability” (a broad and nebulous term) in the international system. Underlying the strategy is fear of what might happen in a world no longer shaped by predominant U.S. power. Continued American hegemony is important because it is seen as the prerequisite for global stability. Instability is dangerous because it threatens the link that connects U.S. security to the strategic interests furthered by economic interdependence. Economic interdependence is an overriding U.S. interest because it is viewed as both a cause and a consequence of peace and stability in the international system. Indeed, the role of interdependence in the strategy of preponderance is circular: interdependence is a vital interest because it leads to peace and stability (and prosperity); however, peace and stability must exist in the international system before interdependence can take root.

Geographically, the strategy of preponderance identifies Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf as regions where the United States has vital security interests. Europe and East Asia are important because they are the regions from which new great powers could emerge and where future great power wars could occur; central to the functioning of an interdependent international economic system; and vital to U.S. prosperity. The Persian Gulf is important because of oil. Geographically, these three regions constitute America’s vital interests; however, its security interests are not confined to these regions. The United States must also be concerned with the “peripheries”—regions that are geographically removed from the core—because turmoil there could affect the core.

The Threats
The strategy of preponderance identifies two main threats to America’s entwined interests in stability and interdependence: the rise of new great powers, and the “spillover” of instability from strategically peripheral areas to regions of core strategic interest. The emergence of new great powers would have two deleterious consequences for the United States. First, new great powers could themselves become aspiring hegemons and, if successful, would seriously threaten U.S. security. Second, the emergence of new great powers historically has been a destabilizing geopolitical phenomenon. (Here one thinks of how the emergence of the United States, Germany, and Japan as great powers in the late nineteenth century contributed to the international turmoil that culminated in the First World War.)

Most of the U.S. foreign policy community accepts (if only reluctantly) that little can be done to prevent China’s emergence as a new great power because it lies outside the U.S. sphere of influence. (It should be noted, however, that there is a faction within the strategic community that believes the United States should derail China’s rise to great power status by fomenting internal unrest or, if that fails, by engaging in preventive war.) The United States may have to acquiesce in China’s rise to great power status. However, within Washington’s sphere of influence, the strategy of preponderance clearly aims to prevent the great
power emergence of Germany and Japan by embedding them firmly in U.S.-dominated security and economic frameworks. U.S. policymakers fear that a “renationalized” Japan and/or Germany could trigger an adverse geopolitical chain reaction.

Renationalization is a cumbersome term that foreign policy analysts use to describe the consequences of allowing Tokyo and Berlin to follow independent military and foreign policies; that is, policies no longer circumscribed by the exercise of American power. It is also a polite way—a code word—for American policymakers to avoid saying what really is on their minds: that they do not trust a resurgent Germany or Japan to behave responsibly.

The strategy of preponderance assumes that resurgent German and Japanese power would revive the security dilemma (dormant during the Cold War) for these two states’ respective neighbors in Europe and East Asia. The “security dilemma” explains an important dynamic of international politics. Because there is no central rule-making and enforcing authority in international politics, states are on their own when it comes to security. That is, each state is responsible for ensuring its own survival (which never can be taken for granted, as demonstrated by the fate of the Soviet Union, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Yugoslavia), and for defending its own interests (unless, of course, the United States undertakes to perform these tasks for it). However, the actions a state takes in self-defense are often perceived as threatening by its neighbors, which respond, in turn, by taking defensive measures of their own. The unintended consequence is an action/reaction spiral of political tensions and arms racing, that is, a “security competition.”

*Ameria* the “Pacifier”

After the Second World War, the United States ameliorated the security dilemma in Western Europe and East Asia by acting, as the foreign policy analyst Joseph Joffe put it, as those regions’ “pacifier.” NATO and the U.S.-Japan security treaty were the instruments of pacification. American pacification of East Asia and Europe created the conditions for economic interdependence to develop after 1945.

Although the Cold War is over, American policymakers still regard America’s pacification role in Europe and East Asia, which is based on the U.S. military presence in those regions, as vital. They fear that if the United States were to withdraw from Europe and East Asia and leave Germany and Japan to tend to their own security, regional security competitions would ensue. At best, the result would be an increase in political tension that would make international cooperation more difficult. At worst, renationalization could undermine regional stability and perhaps lead to war. Either way, the U.S. strategic interests furthered by economic interdependence would be imperiled.

In addition to the emergence of new great powers, turmoil in the peripheries (caused by failed states, or by internal conflict triggered by ethnic, religious, or national strife) could also jeopardize America’s interest in international stability. Turbulence in the periphery could prompt America’s allies to act independently to maintain order in the peripheries, again raising the specter of renationalization, and/or ripple back into the core and undercut prosperity by disrupting the economic links that bind the United States to Europe and East Asia.

American security guarantees to Europe and East Asia are the means by which the strategy of preponderance maintains a benign international political order conducive to interdependence. Through these security guarantees, the United States retains the primary responsibility for defending German and Japanese security interests both in the core and in the periphery. The United States thereby negates German and Japanese incentives to renationalize their foreign and secu-
rity policies and to become great powers. Thus, to implement the strategy of preponderance successfully, the United States, according to a 1992 Pentagon planning document, “must account sufficiently for the interests of the large industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political or economic order.”

As I have said, there is nothing new about this: continuity, not change, has been the hallmark of American grand strategy from 1945 to the present. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has attempted to prevent the emergence of new geopolitical rivals. In the 1940s, of course, it rather grudgingly accepted the reality of Soviet power. This was because a “preventive war,” which was not a serious policy option, was the only way the United States could have prevented the Soviet Union’s ascendance to superpower status. From 1945 on, however, the United States was—and was determined to remain—the sole great power in its own sphere of influence, the non-Soviet world.

As the historian Melvyn P. Leffler points out, U.S. policymakers believed that “neither an integrated Europe nor a united Germany nor an independent Japan must be permitted to emerge as a third force or a neutral bloc.” Indeed, at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, and again in extending a loan to London in 1945, the United States used its power to prevent Britain, Washington’s closest ally, from challenging America’s political and economic preeminence. It is easy to forget that during the Cold War, outside the non-Soviet world, the United States was the only superpower and it sought to keep things that way.

It could be argued, of course, that far from suppressing the reemergence of competing power centers within its sphere, the United States encouraged their emergence by facilitating the postwar economic recoveries of Western Europe and Japan. While helping its allies rebuild economically, how-
ever, the United States maintained tight political control over them.

Washington wanted Western Europe and Japan to be strong enough to help contain the Soviet Union; it did not want them to become strong enough to challenge American leadership. The United States was especially concerned with circumscribing the resurgent power of (West) Germany and Japan. Thus, as the German political scientist Wolfram Hanreider observed, America’s postwar strategy was double containment. That is, the United States sought simultaneously to contain the Soviet Union, and to contain Germany and Japan as well.

Although the postwar American empire was, as the diplomatic historian Geir Lundestad describes it, an “empire by invitation,” it was imperialism nonetheless, and the United States sought—and still seeks—to maintain its geopolitically privileged position vis-à-vis Western Europe and Japan.

Why bother with a critique of the strategy of preponderance? After all, the strategy does have both an intuitive, and a logical, plausibility. Power is important in international politics and the United States today has a lot of it. What could be better than being the only great power in a “unipolar” world?

The obvious answer (the answer given by advocates of preponderance) is “nothing could be better” and hence the United States should do everything it can to perpetuate its current geopolitical preeminence. In the abstract, it is difficult to quarrel with this line of thinking. In the real world, however, the strategy of preponderance may prove more harmful than beneficial to American interests. Whether the strategy is viable turns on the following questions: Can the United States prevent the rise of new great powers and thereby perpetuate indefinitely its hegemony? Does economic interdependence really lead to peace? Will the security guarantees upon which the strategy depends for its success
continue to be credible in the early twenty-first century?

**Hegemony and Unipolarity**
The history of modern international politics, which dates from about 1500, is strewn with the geopolitical wreckage of states that bid for hegemony: the Hapsburg Empire under Charles V, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, Victorian Britain, Germany under Hitler. The historical lesson is pretty clear: states that bid for hegemony invariably fail. The important question, of course, is why do they do so? The answer is no secret to those who study international politics: when one state becomes too powerful, it threatens other states' security.

As I have already suggested, states are ever-vigilant when it comes to maintaining their security because they want to survive as independent actors. Hence, when faced with a hegemonic challenger, they "balance" against it. That is, they build up their own military power and, if necessary, form alliances to create a geopolitical counterweight to the aspiring hegemon. Up to a point, it is a good thing for a state to be powerful. But it is not good for a state to become too powerful because then it frightens others. The fact that hegemons invariably are brought low demonstrates a paradoxical truth of international politics: when a state wins too much, it loses.

Given the poor track record of would-be hegemons, why do American international relations theorists and, more important, policymakers believe the United States can succeed where others have failed? There are three reasons. First, they argue that others do not balance against overwhelming power per se. Rather, they assert that states balance against those who act in a threatening manner, which the United States, as a "benign" hegemon, does not. Second, scholars and policymakers believe that because the United States takes into account other states' interests, far from balancing against the United States, others want to ally with it. Finally, it is claimed that America's "soft power"—the appeal of America's liberal democratic values and culture legitimates its exercise of hegemonic power.

The belief that liberal democracy legitimates American hegemony pervades the U.S. foreign policy community. One commentator contends that the world accepts America's preponderance because others "know that they have little to fear or distrust from a righteous state." A Bush administration Pentagon policy statement contends: "Our fundamental belief in democracy and human rights gives other nations confidence that our significant military power threatens no one's aspirations for peaceful democratic progress."3

**Unchecked Power**
The conviction that America can be a successful hegemon is self-serving—and wrong. No state can afford to base its security on trust in others' good intentions. Intentions are ephemeral; today's peaceful intentions may turn malevolent tomorrow. That is why states rest their strategies on the estimates of others' capabilities; that is, of their power (actual or latent). It is a would-be hegemon's formidable power capabilities that worry others.

To put it in other words, hegemons are threatening precisely because they have too much power. In a unipolar world, the United States is, by definition, hegemonic. It is the very fact of America's unchecked power that others perceive as threatening. And it is this imbalance of power in America's favor that they will seek to counter. The fear that aspiring hegemons instill in others explains in large measure why America's hope of thwarting the rise of new great powers is doomed to failure.

Historically, the existence of an aspiring hegemon has been a powerful catalyst to the emergence of new great powers. In this sense, the rise of new great powers can be properly viewed as a defensive reaction to the threat posed by hegemonic power. There
have been two prior “unipolar moments.” In 1660, France was acknowledged to be Europe’s only great power. By 1713, however, England and Austria, in direct response to France’s overweening power, had established themselves as great powers. Victorian Britain’s mid-nineteenth-century unipolar moment was ended by the rise to great power status of Germany, the United States, and Japan. For all of these states, fear of British power was a driving force in their respective emergence as great powers.

There is absolutely no compelling reason to believe that the United States today will be exempt from this process. Over the next 10 to 20 years, American preponderance surely will spur the emergence of Germany, Japan, and China (and Russia’s probable re-emergence) as great powers capable of acting as counterweights to American power. To return to the question posed earlier in this section: in the abstract it would be great for the United States to be a hegemon if it could do so successfully. The problem, however, is that hegemony has never been a winning strategy in modern international politics, and it is not likely to be so for the United States. The strategy of preponderance is flawed because its assumptions about continued American hegemony in a unipolar world are wrong.

Does Economic Interdependence Lead to Peace?
Economic interdependence has played a central role in U.S. grand strategy since 1945. (“Economic interdependence” means that because of free trade and investment, the economic well-being of each state is linked to its commercial and financial ties with the other states that make up the international economy.) In making this statement, I am not advancing a crude “revisionist” claim that American grand strategy is driven by the desire to capture overseas markets or sources of raw materials, or that U.S. strategy is shaped by the needs of a capitalist ruling elite. American strategy is far more sophisticated than that. American grand strategy rests on a set of assumptions about the relationship between a liberal international economic order (that is, economic openness based on multilateral free trade) and security. Specifically, U.S. policymakers believe that economic interdependence leads to peace, and hence to increased security for the United States.

There are three ways in which economic interdependence supposedly causes peace. First, there is commercial liberalism’s traditional assumption that by increasing prosperity, an open international trading system decreases the risk of war because states will not want to have their trade and prosperity interrupted by war. The intellectual lineage of this notion traces back to the ideas of Adam Smith, John Bright, Richard Cobden, and Norman Angell. (Angell, writing on the eve of the First World War, famously predicted that because of economic interdependence a great European war was impossible.)

Second, U.S. policymakers believe a key “lesson” of the 1930s is that economic nationalism (autarky, rival trade blocs) led to totalitarianism and militarism in Germany and Japan, and thus was an important cause of geopolitical instability. Hence, they believe that the open postwar international trading system will prevent a replay of the 1930s.

Third, they also believe that the Second World War’s origins were rooted in economic causes (in, for example, competition for territorial control of markets and raw materials). An open international trading system eliminates the need to capture resources and markets by providing nondiscriminatory access to all states.

These arguments notwithstanding, international economic interdependence does not cause peace. In fact, it has very serious adverse security consequences that its proponents either do not understand or will not acknowledge. Economic relations (whether domestic or international) never take place in a vacuum; on the contrary, they occur
within a politically defined framework. International economic interdependence requires certain conditions in order to flourish, including a maximum degree of political order and stability.

Just as the market cannot function within a state unless the state creates a stable “security” environment in which economic exchange can occur (by protecting property rights and enforcing contracts), the same is true in international relations. Because there is no world government, it falls to the dominant state to create the conditions under which economic interdependence can take hold (by providing security, rules of the game, and a reserve currency, and by acting as the global economy’s banker and lender of last resort). Without a dominant power to perform these tasks, economic interdependence does not happen. Indeed, free trade and interdependence have occurred in the modern international system only during the hegemonies of Victorian Britain and postwar America.

International economic interdependence generally occurs when states feel secure, when they do not have to worry that others will transform their economic gains from trade into military advantages. Conversely, when states are concerned about their security, they are less likely to engage in free trade. When security is at issue, states are always measuring themselves in comparison with their actual, or potential, rivals. When states feel secure, they focus on the overall gains to global wealth that flow from trade. Under peaceful international conditions, the distribution of this increased wealth is not a matter of high politics: so long as all states are getting wealthier, trade is looked upon as a good thing. When security is an issue, however, states become intensely concerned about how the gains from trade are being distributed.

When security concerns are paramount, the key question no longer is whether everyone is gaining something but rather who is gaining the most. Because economic power is the cornerstone of military strength, when security is an issue states want their economies to be more vigorous and to grow faster than those of their rivals. Also, when war is regarded as a real possibility, states deliberately attempt to reduce their dependence on imported products and raw materials in order to minimize their vulnerability to economic coercion by others. This also impairs economic interdependence.

The bottom line here is this: When security in the international system is plentiful, trade flourishes and, so long as they are getting richer themselves, states are untroubled by the fact that others also are getting wealthier. When security in the international system is scarce, however, trade diminishes; states seek to maximize their power (economic and military) over their rivals, and hence attempt to ensure they become richer than their rivals.

It falls to the hegemonic power to provide the stable, secure conditions that interdependence requires. A concrete illustration of this is the American role in facilitating Western Europe’s economic integration after the Second World War. Even though West Germany’s economic recovery was crucial to jump-starting Western Europe’s war-shattered economy, the West Europeans were leery because they feared that Germany’s economic revival would lead to its geopolitical resurgence. The United States “solved” this problem by taking on the task of protecting the West Europeans from themselves (in addition to protecting them from the Soviets), thus permitting them to put aside their political rivalries and work together to get back on their feet economically.

Bad Habits
Of course, America did not really solve the problem because today there is widespread concern that if the United States were to withdraw from Europe militarily in the future, the Europeans would revert to their bad old geopolitical habits and economic in-
terdependence would collapse. This example illustrates a larger point. The strategy of preponderance requires the United States to maintain an international security environment that is conducive to interdependence. This is a burdensome and often dangerous responsibility. At best, the strategic requirements of economic interdependence compel the United States to assume costly security commitments; at worst, those commitments can lead to war. Two cases, one historical and one current, illustrate how, far from leading to an increase in American security, economic interdependence can have adverse strategic consequences. The two cases are America’s role in Indochina from 1948 to 1954, and its current intervention in Bosnia.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, America’s Cold War strategic imperatives required Japan’s economic recovery, which was believed by U.S. policymakers to depend on its access both to export markets and raw materials in Southeast Asia. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations understood that, for this strategy to succeed, the United States had to guarantee Japan’s military and economic security. This connection between security and economic interdependence—specifically, the American strategic interest in defending Japan’s economic access to Southeast Asia—helped propel America’s deepening involvement in Indochina.

Notwithstanding its lack of intrinsic economic and strategic importance, Indochina became the focal point of U.S. policy because of “domino theory” concerns. The United States regarded Indochina as a firewall for preventing the more economically vital parts of the region—especially Malaya and Indonesia—from falling under communist control. Washington’s concern was that the economic repercussions of toppling dominoes would have geopolitical consequences: if Japan were to be cut off from Southeast Asia, the resulting economic hardship might cause domestic instability in Japan and result in Tokyo’s drifting out of the U.S. orbit (and thus becoming vulnerable to Soviet penetration).

The connection between Japan’s geopolitical orientation, its economic recovery, and its access to Southeast Asia—that is, the belief that core and periphery are economically and strategically interdependent—catalyzed America’s support of France during the First Indochina War and, after 1954, its support of a noncommunist state in South Vietnam. In retrospect, the United States crossed the crucial threshold on the road to the Vietnam War in the early 1950s, when Washington concluded that interdependence’s strategic requirements (specifically, Japan’s—and by extension, Southeast Asia’s—security and prosperity) necessitated that containment be extended to that region.

The Bosnian Case
America’s 1995 military intervention in Bosnia also illustrates how economic interdependence can cause nonpeaceful strategic effects. The parallels between Indochina and Bosnia are striking, notwithstanding that unlike the perceived interdependence between Japan and Southeast Asia in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Balkans’ economic importance to Western Europe is minimal, and there is no geopolitical threat in the Balkans that corresponds to the Vietminh, who, according to Washington’s (mistaken) belief, were the agents of a monolithic, Kremlin-directed communist bloc. Given these differences, the case for intervention was even less compelling strategically in Bosnia than in Indochina. Nevertheless, the rationale for intervention has been the basically the same. U.S. Bosnia policy has been justified by invoking arguments based on domino imagery and the need to protect economic interdependence.

Although a few commentators have contended that U.S. intervention in Bosnia was animated by humanitarian concerns, this is not the case. American policymakers, includ-
ing President Bill Clinton, made clear that their overriding concerns were to ensure European stability by preventing the Balkan conflict from spreading and to reestablish NATO’s credibility.

Indeed, some of the proponents of preponderance believe that U.S. intervention in Bosnia alone is insufficient to prevent peripheral instability from spreading into Western Europe. To forestall a geopolitical snowball, they contend, NATO must be enlarged to incorporate the states located in East Central Europe. These expressed fears about the “spillover” of instability from Bosnia (or East Central Europe) into Europe are often hazy when it comes to stating what the precise consequences of this spillover will be. However, some U.S. policymakers and analysts have detailed their concerns: they fear that spreading instability could imperil economic interdependence. In 1992, William Odom, the former director of the National Security Agency, explicated the perceived significance of the link between U.S. interests in interdependence and its concerns for European stability and NATO credibility: “Only a strong NATO with the U.S. centrally involved can prevent Western Europe from drifting into national parochialism and eventual regression from its present level of economic and political cooperation. Failure to act effectively in Yugoslavia will not only affect U.S. security interests but also U.S. economic interests. Our economic interdependency with Western Europe creates large numbers of American jobs.”

Indochina and Bosnia demonstrate how the strategy of preponderance expands America’s frontiers of insecurity. The posited connection between security and economic interdependence requires the United States to impose order on, and control over, the international system. To do so, it must continually enlarge the geographic scope of its strategic responsibilities to maintain the security of its already established interests. As the political scientist Robert H. Johnson observes, this process becomes self-sustain-

ling because each time the United States pushes its security interests outward, threats to the new security frontier will be apprehended: “Uncertainty leads to self-extension, which leads in turn to new uncertainty and further self-extension.”

Core and periphery are interdependent strategically; however, while the core remains constant, the turbulent frontier in the periphery is constantly expanding. One does not overstate in arguing that this expansion is potentially limitless. Former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski recently has suggested, for example, that NATO expansion is just the first step toward creating an American-dominated “Trans Eurasian Security System” (TESS), that ultimately will embrace Russia, China, Japan, India, and other countries—a security structure “that would span the entire [Eurasian] continent.”

There is a suggestive parallel between late Victorian Britain and the United States today. The late-nineteenth-century British statesman Lord Rosebery, clearly recognized that economic interdependence could lead to strategic overextension:

Our commerce is so universal and so penetrating that scarcely any question can arise in any part of the world without involving British interests. This consideration, instead of widening, rather circumscribes the field of our actions. For did we not strictly limit the principle of intervention we should always be simultaneously engaged in some forty wars.

Of course, it is an exaggeration to suggest that the strategy of preponderance will involve the United States in 40 wars simultaneously. It is not, however, an exaggeration to note that the need to defend America’s perceived interest in maintaining a security framework in which economic interdependence can flourish has become the primary post–Cold War rationale for
expanding its security commitments in East Asia and in Europe. To preserve a security framework favorable to interdependence, the United States does not, in fact, intervene everywhere; however, the logic underlying the strategy of preponderance can be used to justify U.S. intervention anywhere.

Extended Deterrence
Extended deterrence—invoking the threat to use one’s military power to dissuade an adversary from attacking one’s overseas allies—is a difficult strategy to implement successfully: “One of the perpetual problems of deterrence on behalf of third parties is that the costs a state is willing to bear are usually much less than if its own territory is at stake, and it is very difficult to pretend otherwise.” For extended deterrence to work, a potential challenger must be convinced that the defender’s commitment is credible.

For the strategy of preponderance to work, the credibility of U.S. security guarantees must remain robust. As a former high-ranking Pentagon official puts it: “The credibility of U.S. alliances can be undermined if key allies, such as Germany and Japan, believe that the current arrangements do not deal adequately with threats to their security. It could also be undermined if, over an extended period, the United States is perceived as lacking the will or capability to lead in protecting their interests....”

Concern with credibility leads to the belief that U.S. commitments are interdependent. As the strategic theorist Thomas C. Schelling has put it: “Few parts of the world are intrinsically worth the risk of serious war by themselves...but defending them or running risks to protect them may preserve one’s commitments to action in other parts of the world at later times.” If others perceive that the United States has acted irresolutely in a specific crisis, they will conclude that it will not honor its commitments in future crises. Hence, as happened repeatedly in the Cold War, the United States has taken military action in peripheral areas—Bosnia, for example—in order to demonstrate to both allies and potential adversaries that it will uphold its security obligations in core areas.

Notwithstanding its perceived complexities, it appears that extended deterrence “worked” in Europe during the Cold War and was easier to execute successfully than generally was thought. One should not assume, however, that extended deterrence will work similarly well in the early twenty-first century. If extended deterrence indeed worked during the Cold War, it was because of a set of unique conditions that are unlikely to be replicated in the future: bipolarity; a clearly defined, and accepted, geopolitical status quo; the intrinsic value to the United States of the protected region; and the permanent forward deployment by the United States of significant military forces in Western Europe.

The number of great powers in the system affects extended deterrence’s efficacy. During the Cold War, the bipolar nature of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in Europe stabilized the superpower relationship by demarcating the continent into U.S. and Soviet spheres of influence that delineated the vital interests of both superpowers. Each knew it courted disaster if it challenged the other’s sphere.

Also, during the Cold War, the superpowers were able to exercise control over their major allies to minimize the risk of unwillingly being dragged into a conflict by them. In the early twenty-first century, however, the international system will be multipolar and, arguably, less stable and more conflict-prone than a bipolar international system. Spheres of influence will not be delineated clearly. And because other states will have more latitude to pursue their own foreign and security policy agendas than they did during the Cold War, the risk will be much greater that the United States could be dragged into a conflict because of a protected state’s irresponsible behavior.
Extended deterrence is bolstered by a clearly delineated geopolitical status quo and undermined by the absence of clearly defined spheres of influence. The resolution of the 1948–49 Berlin crisis formalized Europe’s de facto postwar partition. After 1949, the very existence of a clear status quo in Europe itself bolstered deterrence. In deterrence situations of this type, the defender enjoys two advantages: the potential attacker must bear the onus (and risk) of moving first and the defender’s interests generally outweigh the challenger’s (hence the defender is usually willing to run greater risks to defend the status quo than the challenger is to change it). In the post–Cold War world, however, the number of political and territorial flash points where the status quo is hotly contested—the Senkaku Islands, the Spratly Islands, Taiwan, Tokdo/Takeshima, and in a host of potential disputes in East Central and Eastern Europe, and in Central Asia—is on the rise.

No Spheres
One could argue, of course, that the United States would not have to deter these potential conflicts because they are peripheral to its security interests. This overlooks, however, the fact that U.S. policymakers believe the strategy of preponderance requires the United States to stand firm in the peripheries. For example, many of the strategy’s proponents believe that to prevent European renationalization and preserve its credibility, the United States could not remain indifferent to Russian aggression against the Baltics or Ukraine (notwithstanding that current policy would exclude these states from the security sphere of even an expanded NATO).

A crucial factor in weighing the credibility of a defender’s commitments is the degree of its interest in the protected area. Had the Soviets seriously contemplated an attack on Western Europe during the Cold War (and there is no evidence that they did so), they almost certainly would have had to draw back from the brink. In a bipolar setting, Western Europe’s security was a matter of supreme importance to the United States for both strategic and reputational (i.e., credibility) reasons. In the early twenty-first century, however, the intrinsic value of many of the regions where the United States may wish to extend deterrence will be doubtful. Indeed, in the post–Cold War world, “few imaginable disputes will engage vital U.S. interests.” It thus will be difficult to convince a potential attacker that U.S. deterrence commitments are credible.

It is doubtful that the United States could deter a Russian invasion of the Baltics or the Ukraine, or, several decades hence, a Chinese assault on Taiwan. To engage in such actions, Moscow or Beijing would have to be highly motivated; conversely, the objects of possible attack are unimportant strategically to the United States, which would cause the challenger to discount U.S. credibility. The spring 1996 crisis between China and Taiwan suggests the difficulties U.S. extended deterrence strategy will face in coming decades. (China provoked the crisis by conducting intimidating military exercises in an attempt to influence Taiwan’s presidential elections.) During the crisis, a Chinese official said that China could use force against Taiwan without fear of U.S. intervention because American decision makers “care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan.” Although this is an empty threat today, as China becomes more powerful militarily and economically in the coming decades, threats of this nature from Beijing will be more potent.

Extended deterrence is strengthened when the guarantor deploys its own military forces on the protected state’s territory. Thus during the Cold War, the presence of large numbers of U.S. combat forces and tactical nuclear weapons in Europe underscored Europe’s importance to the United States and bolstered the credibility of extended deterrence. The defender’s deployment of forces is a visible signal that the defender “means business.” In contrast, in the early
twenty-first century, in many places where the United States may seek to implement extended deterrence, the strategy’s effectiveness will be undercut because the United States will not have a permanent, sizeable military presence in the target state (Korea, so far, is a notable exception).

For example, it is unlikely that the United States would ever bolster the credibility of security guarantees (should they, in fact, be given) to states like Ukraine, the Baltics, or even Taiwan—each of which is potentially threatened by a nuclear rival—by deploying ground forces as tokens of its resolve. Indeed, with respect to the newly expanded NATO’s military posture, Washington has taken an ambivalent stance on the question of whether the United States will deploy troops and/or tactical nuclear weapons in Poland (which, because of its proximity to Russia, is an expanded NATO’s most vulnerable member state). At currently projected force levels, moreover, the American presence in Europe and East Asia probably will be too small to make extended deterrence credible in the early twenty-first century; a challenger, with good reason, may question whether the United States has either the capability or the intent to honor its security commitments. And that is a dangerous situation indeed. In the early twenty-first century, U.S. forward-deployed forces could constitute the worst kind of tripwire: one that invites challenges rather than deterring them.

The United States, of course, could attempt to enhance the credibility of extended deterrence in the early twenty-first century by increasing the size of its conventional deployments in key regions; however, it is doubtful that this would be either feasible or effective. Significantly increasing the number of U.S. forces in Europe and East Asia would be expensive, perhaps prohibitively so. And even then, the effect on the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees would be uncertain. After all, during the Cold War even the presence of over 300,000 U.S. troops in Europe was insufficient to reassure policymakers in the United States and Western Europe that extended deterrence was robust.

Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy

Preponderance is not the only grand strategic option available to the United States. More important, preponderance is not the only realist option available to the United States. In fact, when it comes to grand strategy, realists are split into two camps. They disagree over whether hegemony or the balance of power—the only two compelling models of international stability that can be derived from history—is best calculated to enhance American security. As we have seen, those who advocate preponderance have placed their bet on hegemony. The other camp believes that the United States can best obtain security by taking advantage of the dynamics of the balance of power in an emerging multipolar world (that is, a world in which China, Japan, Germany, and probably Russia will join the United States in the ranks of the great powers). The proponents of a balance of power strategy believe, for the reasons I have discussed, that hegemony is inherently unstable, and hence is not a winning strategy. They also believe that the United States lacks the resources to sustain its present predominance.

The balance of power alternative to preponderance is an offshore balancing grand strategy. The historical model for such a strategy is Britain during its great power heyday. Insulated from European conflicts by geographical serendipity (and, of course, by the Royal Navy’s mastery of the seas), Britain was often able to stand aloof from Europe’s wars. Even when compelled to intervene, Britain usually was able to limit the extent of its involvement and shift most of the costs and risks of war to its allies. Safe behind its English Channel moat, Britain was able most of the time to maximize its power relative to the European great powers.
by doing little more than watching as the Europeans quarreled among themselves in the continent’s geopolitical cockpit (weakening themselves relative to Britain in the process).

Ultimately, Britain was unable to sustain this strategy. This was not due to any flaw in the concept of offshore balancing but rather was a result of material factors that ultimately were beyond Britain’s control. Over time, Britain simply was eclipsed by bigger and more powerful states (especially the United States and Germany). Indeed, when one considers how slender Britain’s resources were, even at the zenith of its power, it is clear that it was able to become a hegemon precisely because it was able to act as an offshore balancer and take advantage of the opportunities to play off its rivals against one another. (London seldom had to manipulate the balance of power because, even without England’s prompting, the Europeans had plenty of incentives to compete against each other.)

The United States is far better placed than Britain ever was to be a successful offshore balancer, for two reasons: America’s margin of power relative to other great powers is, and is likely to remain, far greater than Britain’s was, and the United States enjoys a far higher degree of immunity from external threat than Britain did.

The underlying premise of an offshore balancing strategy is that it will become increasingly more difficult, dangerous, and costly for the United States to maintain order in, and control over, the international political system. In contrast to the strategy of preponderance, offshore balancing would define U.S. interests narrowly in terms of defending America’s territorial integrity and preventing the rise of a Eurasian hegemon (that is, a state so powerful that, like Nazi Germany had Hitler been victorious, would potentially command sufficient resources to threaten North America).

As an offshore balancer, the United States would disengage from its military commitments in Europe, Japan, and South Korea. The overriding objectives of an offshore balancing strategy would be to insulate the United States from possible future great power wars and maximize its relative power position in the international system. Offshore balancing would reject the strategy of preponderance’s commitment to economic interdependence because interdependence has negative strategic consequences. Offshore balancing also would eschew any ambition to perpetuate U.S. hegemony and would abandon the ideological pretensions embedded in the strategy of preponderance.

As an offshore balancer, there would be a strong presumption against U.S. involvement in the following kinds of activities: assertive promotion of democracy abroad; participation in peace enforcement operations; rescuing “failed states” (like Somalia and Haiti); and the use of military power for the purpose of humanitarian intervention. U.S. involvement in these types of external actions should be viewed skeptically because they seldom affect the geostrategic and security interests that would be the core of an American offshore balancing grand strategy.

Offshore balancing is based on the following assumptions: balance of power strategies are superior to hegemonic ones; for a great power like the United States, economic interdependence is a danger, not a comfort; the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments will be significantly degraded in coming years; U.S. strategy need not be burdened by excessive concern with credibility, resolve, and reputation; geography has important grand strategic implications; the risk of a rival Eurasian hegemon emerging is small; U.S. grand strategy can confidently assume that other states would balance against a potential hegemon; the dynamics of alliance relationships favor an offshore balancing strategy; and relative power concerns remain the bedrock of a prudent grand strategy.

In the remainder of this essay, I wish to elaborate a bit on two of these assumptions:
the superiority of a balance of power strategy over a hegemonic strategy and the negative strategic consequences to the United States of economic openness. I will also address the most potent objection to the offshore balancing strategy: that it will make the United States less, rather than more, secure.

Why a Balance of Power Strategy Is Best

The strategy of preponderance assumes that multipolar systems are unstable. As a generalization, this may be true, but instability does not affect all states equally. Advocates of preponderance fail to consider that geography powerfully affects security and strategy. An offshore balancing strategy would account explicitly for geography’s impact on grand strategy. Insular great powers (that is, great powers that are geographically separated from great power rivals) are substantially less likely to be affected by instability than are states that face rivals close to home. Hence the United States could effectively insulate itself from the future great power wars likely to be caused by the instability that accompanies the emergence of new great powers.

Because of the interlocking effects of geography, nuclear weapons (which enhance insularity’s strategic advantages), and formidable military and economic capabilities, the United States is virtually impregnable against direct attack. The risk of conflict, and the possible exposure of the American homeland to attack, derive directly from the overseas commitments mandated by an expansive definition of U.S. interests.

In multipolar systems, insular great powers have a much broader range of strategic choices than less fortunately placed powers. They can avoid being entrapped by alliance commitments and need worry little about being abandoned by actual or potential allies. Offshore great powers also can choose to stay out of great power wars altogether or to limit their involvement—a choice unavailable to states that live in dangerous neighborhoods in which rivals lurk nearby. As an insular great power in a multipolar world, the United States would retain a free hand strategically; although it might need to enter into temporary coalitions, America would disengage from permanent alliance relationships. An insular great power like the United States need not subject itself to strategic constraints of this kind.

The strategy of preponderance is based, in part, on the assumption that the United States must prevent the rise of a hegemonic challenger because other states either will not do the job, or at least will not do so effectively. In contrast, an offshore balancing strategy would recognize that, in a multipolar world, other states will balance against potential hegemons, and it is to America’s advantage to shift this responsibility to them. In a multipolar world, the United States could be confident that effective balancing ultimately would occur because, to ensure their survival, other states have an incentive to balance against geographically proximate rivals, and great powers do not “bandwagon”—that is, they do not align with threatening, would-be hegemons.

Because of its geographic position, the United States generally can stand aloof from security competitions and engage in strategic “buck passing,” thereby forcing others to assume the risks and costs of balancing against threatening great powers. When an offshore balancer shifts to others the dangers entailed by “going first,” it can reasonably hope that it will be able to avoid being drawn into war.

The strategy of preponderance commits the United States to alliance relationships that run counter to geostrategic logic: it imposes the greatest burden (in terms of danger and cost) on the alliance partner (the United States) whose security is least at risk. An offshore balancing strategy, therefore, would reverse this pattern of alliance relations.

There is no inherent reason why the United States should be compelled to bear
the high costs of providing security for other states. Japan and Western Europe, for example, long have possessed the economic and technological capabilities to defend themselves. But the strategy of preponderance (notwithstanding U.S. complaints about burden-sharing inequities) has actively discouraged them from doing so because American policymakers fear any diminution of U.S. control over the international system (including control over U.S. allies) would have adverse geopolitical consequences. Washington has decided that it is more preferable strategically for the United States to defend Germany and Japan than it is for Germany and Japan to defend themselves. In contrast, offshore balancing would rest on the assumption that America’s overall strategic position would be enhanced by devolving to others the responsibility for their own defense.

The Strategic Consequences of Economic Openness
The strategy of preponderance incorporates contradictory assumptions about the importance of relative power. On the one hand, the strategy seeks to maximize America’s military power by perpetuating its role as the predominant great power in the international system. Yet, the strategy’s economic dimension is curiously indifferent to the security implications of the redistribution of power in the international political system resulting from economic interdependence. Nor does the strategy resolve the following conundrum: given that economic power is the foundation of military strength, how will the United States be able to retain its hegemonic position in the international political system if its relative economic power continues to decline?

In purely economic terms, an open international economic system may have positive effects. But economics does not take place in a political vacuum. Strategically, economic openness has adverse consequences: it contributes to, and accelerates, a redistribution of relative power among states in the international system (allowing rising competitors to catch up to the United States more quickly than they otherwise would).

This leads to the emergence of new great powers. The resulting “power transition,” which occurs as a dominant power declines and new challengers arise, usually climaxes in great power wars. Because great power emergence is driven by uneven growth rates (that is, some states are growing faster economically than others), there is little, short of preventive war, that the United States can do to prevent the rise of new great powers. But U.S. grand strategy, to some extent, can affect both the pace and the magnitude of America’s relative power decline.

A crucial relationship exists between America’s relative power and its strategic commitments. The historian Paul Kennedy and the political economist Robert Gilpin have explained how strategic overcommitment leads first to “imperial overstretch,” and then to relative decline. Gilpin has outlined succinctly the causal logic supporting this conclusion. As he points out, the overhead costs of empire are high: “In order to maintain its dominant position, a state must expend its resources on military forces, the financing of allies, foreign aid, and the costs associated with maintaining the international economy. These protection and related costs are not productive investments; they constitute an economic drain on the economy of the dominant state.” Ultimately, the decline in its relative power leaves a waning hegemon less well placed to fend off the challenges to its system-wide strategic interests.

The Economic Paradox
In contrast to the strategy of preponderance, an offshore balancing strategy would be grounded on the assumption that relative economic power matters. (Here, the strategy of preeminence is characterized by a glaring internal contradiction: the strategy’s commitment to economic interdependence results in the decline of America’s relative economic power.)
economic power; yet, economic leadership is a prerequisite for geopolitical preeminence.) A strategic international economic policy would be an integral component of an offshore balancing grand strategy.

Strategic trade policies do not imply that the United States would pursue an autarkic international economic policy. Such policies, however, would subordinate market and global economic welfare imperatives to a prudent geostrategic concern with the manner in which the gains from economic intercourse are distributed.

Offshore balancing also would seek to maximize U.S. relative power by capitalizing on America’s geostrategically privileged position. If the United States adopted an offshore balancing strategy, security competitions almost certainly would occur in East Asia and Europe. America would be the primary beneficiary of these rivalries among the other great powers in the emerging multipolar system. Noninsular states’ constant worry about possible threats from nearby neighbors is a factor that historically has increased the relative power position of insular states. This is because noninsular states are compelled to invest a greater share of their economic resources in national security.

Insular great powers, on the other hand, can afford to invest less on defense and more on economic growth; they can, that is, act more like “trading states” and less like “national security states.” Offshore balancing thus would be a more sophisticated power maximizing strategy than preponderance: the United States would be able to enhance its relative power without having to confront rivals directly. Great powers that stand on the sidelines while their peers engage in security competitions and conflict invariably gain in relative power.

The Risks of War
The most telling objection to an offshore balancing strategy is that it would increase—not lower—the risk of involvement in a major war. Advocates of preponderance believe it is illusory to think the United States can disengage from international commitments, because it inevitably would be drawn into major wars even if initially it tried to remain aloof. The example of Europe is frequently invoked: whenever a major European war breaks out, it is said, the United States invariably is compelled to intervene.

The advocates of a strategy of preponderance also claim that U.S. security commitments in Europe and East Asia are a form of insurance. It is, they say, cheaper and safer for the United States to retain its security commitments and thereby deter wars from happening than to stand on the sidelines only to be compelled to intervene later under what presumably would be more dangerous conditions. There are two responses to this argument. First, it is unsupported by the historical record. Second, it is not evident that the strategy of preponderance will, in fact, minimize the risk of U.S. involvement in future wars.

The argument that the United States invariably is drawn into major overseas conflicts is wrong. Since America achieved independence, great power wars have been waged in Europe in 1792–1802, 1804–15, 1853–55, 1859–60, 1866, 1870, 1877–78, 1912–13, 1914–18, and 1939–45. The United States has been involved in three of these wars, but it could have safely remained out of at least two of those in which it fought.

In 1812, while the British were preoccupied with the Napoleonic threat, the United States initiated war with Britain to advance its own national ambitions. And as the late political scientist Robert Osgood has demonstrated, America’s intervention in the First World War was not driven by any direct threat to its security interests. The United States was not compelled to enter the Great War; largely as a result of Germany’s policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, it chose to do so, arguably with disastrous consequences.
U.S. intervention in the Great War was driven by snowball/domino concerns similar to those imbedded in today's strategy of preponderance. An interesting study awaits on what would have happened had the United States not intervened in 1917. The argument can be made that the war would have ended in a compromise peace. Peace, indeed, might have come before the revolutions that destroyed the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. A compromise peace might not have sown the seeds of social and economic unrest that facilitated Hitler's rise to power. Had such a peace occurred, would a second great war have been waged in Europe? Possibly. But, if so, it would have been a much different war than the Second World War; and it might have been a war the United States could have avoided.

A related argument is that U.S. "isolationism" in the 1920s and 1930s had disastrous consequences and would have a similar effect in the future. Here, two points should be made. First, recent work by diplomatic historians has debunked the notion that the United States followed an isolationist policy during the 1930s. Second, and more important, the United States became involved in the Pacific War with Japan not because it followed an isolationist policy but rather because it assertively defended its perceived East Asian interests (especially in China) from Japanese encroachment. It should also be noted that U.S. strategy toward Europe in 1939–41 was not isolationist but rather a shrewd example of offshore balancing. In 1939–40, the United States stood on the sidelines in the reasonable expectation that Britain and France could successfully hold Germany at bay. When France was defeated stunningly in the brief May-June 1940 campaign, the United States hoped to continue following an offshore balancing strategy based on providing military equipment and economic assistance to Britain and (after June 1941) to the Soviet Union, and fighting a limited liability naval war against German U-boats in the Atlantic. Had Germany not declared war on the United States, Washington might have persisted in that strategy indefinitely. In short, the historical record does not support the claim that European and Asian wars invariably compel the United States to intervene. Wars are not a force of nature that magnetically draws states into conflict. States, that is policymakers, have volition; they decide whether to go to war.

The insurance argument advanced by proponents of the strategy of preponderance is also problematic. Great power war is rare because it is always an uncertain undertaking: war is, therefore, to some extent its own deterrent. It is, however, an imperfect deterrent: great power wars do happen and they will happen in the future. Although the likelihood of U.S. involvement in future great-power conflict may be small, in a world where nuclear weapons exist the consequences of U.S. involvement in such a conflict could be enormous. The strategy of preponderance purports to ensure the United States against the risk of war.

If extended deterrence fails, however, the strategy actually ensures that America will be involved in war at its onset. As Californians know, there are some risks (earthquakes, for example) for which insurance is either prohibitively expensive or not available at any price because, although the probability of the event may be small, if it occurs, the cost to the insurer is catastrophic. Offshore balancing has the considerable advantage of giving the United States a high degree of strategic choice and, unlike the strategy of preponderance, a substantial measure of control over its fate.

The Force of Events to Come

My argument for adopting an alternative grand strategy is prospective: although it may be sustainable for perhaps another decade, American hegemony cannot be maintained much beyond that period. The changing distribution of power in the international system—specifically, the relative...
decline of U.S. power and the corresponding rise of new great powers—will render the strategy of preponderance untenable. This strategy is also being undermined because the credibility of America’s extended deterrence strategy is eroding rapidly. Over time, the costs and risks of the strategy of preponderance will rise to unacceptably high levels. The time to think about alternative grand strategic futures is now—before the United States is overtaken by events.

In advocating an offshore balancing strategy, I do not depurate those who believe that bad things (increased geopolitical instability) could happen if the United States were to abandon the strategy of preponderance. Indeed, they may; however, that is only half of the argument. The other half, seldom acknowledged by champions of preponderance, is that bad things—perhaps far worse things—could happen if the United States stays on its present strategic course.

Grand strategies must be judged by the amount of security they provide; whether they are sustainable; their cost; the degree of risk they entail; and their tangible and intangible domestic effects. Any serious debate about U.S. grand strategy must use these criteria to assess the comparative merits of both the current grand strategy and its competitors. The time is rapidly approaching when the strategy of preponderance will be unable to pass these tests.

The suggestion that the days of American hegemony are numbered no doubt will be met with disbelief by advocates of the current grand strategy. This is unsurprising. Having fulfilled their hegemonic ambitions following the Soviet Union’s collapse, the advocates of preponderance want to keep the world the way it is. American grand strategists view the prospect of change in international politics in much the same way that British prime minister Lord Salisbury did toward the end of the nineteenth century. “What ever happens will be for the worse,” Salisbury said, “and therefore it is in our interest that as little should happen as possible.”

However, it is the very fact of the Soviet Union’s collapse that has knocked the props out from under the strategy of preponderance. The United States could be hegemonic only because the Soviet threat caused others to accept American preeminence as preferable to Soviet domination. The United States could enjoy the relative predictability and stability of the bipolar era only because of the effects of bipolarity itself. Simply put, without the Cold War, America will not be able to preserve its Cold War preponderance or stability.

International politics is dynamic, not static. As Paul Kennedy has observed, “It simply has not been given to any one society to remain permanently ahead of all the others....”30 The conditions that made American preponderance possible are changing rapidly. Make no mistake: sometime in the early decades of the twenty-first century, America’s grand strategy will no longer be preponderance. If the United States does not choose now to begin making the transition to a new grand strategy better suited to the new century’s emerging international realities, events will force it to do so.

Notes

1. See Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., America’s Strategic Choices (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), which collects recent essays on America’s post–Cold War grand strategy that have been published in the quarterly journal, International Security.

2. I have borrowed Melvyn Leffler’s description of postwar grand strategy as a strategy of preponderance to reflect what I will demonstrate to be the underlying continuity between America’s postwar and post–Cold War strategies. See Melvyn P. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992).


5. Arguments that the post–Cold War purpose of American security commitments in Europe and East Asia is to contain Germany and Japan, respectively, and thus prevent the “renationalization” of their foreign and security policies, are legion. On Germany see, for example, Robert J. Art, “Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO,” Political Science Quarterly 111 (spring 1996), pp. 1–40; Charles L. Glaser, “Why NATO Is Still Best: Future Security Arrangements for Europe,” International Security 18 (summer 1993), pp. 5–50.


12. See Art, “Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO.”


15. William E. Odom, “Yugoslavia: Quagmire or Strategic Challenge?” Hudson Briefing Paper,


23. Quoted in Patrick E. Tyler, “As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure U.S. Listens,” New York Times, January 24, 1996. I stress that this analysis is prospective. Today, China lacks the military capabilities to invade Taiwan successfully; however, the balance of forces probably will shift decisively in China’s favor in the next decade or two, and the deterrent effect of any American commitment to Taiwan would be vitiated. Conventional deterrence no longer would be robust, and any U.S. intervention would carry with it the risk of escalation to nuclear war.


27. For example, the United States gained enormously in relative economic power and financial strength while standing on the sidelines during most of the First World War. See Kathleen Burk, Britain, America, and the Sinews of War, 1914–1918 (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985).

