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## Neorealism's Power and Restraint: A Tribute to Waltz on his 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday

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*Kenneth Waltz constructed a pure theory of international politics by isolating structural from unit-level causes. Today's return of great-power politics signals the persistent relevance of Waltz's notion of patterns and regularities driven by structural-systemic forces. We have entered an unbalanced bipolar world, in which America still exceeds China in every important category of national power but the gap is narrowing. The relative-power trajectories of the two sides now frames the structural dynamics of their relationship, and how others perceive and calculate their strategic competition. No longer occupying a position of "primacy" either globally or in the Asian Pacific region, the United States now tends to exaggerate, not underestimate, the perceived threat from China in the economic and security realms. More broadly, the world is transitioning from hegemonic order to global disharmony and a restored balance of power—what I refer to as a "Dissent" phase of history. In this phase, disruption of global stability comes not only from the emergence of a counter-hegemonic alliance, which begins to voice its dissatisfaction with the status-quo order and underlying social purpose. It also comes from the hegemon itself, which behaves in ways that undermine its own order—an order that it now sees as not only unprofitable but a drain on its wasting assets through sponging allies and the exorbitant costs of delivering global public goods.*

Transformation is the watchword of contemporary world politics. The system is moving from unipolarity to bipolarity. Such fundamental structural change is historically rare—the original multipolar system of 1648 shifted to bipolarity in 1945, and then to unipolarity in 1991. A mere two changes over roughly 350 years. Structural change is fundamental change, and so it carries momentous implications for state behavior and the dynamics of the international system. We know this to be true because Waltz's systems theory of international politics tells us so (Waltz, 1979). Before 1979, readers—even specialists in the field of international relations—would have responded: "A theory of international politics?"

Waltz succeeded where no one before him had in defining international politics as an autonomous field of study—as a domain in its own right about which one could

develop a theory disconnected from everything else. Guided by his core interests in political theory and the philosophy of science, Waltz achieved this foundational element of theory design by offering a purely structural conception of international politics—one that excluded unit attributes. Now it was possible to distinguish structural causes from unit-level ones; it was possible to think about constructing a theory of international politics. Here, it is worth remembering that Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron deemed it impossible to so isolate the study of international politics from all that it was interconnected with, whether economics, sociology, domestic politics and so on (Morgenthau, 1970, p. 78).<sup>1</sup> Waltz showed us how to do it. No small trick.

And he did “it” with incomparably graceful, elegant, even memorable prose. At times, his sentences—indeed, whole paragraphs—strike the reader as almost lyrical, more poetry than dreary social-science speak. To make the point, I randomly open *Theory of International Politics* to page 109 and find these gems: “With each country constrained to take care of itself, no one can take care of the system.” “A strong sense of peril and doom may lead to a clear definition of ends that must be achieved. Their achievement is not thereby made possible.” “Great tasks can be accomplished only by agents of great capability” (Waltz, 1979, p. 109). A pathbreaking and profound book of enormous scale written with poetic charm. What more can one ask from a work of social science?

Return is another watchword of contemporary international politics. Waltz not only showed us what a grand theory of international politics would look like, he told us what a theory is and what it can tell us. A theory “cannot explain the accidental or account for unexpected events; it deals in regularities and repetitions and is possible only if these can be identified” (Waltz, 1988, p. 39). Waltz’s theory is not one of change but of enduring realities, principles, and behaviors. “The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality. They are marked instead by dismaying persistence,” Waltz observed (Waltz, 1979, p. 66). These persistent realities, which until recently struck many contemporary observers as archaic, have ferociously returned, like atavistic episodes. For decades, neorealists have been in the wilderness, driven out of the mainstream by a liberal teleological view of history that has, in recent years, proved an illusion. The modern world has not progressed along an inevitable and inexorable road to peace, human rights, globalization, and

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<sup>1</sup> Morgenthau insisted on the “autonomy of politics,” but did not apply this rule to international politics.

market democracies. It can and has reverted to familiar patterns. While progressives would like to believe otherwise, “in geopolitics, as in biology, mankind remains susceptible to new strains of old maladies” (Serchuk, 2020, p. A15). And so a world that had grown accustomed to thinking of progress as inevitable and irreversible is now being rocked by old toxic patterns previously thought crushed by the march of progress—the outbreak of a global pandemic, the rise of authoritarian alternatives to democracy, the global reign of Middle East oil producers, and the return of inflation, nationalism, and, most important, great-power competition and war (Serchuk, 2020; Sitaraman, 2020). The comeback of these old system disturbances conforms with Waltz’s notion of patterns and regularities driven by structural-systemic forces, with the twenty-first century’s wider theme of “back to the future” (Mearsheimer, 1990).<sup>2</sup> History is accelerating, not ending.

“The game between major powers is becoming more and more fierce,” Chinese President Xi Jinping observed at China’s annual legislative sessions in March 2022 (Wei, 2022, p. A14). A month earlier, Mr. Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a declaration that their countries’ friendship has “no limits.” The formation of this united front heralded what, from Washington to Brussels, is now being called a new Sino-Russian “axis of autocracy”—one that actively rejects the existing economic and political order that the U.S. and its allies created in 1945 and extended after the Cold War (See, for instance, Galston, 2022, p. A15). Challenging the U.S.-led world order has become the centerpiece of Xi’s and Putin’s foreign policies. China and Russia are revanchist powers, determined to regain territories and lost prestige after lengthy periods of national humiliations inflicted on them by the West. Waltz predicted that these humiliations—which he called overextensions of power, the “vice to which great powers easily succumb...in a unipolar world”—would trigger the aggressive backlash we see today (Waltz, 2000, p. 13). Large imbalances of power, he argued, “by feeding the ambition of some states to extend their control, may tempt them to dangerously adventurous activity” (Waltz, 1979, p. 132). After the Cold War, he preached restraint in victory, but no one in the halls of power was listening—a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

In response to the Sino-Russian threat, the United States has bolstered the Quad security arrangement involving Japan, India, the U.S., and Australia. Yet Waltz tells us that, in a dangerous and uncertain self-help world, states should seek to rely as much

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<sup>2</sup> A term first used to describe international politics by John J. Mearsheimer, his prediction proved several decades too early, but ultimately correct.

as possible “on their own capabilities rather than on the capabilities of allies. Internal balancing is more reliable and precise than external balancing” (Waltz, 1979, p. 168). And we see this today as well. In Japan, the power elite are “openly discussing nuclear weapons even as Beijing reflects on the lessons of Mr. Putin’s war for Xi Jinping” (Mead, 2022, p. A21). Meanwhile, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, awakened by Russian aggression to power realities and power politics, shocked the world by reversing three decades of German military-averse shirking and naïve-pacifist diplomacy. On February 27, 2022, the chancellor announced that Germany would not only end its foot-dragging on providing arms to Ukraine but would also: (1) create a \$113 billion special defense budget to fund equipment purchases and upgrades; (2) exceed NATO’s target of 2% of gross domestic product spent on defense each year; and (3) treat energy as a national security issue, vowing to wean Germany off Russian natural gas in favor of fossil fuels and maybe even nuclear power (Eddy, 2022). This revolution in Berlin’s conduct of foreign and military affairs signals the arrival of Germany as a major power and leader of Europe.

More generally, the West has countered Putin’s war against Ukraine by waging an economic war—facilitated by asymmetric economic interdependence—to isolate the Russian economy and pressure President Vladimir Putin. Almost immediately after Ukraine was invaded, the Western-led global financial system unplugged Russia from the global economy, severing practically every artery of money between Russian and the rest of the world (Hoffman, 2022, pp. A1,A7). Waltz correctly saw interdependence as a weapon that could be used by less dependent countries against more dependent ones. Thus, he wrote: “Countries that are dependent on others in important respects work to limit or lessen their dependence if they can reasonably hope to do so” (Waltz, 1979, pp. 154-155). He also saw globalization trends as reversible because interdependence “is more a dependent than an independent variable” (Waltz, 2000, p. 15). Peace causes interdependence, not the other way around. Under conditions of global crises and war, interdependence quickly unravels. Thus, he concluded: “Not only are the effects of close interdependence problematic, but so also is its durability” (Waltz, 2000, p. 18). Since 2010, the amount of trade covered by tariffs and other trade barriers has climbed to \$1.5 trillion from \$126 billion (Zumbrun, 2022, p. A1). The 2008 global financial crisis, the U.S.-China trade war, the coronavirus pandemic, and, most recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine have fractured the “free-trade, liberal order” vision that has guided American foreign economic policy for the past thirty years. The future appears to be one of protectionism, economic regionalism, and

trading blocs among like-minded countries. Is anything of importance happening today that does not conform with Waltz's regularities and repetitions, that does not support his predictions or enduring patterns of state behavior and system dynamics?

### **Structure and the Context of Action**

Since its publication in 1979, Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* has sparked debates over whether his deductively rigorous, structural-systemic version of realist theory offered much-needed refinements that strengthen classical realism or a poor substitute for the original (Specter, 2022, p. 2; Kirshner, 2015). After more than four decades of discussion, disagreement remains over the questions: Is neorealism a progressive or degenerative scientific research program? Is it more systematic and logically coherent than its classical realist predecessors? Is its parsimony worth the price paid for the elegance? Is it a fruitful paradigm for puzzle-solving and interpreting contemporary international politics?

Most everyone agrees, however, that structural-systemic theory is vital because "we must understand the context of action before we can understand the action itself" (Keohane, 1986, p. 193).<sup>3</sup> For Waltz, system structure constrains the units by encouraging certain actions and discouraging others and by thwarting their ability to achieve their objectives by means of straightforward purposive action. Regarding the latter, systems generate unintended consequences and perverse effects. The unanticipated consequences of purposive action result from the interplay of the action (at the level of the units) and the objective situation or conditions of action (constraints at the level of the system) (See Merton, 1936). Emphasizing these system effects, Waltz did not and could not accept the widely held and accepted ideas about the concept of power. Let me explain.

### **Power and Systems Theories**

Consistent with his beliefs about the value of holistic thinking and systems theory, Waltz did not accept Robert Dahl's definition of power as a relational concept, such that A has power over B to the extent that it can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957). For Waltz, this standard definition of power is both tautological and reductionist; it violates the very essence of systems effects at the core of politics. Waltz notes, "The common relational definition of power omits consideration of how acts and relations are affected by the structure of action. To measure power by

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<sup>3</sup> Waltz also makes this point with respect to unit interactions: "Like the outcome of states' actions, the implications of interactions cannot be known, or intelligently guessed at, without knowledge of the situation within which interactions occur" (Waltz, 1979, p. 66).

compliance rules unintended effects out of consideration, and that takes much of the politics out of politics” (Waltz, 1979, p. 192). His key observation is that, in politics, the powerful do not always get their way; they fail to impress their wills on others in precisely the ways they intend to do so. This is because power “is one cause among others, from which it cannot be isolated” (Waltz, 1979, pp. 191-192). The paradox of power is that states with large advantages in terms of relative capabilities are not always able to make their own preferences about outcomes prevail over the preferences of others.

Within complex systems, outcomes rarely align with the intentions of powerful actors, which is why systems theories are needed. If actors could achieve their aims by means of straightforward actions, consistent with relational power analysis, then there would be no need for systems theories. Rather, such systems can be said to exert only weak effects on the actors within them. Identifying power with control over outcomes is, accordingly, consistent with the essence of the reductionist approach: the whole is known through the study of its parts. It is a logic that wrongly infers actor attributes from outcomes, and so mis-labels as “weak” those whose wills are thwarted—for, by definition, the powerful achieve their desired ends. In response, Waltz said, “Power is a means, the outcome of its use is necessarily uncertain. To be politically pertinent, power has to be defined in terms of the distribution of capabilities; the extent of one’s power cannot be inferred from the results one may or may not get.”

The semantic, epistemological, and methodological debates over power (essentially, how can we know who is powerful and why?) arose, in Waltz’s view, from the discipline’s division into two different paradigms: one behavioral, the other systemic. Old realists are behavioralists, he argues, new ones are systemic thinkers: “Old realists see causes as running directly from states to the outcomes their actions produce. New realists see states forming a structure by their interactions and then being strongly affected by the structure their interactions have formed. Old realists account for political outcomes mainly by analyzing differences among states; new realists show why states tend to become like units as they try to coexist in a self-help system, with behaviors and outcomes explained by differences in the positions of states as well as by their internal characteristics” (Waltz, 1997, p. 913).

So how does Waltz define power? He equates power with capabilities. Power is a means by which states attempt to influence others and shape their environments in ways that advance their interests. We know who is powerful because they are the actors who affect others more than others affect them (Waltz, 1979, p. 192). It is view of

power oddly consonant with Susan Strange's definition of power as "the ability of a person or group of persons so to affect outcomes that their preferences take precedence over the preferences of others" (Strange, 1996, p. 17).<sup>4</sup> Waltz's conception of power as capabilities is consistent with the "elephant in your bed" metaphor. What the powerful do has significant consequences for everyone else. They may be well intentioned or not. But their intentions are beside the point—what they intend to do with their power and how they want others to perceive their actions are mostly beyond their control. Indeed, their actions often move them further away from, not closer to, their intended purposes.

Neorealism largely rests on this simple and straightforward conception of power as capabilities. Polarity is measured by counting the number of great powers in the system—the handful of "consequential" states that stand apart from the rest. His neorealist view of international politics is, accordingly, a study of small-numbered systems: the politics of the powerful (Waltz, 1979, p. 131). Simply put, an actor is powerful to the extent that s/he affects others more than they affect it.

National power expresses itself in many varied ways. For example, neorealists view international regimes less as the product of a coming together of equals than as the manifest expression of the power and interests of the dominant state or group of states. They are instruments—tools to project power—of national governments for the pursuit of their national interests. In Waltz's words, "international institutions serve primarily national rather than international interests...[They] are created by the more powerful states, and the institutions survive in their original form as long as they serve the major interests of their creators, or are thought to do so" (Waltz, 2000, pp. 21,26).<sup>5</sup> He, therefore, would accept the view of the US-China contest as a competition over various forms of control (coercive capability, consensual inducements, and legitimacy) that sustain regional and global order, as articulated by Rush Doshi, Biden's current director for China at the National Security Council (Doshi, 2021). He would further agree with Doshi's zero-sum claims that China, like rising powers before it, "has pursued a grand strategy to displace American order first at the regional and now at the global level[...]through strategies of blunting, building, and expansion"; and that the United States cannot preserve its dominant position unless it checks China's worldwide military, economic, and political order-building and reinvests in the foundations of American order (Doshi, 2021, p. 10). But these terms would most likely not be those that Waltz would privilege. Instead, he would emphasize: (1) the self-serving nature of

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<sup>4</sup> I say "oddly" because Strange argues that capabilities or resources are a "poor way of judging relative power" (Strange, 1996, p. 25).

<sup>5</sup> See also (Krasner, 1985, p. 263; Krasner, 1991, p. 356)



orders, whether built by China or America; and (2) the tendency of the two poles within a bipolar system to adopt a zero-sum perspective, for in a “two-power competition a loss for one appears as a gain for the other” (Waltz, 1979, p. 171). Simply put, Waltz would discuss U.S.-China relations within a realist framework of balance of power.

### **Balance of Power as an Unintended Order**

In the international arena, "objective rights and duties are non-existent, so that no one is entitled to anything, and nothing can be expected of anyone" (James, 1973, p. 65). Yet it would be incorrect to say that international relations and behaviors are entirely unpredictable, uncoordinated, and without pattern. A balance-of-power system, for instance, exhibits order even though it emerges spontaneously through simple, straightforward, and uncoordinated egoistic behavior among its constitutive units.<sup>6</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, collective security is a humanly contrived international order rooted in institutionalized collective behavior, explicit commitments (rights and duties), and formal organizational structures. One might expect more order from the collective security system, given its thickly institutionalized and rule-based nature, than from the relatively primitive balance-of-power system, which asks nothing of states but to act in their selfish short-run national interests. But the logic is not that simple—a point to which I will return at the end of this section.

What do we mean by an international order? A system exhibits order when the set of discrete objects that comprise the system are related to one another according to some pattern; that is, their relationship is not miscellaneous or haphazard but accords with some discernible principle. Order prevails when things display a high degree of predictability, when there are regularities, when there are patterns that follow some understandable and consistent logic. Disorder is a condition of randomness—of unpredictable developments lacking regularities and following no known principle or logic. Some systems are characterized by robust and durable orders. Others are extremely unstable, such that their orders can quickly and without warning collapse into chaos.

International orders vary according to: (1) the amount of order displayed; (2) whether the order is purposive or unintended; (3) and the type of mechanisms that provide order. On one end of the spectrum, there is rule-governed, purposive order, which is explicitly designed and highly institutionalized to fulfill universally accepted

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<sup>6</sup> For classic analyses on the balance of power, see (Vagts, 1948; Wolfers, 1962, pp. 122-124; Haas, 1953; Hinsley, 1963; Sheehan, 1996; Luard, 1992; Claude, 1962; Gulick, 1955; Seabury, 1965) and (Spykman, 1942; Claude, 1989; Levy, 2003; Paul, 2004; Nexon, 2009). See also (Vincent & Wright, 1989).

social ends and values.<sup>7</sup> At the other extreme, international order is an entirely unintended and un-institutionalized recurring pattern (e.g., a balance of power) to which the actors and the system itself exhibit conformity but which serves none of the actors' goals or, at least, which was not deliberately designed to do so. Here, international order is spontaneously generated and self-regulating.

The classic example of this spontaneously generated order is Waltz's notion of the balance of power. Throughout history, balances of power repeatedly form though none of the great powers may seek equality of power. To the contrary, all major actors may seek greater power than everyone else but the concussion of their actions (which aim to maximize their power) produces the unintended consequence of a balance of power.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the actors are constrained by a system that is the unintended product of their coactions (akin to the invisible hand of the market, which is a spontaneously generated order/system).

The basic intuition that drives balance-of-power theory is that states cannot be trusted with inordinate power. The danger is that a predatory great power might gain more than half the total resources of the system and thereby subjugate all the rest. It might even fold up international politics as we know it. The theory assumes that states pursue power, security, and prestige through self-help measures in an anarchical international system. States maximize their security by minimizing the probability that they will be conquered or destroyed by other states. Here, security may be defined as one minus the probability that a state will be conquered or destroyed (Lynn-Jones, 1995, p. 664). Moreover, anarchy pressures states to seek autonomy, not interdependence with others; that is, they prefer to rely on their own efforts (self-help) to maximize their power and security. In international politics, self-help takes the form of unilateral arms buildups and the immediate acquisition of military capabilities by means of alliances with other states. In the competitive international system, states maximize their power, security, and prestige by using their resources efficiently.

It is further assumed that the only truly effective and reliable antidote to power is power. Increases in power (especially a rival's growing strength), therefore, must be

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<sup>7</sup> This is Hedley Bull's definition of social order in (Bull, 1977) Chap 1.

<sup>8</sup> The source of stability in a balance-of-power system (equilibrium) may arise as an unintended consequence either of actors seeking to maximize their power or of the imperative for actors wishing to survive in a competitive self-help system to balance against threatening accumulations of power. See (Waltz, 1979, pp. 88-93) and chap. 6.

checked by countervailing power.<sup>9</sup> Balancing is done by both building arms (internal balancing) and forming alliances (external balancing) to aggregate military power. This simple internal-external balancing scheme accommodates a surprisingly rich set of possible foreign policy behaviors—complexity that Waltz and his followers have overlooked.<sup>10</sup> For instance, a state may internally balance while simultaneously passing the balancing buck to others and bandwagoning with the most dangerous threat to its survival. Josef Stalin accomplished this feat with one stroke: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939. For Stalin, the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had three intended goals: (1) to buck-pass the German threat to France and Britain—fomenting a war in the West that would bleed all parties white and allow Soviet Russia to swoop in afterwards, like a phoenix, and arise from their ashes; (2) to balance (internally) against Germany by buying sorely need time to rebuild the Red Army, which he decapitated in a paranoid rage from 1937 to 1938<sup>11</sup>; and (3) to bandwagon with Germany, the most dangerous threat to the Soviet Union, to gain control over Latvia, Estonia, and Finland, and parts of Poland, while giving Germany control over Lithuania and Danzig, and the rest of Poland.

Let us return to the question of order. There are a dozen or more Realist reasons to believe that collective security would not work when needed, or would work when it should not, or would be awful if it did work.<sup>12</sup> Waltz tells us that states under anarchy seek autonomy in a self-help world. Collective security requires centralization of power and interdependence, which are at odds with the realist principles of independence and freedom of action. As Waltz argues:

States cannot entrust managerial powers to a central agency unless that agency is able to protect its client states. The more powerful

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<sup>9</sup> Assessments of the balance of power usually include: (1) the military capabilities (the means of destruction) each holds and can draw upon; (2) the political capacity to extract and apply those capabilities; (3) the capabilities and reliability of commitments of allies and possible allies; and (4) the basic features of the political geography (viz., the military and political consequences of the relationships between physical geography, state territories, and state power) of the conflict. Regarding specific measures of power, relative national capability assessments typically include combinations of the following measures: land area (territorial size), total population, size of armed forces, defense expenditures, overall and per capita size of the economy (e.g., gross national product), technological development (which includes measures such as steel production and fossil fuel consumption), per capita value of international trade, government revenue, and less easily measured capabilities such as political will and competence, combat efficiency, and the like.

<sup>10</sup> Since Waltz denies that his theory is one of foreign policy, he may be excused for ignoring these variations. Many realists, however, have used his theory to make foreign policy predictions. See the Waltz and Colin Elman debate:

<sup>11</sup> Stalin claimed that he was purging the Red Army of senior officers accused of working for Nazi Germany, coordinating a so-called 'military-fascist plot' to commit sabotage, espionage, and overthrow the Stalinist regime.

<sup>12</sup> See (Betts, 1992; Mearsheimer, 1994/95).

the clients and the more the power of each of them appears as a threat to the others, the greater the power lodged in the center must be. The greater the power of the center, the stronger the incentive for states to engage in a struggle to control it.

States, like people, are insecure in proportion to the extent of their freedom. If freedom is wanted, insecurity must be accepted. Organizations that establish relations of authority and control may increase security as they decrease freedom. If might does not make right, whether among people or states, then some institution or agency has intervened to lift them out of nature's realm.

For Waltz, the problem with institutions is not that they are hard to create and set in motion, but that “once created they may take on something of a life of their own; they may begin to act with a measure of autonomy, becoming less dependent on the wills of their sponsors and members” (Waltz, 2000, p. 19). But this is something that neither he nor his fellow structural realists truly fear. For them, institutions serve not the international community’s interests but the national interests of the powerful states that create them; and they survive in their original form as long as they serve the major interests of their creators. International order of any kind is always a product of power.<sup>13</sup>

### **Unipolarity and the Pressures Against Restraint**

“Never since the Roman Empire has power been so concentrated in one state,” Waltz observed after the Cold War (Waltz, 2000, p. 17). It was not an observation meant to elicit cheerfulness or optimism, even for Americans, who might have been expected to celebrate their victory over the Soviets and newly exalted position of unipolarity. Waltz set out immediately to rain on their parade. Unbalanced power, he warned, no matter who wields it or how benign their intent, is a potential danger to others. In International politics, overwhelming power repels and leads other to try to counterbalance it. Concentrated power is easily misused by those who possess it, and so invites distrust. It also short-lived. Dominant powers overextend themselves; they take on too many tasks beyond their own borders, thus weakening themselves in the long run. Waltz saw no reason to expect American exceptionalism here. It, too, would foolishly exercise its unbalanced power in capricious and overbearing ways. The United States, he pointed out, had a long history of meddling in the affairs of weak states within its own hemisphere. “American behavior over the past century in Central America provides little evidence of self-restraint in the absence of countervailing power.

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<sup>13</sup> “The nature of institutional arrangements,” as Stephen Krasner put it, “is better explained by the distribution of national power capabilities than by efforts to solve problems of market failure” (Krasner, 1991, p. 234).

Contemplating American history and measuring its capabilities, other countries may well wish for ways to fend off our benign ministrations” (Waltz, 2000, p. 3).

For Waltz, the survival and expansion of NATO was a catastrophic overreach on the part of the United States. The reasons for NATO expansion were weak and mostly found at the level of American domestic politics. The reasons for opposing expansion were strong. It drew new lines in Europe, alienated those left out, could find no logical stopping point west of Russia, weakened those in Russian most in support of liberal democracy and capitalism, while strengthening illiberal and anti-West forces in Russia. Most dangerous of all for the United States and its allies, NATO expansion pushed “Russia toward China instead of drawing Russia towards Europe and America” (Waltz, 2000, p. 5). In NATO, Waltz saw, the only force that could overcome the “long history or mutual suspicion and enmity” between Russia and China (Waltz, 2000, p. 5). Unfortunately, reckless overexpansion is an all-too predictable mistake made by a preponderant power. All the powerful reasons against enlarging NATO and in favor of U.S. grand strategic restraint were not powerful enough to overcome the structural vice to which great powers easily succumb in a unipolar world, overextension (Waltz, 2000, p. 13).

### **The end of Unipolarity: A Balance Almost Restored**

Waltz spoke of a unipolar moment of sorts. He did not predict nearly thirty years of a global balance disrupted but not restored. Better late than never for Waltz’s theory. It finally appears that America’s unchallenged primacy has faded. China is emerging as a peer competitor seeking to overtake the reigning hegemon.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the United States still accounts for roughly 29.93 per cent of global wealth (China only 17.7%), 35 per cent of world innovation, and 40 per cent of global military spending (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2019).

But, according to World Bank statistics, China’s GDP has soared from 20 percent of the U.S. level in 1991, to 120 percent today measured by purchasing power parity (PPP)—the metric that both the CIA and the International Monetary Fund use to compare national economies. In 2014, the U.S. fell to second place behind China, for the first time since the 1870s (MacDonald & Parent, 2018, p. 21). That said, it is a rather misleading, though oft-cited statistic. With four times as many citizens as the

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<sup>14</sup> For two important recent works that adopt the logic of “power transition” theory, see (Allison, 2017; Friedberg, 2011). The classic statements of power transition are (Organski, 1958; Organski & Kugler, 1980) and. See also (Tammen, et al., 2000; DiCicco & Levy, 2003; Kugler & Lemke, 1996; Kim & Morrow, 1992) and (Lemke & Reed, 1996).

United States, China has only one-third the GDP PPP per capita (\$21,084) of the United States (\$67,082) (MGM Research, 2018).<sup>15</sup>

In 2012, China surpassed the U.S. to become the world's biggest trading country measured by the sum of exports and imports of goods according to official figures from both countries.<sup>16</sup> And prior to this milestone, China had already become the world's largest exporter of goods in 2009 (Monaghan, 2014). The economic balance of power has shifted most dramatically in Asia, where China is the number one trading partner of every East Asian country, including U.S. allies (Allison, 2020, p. 34). China has "overtaken the United States in total foreign investment, renewable energy production, number of Internet users, and back-end research and development (R&D) spending" (MacDonald & Parent, 2018, p. 21). According to *Bloomberg*, China will dethrone the United States as the world's largest economy as measured by GDP by 2030 (Scott & Sam, 2019).

The remarkable shift in China's economic fortunes—twenty-five years ago, its economy was smaller than Italy's; it is now twenty-four times the size it was then—has fueled the growth and improved quality of its military forces. Meanwhile, America's qualitative edge over China has narrowed after nearly a decade of gradual decline in the U.S. military budget's topline. During the celebration parade for the seventieth birthday of the People's Republic of China, for instance, President Xi unveiled the Dongfeng-41, a state-of-the-art missile that can travel at twenty-five times the speed of sound toward targets more than nine thousand miles away, farther than any comparable missile in the U.S. arsenal (Osnos, 2020, pp. 32,34).

More important still are the national security implications of China's great leap forward in the cutting-edge sector of artificial intelligence (AI). Back in 2016, President Xi Jinping set national targets to put China on a path to global supremacy in AI technology and related applications by 2030. So far, his plan is succeeding. Led by his designated national champions—Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, iFlytek, and SenseTime, China is not just a near-peer competitor but already a full-spectrum peer competitor of the United States in commercial and national security applications of AI—from facial recognition to fintech to drones and 5G (Allison & 'Y, 2020, p. 11). Unlike the U.S.-Soviet competition in developing and deploying nuclear weapons, the AI race between

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<sup>15</sup> [The comparison of GDP per capita for 2020 is even more lopsided in the U.S.'s favor: China \(\\$10,971\) compared with the US \(\\$67,082\). In 2020, China's GDP per capita is less than that of the US in 1980. See \(MGM Research, 2018\).](#)

<sup>16</sup> In 2012, U.S. exports and imports of goods totaled \$3.82 trillion, while China's amounted to \$3.87 trillion. See (Bloomberg News, 2013).

the United States and China will dictate battlefield superiority. “Advances in AI have the potential to change the character of warfare for generations to come. Whichever nation harnesses AI first will have a decisive advantage on the battlefield for many, many years,” predicts Secretary of Defense Mark Esper.<sup>17</sup> The inescapable fact is that future warfare will be AI-driven. More generally, the outcome of the AI contest will decisively impact the power trajectories of both countries.

As the gap in relative power between the United States and China shrinks, unipolarity will eventually give way to a more bipolar system. The key words are “eventually” and “more.” Most observers want to jump the gun and to see more change than is warranted. The *Economist*, for instance, recently declared that the “Chinese century is well under way,” calling China a “new hegemon” that “has already replaced [America] as the driver of global change” (The Economist, 2018). This is premature. The United States still holds a huge lead over everyone else—it has four times as much wealth as China and more than five times the military capabilities. Most important, the United States exerts enormous control over the international financial system. “U.S. sanctions are based on monopoly power over a global commons: the world’s reserve currency and medium of exchange” (Stevenson, 2022, p. 25; Mulder, 2022). New York is effectively the organizational headquarters of global capitalism; and the dollar’s role in the global payments system means that the U.S. Treasury has the power to impose financial sanctions on targets anywhere in the world. In contrast, the status of China’s power resources is inflated by gross indicators (like GDP and military spending) that overstate the power of populous countries (Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower*, 2018; Beckley, *The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters*, 2018). In addition, China’s continued rise faces strong headwinds, including a slowing economy, massive protests in Hong Kong, an election in Taiwan that rebuffed Beijing, a protracted trade war with the United States, and the coronavirus epidemic.

Arguably, the most worrisome internal problem for China is Xi Jinping himself. His push to steer China away from capitalism and the West—tightening controls on private businesses, from tech giants to property developers—has thrown the economy into a state of uncertainty and slow growth. His heavy-handed “lockdown” approach to the Covid crisis has also hurt consumer spending and factory output. The second most worrisome problem is China’s worker-to-retiree ratio, largely the result of its disastrous one-child policy. While China now has a 5-to-1 worker-to-retiree ratio, if the birthrate

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<sup>17</sup> As quoted in (Allison & ‘Y, 2020, p. 20).

continues as is, the ratio would be only 1.6 to 1 by 2040. Despite these problems, a state-managed capitalist China presents the United States with a dramatically more potent threat than the Soviet Union ever did. But true bipolarity has not quite arrived.

And there is a good geopolitical reason to doubt that Sino-American bipolarity will ever emerge: as land powers become stronger, the more they threaten their neighbors and provoke balancing coalitions against them. This bedrock realist principle tells us that the growth in China's power (particularly its power projection capabilities) will be limited by regional balance-of-power forces. Unlike the Soviet Union before it, China is completely encircled by a formidable array of mostly hostile countries, viz., India, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Russia. It is hard to imagine that such a hemmed-in China could ever grow to become a world power capable of competing with the United States on an equal footing (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). Beijing's power will be stopped shy not only of global hegemony but, most likely, of superpower (or world-power) status within a symmetric bipolar system.

Still, global power is increasingly more diffuse. This means that alliances can and will form to counterbalance American power. Consistent with this theme, the U.S. Intelligence Community has, for years now, warned of increased threats from tighter Sino-Russian cooperation. A 2019 report on global threats claimed that China and Russia: (1) "are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s," (2) "are expanding cooperation with each other and through international bodies to shape global rules and standards to their benefit and present a counterweight to the United States and other Western countries," and (3) are pouring resources into a "race for technological and military superiority" that will define the twenty-first century (Coats, 2019, pp. 4-24). On February 4, 2022, China and Russia declared their friendship with "no limits." A month after, Russia invaded its neighbor, Ukraine, compelling Beijing to adjust its relations with the U.S.-led West and unraveling years of Chinese efforts to paint itself as a responsible world leader.

Putin's main ambition is to restore Russia's rightful place in the global hierarchy as a great power. With only limited and declining material capabilities relative to those of China and the United States, however, Russia can only move up the ladder of prestige by reducing the status and influence of the United States. China plays a special role in this strategy: Putin views the Sino-Russian relationship as a tool to challenge U.S. influence. Cooperation between Russia and China imposes costs on U.S. actions. The very idea of friendly Sino-Russian relations frightens Washington, deterring it from aggressive acts against either of them. Partnering with China also



promises long-term material gains for Russia, in terms of the potential economic benefits that, in theory, will accrue from Chinese loans and investment and the security benefits that would materialize if a genuine Sino-Russian military alliance were to emerge. Most tangible in the short term, it signals to America and its allies—and to audiences within Russia’s sphere of influence—that Russia is China’s equal, not junior, partner (Elgin, 2019).

At the core of balance of power is an Arab proverb: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Assessing the number one threat to their countries’ survival, national security analysts in both Russia and China see the specter of the United States—a superpower that continually challenges their interests in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea, and that actively works to undermine, even topple, each leader’s control within his own society (Allison G. T., 2019, p. 7). That said, the alliance suffers from both short- and long-term problems. For China, the problem has already manifested itself: by cozying up to Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping emboldened Russia to invade Ukraine (and possibly its other neighbors), putting enormous pressure on the Chinese leader to talk his closest friend out of the war. For Russia, the alliance poses a long-term problem: Putin sees Beijing as a likely future threat.

Waltz’s realism tells us that states in possession of formidable offensive military capability cannot help but threaten the survival of their neighbors. Great powers especially fear states with large populations and rapidly expanding economies—an anxiety that is considerably heightened when they share a long border (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 42-46). China has more than eight times as many people and seven times as large a GDP as Russia. Not surprisingly, Moscow has made balancing China’s influence in, for instance, Mongolia a priority. The danger is that, if Russia’s 2,165-mile border with Mongolia fell under Chinese control, its Siberian underbelly would be exposed (Goodson & Addleton, 2020). Thus, Putin is playing a tricky game—developing Russia’s relationship with China as a political weapon against the United States, while guarding against China’s potential threat to Russia’s own future power and security. That noted, there is little evidence that Putin desires a real military alliance directed against the United States; and even if he did, China would not acquiesce to building one. Beijing is so far reluctant to form long-term alliances, and it surely understands the importance of the United States for Chinese prosperity.

### **Theft, Emulation, and the Cyber Age**

Waltz’s theory explains why and how international structure compels states to emulate the successful institutions, technologies, and governing practices of one another.

Because units that exist in anarchic realms are constrained to put a premium on their relative competitive effectiveness, states emulate the military, political, and economic ways of the most powerful and successful in their number.

Thus, João Resende-Santos observed in 1996, “Just as U.S. ‘Fordism’ had inspired industrial organization for the industrial powers in the early part of the century, Japan served as a model of industrial planning and organization for the South East Asian ‘Tigers’ and other states in the postwar period, including Japan’s advanced industrial partners” (Resende-Santos, 1996, p. 195).<sup>18</sup> Likewise, over the past twenty-five years, American practices in virtually every leading sector technology—from aerospace to biotechnology to robotics—have been adopted by its competitors for the purpose of enhancing their relative competitiveness, precisely as Waltz’s theory of international constraints under anarchy predicts.

We see this pressure to emulate and “keep up with the Joneses” most clearly in the U.S.’s sole peer competitor, China. While Waltz’s book was published many decades before the use of cyber theft to emulate the most modern successful economic and military practices, and thereby produce “sameness” among the competitors, his theory predicts and explains this kind of behavior. Some estimate that China stole American intellectual property to the tune of \$600 billion dollars of value a year between 2008 and 2013. Theft on this massive scale certainly gave a large boost to Beijing’s Made in China 2025 (MIC 2025) initiative—a broad industrial plan introduced in 2015, which seeks to boost China’s economic competitiveness in areas where the United States has strong comparative advantages. Emphasizing technology and innovation as drivers of national growth and productivity, MIC 2025 will augment China’s domestic production of artificial intelligence systems, telecommunications, aerospace products, biotechnology, semiconductors, microelectronics, clean energy technology, and pharmaceuticals. Consistent with neorealist assumptions that state’s prefer national autonomy and self-sufficiency over economic interdependence, MIC 2025 promises to advance China position in the global manufacturing value chain, leapfrogging into emerging technologies and reducing reliance on foreign firms.

Critics of China’s commercial policies point out that “they steal U.S. technology and then sell their plagiarized equipment at a lower price. Worse, they seek to build an alternative, China-led global telecom infrastructure, positioning Beijing to spy on the users and capture yet more U.S. commerce” (Epstein, 2019, p. A17). In

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of military emulation inspired by Waltz’s theory, see (Posen, 1993).

February 2020, the Trump administration escalated its pressure campaign against the Chinese telecommunications giant, filing a federal indictment against Huawei for racketeering and conspiracy to steal trade secrets.

We should not be surprised by China's theft operations. This is what all up-and-coming revisionist powers do: they steal commercial secrets; they import and pirate, all while attempting to ride free on the security provided by the existing hegemon. Beijing's tactics today look very much like those of the United States when it was a rising power challenging British hegemony. As Katherine Epstein explains: "In its drive for world status, America routinely pilfered foreign technology well into the 20th century, and it gained considerable strategic advantage from its theft" (Epstein, 2019, p. A17).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, America became a dominant commercial power largely by appropriating technology from imported European innovations and then protecting the stolen technology through patent registration. The historian Doron S. Ben-Atar writes:

...the statutory requirement of worldwide originality and novelty for American patents did not hinder widespread American appropriation of innovations protected under other nations' patent and intellectual property laws. In fact, once a technology was in the New World, its introducers quickly claimed it as their own, and used the courts to discourage infringements. The Boston Manufacturing Company registered nine patents and obtained the rights to two others. It hired the country's most famous lawyer, Daniel Webster, and sued competitors for patent infringement. Claiming ownership of a pirated innovation was quite easy. Obtaining a patent under the 1793 act involved little more than filing the necessary papers and paying the thirty-dollar registration fee. The poorly staffed Patent Office was in no position to examine the merits of the nearly ten thousand patents it issued from 1793 to 1836. As one critic charged, most American inventions registered with the patent office were at best only slightly different from known and operating existing devices. The mechanics of patent registration not only betrayed the spirit of the original legislation by granting patents to innovations of questionable originality, but also, in effect, it allowed wealthy importers of European technology, such as the Boston Associates, to claim exclusive rights to imported innovations and use the courts to validate their claims and intimidate competitors (Ben-Atar, 2004, p. 204).

Technology transfer accounted not only for the rapid economic growth of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century but also for the experimental and innovative reputation of the "American system of manufactures," as New World innovators rejected wholesale adoption of imported machinery and processes and

opted, instead, for selective adaptation and tinkering (Ben-Atar, 2004, pp. 213-214). Ben-Atar concludes:

In the span of seventy years an agricultural republic with some household manufactures that had more in common with the Middle Ages than with the industrial world transformed itself into a world leader of cutting-edge industrial technology. American machines and the ‘American system of manufacturing,’ as the British press called it, became models for worldwide imitation. Like modern developing nations, early in its history the United States violated intellectual property laws of rivals in order to catch up technologically. Integration into the international community required that the government of the United States distance itself from such rogue operations. In the process the United States had come full circle. The fledgling republic, once committed to technology piracy, had become the primary technology exporter in the world. The years of piracy upon which the new status was founded, however, were erased from the national memory. The intellectual debt to imported and pirated technology did not turn the United States into the champion of free exchange of mechanical know-how. As the technology began to flow eastward across the Atlantic, the United States emerged as the world’s foremost advocate of extending intellectual property to the international sphere (Ben-Atar, 2004, p. 214).

These tactics persisted into the first half of the twentieth century, as Katherine Epstein documents: “The 1912 Supreme Court case *Crozier v. Krupp*, which formally extended the power of eminent domain to intellectual property, concerned a German gun-carriage design the U.S. Army had plagiarized. That same year, a U.S. naval officer walked off with the plan for the British navy’s super-secret long-range torpedo” (Epstein, 2019, p. A17).<sup>19</sup> Next, Washington officials pushed the limits on the types of policies they would consider in response to a perceived threat to the U.S. economy and national security from German dominance of the synthetic organic chemicals industry after World War I. “Most striking,” Kathryn Steen posits, “was the American confiscation of German property, which included German chemical subsidiary plants and German-owned U.S. patents”—confiscations that supplemented U.S. tariffs and other discriminatory trade policies against German manufacturers designed to protect the development of America’s infant chemical industry (Steen, 2014, p. 4).

The bottom line is that emerging powers “have compelling strategic incentives to control the sinews of global economic activity as well as to acquire foreign

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<sup>19</sup> Also see (Epstein K. C., *Torpedo: Inventing the Military-Industrial Complex in the United States and Great Britain*, 2014; Epstein K. C., *Scholarship and the Ship of State: Rethinking the Anglo-American Strategic Decline Analogy*, 2015)

technology” by hook or by crook (Epstein K. E., 2019, p. A17). In this regard, China is no different than any other rising power in history.

### **The Prudence of Restraint**

“Because power is a means and not an end,” Waltz reasoned, states “cannot let power, a possibly useful means, become the end they pursue. The goal the system encourages them to seek is security. Increased power may or may not serve that end.” He went on to say: “States can seldom afford to make maximizing power their goal. International politics is too serious a business for that” (Waltz, 1979, pp. 126-127). Little wonder that Waltz became an outspoken critique of NATO expansion and what he viewed as the reckless “overextension” of U.S. power in the post-Cold War age. Thus, as NATO swelled to thirty states, home to nearly one billion people, in multiple rounds of expansion that brought it closer and closer to Russia’s borders, Waltz predicted the current Sino-Russian alliance:

Even while American leaders were assuring Russia that NATO's expansion was not motivated by animosity towards Russia, American and NATO estimates of the costs entailed depended in large measure on speculations about when Russia would once again pose a military threat to Europe. As Boris Yeltsin said in Moscow, with President Jiang Zemin at his side, 'someone is longing for a singlepolar world'. Pressure from the West helps to unite them in opposition to this condition. Both parties now speak of a 'constructive partnership aimed at strategic co-operation in the twenty-first century'. The American rhetoric of globalization turns out to be globaloney: we fail to understand how our policy for one region affects another. Winners of wars, facing few impediments to the exercise of their wills, have often acted in ways that created future enemies (Waltz, 2000, p. 32).

To be sure, he was not the only Realist calling for restraint.<sup>20</sup> George Kennan famously proclaimed NATO enlargement “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era” (Kennan, 1997, p. A23). Likewise, the French President Jacques Chirac presciently warned at the time: “We have humiliated them too much...the situation in Russia is very dangerous...One day there will be dangerous nationalist backlash.”<sup>21</sup>

Fast forward to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. The extent and ruthlessness of Putin’s war has engendered global outrage and shock. Yet, for Realists who watched NATO expand to include nearly every nation in Central and Eastern

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<sup>20</sup> For realist restraint, see (Posen B. R., 2015; Rosato, Sebastian, & Schuessler, 2011; Thrall & Friedman, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> French President Jacques Chirac as quoted in (Kaplan, 2022, p. 28). See also (Sarotte, 2022)

Europe that had been a Kremlin vassal, the attack is hardly a surprise. It was a long-anticipated backlash waiting to happen (Kaplan, 2022, p. 27). Its most powerful cause was the NATO conference in Bucharest in April 2008. There, in a surprise move, President George W. Bush urged letting Ukraine and Georgia embark on a “Membership Action Plan,” which aimed for their full membership in the future.<sup>22</sup> The official communique read: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”<sup>23</sup> As Rajan Menon avers, “President George W. Bush’s administration couldn’t possibly have believed Moscow would take Ukraine’s entry into the alliance lying down” (Menon, 2022). Indeed, the American ambassador to Russia, William J. Burns, had warned in a cable two months earlier:

Russia’s opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the impact on Russia’s interests in the region. It is also politically popular to paint the U.S. and NATO as Russia’s adversaries and to use NATO’s outreach to Ukraine and Georgia as a means of generating support from Russian nationalists. While Russian opposition to the first round of NATO enlargement in the mid-1990’s was strong, Russia now feels itself able to respond more forcefully to what it perceives as actions contrary to its national interests.<sup>24</sup>

Would a grand strategy of restraint long advocated by Waltz and other realists have prevented the war? Or as Fred Kaplan asks and answers: “Is NATO enlargement to blame for Putin’s revanchism, or has it served as a pretext for fulfilling his obsessive nostalgia for empire? Probably a bit of both” (Kaplan, 2022, p. 28). Yes, but this assumes that Putin would have risen to power even if the U.S. had not enlarged NATO and instead pursued a grand strategy of restraint. Moreover, for the United States and its allies, the benefits of restraint far exceed the prevention of a cruel and misguided war in Eastern Europe waged by a delusional leader who dreams of regaining superpower

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<sup>22</sup> John Mearsheimer, arguably Waltz’s most famous disciple, has most forcefully made this case. In a recent *New Yorker* interview, he said: “I think all the trouble in this case really started in April, 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, where afterward NATO issued a statement that said Ukraine and Georgia would become part of NATO. The Russians made it unequivocally clear at the time that they viewed this as an existential threat, and they drew a line in the sand. Nevertheless, what has happened with the passage of time is that we have moved forward to include Ukraine in the West to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia’s border. Of course, this includes more than just NATO expansion. NATO expansion is the heart of the strategy, but it includes E.U. expansion as well, and it includes turning Ukraine into a pro-American liberal democracy, and, from a Russian perspective, this is an existential threat.” As quoted in (Chotiner, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Bucharest Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008: (NATO, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Ambassador William J. Burns (2008).

status. Contrary to grand strategic restraint, the “overextension” of power—the vice which Waltz associated with unipolarity and unchecked power—not only needlessly drains the unipole of its resources and energy but also generates avoidable enemies—enemies that might better serve as allies to balance the real threat. Discussing this point, John Mearsheimer recently opined:

We should be pivoting out of Europe to deal with China in a laser-like fashion, number one. And, number two, we should be working overtime to create friendly relations with the Russians. The Russians are part of our balancing coalition against China. If you live in a world where there are three great powers—China, Russia, and the United States—and one of those great powers, China, is a peer competitor, what you want to do if you’re the United States is have Russia on your side of the ledger. Instead, what we have done with our foolish policies in Eastern Europe is drive the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. This is a violation of Balance of Power Politics 101 (Chotiner, 2022).

The problem is that U.S. post-Cold War foreign policy has been captured by liberal internationalism or “liberal hegemony.”<sup>25</sup> It is a creed that sees multilateral regimes, democratic institutions, economic interdependence, and the export of American values and norms as the most effective and appropriate means to enhance U.S. security, to increase American prosperity, and to get others to do and want what Washington wants. Fueled by an activist mentality at its core, liberal internationalism views wars intended to create liberal subjects abroad as vital to national security. The goal of recreating the world in America’s own image, liberals believe, “will make the world more peaceful and ameliorate the dual problems of nuclear proliferation and terrorism. It will reduce human rights violations and make liberal democracies more secure against internal threats” (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. viii).

In sharp opposition, realists have promoted an alternative U.S. grand strategy of restraint that would shift defense burdens (pass the balancing buck to America’s allies) and accept multipolarity. Rooted in structural realist principles, arguments for restraint suggest that the United States is in relative decline and must stop wasting its precious assets on foolish activist foreign policies.<sup>26</sup> As Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent show, history suggests that strategies of retrenchment—such as reducing military spending, restructuring military forces, reforming institutions, redeploying forces, defusing flashpoints, and redistributing burdens---can arrest and even reverse the

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<sup>25</sup> For recent realist critiques of liberal hegemony, see (Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2018; Desch, 2008; Kay, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> For a forceful and consistent voice on this issue, see (Ruger, 2020)

relative decline of great powers (MacDonald & Parent, 2018). The key is to bring a state's power and commitments into balance and thereby prevent further overstretch, insolvency, and exhaustion.

Alas, advocates of a new foreign policy based on the principles of structural balance-of-power realism and restraint have been completely shut out of the American foreign policy establishment since the onset of unipolarity (and arguably since 1945). As Sumantra Maitra points out: "The prevalent view is that unipolarity, a unique geopolitical aberration, and American geographic security made primacy the default cost-free option. The American foreign policy establishment prefers meddling around the globe because they can afford to without cost or political price" (Maitra, 2022). Realist restrainers have been on the outside looking in for decades even though most Americans have realist sympathies and regularly vote for the more restrained of the two presidential candidates (Drezner, 2008).

Ironically, a significant problem for restrainers rooted in Waltzian realism is that the main explanations for the dominance of U.S. primacy and Liberal Hegemony reside at the level not of international structure but of domestic politics, that is, within the U.S. foreign policy establishment itself.<sup>27</sup> As Robert Jervis writes, "regime and leadership characteristics are likely to matter more in unipolarity than in other systems because of the weakness of external constraints" (Jervis, 2009, p. 204). Thus, as Justin Logan concludes: "Proponents of sweeping changes to American strategy should recognize the centrality of domestic politics to the foreign policies of a unipole," focusing on unit-level foreign policy inputs—"public opinion, elite preferences, and the institutional desires of the national-security bureaucracy" (Logan, 2010, pp. 16,36).<sup>28</sup> It is high time, as William Ruger maintains, for those opposed to Liberal Hegemony to "seize this moment to establish a new foreign policy—one that is consistent with our character and principles and bolsters the nation's safety and economic well-being" (Ruger, 2020).

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<sup>27</sup> See (Walt, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> See also (Porter, 2018)



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