The US is committed to continued hegemony. The current unipolar world is secured by unmatched military power. America's view their hegemony as a form of leadership in-line with Anglo-American tradition of securing the global commons for commerce and trade. As a result of American success in ensuring free trade and open markets, a flourishing globalized society has seen a diffusion of power as states emerge economically. In what appears to be a transition away from hegemony, three possible futures are presented: a bipolar world, a multipolar world and continued unipolarity. Realist thought prevalent in US strategic planning documents and contemporary literature fear the evident shift away from unipolarity. This unwillingness to accept its own fading hegemony could drive the US to rely on its military supremacy to resist the emergence of other powers. Maintaining hegemony beyond its natural life through military supremacy will bring instability to world order. However, if the US "is able to rise above the impulse to build nightmarish scenarios based on a paranoia about the threat of a rivalry with China or the world collapsing into anarchy in the absence of a hegemon" the nation can retain its leadership.
FUTURE WAR PAPER

TITLE:

Unipolar Moment or Unipolar Era: An Assessment on the Endurance of US Hegemony

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  
Research Question, Thesis, Method, and Limitations ......................................................... 1  
Perspectives on Hegemony .................................................................................................. 3  
The World Today .................................................................................................................. 4  
Possible Futures .................................................................................................................. 6  
Bipolar World ...................................................................................................................... 6  
Multipolar World .................................................................................................................. 8  
Unipolar World .................................................................................................................... 10  
Summary and Conclusions ................................................................................................. 12  
Citations ............................................................................................................................. 14  
Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 17
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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the US has unrivaled strength in the world. It is dominant by every measure: military, economic, technological, diplomatic and cultural. While the world has seen hegemonic power in the past, the gap between the US and all other powers is unprecedented; it has yielded an international structure unique to modern history.

Since the emergence of the US as a global hegemon, academics and social scientists have been predicting America’s demise. Predicting the rise and fall of great powers brings vast disagreement. However, one theme remains constant across the literature; nothing lasts forever in world politics. While Americans might wish for the US to remain a hegemonic power forever, “realists consider it almost a law of international politics that, as one nation becomes too strong, others will team up to balance its power.” However, a US that seeks to “maintain a military without peer,” appears unwilling to cede its hold on world hegemony. What popular columnist Charles Krauthammer dubbed the “the unipolar moment” appears to be resilient. The Cold War has been over for more than 20 years. US hegemony remains and “the prevailing view among policy makers and foreign policy scholars today is that America’s economic, military and technological advantages are so great that it will be a long time before US dominance can be challenged.” The US is determined to avoid its predestined downfall through the adoption of a strategy of military primacy. According to the 2010 National Security Strategy, “we will maintain the military superiority that has secured our country, and underpinned global security for decades.”


The principal question of this research is a reflection of the above quote from the National Security Strategy: will US military superiority continue to secure our country and
underpin global security in the coming decades? Can the “unipolar moment” survive the inevitable decline predicted by political scientists?

The thesis of this paper is that attempts to maintain hegemony beyond its natural life though military supremacy will bring instability to world order. US influence and economic power is waning while American military primacy continues to be unchallenged. American realists hesitant to accept a multipolar world order could lead the nation toward military adventurism in a bid to check rising powers. It is not rising powers that will destabilize global security. It is the actions of the hegemon in recognizing and managing its own decline that will have the most effect on whether there is a violent or non-violent transition away from unipolarity. US-Sino relations are presented as a vignette to illustrate American resistance to its fading hegemony. While China is a recurring theme, this paper is not about the rise of China. Instead, the topic here is the US ability to manage its own decline.

The research employs a scenarios approach. Using Robert Gilpin’s theory of international political change, three possible futures are presented: a) continuation of a unipolar world under US hegemony, b) a bipolar world order with the ascendance of China, and c) a multipolar world with power being diffused among several emerging nations. Each scenario reveals the fears of a nation confronted with the possible decline of its own hegemony.

This research is limited in that it focuses primarily on China and ignores the rise of other nations. That is not to imply that a bipolar world is the most likely future, nor should it diminish the probability of a multipolar order. The emergence of Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Brazil and India indicate that a dispersal of power across multiple nations is in fact evident. However, in order to ensure an appropriate level of depth in a limited number of pages, this paper centers on China as the most likely competitor to US hegemony. Another shortcoming in this research is
that it assumes the nation state is the central player in international relations. The growing importance of non-state actors in global affairs is not addressed.

**Perspectives on Hegemony**

The term hegemony brings disparate connotations. The concept measures the level of power among states in the international system. In the dictionary, there are two definitions. The first is, "leadership or predominant influence exercised by one nation over others." Conversely, the second offers, "aggression or expansionism by large nations in an effort to achieve world domination." With regard to which definition is accepted, it would seem that where you stand largely depends on where you sit.

Traditionally anti-imperialistic, the US views hegemony in line with the first definition. It perceives itself a benevolent leader. America seeks to "confront the challenges of our time by leading a growing community of democracies." The US accepts that a hegemong is expected to maintain international institutions, organizations and norms as well as provide economic openness, peace and security to members of the international community. For three centuries, the world has been undergirded by a hegemon - first Britain, then the United States. They have created open markets, secured the global commons and defended the world from aggressors. Acclaimed journalist Fareed Zakaria wrote, "the United States has been the creator and sustainer of the current order of open trade and democratic government – an order that has been benign and beneficial for the vast majority of human kind." This is echoed in the National Security Strategy (NSS), "We have created webs of commerce, supported an international architecture of laws and institutions, and spilled American blood in foreign lands - not to build an empire, but to shape a world in which more individuals and nations could determine their own destiny, and live with the peace and dignity that they deserve."
China's view of hegemony reflects the second definition conjuring images of world domination. The concept of \textit{Ba} (hegemon) in China was invented by strategic theorists 2,800 years ago. There are sinister nuances in the concept supported by lessons in Chinese history. Specifically, in the 70's and 80's the term was used to describe the Soviet Union. It reinforced the Chinese derogatory connotation of a hegemon as a domineering state which imposes its will on others. A study conducted by Samantha Blum, defense consultant on China, found that these perceptions exist today. According to Blum, “most Chinese analysts seem to consider the fundamental goals of US grand strategy to be achieving dominance over the world.” China’s disdain for a unipolar world order is evident. The Chinese government railed against US hegemony in its assessment of the global security situation written in 2000.

Hegemonism and power politics still exist and are developing further in the international political, economic and security spheres. Certain big powers are pursuing 'neo-interventionism,' 'neo-gunboat policy' and 'neo-economic colonialism,' which are seriously damaging the sovereignty, independence and developmental interests of many countries, and threatening world peace and security.

\textbf{The World Today}

Currently, the US enjoys unrivaled strength. With just five percent of the world’s total population, the US has generated twenty to thirty percent of world output for the last 125 years. As of 2006, the US share of the Gross National Income was 29 percent. Lu Zhongwei of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations consider the US economy to be “the cornerstone of its comprehensive national strength” and “its overall advantage in the military, science and technological and IT fields.” The US technological and economic dominance has translated directly into military supremacy.

No country can match the US militarily; that is by design. On defense, the US outspends the next seven biggest spenders combined. American hegemony is underpinned by military
supremacy. The Defense Planning Guidance for fiscal years 1994 to 1999 espoused a grand strategy of preventing great powers from emerging. The guidance called for “mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.”\(^\text{24}\) The 2002 NSS confirms the US vision stating, “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”\(^\text{25,26}\)

A US strategy of ensuring continued unipolarity through unrivaled military strength returns the discussion to the two disparate definitions of hegemony. According to the US, American military strength ensures an ability to pursue the benevolent cause of furthering freedom in the world. The NSS tells us, “In keeping with our heritage and principles, we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favors human freedom.”\(^\text{27}\) While the US views military superiority as a means to advance freedom, the Chinese view of a militarized policy aligns with its sinister ideas of hegemony. According to Shen Juru, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the intent is “so that all other countries will submit to the unipolar world order, and will obey the unipolar world’s laws and regulations.”\(^\text{28}\)

In a revisit of his 1990 article, Krauthammer stated: “the unipolar moment has become a unipolar era.”\(^\text{29}\) Many argue a unipolar world is enduring while others hold that this is indeed just a moment. Stephen Burman, author of the book *State of American Empire*, comments that “no empire lasts forever” predicting the US will “decline from its current pinnacle.”\(^\text{30}\) It is argued that the unipolar system creates an imbalance. The Chinese note this imbalance stating, “The world is far from peaceful. There is a serious disequilibrium in the relative strength of countries.”\(^\text{31}\) International relations theorist Robert Gilpin discussed equilibrium in his book
War and Change in World Politics. He writes, “If the disequilibrium in the system is not resolved, then the system will be changed, and a new equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power will be established.”32 Does the disequilibrium of the current world order portend a certainty of an American demise from hegemony? Can military superiority hold off attempts to restore equilibrium? Is this a moment or an era?

Possible Futures

There are three possible futures with regard to international control structures that could arise in the coming decades. While the international system is anarchical, there are elements of order within it. “The distribution of power among states constitutes the principle form of control in every international system.”33 Gilpin describes these three control structures as:

a) Bipolar: Two powerful states control and regulate interactions within and between their respective spheres of influence.

b) Multipolar: A balance of power in which three or more states control one another’s actions through diplomatic maneuver, shifting alliances and open conflict.

34

c) Imperial or Hegemonic [Unipolar]: A single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system.

Each of these possible futures will be assessed in terms of implications for American security and international order. The concepts of the balance-of-power theory, the unipolar-stability theory and the power-transition theory will also be introduced. These academic concepts will be embedded in a literature review of American realist authors that fear an end to American hegemony.

Bipolar World

One possible future is a bipolar world with the emergence of China. China is headed toward economic superpower status. In 2003, China surpassed the US as the most popular country for foreign direct investment. It is projected that by 2030 the Chinese economy will be
larger than the US.\textsuperscript{35} An elevated economic base has allowed China to increase military modernization programs and expand its influence in the Pacific region.

American realists have developed an unhealthy fear of China’s growth. International relations theorist Christopher Layne writes “China’s great power emergence will be the paramount issue facing the US.”\textsuperscript{36} He goes on to state “China is pursuing a peaceful policy today in order to strengthen itself to confront the US tomorrow.”\textsuperscript{37} Author Stephen Mosher went so far as to title his book \textit{Hegemon: China’s Plan to Dominate Asia and the World}. In the book, he argued that China “has reawakened vengefully” and is intent to “reclaim its rightful position at the center of the world.”\textsuperscript{38}

That fear driven narrative certainly runs counter to statements in Chinese strategic planning documents. The 2008 Chinese defense white paper posits, “China will never seek hegemony or engage in military expansion now or in the future, no matter how developed it becomes.”\textsuperscript{39} Without conceding to fears of Chinese domination, there is strong reasoning to doubt China’s claim toward “peaceful development.”\textsuperscript{40} Gilpin writes, “Those who benefit most from a change in the social system and who gain the power to effect such change will seek to alter the system in ways that favor their interest.”\textsuperscript{41} China has demonstrated a desire to restore equilibrium to the world order. China’s 2002 defense white paper stated that it will “oppose all kinds of hegemonism and power politics.”\textsuperscript{42}

While it is undoubtedly an emerging power, to claim China an imminent peer competitor to the US is simply a bridge too far. Three distinct obstacles - an inferior military, competing regional powers and social disorder - will prevent China’s emergence as the \textit{other} in a bipolar world. First, China’s military will take “decades before it can challenge American primacy.”\textsuperscript{43} Chinese military modernization has caused some alarm, however the issue is trivial in
comparison to the US budget. The Pentagon estimated China spent between $105 and $150 billion on defense in 2009. That number is dwarfed by the US budget of $719 billion. The US spends 4 percent of its GDP on defense compared to just 1.4 percent for China.\textsuperscript{44} Also of note, caring for an Army of three million consumes a vast amount of the defense budget prohibiting resources from going to advanced weapons and new technologies.\textsuperscript{45} Second, regional neighbors - India, Japan and Russia - are also emerging powers and would likely check any bid at hegemony by China. This was recognized by the Chinese government, commenting in 2006 that, “a small number of countries have stirred up a racket about a ‘China threat,’ and intensified their preventive strategy against China and strove to hold its progress in check.” Finally, China has to manage the political and social challenges that arise from rapid growth in an overpopulated nation.\textsuperscript{46} Their growth has brought corruption, environmental concerns and massive migrations from farms to factories.\textsuperscript{47} According to one author, “the political challenges that lie athwart Beijing’s path to polar status are much more substantial than those that may block Washington’s efforts to maintain its position.”\textsuperscript{48} This estimate that an inferior military, competing regional powers and social disorder will inhibit China’s advance is directly addressed in its own 2008 security assessment:

China is faced with the superiority of the developed countries in economy, science and technology, as well as military affairs. It also faces strategic maneuvers and containment from the outside while having to face disruption and sabotage by separatist and hostile forces from the inside. Being in a stage of economic and social transition, China is encountering many new circumstances and new issues in maintaining social stability.\textsuperscript{49}

Multipolar World

A more likely future is a multipolar world. America’s position as the dominant economic power is fragile in the wake of globalization. An open world economy has brought a period of unprecedented growth. Author Fareed Zakaria’s best-selling book \textit{The Post American World}
dubs this phenomenon the “rise of the rest.” In 2006 and 2007, more than 120 countries grew at a rate of higher than 4 percent. The American mission to expand global markets, encourage others to embrace capitalism and establish free trade has succeeded. A victim of our own success, the resultant globalized economy has brought a balancing of economic power away from the US. According to Zakaria, “At the politico-military level, we remain in a single superpower world. But in every other dimension – industrial, financial, educational, social, cultural, - the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance.” The “rise of the rest” has brought more voices into the international arena whereas in the past, there were only a few.

Historians laud a multipolar world as more stable. The balance-of-power stability theory posits that a system made up of states in anarchy will tend towards equilibrium. This is rooted in the view that the balance-of-power in Europe from the Treaty of Westphalia through to the eve of World War I represented a stable international system. Conventional wisdom advocates the multipolar world as the most stable. The diffusion of power and potential for alignments create an uncertainty that compels caution in policymakers and facilitates adjustment to the system in response to potentially disruptive forces.

American realists don’t accept the balance-of-power stability theory. They relate a multipolar world to anarchy. In a 2004 article in *Foreign Policy*, social scientist Niall Ferguson wrote:

Critics of US global dominance should pause and reconsider the alternative. If the United States retreats from its hegemonic role, who would supplant it? Not Europe, not China, not the Muslim world and certainly not the United Nations. Unfortunately, the alternative to a single superpower is not a multilateral utopia but the anarchic nightmare of a new dark age.
The book *War, Peace and Hegemony in a Globalized World* dismisses Ferguson’s comments as “one of a growing number of neoconservative thinkers who seek to justify every US action, including its most glaring mistakes, on the grounds that these are sometimes unfortunate and always unintended byproduct of a necessary exercise of hegemony.”\(^57\) Despite the harsh critique, Ferguson’s fears are grounded in William Wohlforth’s well-known unipolar-stability theory. Wohlforth argues, “Hegemons foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state for leadership. The clearer and larger the concentration of power in the leading state, the more peaceful the international order associated with it will be.”\(^58\) If Ferguson subscribes to Wohlforth’s argument, then it is rational to believe that maintaining primacy is critical to security in the international system. The emergence of a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge US hegemony will destabilize the international system.

**Unipolar World**

The US desires a unipolar world. Realists adhering to Wohlforth’s theory reason that unipolarity provides security to the international system. US strategic guidance demonstrates a grand strategy of retaining hegemony through military primacy. The 2010 National Defense Strategy states, “The strength and influence of the United States are deeply intertwined with the fate of the broader international system.”\(^59\) Chinese scholars dismiss this as “American’s superficially singing their own praises” in an attempt to legitimize US hegemony.\(^60\) Chinese political scientists criticize Wohlforth’s theory as typical “American exceptionalism” arguing that it has more to do with the US than it is a political science theory.\(^61\) Despite these counterarguments, there are legitimate fears associated with a transition of power in the international system.
The power-transition theory tells of violence with a change to the international system. Both balance-of-power theory and unipolar-stability theory advocated stability as a central tenet. However, both recognize that transition from one world order to another is often accompanied by violence. The central claim of the power-transition theory is that “the danger of war increases when a dissatisfied challenger catches up with or even overtakes an existing hegemon.” Gilpin labels this phenomena “hegemonic war.” He states, “Although resolution to a crisis through peaceful adjustment of the systemic disequilibrium is possible, the principle mechanism of change throughout history has been war.”

The rise of a challenger, or an alliance of challengers, attempting to change the system to restore equilibrium could bring violence in two ways. First, the challenger could pursue violence as a means to balance against the hegemon. Scholars critical of the unipolar-stability theory accept this plausibility. They see unipolarity as highly “prone to conflict as other states seek to create a counterpoise to the overwhelming power of the leading state.” The second source of violence could arise from the hegemon itself as it attempts to hold its position. If a hegemon expected a “deep and irreversible setback, the dominant but declining power should prefer to fight an earlier rather than a later war.” Historically, fading hegemons are prone to military endeavors to stall economic or security loss. Ironically, the resultant imperial overstretch contributes to the hegemons demise.

The power-transition theory has not proven true in every historical case study. The peaceful transition of hegemony from Great Britain to the US in the 20th century or the relatively peaceful shift from bipolarity to unipolarity in the years after the fall of the Berlin wall both prove to be memorable exceptions. However, it is rational to assume that a shift away from unipolarity could be accompanied by violence as actors or alliances arise that have both the
desire and the power to restore equilibrium to the system. It is the actions of the hegemon in recognizing and managing its own downfall that would seem to have the most effect on whether it is a violent or non-violent transition.

Summary and Conclusions

The US is committed to continued hegemony. The current unipolar world is secured by unmatched military power. American's view their hegemony as a form of leadership in-line with Anglo-American tradition of securing the global commons for commerce and trade. As a result of American success in ensuring free trade and open markets, a flourishing globalized society has seen a diffusion of power as states emerge economically. In what appears to be a transition away from hegemony, three possible futures were presented: a bipolar world, a multipolar world and continued unipolarity. Realist thought prevalent in US strategic planning documents and contemporary literature fear the evident shift away from unipolarity. This unwillingness to accept its own fading hegemony could drive the US to rely on its military supremacy to resist the emergence of other powers. Maintaining hegemony beyond its natural life through military supremacy will bring instability to world order.

The US fears the emergence of a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge America’s hegemony. We have read alarmist quotes exhibiting fear that a militarily resurgent China seeks to rival the US. Given the obstacles to China’s development, it seems illogical to think China would choose to exercise aggression or prohibit the freedom of action of a dominant US military. However, this fear continues to permeate among military and civilian leaders that espouse a strategy of hedging China’s growing power. The NSS instructs, “We will monitor China’s military modernization program and prepare accordingly.” China demonstrates awareness of a US hedging strategy in its own strategic document: “The United States is
accelerating its realignment of military deployment to enhance its military capability in the Asia-Pacific region."\textsuperscript{68} In his testimony to congress, US Pacific Commander Admiral Willard commented that the Chinese escalation "appear[s] designed to challenge US freedom of action in the region or exercise aggression or coercion of its neighbors."\textsuperscript{69} These statements by US and Chinese leaders contribute to a security dilemma that precepts conflict.

US actions driven by the fear of an emerging China is escalating friction. According to Gilpin, a growing nation will attempt to increase its own security by expanding its political, economic, and territorial control. Great powers have always seen themselves as being forced by necessity to act to protect their interests.\textsuperscript{70} The result is a security dilemma like that which is unfolding between the US and China. The US should pursue a strategy of engagement, not containment, to welcome a rising China. Hedging strategies could provoke an actor that has the desire to restore equilibrium and bring about a violent change to the international system. A security dilemma also increases the likelihood that a resident hegemon might resort to violence to curtail that threat to the system.

Realist thought has also demonstrated a belief that multipolarity is anarchical. These advocates argue that continued hegemony is necessary to maintain global order. The US appears unwilling to accept the diffusion of power that is germane to globalization. While the unipolar-stability theory argues that a hegemon brings stability, it also shows that a fading hegemon could destabilize the system in an attempt to hold the current international order. What Layne calls "strangling the baby," a declining hegemon could attack any challenger preemptively while the hegemon has the upper hand.\textsuperscript{71} The imbalance of a contested influence and an uncontested military could result in the imperial temptation to hold power through military adventurism. Burman commented, "The US will retain the military capacity to resist challenges to its power,
but reliance on force to preserve its position will escalate conflict to a level that would damage the stability of the world order and threaten a descent into barbarism.” Use of hard power to check the “rise of the rest” will result in more actors that would desire to restore the equilibrium and change the system.

The initial research question posed here is: will US military superiority continue to secure our country and underpin global security in the coming decades? The answer is: it depends on us. If the US attempts to maintain its preeminence through military power it will bring instability to world order. Reliance on hard power will bring military adventurism, imperial overstretch, and a destabilization of global security. However, if the US “is able to rise above the impulse to build nightmarish scenarios based on a paranoia about the threat of a rivalry with China or the world collapsing into anarchy in the absence of a hegemon” the nation can retain its leadership. If the US is to hold the current international structure in place, it needs to prevent the rise of actors that have the desire to change the international structure. If the US can pursue engagement vice containment, it will deescalate security concerns and slow the attempt of emerging powers to grow militarily. If the US accepts multilateralism and commits to international institutions, it will reduce the desire of nations to change the international order. Most importantly, if the US uses its military primacy to continue a legacy of securing global trade, commerce and growth, the benign hegemon can lead a globalized world order to equilibrium. As stated in the NSS, “for all of its dangers, globalization is in part a product of American leadership and the ingenuity of the American people. We are uniquely suited to seize its promise.”

2 Ibid, 5
47 Ibid, 98
48 Wohlforth, 33
49 PRC White Paper, 2008
50 Zakaria, 2
51 Ibid, 2
52 Ibid, 5
53 Wohlforth, 24
54 Gilpin, 29
55 Waltz thru Gilpin, 88
57 Chari, 1
58 Wohlforth, 23
61 Blum, 248
62 Chan, x
63 Gilpin, 15
64 Wohlforth, 6
65 Chan, 6
66 Rasmussen, 4
67 President, “National Security Strategy”, 2010, 43
68 PRC White Paper, 2004
70 Zakaria, 114-115
71 Layne, 17
72 Burman, 15
73 Chari, 10
74 President, “National Security Strategy”, 2010, 5
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