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The Stability of a Unipolar World Revisited

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The Stability of a Unipolar World Revisited

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Grady Nixon

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Acknowledgements

My advisor on this project, Walter Russell Mead, told me that I should want my project to be like a fine Biedermeier chair. The German bourgeoisie style emphasizes smooth lined, elegant yet unembellished pieces designed on the basis of functionality. The Biedermeier style came to be around the same time Carl Von Clausewitz began writing his masterwork, *On War*. I became aware of both Clausewitz and the Biedermeier style only during the writing of this project. I hope I may do justice to both. I present to you a biedermeier-style Political Studies Senior Project. If this has already been too much of an embellishment to be considered Biedermeier, I apologize.

I would like to thank Professor Mead for his guidance and assistance throughout this project and throughout my college career. I have never had a teacher believe in me as he has, and it has made all the difference.

I would like to thank Professor Michelle Murray for her help throughout this entire process. Professor Murray has many other students and papers to be concerned with, and I cannot express my appreciation for her willingness to help me with this project. I would also like to thank Professor Ian Buruma for his willingness to participate on my board.

I would like to thank my friends who have been with me throughout college. None of them have read or likely will read this paper, but without them I would have been unable to write it at all.

I would like to thank Bard College for giving me the financial assistance that allowed me to be here.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for everything that they have done for me throughout my life. Without you, I would not be me, and I only hope to someday return to you the gifts that you have given me.

This project is dedicated to you, as am I.

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Introduction:

I set out to write a project that would have something to do with the origins of war. So I read sections of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I checked out Clausewitz's *On War*, and for some time left it on my bookshelf. I knew that, somehow, the project would deal with nuclear peace and that I would somehow offer a new critique of that theory. I read unclassified Cold War documents, Kissinger, and parts of Herman Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War*. I was interested in the issue of democracy, so I spent some time reading up on Reiter and Schuessler. To understand democracy, one should understand its origins. I brushed up on Hobbes, Locke, and Tocqueville. I knew that at some point I would have to acknowledge the philosophical underpinnings of liberalism, so I read as much of *Perpetual Peace* as I could get through. I read some Arendt at some point as well.

By the mid-point of this research process the image of my project was none the clearer. I returned to Clausewitz, this time with a more patient eye. I found that much of his theory of war could be applied to conflict of any sort, that his theory could speak to the nature of dueling interests more generally. While my research process has been scattered and at times tangential to the point of distraction, the ideas I have been concerned with have remained more or less constant. Since the outset of this project, I wanted to gain some deeper understanding of how the world works, what the United States' place in that world is, and what the condition the United States' place is in. I may

have realized too late how vast and largely unanswerable these questions are. The Senior Project is ultimately a rather small foray into the world of academic research. One can only accomplish so much in a year, and even less in sixty pages. Throughout the writing process, there have been many different pages that make up my project. I could rarely escape the feeling that the sum of the paper's parts added up to something less than a whole. Chapters have had to be cut, ideas forgotten, and arguments left behind. This final product surely has its shortcomings as a result. By the time that I had figured out what I needed to say and prove, the time to do so was already running out. I wish that I had been able to perfect this draft, to include every sentence and piece of evidence necessary to make my argument as effectively as possible. In a perfect world, this all would have been possible. However, we do not live in a perfect world. To some extent, that is the point of this project.

The End of History

At the twilight of the Soviet Union the Western world celebrated the death of geopolitics. The collapse of the Soviet Union was viewed by the public as the end of the Cold War. It signaled to scholars that the time of the bipolar system had come to an end. So as Fukuyama proclaimed "the end of history," the focus shifted away from the realist interpretation of the international system and toward a giddied excitement over a new era in which liberal democracy would have to fight no ideological rival. There was no power left to struggle against the Western order, no will to outmatch or limit the West's own.

Western scholars failed to remember a Clausewitzian principle - an enemy defeated is not an enemy destroyed. What followed the Soviet collapse was an era in which strategy was subordinated to ideology. With no one to legitimately contest the United States' power, it was easy to fall under the illusion that there would never be a true balance of power struggle again. The West made the

mistake of believing that the supremacy of its ideology accounted for its victory over the Soviet Union.

Since this belief was held to be true, it dictated the United States' actions throughout the late 1990's and early 2000's. This can be seen most clearly with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a security alliance that came into existence for the purpose of counterbalancing against the Soviet Union. Although Russian Federation leaders and officials routinely expressed their fears over NATO expansion - not to mention that the leaders of prospective member states explicitly listed security as their primary motivation for joining NATO - the West pushed forward with the liberal democratic project. The most obvious issue with the expansion was the dissonance between what the West claimed NATO had evolved into and what the organization was still perceived to be. While the revised NATO doctrine put forth the idea that NATO would exist as a community of like-minded member states, it was founded by the Western bloc in opposition to the Eastern bloc. It began as a military alliance and while its members revised its mission after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian officials did not forget its origin. There was also the issue that by never truly considering the prospect of allowing Russia full member status, the expansion carried with it the implicit notion that the organization, as an alliance, community, or whatever else, remained defined by the exclusion of Russia. NATO expansion was an ideological mission and its advocates looked over the security concerns of both those in favor of and in opposition to the project.

The West's liberal ideology expanded, but with it came an expansion of U.S. backed security assurances. This would pose no problem in a post-historical world.

The Return of Geopolitics

At the 2015 annual McGinley lecture hosted by the Heritage foundation, General James Mattis delivered a speech that described the nature and origins of the current world order. Mattis detailed his concerns over the rising threats to said order. About twenty-five minutes into his speech, Mattis summed up the United States' current dilemma with revanchist Russia. "Putin goes to bed at night knowing that he can break all the rules, and the West will try to follow the rules," he said.¹ The answer to this problem is not for the West to begin to break the rules. Mattis has extolled the value of alliance making and the importance of NATO. During his senate confirmation hearing for the position of Secretary of Defense, Mattis stated, "if we did not have NATO today, we would need to create it."² The liberal world order is in large part advanced and protected by the West's alliances. Those alliances in turn prop up the ideals of the United States, the order's hegemon. Until the end of the Cold War the West's alliances were safeguards for security. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the alliances were intended to advance the liberal democratic project and keep the West united in its goals. However, with recent Russian behavior the alliance system may need to be one of security once again, and Mattis is absolutely correct that the United States must protect its interests and its allies.

Mattis said that the Russians are "now trapped, looking at NATO as a threat and they do not see having democratic nations on their borders as a good thing. They want security through instability... Putin goes to bed at night knowing that he can break all the rules, and the West will try to follow the rules. That is a very dangerous dichotomy in the way the world is being run."³ The West will try to follow 'the rules,' as Mattis states, because the rules are in the West's interests. This, of course, is why one side of this conflict is status quo while the other is revisionist.

¹ Mattis, James. McGinley Lecture, *The Heritage Foundation*, 2015.

² United States Senate, Senate Confirmation Hearing of General James Mattis, 1/12/17

³ Mattis, 2015 McGinley Lecture, *The Heritage Foundation*

The Russian threat is oft overblown, and increasingly so. Putin is far off from having actually advanced upon any NATO state, there has yet to be any sort of extended deterrence failure. What he has achieved, though, is impressive and threatening given Russia's plethora of domestic problems. Putin has been able to, over the past decade or so, project his state's power beyond its borders to the chagrin of the United States. With Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and Russia's role in Syria's civil war, Putin has repeatedly interfered with states' sovereignty and with the United States' narrative of the international system's stability. The sum gain of his efforts is paranoia and fear. Although it has yet to be seen if this fear is warranted or not, Russia's revisionist behavior has led to the Baltic States, Poland, and others questioning their security more than they have since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The U.S. and NATO have had to seriously consider the strategic implications of NATO enlargement. This has included a great deal of writing and speech-making, as well as tangible military decisions, most significantly Obama's late-term deployment of 4,000 troops to Poland.

Project Outline

The goal of this project is to add some perspective on how we got from point A to point B. Why has geopolitics returned? The simplest answer to this question is that it never really left. It was simply stifled. In this paper I argue that the distribution of capabilities in a unipolar system allow for the suppression of strategy and security and for the promotion of ideological foreign policy. "Unipolar systems possess only one great power, which enjoys a preponderance of power and faces no competition."⁴ In the 1990's, the United States became a unipolar power and suddenly enjoyed a

⁴ Monteiro, Nuno. *Unrest Assured*, 13

lack of competition and a total dominance of power. The question of this paper is a question of the meaning of power, or rather a question over how power is assessed and then acted upon.

I begin the project by defining what unipolarity is, and explaining how both realist and liberal scholars interpreted the Soviet collapse. I then turn to the work of Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth and prominent realist scholars to illustrate the central themes and arguments surrounding unipolarity's durability.

After providing this theoretical background I critique each side of the argument and propose my own theory of unipolarity. My contention is that the system is neither as durable as Brooks and Wohlforth claim nor as susceptible to counterbalancing as the realists suggest. Instead, the unipole's preponderance of power allows for a disregard of strategy that leads to overexpansion. Without the threat of hostilities from rival great powers, the unipole can pursue a foreign policy without taking said rivals' concerns into consideration. This leads to an entanglement of vital and non-vital interests, which in turn becomes problematic when the unipolar power is confronted with the choice of whether to defend these non-vital interests or not. I then turn to the arguments for and against NATO expansion to provide some evidence of my theory and to demonstrate how, as I wrote above, we got from point A to point B. I conclude the paper with my thoughts on international relations theory in general and question scholars' desire to predict outcomes of the international system in the short and long-term.

Chapter One:

The Unipolarity Debate

When the Soviet Union fell, there was some questioning over whether the United States was a unipolar power or not. Eventually, Wohlforth would answer this question with an elegantly brief equation; “two states measured up in 1990. One is gone. No new pole has appeared: $2 - 1 = 1$.”⁵ The absence of a balancing rival to the United States marked the shift from a bipolar world to a unipolar one. The debate then turned to the question of how long unipolarity would last for.

A little more than a decade before the fall of the Soviet Union, Kenneth Waltz claimed that the smallest possible number of poles in the international system was two.⁶ The course of history proved him wrong. Following the emergence of the United States as the hegemon of the international system, scholars began to question how long the system could survive for. Realists argued that other powers would soon counterbalance against the U.S. and restore either bi- or multipolarity. For some time, this perspective dominated. Unipolarity was referred to as a “moment.”⁷ Krauthammer discussed the various ways in which the moment could end: economic downturn, isolationism, etc. Although Krauthammer rejected the idea of a quick return to multipolarity⁸ he fell in line with the conventional wisdom that, at some point, other states would reject the United States’ hegemony and the moment would end. It was against this background that Brooks and Wohlforth proposed their theory of unipolar stability. In this chapter I will outline the

⁵ Wohlforth, William C. *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 10

⁶ Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*, 136

⁷ Krauthammer, Charles. *The Unipolar Moment*, 25

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24

two most relevant perspectives of said dispute, namely those of Brooks and Wohlforth and those of prominent realist scholars. I will begin by defining unipolarity. Following this I will detail the realist thinking regarding liberal theory and then summarize the argument between Brooks and Wohlforth and the realists regarding unipolar durability.

What is Unipolarity?

“To date, scholars do not have a theory of how unipolar systems operate.”⁹ Monteiro suggests that there are three fundamental aspects of a unipolar system: “unipolarity is an interstate system...unipolarity is anarchical...unipolar systems possess only one great power, which enjoys a preponderance of power and faces no competition.”¹⁰ Unipolarity remains anarchical since states remain autonomous. The lack of total external control of the unipole limits its power. However, the unipole faces no competitor in regard to hegemony. While the unipolar power may be incapable of projecting its power in totality over the other states in the international system, it is uncontested.

In its most basic sense, unipolarity is the total dominance of a single power in the international system, without said power dissolving into global empire. A unipolar power can be contested and its aims can be denied. The unipolar power cannot exercise its outward ambition without fail, but it cannot be subordinated to the power of another state. This differs from bipolarity, in which the global system is balanced between two states. Instead, the unipolar power has sole authority in the international system. Unipolarity is in some sense similar to the conclusion of offensive realism, when a state achieves the greatest level of security possible by becoming the system’s hegemon.

⁹ Monteiro, *Unrest Assured*, 11

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,13

Realists Respond to Unipolarity

In the wake of the end of the Cold War, the validity of realist thought was questioned. Fukuyama and others argued that the war was a contest of ideas, and those of the Soviet's had been proven faulty. The end of history had come; liberal democracy would inevitably wash over the world. This was the great benefit of unipolarity; the era of ideological competition had come to an end, as had the era of geopolitics. For realists, whose theory relies on the belief that states are ultimately distrusting and security-seeking due to the anarchical nature of the international system, the prospect of great power competition coming to an end represented a threat to their entire theory. Because of this, realist scholars defended their own theories and critiqued those of liberals. Mearsheimer reduces the central tenets of liberalism to “three core beliefs...first, liberals consider states to be the main actors in international politics. Second, they emphasize that the internal characteristics of states vary considerably...liberal theorists often believe that some international arrangements (e.g., democracy) are inherently preferable to others...Third, liberals believe that calculations about power matter little for explaining the behavior of good states.”¹¹

These tenets influence another belief that liberal theorists often share; economic interdependence creates peace. “The creation and maintenance of a liberal economic order” is what promotes stability in the international system.”¹² To defend their existence, realists focused their critiques on two of the most important liberal prepositions: the democratic peace theory and the role of international institutions.

Democratic peace theory is the idea that democracies do not go to war with one another.¹³ “The explanation given generally runs this way: Democracies of the right kind (i.e., liberal ones) are

¹¹ Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 15-16

¹² *Ibid.*, 16

¹³ Russett, Bruce. *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, 4

peaceful in relation to one another.”¹⁴ Part of the optimism surrounding democratic peace theory comes from the hope that the spread of democracy will end hostilities between states that subscribe to different ideologies. This is the benefit of homogeneity, not democracy. Another part of the optimism comes from the empirical reality that “in the modern international system, democracies have almost never fought each other.”¹⁵ This phenomenon is often attributed to the fact that democracies “have other means of resolving conflicts between them and therefore do not need to fight each other.”¹⁶ The democratic peace theory extends beyond the argument that states of similar types do not engage in direct conflict with each other and instead suggests that the nature of democracy prevents democratic states from going to war with one another. The logical conclusion of the democratic peace theory is thus; “the more democracies there are in the world, the fewer potential adversaries we and other democracies will have and the wider the zone of peace.”¹⁷ The spread of democracy is then equated with the spread of peace.

In response to this, Waltz writes “democracies may live at peace with democracies, but even if all states became democratic, the structure of international politics would remain anarchic.”¹⁸ The realist counterargument to the democratic peace theory is a rejection of the role of states’ characters. Since the character of a state is temporary and internal, it has little effect on the structure of the state system. So long as the system remains anarchical, the same rules will apply and the same doubts states always have will still be present. Fukuyama claims that it is “perfectly possible to imagine anarchic state systems that are nonetheless peaceful,” so long as the states in said system resemble Hegel’s slave rather than Hobbes’ first man.¹⁹ Fukuyama suggests that the competition of the state system realists describe has more to do with an assumption that states seek something more than

¹⁴ Waltz, Kenneth. *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 6-7

¹⁵ Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, 4

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4

¹⁸ Waltz, *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 10

¹⁹ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, 255

security. What he fails to recognize is that a) security can be comprised of many things and b) when a state can never be sure of other states' motives, a security-seeking state can act in seemingly aggressive ways.²⁰

This is Waltz's point; "in the absence of an external authority, a state cannot be sure that today's friend will not be tomorrow's enemy."²¹ In essence, the realist counterargument to the democratic peace theory is that a state's system of government does not affect the state structure. Russett's point that democracies "have other means of resolving conflicts"²² accepts that conflicts do arise between democracies. The realist argument holds that there cannot be a guarantee that conflict will end altogether, even in a totally democratic world. There is always the possibility of democratic backsliding or regime failure. Waltz notes that "'wayward' democracies are especially tempting objects of intervention by other democracies that wish to save them."²³ While these types of intervention may not be as black and white as direct conflict, their existence muddles the concept of democratic peace.

Realists also critiqued the liberal contention that "international institutions enhance the prospects for cooperation among states and thus significantly reduce the likelihood of war."²⁴ Ikenberry writes that "Western order has what might be called 'constitutional characteristics' - a structure of institutions and open polities that constrain power and facilitate 'voice opportunities,' thereby mitigating the implications of power asymmetries and reducing the opportunities of the leading state to exit or dominate."²⁵ Liberals argue that institutions, not power dynamics, are to thank for the postwar peace in the West. Realists counter, "the institutionalist interpretation misses

²⁰ Such is the case with the security dilemma. See Van Evera, Stephen. *Causes of War*, p. 193.

²¹ Waltz, *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 10

²² Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, 4

²³ Waltz, *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 9

²⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 17

²⁵ Ikenberry, John G. *Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order*, 77

the point.”²⁶ Institutions survive so long as they serve a purpose; their continued survival shows only that they remain useful tools for member states pursuing of security and power.

Taking the case of NATO, Waltz writes that “the ability of the United States to extend the life of a moribund institution nicely illustrates how international institutions are created and maintained by stronger states to serve their perceived or misperceived interests.”²⁷ So long as an institution serves the interests of powerful states it will remain. Realists respond to the liberal institutionalist argument by pivoting the issue away from the outcomes of institutions and toward their creation. Waltz writes, “a state that is stronger than any other can decide for itself whether to conform its policies to structural pressures and whether to avail itself of the opportunities that structural change offers, with little fear of adverse [e]ffects in the short run.”²⁸

Realists made these arguments in response to the emergence of the unipolar system because liberals argued that the unipolar system was synonymous with the end of geopolitical conflict between great powers. Realists attempted to disprove liberal theories and prove that the unipolar moment was just that - a moment. As time went on, realists seemed to lose the argument over the meaning of the Soviet collapse. Realists asserted that eventually, through either hard or soft balancing - or as Layne suggests, “leash-slipping”²⁹ - the United States’ time as an uncontested hegemon would come to an end. Eventually Brooks and Wohlforth argued otherwise.

The Unipolar Durability Argument

Waltz and other realists argued that other powers would emerge to balance against the United States, thus reestablishing equilibrium to the balance of power. The realist argument counted

²⁶ Waltz, *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 20

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24

²⁹ See Layne, Christopher. *The Unipolar Illusion Revisited*

on unipolarity having a finite lifespan. Wohlforth, in *The Stability of a Unipolar World*, argued that the unipolar system was durable. In this section, I will outline Wohlforth's stability argument. I will then detail Brooks and Wohlforth's counterarguments against balance of power and balance of threat theories. Realists relied heavily on these theories to explain why the unipolar system would end shortly. I will conclude the chapter with some realist perspectives on unipolarity as a system.

Wohlforth writes, "none of the major powers is balancing; most have scaled back military expenditures faster than the United States has...any effort to compete directly with the United States is futile, so no one tries."³⁰ Wohlforth's argument is based in power dynamics; the total advantage of power the United States enjoys, he suggests, prevents hard balancing. For realists such as Waltz balance of power it suggests that when there is an imbalance of power in the international system, other states will rise to correct it. Wohlforth writes, "balance-of-power theory has been at the center of the debate, but absent so far is a clear distinction between peacefulness and durability...Less often noted is the fact that as long as the system remains unipolar, balance-of-power theory predicts peace."³¹ Wohlforth argues that in a unipolar world, the balance of power would promote peace since capabilities are concentrated. Following balance of power theory the chance for uncertainty is reduced in a unipolar world and thus the chance for conflict is as well. Thus, the main distinction between Wohlforth and the realists is not that one party believes unipolarity causes conflict, but that one party sees the system's end in sight and the other does not; "it is not unipolarity's peacefulness but its durability that is in dispute."³²

Much of Wohlforth's durability argument centers on his assertion that counterbalancing against a unipolar power is difficult. Indeed, he defines the unipolar system as "one in which a

³⁰ Wohlforth, *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 18

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24

³² *Ibid.*, 24

counterbalance is impossible.”³³ To outmatch the United States’ military infrastructure and thus pose a legitimate challenge to its raw power advantage, a state would have to mobilize its economy with that explicit goal in mind. To most states, such a task would inevitably undermine other state interests. Wohlforth notes that “the only other economy big and rich enough to generate military capabilities on the American scale is that of the European Union, whose 27 member states have a combined GDP larger than that of the United States.”³⁴ He goes on, “to realize that potential, however, Brussels would have to wield Europe’s aggregate economic output with the same strategic purpose as the United States, a unitary state.”³⁵ Since the EU functions as a collection of states and not as a unified actor, Wohlforth disregards the possibility of such a mobilization occurring.

Wohlforth also notes that, during the process of counterbalancing, “states are tempted to free ride, pass the buck, or bandwagon in search of favors from the aspiring hegemon.”³⁶ That is, it is often easiest and safest to align with the hegemon rather than go against it. If the international system were one in which the United States was an aspiring hegemon, balancing may be easier. Since the United States emerged from the ashes of the bipolar world order as a sole pole, there was never a time when it was an aspiring hegemon. Over time, the distribution of power will shift, “but,” he writes, “there is no evidence that this has occurred in the 1990’s.”³⁷ Until the distribution of power shifts the United States’ unipolarity will continue, since no other power can successfully balance against it. He writes, “For many decades, no state is likely to be in a position to take on the United States in any of the underlying elements of power.”³⁸ As an offshore power separated by two oceans

³³ Ibid., 29

³⁴ Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 31

³⁵ Ibid., 31

³⁶ Wohlforth, *Stability of the Unipolar World*, 29

³⁷ Ibid., 36

³⁸ He lists the “components of power as such: “economic, military, technological, and geopolitical.” See Wohlforth, *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 7

from all other great powers or potential balancing states, the United States can retain its advantages without risking a counterbalance.’’^{39,40}

Wohlforth’s argument of unipolar stability can be distilled to three points; the United States is a unipolar power; unipolarity is peaceful; unipolarity is durable. The first of these points must be taken as a given. The third point, as has been discussed, is intimately connected to the first. The United States is a unipolar power because it is vastly more powerful than any other state or alliance of states. For this to change, the power dynamics of the unipolar system would have to change, and no state or alliance of states seems to be in a position to do so.

The second point, his assertion that unipolarity is peaceful, is also grounded in the realities of power dynamics. “No other major power is in a position to follow any policy that depends for its success on prevailing against the United States in a war or an extended rivalry...At the same time, unipolarity minimizes security competition among the other great powers.⁴¹ Unipolarity is peaceful, then, because it reduces hegemonic rivalry and minimizes uncertainty. Monteiro points out that this peacefulness only extends to the absence of conflict between great powers. I would add that such direct conflict between great powers was already absent in the bipolar world.⁴²

As has already been discussed, Wohlforth believes that other powers cannot balance against the United States because of its power advantage. In *World out of Balance*, Brooks and Wohlforth write that “balance of power theory predicts that states will try to prevent the rise of a hegemon; it

³⁹ Ibid., 8

⁴⁰ That he attributes significance to the United States’ offshore status is faulty. It would only be significant through a geopolitical lens. Since the United States has committed itself to the maintenance of permanent alliances in Europe, and attached, both through rhetoric and strategy, vital interest status to those alliances, the United States’ offshore status only matters inasmuch as it is concerned with its domestic security alone.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7

⁴² The great power peacefulness could then be due to any number of things, including the institutions that were set up after WWII. I believe that those who thank nuclear weapons for this peace are likely correct, although this may be affected by the fact that we are now in a second nuclear age. See Bracken.

tells us nothing about what will happen once a country establishes such a position.”⁴³ Other than the difficulties of mobilizing one’s economy and competing against the hegemon, Brooks and Wohlforth note that “a final impediment to balancing is the opportunity cost of using resources and bending strategy toward countering the system’s strongest state.”⁴⁴ They conclude that for most states, local conflicts escalate the opportunity costs of balancing.⁴⁵⁴⁶ Their ultimate point is that once a leader crosses into the realm of unipole status, “the causal arrows reverse: the stronger the leading state is and the more entrenched its dominance, the more improbable and thus less constraining counterbalancing dynamics are.”⁴⁷ This final point against balance of power theory illuminates a key position of Brooks and Wohlforth, if it were not clear already: they assert that unipolarity is not only durable, but also self-perpetuating.

The second realist theory Brooks and Wohlforth grapple with is the balance of threat theory. Conceived of by Stephen M. Walt, balance of threat theory posits that, rather than checking the power of the hegemon or aspiring hegemon, states will balance against perceived threats, leading to soft-balancing with the intention of undermining the perceived threat’s ambition. Brooks and Wohlforth disagree with the theory itself, claiming that “using the term balancing to describe bargaining amounts in practice to equating balancing with international relations writ large...Balancing, in short, is a systemic constraint while bargaining is governed by the specific constellation of interests among the states involved in a given issue.”⁴⁸ It would be difficult to discern between soft-balancing and the natural disputes which occur between states. It would be difficult to observe, much less prove, that a state that acts in opposition to the United States’ agenda is actually acting in defiance of the United States. They write, “other states may take actions that end

⁴³ Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 35

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-9

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 40

⁴⁶ This, again, ignores the realities of the United States’ position in Europe, as will be discussed later.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 96

up impeding U.S. security policy in future years, but this will ultimately depend on a constellation of factors particular to other societies that is unrelated to U.S. power.”⁴⁹

Brooks, Wohlforth, Realists, and Liberals on what a Unipolar Power Should do

On one side of the argument, Brooks and Wohlforth claim that unipolarity is durable and peaceful. On the other, realists claim that a unipolar power will be balanced against, and thus the system is short-lived. Each respective side then offers opposite advice for a unipolar power. Wohlforth writes, “the chief threat is U.S. failure to do enough.”⁵⁰ Part of his logic stems from the belief that because the unipole has tremendous power to wield, it can use its power to promote and protect stability; “[by] exploiting the other states’ security dependence as well as its unilateral power advantages, the sole pole can maintain a system of alliances that keeps second-tier states out of trouble.”⁵¹ Not only do other states have little choice but to yield to the unipole, it is in many states’ interests to do so. A sustained interventionist policy is both beneficial to the United States and desirable to weaker states; “in each region, cobbled-together security arrangements that require an American role seem preferable to the available alternatives.”⁵² For Wohlforth, the United States has the responsibility as a unipolar power to promote order; “the more efficiently the United States performs this role, the more durable the system.”⁵³ Again, Wohlforth builds into his unipolar stability theory the assumption that unipolarity is a self-perpetuating system. Wohlforth argues that the unipolar power is unconstrained, cannot be balanced against, and should work to control other states and promote stability. He does not go so far as to claim that the unipolar system is no longer

⁴⁹ Ibid., 96-97

⁵⁰ Wohlforth, *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 8

⁵¹ Ibid., 25

⁵² Ibid., 39

⁵³ Ibid., 39

anarchical, but his argument hints at a more significant and lasting structural change than others before him had.

In the 1990's and early 2000's, NATO expansion was the battlefield over which the unipolarity debate played out. Realists opposed it, liberal scholars argued for it, and the idea of it fell in line with Brooks and Wohlforth's arguments for interventionist grand strategy. Waltz writes, "the reasons for expanding NATO are weak. The reasons for opposing expansion are strong. It draws new lines of division in Europe, alienates those left out, and can find no logical stopping place west of Russia."⁵⁴ For Waltz and other realists, NATO expansion threatened to alienate Russia, something that could provoke counterbalancing in the future. Other than to maintain a presence in Europe and exert its power, Waltz argues that there is little reason for the United States to expand NATO.

Russett writes that "the end of ideological hostility matters...because it represents a surrender to the force of Western values of economic and especially political freedom."⁵⁵ The reduction of the Soviet Union to a non-presence on the international stage made it seem as though the great powers were unified in their ideology.

In *Building a New NATO*, Ronald D. Asmus writes that "the end of the Cold War has wiped away the strategic distinction between Europe's center and periphery."⁵⁶ Once the international system stepped away from bipolarity, the various spheres of influence that made up the Western and Eastern blocs were no longer viewed in strategic terms. Asmus goes on to suggest that the power vacuum created by the Soviet Collapse could provoke instability and undermine the progress of fledgling Eastern European democracies. He writes of two 'arcs' that formed from the dust of the Cold War; "The first is the eastern arc: the zone of instability running between Germany and Russia

⁵⁴ Waltz, *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 22

⁵⁵ Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, 4

⁵⁶ Asmus, Ronald D., *Building a New NATO*, 29

from northern Europe down through Turkey, the Caucasus and middle Asia. The second is the southern arc, running through northern Africa and the Mediterranean into the Middle East and Southwest Asia.⁵⁷ He goes on to discuss how said vacuum may provoke instability by reigniting old rivalries, by pitting democracy against non-democratic forces, and by the possibility of these first two threats' spillover into the West.⁵⁸ He asserts that the West can take action to expedite and protect the world's march toward a post-historical, liberal international order.

Asmus concludes that the West must "project collective defense, democracy and security into the twin arcs of crisis. Such a strategy must be, first and foremost, political and economic. But the West must also establish a stable security framework for these regions. The obvious tool for this new strategy is NATO."⁵⁹ He proposes a more equal distribution of responsibility amongst the NATO states,⁶⁰ and the acceptance of American hegemony.⁶¹ Without full European integration and the United States' support, the prospects for success of his 'new NATO' are slim. Asmus concludes that "opening the EC to the East is the best guarantee against a revival of anti-Western nationalism and of stabilizing the process of political and economic reform."⁶² This was the reigning liberal sentiment at the dawn of the unipolar moment; the expansion of alliances would lead to the promotion of stability, freedom, and democracy.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 29

⁵⁸ Ibid., 29-30

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30

⁶⁰ Ibid., 32

⁶¹ Ibid., 33

⁶² Ibid., 35

Chapter 2:

Three Critiques and a Theory

In the last chapter I laid out the key arguments of each side of the unipolarity durability debate. The realists argue against Brooks and Wohlforth and liberalism, and thus NATO expansion and increased interventionism. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the system is durable, and thus interventionism is desirable - even necessary. Liberals argued for expansionist policy as well. In this chapter I will offer a critique of the former two arguments, lay out my theory regarding unipolarity's durability, and expand on this theory by concluding the chapter with a positive argument against liberalism.

Critique of Brooks and Wohlforth

Much of Brooks and Wohlforth's argument has already been discussed. Their contention that unipolarity is self-perpetuating is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with arguments they have made in other papers, most notably *Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Rethinking a Landmark Case for Ideas*. In said paper, the authors analyze the policy shifts that occurred during the Gorbachev era and grapple with the liberal theory that ideas played a significant role in the retrenchment, reform, and engagement of the Soviet Union in the years leading up to its collapse. Brooks and Wohlforth establish that the Soviets faced relative decline that proved to be a disproportionate burden to them. A major cause of the outsized burden, they argue, was the nature

of the international system and of globalization itself. They write, ““globalization” was not global: It took sides in the Cold War.”⁶³ The authors’ assessment of material pressures on the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era and the time immediately preceding it effectively establishes that the reform efforts seemed to follow the emergence of material pressures on the Soviet Union. This conclusion in turn diminishes the role of ideas, although the authors claim that ideational models may still have a place on the micro-level.⁶⁴

I mention this paper because it offers perhaps the best insight into the authors’ particular perspective; for Brooks and Wohlforth, as with the realists, the Soviet Union fell due to the economic burden that the bipolar system placed on it. Eventually, the Soviet Union was unable to keep pace with the West’s technological innovations and collapsed under the pressure. They analyze the Soviet fall through the lens of power dynamics and their analysis of unipolarity’s durability is made in this same mindset. It follows, then, that the authors believe the only way unipolarity can end is through a similar process of relative decline. While their argument goes against what realists claim, it is nonetheless an argument concerned solely with power dynamics. The problem with their argument isn’t that they disagree with the realists, - I will critique the realist argument shortly - the problem is that they go beyond discounting the possibility of counterbalancing and claim that unipolarity is self-perpetuating. Since Brooks and Wohlforth believe that the preponderance of the United States’ power prevents balancing, they believe that so long as such a level of power is maintained, the United States will maintain its unipolar status. They do not claim that unipolarity will be permanent, but their analysis offers no real insight into how it will come undone.

If unipolarity is self-perpetuating, the rules of the international system are structurally altered. Their argument for the durability of unipolarity justifies the assumption that the United

⁶³ Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth, *Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas*, 35

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52

States no longer has to concern itself with worries over its security. This alone is valid. Indeed, the reduction of domestic security concerns is one of the defining features of unipolarity. However, when paired with an argument for interventionist policy, their theory fails to recognize the realities of the international system. States are still security-seeking and weary of other states' intentions. Geopolitics remains of great concern to many states. Brooks and Wohlforth even emphasize this reality to *support* their theory:

“The costs and challenges of moving military forces over long distances mean that countries generally pose greater threats to their neighbors than to states farther away...The Atlantic and Pacific oceans separate the United States from the Eurasian landmass, where all the prospective balancers reside...balancing the hegemon is less likely to come at the expense of addressing local security challenges.”⁶⁵

Brooks and Wohlforth bring up the comparative likelihood of neighborly disputes occurring as further proof that the unipolar power will not have to concern itself with balancing efforts or direct conflict. In a geopolitical sense, this argument makes perfect sense. The United States not only has the greatest buffer zone in the form of oceans, it has control over these waters. Posen refers to this edge as ‘the command of the commons’ and claims that it “is the key military enabler of the U.S. global power position.”⁶⁶ What Brooks and Wohlforth fail to account for is that the United States’ interests and security concerns are not the same as weaker states. The United States projects its power beyond its borders, maintains a powerful network of alliances, and guarantees the security of said allies. Wohlforth acknowledges this when he argues that many states find the United States’ promotion and protection of stability desirable.⁶⁷ While the United States has an excellent geopolitical buffer zone, many of its allies do not. The argument that conflict between neighboring states protects the unipolar power from balancing makes little sense when the unipolar power is intimately concerned with its allies’ security. Thus, every intervention and expansionist move the

⁶⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 39

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28-29; from Barry Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28 (2003): 9

⁶⁷ Wohlforth, *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 39

United States makes extends the umbrella of its interests. Brooks and Wohlforth's pro-expansion conclusion misses the point that while the United States may not have to worry about its own security, it has to worry about the security of its allies. Inevitably there will be times when the United States' will to protect its interests is outweighed by another state's will to malign them. Expansionist policy absent of strategy only increases the likelihood of this happening.

Critique of Realists and Establishment of Another Theory

The realist argument against unipolar durability is flawed for many of the same reasons that Brooks and Wohlforth's theory is. The realist argument is also focused entirely on raw power dynamics. Yet, as I will suggest shortly, the unipolar system is not flawed because the structure provokes counterbalancing. As such, the realists misinterpret unipolarity even as they correctly question its durability. Brooks and Wohlforth's counterarguments to the balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theories are valid. I do not believe that there is anything about unipolarity in particular that would provoke hard-balancing, and I agree with Brooks and Wohlforth that there is likely no state for which a policy of hard-balancing against the United States would be desirable or even possible. I also agree with Brooks and Wohlforth that it is hard to know when states are soft-balancing and when they are simply acting in their best interests or bargaining. More broadly, I agree with Brooks and Wohlforth that the actual conventional power dynamics of the unipolar world are likely to change slowly and as a result of internal decline, rather than as a consequence of balancing from other states. What, then, undermines unipolarity?

First, there is a significant result of the unipolar power's ability, or responsibility as Wohlforth argues, to maintain an interventionist foreign policy. Wohlforth writes, "when the world was bipolar, Washington and Moscow had to think strategically whenever they contemplated taking

action anywhere within the system. Today there is no other power whose reaction greatly influences U.S. action across multiple theaters.”⁶⁸ Waltz, in his criticism of NATO expansion, makes the same point but does so with far more insight; “NATO, led by America, scarcely considered the plight of its defeated adversary.”⁶⁹ The United States does not have to concern itself with the reactions of other states in the way that it did before the era of unipolarity. Other states’ lack of influence renders their reactions to U.S. policy less important.

Although unipolarity is not an absolute hierarchy,⁷⁰ perception of power is drastically altered. The unipole faces no real security risk. This, I would suggest, is the singular element of unipolarity that distinguishes it from other systems. Domestic security is a secondary concern to the unipolar power. In the early 1990’s, following the fall of the Soviet Union, no non-allied state maintained a nuclear arsenal that posed a legitimate threat to the United State’s second-strike capability. No state in the world, then or now, posed a threat to the United States’ conventional military power. This is precisely what Wohlforth means when he writes that a unipole’s “capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced.”⁷¹ Unipolarity is defined by the reality that there is an absence of competition. In the absence of competition, security is naturally secondary to ambition.

The unipolar power thus betrays itself. When a state has achieved this position in the international system, it ignores the transient nature of its status. The United States’ uncontested status won’t be permanent. Monteiro writes, “unipolarity minimizes structural constraints on grand strategy, and the unipole is likely to see in offensive dominance an opportunity to extract maximum benefits from its preponderance of power.”⁷² While Monteiro discusses various possible behaviors of unipolar powers, the other two being defensive dominance and disengagement, this tendency

⁶⁸ Ibid., 36

⁶⁹ Waltz, *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, 22

⁷⁰ Monteiro, *Unrest Assured*, 13

⁷¹ Wohlforth, *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 9

⁷² Monteiro, *Unrest Assured*, 21-22

toward offensive dominance is reflective of history and in line with a realist perspective of the international system. The unipole possesses a level of power that assures its security. Unipolar powers then have the luxury to think far beyond security when crafting strategy.

Each of the arguments for and against unipolar durability is grounded on some conception of power dynamics. I would argue that each side of the durability argument misses an important reality of what power is and, as a result, fails to properly account for how the system itself plays out.

My argument is straightforward: a unipole does not have to concern itself with security in the same way that a great power in a bi- or multipolar system would; because of this, the unipolar power can commit itself to a grand strategy based on liberal ideology rather than on strategic thinking; because liberalism fails to understand the realities of the international system, the unipole will undermine itself by over-expanding and overcommitting. Thus, the issue with unipolarity is not that other states will balance against the unipole, but that the unipole will expand beyond its vital interests and commit to projects, states, and positions with little strategic rationale behind them. This works fine in a world in which strategy does not matter, but if the unipole's expansionist moves are contested by another power, then the question of raw power matters less than the question of Clausewitzian-defined power. That is, a combination of means and will. The United States' means are unparalleled, but in certain situations its will can prove to be inferior. This has little to do with counterbalancing. It is an outcome of the fact that the United States' policy is not in line with its strategic interests, due to the fact that the United States could pursue an ideologically driven policy when no power contested its hegemony. Today, Russia is still not a security threat to the United States or its vital interests, but it has taken actions that call into question the validity of the commitments the United States made during the past three decades.

Means and Will: Competition over Interests

To understand why this question of validity exists, a brief explication of Clausewitzian theory is necessary. The United States' preponderance of power allowed for expansionist, ideological policy. The United States' advantage of means and lack of a rival rendered the element of will, for a time, obsolete. The era of ideological hostility had seemingly come to an end, so the United States' means outweighed the wills of other states. One half of what Clausewitz defines as power was disregarded. It is important to remember it here.

On War is often used as a footnote for famous quotes. Of those, the quote, "war is nothing but a duel on a larger scale," is used with particular frequency and unfortunately must again be used here.⁷³ Clausewitz goes on to explain that war can be thought of as a wrestling match in which the two opposing forces muscle out between each other until there is a victor. War it is a first and foremost a test of will. It only begins once a defensive action has taken place. In Book VI he writes,

"War comes into being more for the benefit of the defender than for that of the conqueror for not till the invasion has called forth the defense does war begin. A conqueror is always a lover of peace (as Bonaparte constantly asserted of himself); he would like to make his entry into our state unopposed."⁷⁴

War is a defensive choice that an attacked party makes. This fact is particularly important in the modern context. For one, the United States is a status-quo power. Secondly, alliances between great powers and minor powers complicate the picture of who the defensive actor is. Furthermore, modern great powers, Brodie writes, have "the luxury (or burden) of thinking in terms of national responsibility rather than simply of national peril."⁷⁵ Because great powers can afford to make their

⁷³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 3

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 331-332

⁷⁵ Brodie, Bernard., *War and Politics*, 344

voices heard far beyond the confines of their borders, they often feel a right or duty to do so. The decision to defend often comes from whichever great power a minor power has hitched itself to.

This decision is based upon a calculus of will, as Clausewitz explains. To start a war the defense must have sufficient will to resist. Once begun war becomes a test of will. Clausewitz writes that states “proportion [their] effort to [their enemy’s] power of resistance.”⁷⁶ He defines power as “the extent of the means at [one’s] disposal and the strength of his will.”⁷⁷ Of course one party can have a far greater will and still be overcome due to the extent of their opponent’s means. However, the strength of will cannot be measured so easily or accurately as the extent of means. The strength of will is directly related to what object is at stake and the interests involved.

Each side in a conflict resists to the extent that it can or will. The ‘able’ is obvious; a state’s capability depends upon factors of technology, resources, the size of its military, its economy, its geographic placement and other calculable factors of this sort.⁷⁸ The ‘willing’ is less concrete but it is vital to understanding the reality of power dynamics in the unipolar world. The ‘willing’ is the investment a state has in the political object that is the cause of the conflict. Clausewitz writes, “the smaller the sacrifice we demand from our adversary, the slighter we may expect his efforts to be to refuse it to us.”⁷⁹ The political object being the demanded sacrifice; “the standard alike to be attained by military action and for the efforts required for this purpose.”⁸⁰ Victory can be attained by the state with greater military capability, but the amount of effort said state must expend on the seizure of the political object at stake is entirely dependent upon the amount of resistance the other state is willing to display. The effort of the former and the resistance of the latter are dependent upon the value of the political object.

⁷⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 5

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6

⁷⁸ Wohlforth, *Stability of a Unipolar World*, 7

⁷⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 9

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

There are reciprocal actions that push conflict toward extremes. Conflicts would regularly escalate toward total war were it not for the fact that effort expended is proportional to the perceived value of the political object. Total war does not occur unless the political object one state demands from another is so essential to both states that each will refuse to expend anything less than maximum effort. In *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger notes the instances of total war; sixteenth and seventeenth century religious wars, the wars of the French Revolution, the World Wars, and perhaps, he notes, the American Civil War.⁸¹ These wars, Kissinger writes, were fought over a schism or represented a revolutionary struggle.⁸² Unless a conflict took place over such a schism, states would avoid and moderate away from total war. In the modern context, when great powers avoid conflict with each other in part due to the fear of total war, direct conflict is rarely even considered a possibility. This could be due to democratic peace or nuclear peace. Regardless, great powers go to lengths to avoid direct conflict with other great powers.

What a state defines as a vital interest is subjective and changes over time. Brodie writes that modern American vital interests “concern those issues in our foreign affairs that are thought to affect the survival or security of the nation, meaning specifically security against military attack.”⁸³ For most modern states, the same is true. The paramount interest of a state is to secure its sovereignty. However, as states grow in capability, the list of interests that fall under the umbrella of ‘vital’ expands:

“A nation ready to resort to aggression to gain its ends is enlarging its conception of its vital interests. However, such aggression, too, has often been justified by its perpetrator on the ground of its alleged necessity to the security of the state, and this allegation has sometimes been sincerely meant.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Kissinger, Henry., *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, 87

⁸² *Ibid.*, 87

⁸³ Brodie, *War and Politics*, 344

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 344

Ultimately, the definition of a vital interest will be that its protection or procurement is essential to the security of the state. A unipolar power has an increased ability to expand beyond sovereignty and security when determining what its vital interests are. However, the will to do so must be great enough to outmatch their opponent's will to block their aims. Clausewitz writes, "the less important our political object, the less will be the value we attach to it and the readier shall we abandon it. For this reason also our own efforts will be the slighter."⁸⁵ If, for example, the combination of the United States' means and will outweighed that of its adversary, its ambition would go unchecked. In the 1990's, I would suggest, the United States' means were so great and Russia's so reduced that the factor of will was ignored.

All of this is to say, a political object is only defended if a state has the means and motivation to defend it. Brooks and Wohlforth and the realists focus too much on the means element of this equation. The United States' power is uncontested. It would not be in any state's interest to trespass against the United States' vital interests. However, there are many security concerns the United States still has to confront even though it is safe from direct attack or hard-balancing. It would not be in the United States' interest to engage in any sort of direct conflict with another great power. Since unipolarity allowed for the United States to expand its umbrella of influence, there are now allies that may be of more significance to other great powers than they are to the United States, or even the West. Protecting these allies, and protecting liberal projects, may be less vital to the United States' security than avoiding the possibility of conflict. It is here that the folly of unipolarity should be made clear; the misunderstanding of power dynamics and the misinterpretation of the meaning of the Soviet collapse allowed for liberal ideology to dominate strategy. The United States, acting as an uncontested unipolar power, committed to expanding the liberal democratic project. But the nature of the international system and the nature of politics did not change along with the post-Soviet

⁸⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 9

structural shift. The preponderance of the United States' power allowed for it to act as though it did. Again, this is not the same as counterbalancing. Other states do not seem to be reacting to the United States' power to balance against it or the perception of a threat. The United States simply enmeshed its vital interests with lesser interests because, for a time, there did not seem to be a strategic reason to do otherwise.

Argument Against Liberalism

So far, I have claimed the following: Brooks and Wohlforth are wrong for thinking the unipolar system durable and self-perpetuating; the realists are wrong for framing their argument as a balance of power issue; that both sides of the durability argument fail to understand the nature of power dynamics; and that unipolarity is self-undermining because the unipole's security allows for it to disregard strategy and pursue policy based on liberal ideology. Before demonstrating how the United States acted this way in regard to NATO expansion, I must first explain why liberalism is fallible and why a grand strategy structured on ideology is strategically unwise.

The dawn of the unipolar moment was a triumph for liberalism and was viewed as a resounding defeat of realism. In his farewell address, Gorbachev said that he was "convinced that the democratic reform that we launched in the spring of 1985 was historically correct."⁸⁶ Even as the Soviet Union fell apart, Gorbachev proclaimed his confidence in the democratic system. His perestroika and glasnost reforms were widely criticized and reviled. Uskoreniie, the broad Soviet policy of acceleration, had not succeeded in its mission of rescuing the state from collapse. The predicament should have been obvious. Soviet democratic reforms were viewed as failures. The Russian Federation would hinge upon the successful implementation of democratic and capitalist

⁸⁶ Gorbachev, Mikhail., *Gorbachev's Farewell Address*

reforms. Instead, shock therapy was introduced. Most chalked the failure of the Soviet Union up to the failure of its ideology. The success of Western ideology in Russia would be of great importance, however no Marshall plan equivalent was put in place. This in itself may be the root cause of modern-day strife between the West and Russia. Disregarding this, though, the Soviet collapse was viewed as an ideological conflict that the West had won. The scholarship written on the event informed the grand strategy of the United States during the unipolar moment.

In 1989, Fukuyama wrote, “[that] the triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.”⁸⁷ This would serve as the thesis and conclusion of liberal scholars at the dawn of the unipolar moment. All other ideologies had been proven ‘wrong,’ the argument goes. Somewhat ironically, as many connect the threads between Clausewitz’s philosophizing and Hegel’s dialectic, Fukuyama draws from Hegel’s concept of the end of history. For Hegel, the end of history represented a moment in which humankind would conclude its ideological struggle, or, as Fukuyama puts it, “a moment in which a final, rational form of society and state [becomes] victorious.”⁸⁸ Fukuyama and others believed that the time had come.

The end of history necessitates the end of realism, as realism is inherently concerned with geopolitics and has no place in a post-historical world. Fukuyama’s proclamation of the end of history contributed greatly to the idea the era of geopolitics was over. From the beginning, there was a belief that the establishment of unipolarity represented some permanent paradigm shift. It was an utter disregard of a Clausewitzian principle; “the defeated state often see it [itself, in defeat] in only a transitory evil, for which a remedy can yet be found in the political circumstances of a later day.”⁸⁹ Clausewitz writes, “[that] disarming or the overthrow of the enemy...must always be the aim of

⁸⁷ Fukuyama, Fukuyama., *The End of History?*, 1

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3

⁸⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 8

military action.”⁹⁰ The Soviet Union was disarmed and overthrown, but the state itself was not entirely destroyed. Kennan understood this decades before Soviet collapse was in sight. Russia itself, not communism, was the geopolitical threat. Communism had failed Russia but the state itself had not. As such, there was always the prospect that the Russian state would remain a geopolitical rival. Of course, the capabilities of Russia both as an economic and military rival have been drastically diminished. Russia as it stands today is a single-source economy; its prosperity is intimately attached with the value of oil. Russia also faces profound demographic and border problems, as it has since the time of Catherine II. Nonetheless, the resurgence of Russia’s ability to project its power beyond its borders suggests that, regardless of its actual power or its domestic issues, the state is set on playing the game of geopolitics.

Russett contextualizes the Soviet collapse as a surrender to the Western values of economic and political freedom, rather than the success of decades of containment and arms races. Pure realism, theoretically, ignores the impact of domestic factors and ideological characteristics. Surely the United States was able to win such a contest due in large part to its ideology.⁹¹ Internal variables obviously affect a state’s ability to grow and thus compete in the international system. To claim that such differences are irrelevant ignores a major facet of the global system. But realists are correct in their evaluation of the *nature* of that system, that it is based in power and the question of security.

As with other scholars, Asmus makes the misstep of embracing realism as an antidote to the realist system. Even as he mentions the existence of “residual fears about the threat of a possibly resurgent Russia - a nation that has itself demonstrated real signs of instability, the potential for a shift to the right and flirtations with imperial restoration,”⁹² Asmus fails to acknowledge the strategic implications of provoking such a state and instead argues that NATO expansion “remains the best

⁹⁰ Ibid., 5

⁹¹ See Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment*

⁹² Asmus, *Building a New NATO*, 29

guarantee for securing democracy in Europe and guarding against the revival of destructive nationalism.”⁹³

It is clear with this policy prescription that Asmus is focused on the maintenance of security inasmuch as it applies to the spread of democracy. The military presence of the United States and other European powers, the cooperation between the states, the acceptance of American power, and the distribution of burden between member states - each of these suggestions is oriented around power and built upon structure, all with the end goal of preserving and promoting the spread of liberal ideology. The rationale of NATO expansion, or at least Asmus’ rationale, was that geopolitics was over and the West’s ideology had won out.

Asmus’ argument is grounded in the liberal idea that alliances promote stability. On alliances, Russett writes,

“Allies may be presumed to choose each other because of their common interests, and hence to be already peacefully inclined toward each other. Moreover, their common interests are likely to concern security against a common enemy; if so, they are not likely to fight each other. Many democracies have shared common interests in presenting a unified alliance front.”⁹⁴

Alliances promote stability and peace due to the fact that those engaged in alliances often share common interests and, once allied, are incentivized to behave cooperatively. This liberal idea makes sense in a multipolar or bipolar system, when there are sides to be balanced *against*. However, in a unipolar system in which the relevance of the balance of power is greatly diminished, alliance making can trend toward the unnecessarily oppositional rather than the stability promoting. In a unipolar world, democratic alliances that claim to stand in unison for the simple goal of promoting their shared values create a needless dichotomy between those states that are acceptable and those that are not. This is a natural impulse for liberal theorists who evaluate states on their ‘goodness.’ In

⁹³ Ibid., 33

⁹⁴ Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, 27

a unipolar world, when there is no rival great power to balance against, alliance making presents a unified front that is inherently asymmetrical in power to those states excluded from the process and its product.

Alliances are formed to unify against an external force. Alliances are power balancing and strategic, yet Asmus and others pushed for such expansion with the thought in mind that the time of ideological conflict had come to an end. Alliance expansion would then simply serve to promote shared values. Theorists in the early 1990's attempted to advance the democratic project by promoting a strategic move - alliance expansion - on the basis of liberal ideology - notably democratic peace theory.

Chapter 3:

NATO Enlargement as a Unipolarity Case Study

On Christmas day of 1991, the Soviet Union officially fell. Its collapse represented the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the 'unipolar moment.' The United States would become hegemon without equal; the system of geopolitical balancing appeared to be over. In the following years, the U.S. and its Western allies would enjoy the peacefulness of the post-historical age by pursuing an ideological agenda without regard to strategy. Since there was no power to balance U.S. action the West could advance its project of democratic expansionism without real opposition from other great powers. A major aspect of the expansion project would be the enlargement of NATO.

In 1990, NATO expanded to include East Germany. In 1999 NATO welcomed the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Hungary shares a border with Ukraine while Poland, which had been under Soviet control since WWII, shares a border with Kaliningrad Oblast. In 2004, NATO expansion included seven states, two of which border Ukraine - Slovakia and Romania. Three of the states added in 2004 were former Soviet states and are Baltic States. Of these three, Estonia and Latvia border mainland Russia while Lithuania borders Kaliningrad Oblast. In five years, NATO expanded to the Russian border and its new members encircled Kaliningrad Oblast, a population center, and now Russia's only ice-free port in the Baltic Sea.

Russian officials continually opposed the expansion and expressed fears on the basis of not only prestige, but security. Government officials and analysts continually dismissed these protests, and the organization's enlargement continued. In 2016, the United States finds itself in a far less secure position. Recent revisionist behavior from Putin's Russia has forced U.S. officials to consider the possibility of actually having to make good on the security assurances NATO's newest members

were given. Putin's actions have cast doubt on the idea that the U.S. will indeed stand by Article V. While Estonia and Latvia may not be of vital interest to the United States, Western European countries certainly are. The United States' ability to deter Russian revisionist behavior or to ensure the security of NATO's newest and easternmost members in the case of Russian aggression will impact the validity of NATO as a whole and the validity of the U.S. as a stable unipolar power.

In this chapter I will offer a history of NATO expansion, from the fall of the Soviet Union up to modern day. By detailing the way in which NATO expansion occurred, I aim to illustrate that the enlargement project was not only ideologically driven, but also dismissive of a continuous flow of protestations from Russian officials. In the earliest stages of NATO expansion, many argued that these protests, if yielded to, would amount to a Russian 'veto' over certain states' prospective accessions into the organization. However, Russia's continued use of narrative in which promises were made and broken, gentlemen's agreements were scorned, and red lines were drawn and stepped over signals that the issue of NATO enlargement was always of great concern to the state's geopolitical influence, prestige, and security. Rather than pause at the Russian disapproval of expansion the West continued with the project, often citing the advancement and protection of democracy as its reason for doing so. Significantly as well, the leaders of prospective member states in Eastern Europe often cited security concerns vis a vis Russia as a central reason for joining the organization. The parties involved in this process can be broken into three broad groups: the most powerful states in NATO, Eastern European prospective/future members, and Russia. The latter two groups were consistently explicit about their perceptions of the organization; both groups viewed the enlargement process as a security concern albeit those concerns being opposite. The existence of Russia's will regarding NATO expansion was always clear, but it was ignored.

The Soviet Fall

Reflecting on the material pressures the Soviet Union faced in its final years, Medvedev commented, “it became obvious that without a reduction in military expenditures, it would not be possible to resolve the urgent socioeconomic problems...[This situation] stimulated the development of a new military doctrine and a new foreign policy aimed at stopping the arms race.”⁹⁵ His understanding of the fall is simple; the Soviet Union could literally no longer afford to oppose the West.⁹⁶ In 1991 Gorbachev’s farewell address struck a greatly different, ideologically-impassioned tone, but his reforms were vastly unpopular, he was forced out of office, and succeeded by a political rival - whose own successor would be Vladimir Putin. While Gorbachev himself praised democracy, there was little reason to think that the people of Russia and their leaders had embraced Western values as well. The end of the Cold War should, then, have been interpreted as the temporary end of conflict between the West and Russia rather than as the end of ideological competition. Mearsheimer and other realists expressed these doubts.

He credits the post-1945 European peace to bipolarity, parity in power, and the presence of nuclear weaponry, not to ideological progression.⁹⁷ “Relations among the EC states were spared the effects of anarchy—fears about relative gains and an obsession with autonomy—because the United States served as the ultimate arbiter within the alliance,”⁹⁸ he writes. During the Cold War power was concentrated between two poles and their military power was so great that the benefits for going to war were very limited. Mearsheimer points out the possibility that the Cold War was not won on the basis of ideology, and thus the international system might not see more or permanent stability. He

⁹⁵ Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth, *Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas*, 43; taken from Ellhman and Kontorovich, *Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*

⁹⁶ See Brooks and Wohlforth, *Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas*, for a more expansive explanation of this perspective. Brooks and Wohlforth do an excellent job of establishing that material pressures, rather than ideas, led to the Gorbachev-era Soviet policy shifts.

⁹⁷ Mearsheimer, John. , *Back to the Future?*, 6

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47

writes, “the Soviet Union also might eventually threaten the new status quo. Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe does not mean that the Soviets will never feel compelled to return to Eastern Europe.”⁹⁹ This, however, was the assumption that the West seemed to operate on.

Many assumed that the fall of the Soviet Union meant the death of geopolitics. NATO expansion and Clintonian democratic expansionism were carried out with the thought that liberal ideology had won the Cold War. This ignored the argument that Kennan had made at the dawn of the Cold War, that the conflict was chiefly with Russia, not communism. Regardless, the action taken by the U.S. and the West was in the name of an ideology, not strategy or security. The West’s behavior during this period seems to echo the behavior of a state that is certain it can win an all-out war. Due to the weakness of Russia during this time, it seems as though the West acted as the victor of an all-out war of ideologies.¹⁰⁰ The West’s lack of strategy in its expansion signals toward its confidence that there would no longer be conflict with Russia or a need for extended deterrence against it. The U.S. bet - and bet wrong - that the age of geopolitics was over. The U.S. acted under the assumption that its capability and Russia’s inability to exert its will were permanent realities.

Ronald D. Asmus writes that in the early stages of drafting the NATO enlargement study, “an initial round of ‘brainstorming sessions’ had led to agreement on a set of core ideas. The first was that enlargement’s rationale was to expand integration and stability in Europe eastward, and not a strategic response to a specific threat from Russia. A second was that there would be no ‘second class’ membership. New members would share both the benefits and risks of membership.”¹⁰¹ The latter idea highlights that each NATO member has an equal responsibility to the others. While this ostensibly makes sense, to ensure that the burdens of the Alliance are shared by all, it has an obvious flaw; from a strategic standpoint, all members are not equal. The former ‘core idea’ emphasizes that

⁹⁹ Ibid., 33

¹⁰⁰ Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, 97

¹⁰¹ Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door*, 103

the Alliance's new *raison d'être* is the protection of democracy and not of strategic interests. The organization would still exist as a military alliance, but without a threat to counterbalance. Instability was the threat that the post-Cold War NATO would protect against. Still, NATO membership came with a security assurance and inclusion in the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

In 1993, Steven Larrabee, Richard Kugler, and Ronald D. Asmus published a piece in *Foreign Affairs* entitled "Building a New NATO." It would become one of the earliest and most prominent public arguments for NATO expansion. In it, the three argue that in order to ensure stability and to curb nationalistic violence, NATO must be expanded. They acknowledge the fear that Russia would see expansion as a threat, but claim that "it is hard to understand how supporting democracy and stability in Eastern Europe can undercut democracy in Russia."¹⁰² Aside from ignoring the obvious concern that the encroachment of a security alliance up to one's borders would raise, they overlook the fact that NATO was created to counter the Soviet Union, and its expansion to the exclusion of Russia could likely be seen as a continuation of Cold War strategic doctrine, even if it were not intended as such.

Clinton and Democratic Expansionism

In spite of initial opposition from Russia, members of Clinton's own party, and from U.S. allies, the argument for NATO expansion grew in support. Former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott noted that "there were more people against it than were for it...most of [what] the arguments came down to was [that] the Russians didn't like it."¹⁰³ Russian opposition to the expansion was the main argument against it. Rather than giving Russian concern deference, though, this argument was eventually turned on its head as a reason *for* enlargement. As Talbott notes, the

¹⁰² Larrabee, Steven, Richard Kugler, and Ronald D. Asmus, *Building A New NATO*, 37

¹⁰³ Brown, Emma., *Ronald D. Asmus, who pushed for NATO expansion, dies at 53*, Washington Post, 05/03/11

argument became that the U.S. and the West “couldn’t give Russia a veto over the right of what were now independent countries to join the alliance.”¹⁰⁴ This meant that NATO’s open-door policy would be truly open for any state that met its standards of democracy and stability, with the implicit statement that Russia should have no ability to subordinate a sovereign state’s will over its strategic aims. NATO’s evolution during the unipolar moment placed a higher value on the sovereignty of minor states than on Russia’s security goals.

“Clinton was under pressure to prove his and his party’s foreign policy credentials. Not only had the Democrats been out of power for twelve years, but also they were still viewed by the public as less competent than Republicans on national security issues.”¹⁰⁵ The Republicans supported NATO expansion. When Gingrich’s House Republicans released their *Contract With America*, one of the ten proposed bills was the “National Security [Revitalization] Act.” The act called for the expansion of NATO, and the *Contract With America* was a highly public statement of the highest line items on the Republican agenda.¹⁰⁶ Though the act itself did not pass in the Senate, the Republican call for NATO expansion likely influenced the Clinton Administration.

In April of 1993, Vaclav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic, met with Clinton to discuss the prospect of his country joining NATO. He told Clinton that “the issue is not that we are faced with imminent threats. Rather, we are in the process of undergoing an image transformation - a reshaping of our identity...entry into NATO and the EC is central to expanding democracy.”¹⁰⁷ Havel’s argument was an image-based one; NATO membership represented a state’s ascension into the Western liberal democratic order. Lech Walesa, the president of Poland, met with Clinton soon after to explain his reasons for joining NATO: “we are all afraid of Russia,” he said.¹⁰⁸ Clinton later

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door*, 27

¹⁰⁶ United States 104th Congress, H.R. 7, *National Security Revitalization Act*, 02/22/1995

¹⁰⁷ Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door*, 24

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 24

stated that the Central and Eastern European leaders knew that NATO would “provide a security umbrella to its members.”¹⁰⁹ For the members-to-be, the security assurance that came with NATO membership was the driving factor behind their desire to join. But the Clinton administration was more concerned with building a relationship with Russian reformers than crafting a new containment strategy against the state. “As a ‘New Democrat,’” Asmus writes, “Clinton believed expanding democracy should be a key foreign policy priority.”¹¹⁰ The expansion of NATO meant the expansion of democracy; Clinton pushed for the expansion of the Alliance based on the goal of spreading ideology, not security.

James M. Goldgeier, in a 2003 article entitled *Not When But Who*, published by the NATO review, wrote that “President Yeltsin tried unsuccessfully to get President Clinton to shake hands in Helsinki in March 1997 on a “gentleman's agreement” that the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania would never become NATO members. Since then, Russia has had to accept that it is unable to prevent these countries from joining the Alliance.”¹¹¹ Yeltsin’s “gentlemen’s agreement” was the only tool he had to try and prevent the loss of a political object Russia valued more than the United States and the West did. The West’s confidence that Russia had no ability to resist led to the expansion of the treaty organization right up to the Russian border. NATO expansion was carried out with the understanding that Russia “had to accept”¹¹² it and the misbelief that this would always be the case.

At the International Security Conference in 1999, Russia’s deputy foreign minister Yevgeny Gusev went beyond the request of a “gentlemen’s agreement.” Gusev “said Moscow had drawn a “red line” on further eastward expansion of NATO into lands of the former Soviet Union, such as

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 25

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 25

¹¹¹ Goldgeier, James M., *Not When But Who*, 1

¹¹² Ibid., 1

the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.”¹¹³ Even more boldly, he equated NATO expansion with the "destruction of the existing world order."¹¹⁴ Gusarov made this calmer statement as well: “We hope the NATO alliance will act in the common European interests as an important element of the European security structure. We do not want a recurrence of confrontation with NATO.”¹¹⁵ With this appeal, Gusarov seems to clearly ask NATO’s member states to consider his state’s interests and avoid expansionist moves that would threaten Russia’s security. While the former statements delve into hyperbole, this request is a restrained attempt to deter the alliance from expanding up to Russia’s border, something that would be perceived as a geopolitical threat.

Later that year, at the 1999 meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C., NATO added three member countries to its organization and updated its strategic concept. The press release details the reaffirmation of Article X and the approval of a ‘Membership Action Plan’ to vet aspiring members and prepare for their admission. The press release states: “Our commitment to enlargement is part of a broader strategy of projecting stability and working together with our Partners to build a Europe whole and free...The three new members will not be the last...we also recognize and welcome continuing efforts and progress in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.”¹¹⁶ At the same time it updated its strategic concept, with the mission of building “a Europe whole and free”¹¹⁷ to the exclusion of Russia, NATO listed the Baltic States as potential future members. In short, Yeltsin explicitly asked Clinton to not allow for NATO expansion into the Baltics; Russia’s deputy foreign minister claimed that doing so would cross a red line that would threaten the international order. There was pronounced protest from the Russian side on the basis of security, the expansion occurred on the basis of ideology.

¹¹³ Tribune News Service, *Minister Accuses NATO Of Planning Further Expansion*, February 08, 1999

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Eggleston, Roland, *NATO: Russia Doubts New Strategic Concept*, Radio Free Europe, February 9, 1999. and Tribune News Service, *Minister Accuses NATO Of Planning Further Expansion*, February 08, 1999

¹¹⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Press Release NAC-S(99)64*, April 24, 1999

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Bush and the Baltics

In 2016, Goldgeier updated his analysis regarding Yeltsin's acceptance of Russia's inability to stop NATO expansion. Goldgeier writes, "Yeltsin was not placated, but he was too weak to push back. And the simmer in Moscow regarding what was seen as U.S. humiliation of Russia in the 1990s grew to a boil by 2008, when Vladimir Putin decided he had enough of the alliance's push eastwards and went to war to prevent Georgia from moving closer to NATO membership."¹¹⁸ Here, with the wisdom of hindsight, Goldgeier writes of Russian repudiation of NATO expansion as though it was inevitability. To some extent, it was. Since the beginning of NATO expansion and the fall of the Soviet Union Russian officials have made it clear that NATO expansion is viewed as a security threat. Russia has always been willing, yet unable, to fight over what it views as an essential political object - its security. The United States has been able to expand NATO and the ideology of liberal democracy due to its strategic superiority, but now finds itself perhaps unwilling to fight over what it views as non-essential political objects - the very states it let under its security umbrella while history was over and geopolitics was dead.

In 1997 the Belarusian government press voiced concerns over NATO expansion. A NATO document published in 1999, five years before the Baltic States would join, listed the Belarusian government's concerns, its sharpest being the claim that "NATO's decision to extend the Alliance to the east was a strategic mistake. This was a mistake in building a new Europe and in structuring the entire system of international relations."

The Baltic States were invited to join NATO during George W. Bush's presidency. In 2003, on the day that the states were admitted into the organization, Bush delivered a speech in which he

¹¹⁸ Goldgeier, James M., *Promises Made, Promises Broken?*, July 12, 2016

stated, “the United States Senate voted unanimously to support NATO admission for Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. These heroic nations have survived tyranny. They have won their liberty and earned their place among free nations. America has always considered them friends, and we will always be proud to call them allies.”¹¹⁹ Bush consistently employed such ideological rhetoric but the choice to use it here, in the context of a security alliance, only further demonstrates the lack of strategy that went into NATO’s expansion. The logic driving the Baltic States’ inclusion was grounded on their ‘survival of tyranny’ and the idea that they had “earned their place among free nations.”¹²⁰ Indeed, the House bill in support of the Baltic States’ NATO accession simply stipulates the following:

“Whereas former Secretary of Defense Perry stipulated five generalized standards for entrance into NATO: support for democracy, including toleration of ethnic diversity and respect for human rights; building a free market economy; civilian control of the military; promotion of good neighborly relations; and development of military interoperability with NATO; Whereas each of these Baltic countries has satisfied these standards for entrance into NATO.”¹²¹

The Senate would go on to ratify the treaty introducing these states into NATO with a vote of 96-0.¹²² The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair called it “another important step toward making Europe whole and free.”¹²³ The vote took place on the 58th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s surrender.¹²⁴ These states could have enjoyed their liberalization without being granted Article V security assurances. The expansion of the security community was largely symbolic; a way to set in stone each territorial gain that the liberal democratic order had made while Russia looked on during

¹¹⁹ Bush, George W., *Remarks Honoring Central European Nations on Their Upcoming Admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 05/08/2003

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Shimkus, John. H.Con.Res.116 - Recommending the integration of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). 107th Congress (2001-2002)

¹²² Cable News Network, *Senate Ratifies NATO Expansion Treaty*, May 8, 2003.

¹²³ Cable News Network, *Senate Ratifies NATO Expansion Treaty*, May 8, 2003.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

the U.S. unipolar moment. The expansion was certainly made possible due to the mismatch of power, Russian officials expressed concern and disagreement but the United States and its Western allies seemed certain that no provocation would result in retaliation.

In a 2002 article for the NATO Review, *The Silence of the Bear*, Dmitri Trenin notes that “the aspect of NATO enlargement which generates greatest passion in Russian policy circles is the likelihood of membership invitations being offered to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania...this is problematic because it would, for the first time, bring the Alliance onto the territory of the former Soviet Union, which, from the Russian perspective, is the only issue that matters...the loss of superpower status has been a painful process and the admission of the Baltic states into NATO would mean crossing another important, though largely symbolic, threshold.”¹²⁵ While increased stability was consistently touted as the rationale behind expansion, one still must wonder what strategic benefit, if any, the U.S. and the West received from crossing Russia’s most “important thresholds,” from provoking Russia on “the only issue that matters.”¹²⁶ Trenin was not the only one to point out the value Russia placed on the Baltic States and he was certainly not the only one to dismiss the matter, others have already been cited. He calls the threshold he mentions symbolic, yet since the fall of the Soviet Union Russian officials made a point of emphasizing that the Baltic States were valued as vital political objects.

Many Russian officials, including Putin who was the state’s leader during the Baltic NATO expansion, were members of the old guard. Such explicit Western influence over former Soviet Territory may have been perceived in the way that a seizure of homeland territory would have been. The West, however, viewed the expansion of the organization and the security assurances that went along with it as symbolic gestures because the West did not expect to have to provide security for its new members against a geopolitically minded aggressor. If the U.S. and the West did expect to have

¹²⁵ Trenin, Dmitri., *The Silence of the Bear*, 1

¹²⁶ Ibid.,1

to make good on the assurances, advocates for expansion might have taken Russian concerns into greater account. The simple fact is that the NATO could expand at this moment, so it did. If the West believed that Russia would one day use force to retaliate against the expansions made during the unipolar moment, no one would have advocated for adding states that Russia viewed as vital political objects to NATO. If Russia were to have the ability, it certainly would have the will.

For Russia and for Yeltsin, the idea of Baltic States joining NATO was an issue of prestige, security, and strategy. Clinton denied making such a gentlemen's agreement with Yeltsin, but the pill he made Yeltsin swallow has since been spit up by Putin. With the 2008 annexations in Georgia, Russia gained a foothold in a former Soviet state. Although the annexed regions do not, the state itself borders Turkey, a NATO ally. Since, no security agreement bound the United States to protect Georgian sovereignty, the annexation was roundly criticized but met with little action. In 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, Russia gained influence in Ukraine that it has continued to expand through the exploitation of ongoing conflict in the state. Ukraine shares a border with NATO states Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. As with Georgia, Crimea and the current areas of conflict do not border these states. And as with Georgia, Russia's actions were condemned but not confronted. The Russian presence in these states leads to a continued sense of instability and uncertainty. Both Georgia and Ukraine were possible candidates for the NATO membership action plan. The pro-Russian and now ousted Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich abandoned aspirations of joining NATO in 2010, but after the revolution Obama rejected the idea that either state would be invited to join NATO anytime soon. In a 2014 speech, he stated, "neither Ukraine or Georgia are currently on a path to NATO membership. And there has not been any immediate plans for expansion of NATO's membership."¹²⁷ Obama's statements directly contradict NATO documents that claim the organization is making efforts to "help Georgia advance in its preparations

¹²⁷ Croft, Adrian., *Obama says NATO needs to boost presence in eastern Europe*, Reuters, 03/26/14

towards membership.”¹²⁸ This statement “was understood by Moscow as Russia’s veto power over the enlargement of the alliance.”¹²⁹ Russian aggression over the past eight years has undermined the credibility of the United States’ security assurances and its deterrence threat. Russian action in Georgia and Ukraine led first to the United States’ rejection of the NATO enlargement project. While, for years, many believed that Russia was unable to resist the expansion of NATO, once such resistance came the United States abandoned the idea of spreading the organization any further. This showed that the United States would not pursue its ideological agenda if such pursuit posed any threat to its security.

Russia’s actions correlate to U.S. response; the U.S. had no responsibility toward Georgia. Although Ukraine was not a NATO member, Russian action in 2014 certainly breached the Budapest Memorandums. The memorandums are vague, but the U.S made some level of commitment to protect Ukraine’s sovereignty. U.S. failure to respond to this situation with strength gave Putin a bigger gain than Crimea: the ability to chip away at U.S. credibility. Putin has successfully used a “salami-slicing” strategy, in the words of Thomas Schelling, to undermine U.S. credibility and thus U.S. power. Putin has escalated his aggression to test the boundaries of U.S. patience. The result has been clear: the United States will not intervene in situations where its vital interests are not at stake. Even in Syria, where Russian involvement has directly disrupted U.S. strategy, the United States has done little to combat Putin’s actions. Putin has successfully put an end to the democratic expansionist era and is steadily casting doubt on the United States’ credibility as the unipolar power and a security ally. With Russia’s annexation of Crimea and regions of Georgia, the Federation’s presence can now be felt by 4 more NATO states. The gains made during the unipolar moment are falling to apart due to Putin’s exposure of the modern U.S. deterrence

¹²⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO Enlargement & Open Door*, 2

¹²⁹ Tsereteli, Mamuka., *Georgia Needs A Shorter Path for Membership in NATO, Not a MAP*, 1

problem. The U.S. is unwilling to expend effort beyond that of Russia's on non-vital political objects, such as Ukraine.

In 2016, the RAND corporation published a report from David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson entitled *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank*. The report detailed findings from a series of wargames the center conducted in 2014 to assess the possibility of Russian conventional aggression against NATO's Baltic members. Shlapak and Johnson concluded that "as currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members."¹³⁰ "The longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively," they write, "is 60 hours."¹³¹ The pair concludes that NATO must either expand its military presence in the Baltics or consider the implications of three potential consequences of inaction. Escalation, threats of nuclear response, or capitulation.¹³² In a piece for *War on the Rocks*, Michael Kofman critiqued the RAND report by claiming that, among other things, an increase of NATO forces in the Baltics would not mitigate Russia's geographic advantages. He writes, "there's no need to seize Baltic cities since they can simply walk through Belarus and link up with Kaliningrad, thereby severing NATO's "Army of Deterrence" in the Baltics from the rest of its forces in Poland."¹³³ Adding military might in the Baltics would not necessarily deter a hostile Russian force. If anything, it could provoke direct confrontation or a security dilemma.

In an article for the *American Interest* entitled *Can NATO Defend the Baltics?* Kirk Bennett pulls from both RAND's findings and Kofman's critique to offer alternative strategic responses to hypothetical Russian aggression. Bennett asks a simple question; "if Russia can strike where it enjoys an overwhelming advantage, why can't NATO also strike back precisely where Russia itself is most

¹³⁰ Shlapak, David A. and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, 1

¹³¹ Ibid., 1

¹³² Ibid., 7

¹³³ Kofman, Michael, *Fixing NATO Deterrence in the East Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love NATO's Crushing Defeat by Russia*, 5

vulnerable?”¹³⁴ In his opinion, those points of strike-back would be of a non-military nature: seizure of assets, expulsion of Russia from SWIFT, a halting of lending from Western banks.¹³⁵ If conflict were inevitable, NATO members’ superior naval capacity could interrupt Russia’s mission in Syria.¹³⁶ Each of his suggestions relies upon the same idea; if Russia were to attack the Baltics, NATO would have ways of confronting the situation indirectly.

Of course, as members of the Alliance, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have the same security assurances as any other NATO members. The Baltic States’ sovereignty is, ostensibly, protected by Article V of the treaty. For this exact reason the hypothetical responses to Russian aggression offered by Shlapak and Johnson, Kofman, and Bennett all share the same flaw; each author, aside from the RAND authors to an extent, attempts to circumvent the fact that NATO has provided the Baltic states with security assurances. The across-the-board rejection of the idea that direct conflict would be a possibility if Russia were to advance upon one of the Baltic States exposes the deterrence problem NATO—the West and more specifically the United States—faces today. NATO expanded during the so-called ‘unipolar moment.’ This has led to a dilemma in which the United States’ credibility regarding its commitment to its vital interests has been enmeshed with its willingness to defend non-vital interests that Russia may care about more than U.S. does.

Mearsheimer also comments that “nuclear weapons make conquest more difficult; international conflicts revert from tests of capability and will to purer tests of will, won by the side willing to run greater risks and pay greater costs.”¹³⁷ He writes that this gives defenders a greater advantage because they are protecting their very existence. However, currently Russia is behaving in a revisionist manner. There is a chance that this behavior will escalate into a threat more direct than annexations of Ukraine and Georgia, aka non-member states. The current situation seems to be a

¹³⁴ Bennett, Kirk, *Can NATO Defend the Baltics?*, 4

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5

¹³⁷ Mearsheimer, *Back to the Future?*, 20

more or less pure test of will in which Russia is more inclined toward risk-taking than the United States. The reason that Russian revisionism has been met with little real opposition seems to be due to the fact that, thus far, their actions have not threatened the existence of the United States or its vital interests. The United States is thus unwilling to directly confront Russian revisionism. As Putin tests the boundary in his search for America's red line, he continually provokes questions over the United States' commitment to its allies and its vision of a liberal democratic order.

Chapter 4:

Stability, Theory, and Impermanency

Wohlforth claims that a unipolar world offers stability. Realists contest this, taking the opposite stance that unipolarity leads to increased competition amongst states. Earlier I argued that liberal ideology is flawed, and ignores strategy to the extent that the applications of such ideas can undermine power structures. In other ways, liberal ideology is as valid as realist thinking. Explicitly or not, liberals accept that power is a key aspect of the international system. It is easy to understand how arguments such as Asmus' that pushed for NATO expansion were both grounded in liberal thinking and accommodating for the reality of power dynamics. The expansion and maintenance of alliances is a liberal proposition that accepts the role power plays in the international system. Both schools of thought seek out the same goal of stability. Both schools of thought thus falter on the same line - they aim to 'end' the international system of power dynamics and geopolitics. Both schools fall prey to the dream that the system can be won. Clausewitz's influence can be seen on both schools; for liberals, the primacy of the defense that Clausewitz argued for is a major part of their theory. For realists, Clausewitz's thoughts on means and competition are intimately intertwined with their theories. On defeat, Clausewitz writes that "the defeated state often see it in only a transitory evil, for which a remedy can yet be found in the political circumstances of a later day."¹³⁸

As I have said before, an enemy defeated is not an enemy destroyed. Total conclusion of conflict may be an impossibility in the modern era. The War on Terror demonstrates how true this is

¹³⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 8

when it comes to conflicts with nonstate actors. The slow process of negotiating and dealing with other states shows how this is likely the case when it comes to legitimate actors as well. Actions are condemned, sanctions are drawn, but proactive response is slow and made hesitantly. For one, the threat of escalation that WMD's present has had an impact on where red lines are drawn. This is the more cynical way of viewing Waltz's nuclear peace theory - the possibility of threats occurring is reduced but the possibility of concrete defensive responses as well. Far before the discussion of deterrence and nuclear weapons though, there are other aspects of the international system that make the total defeat of an enemy difficult in the modern era. From the liberal side, things like democratic peace theory, the intertwining of economies, and values such as human rights place limits on what can be considered justifiable action. This, again, goes both ways. It means that there is to some extent a limit to what a state can do to its citizens or the citizens of other states before it is exiled from the international system or confronted by it. At the same time, these realities place limits on the defensive actions a state can take - not in the sense of pure 'defense' but in the Clausewitzian sense of taking a defensive action and thus beginning a war.

Both sides of the international relations debate discuss stability, but what we talk about when we talk about stability comes down to the evolution of what is considered possible and acceptable. Regardless of one's theoretical perspective, one must address these limits. What both schools fail to acknowledge in full is that these limits, this drive toward stability, is dual-pronged. Limitations are placed on status quo, defensive actors just as they are placed on aggressors. While realists and liberals each have their own thoughts on what the outcome of the international system will be, the idea pervades on both sides that such an outcome exists. That the path of history will lead to some sort of favorable stability. This may very well be true, and when comparing the modern world to the history one can see the upward trend of global society. Societies are by and large more stable and wealthy than ever before. By practically any metric, the world is better off and more peaceful than it

ever has been. Again, realists and liberals have their respective answers for this. Here, though, what matters is that stability can be understood as the evolution of limitations societies place on themselves and one another. Whether it be power, institutions, ideas, leaders, or any other factor, stability is at its core the same as war or states. Its nature is reciprocal.

Of course, scholars understand that and write on how states interact with and check one another. What seems to be lost in translation is the acceptance that this reciprocal evolution lends itself better to stagnation than conclusion. The range of acceptable state behavior shrinks. This conception of the path of history may be best explained as a sort of diminishing returns graph. As we lurch closer toward the finish line realists and liberals believe exists, the probability of our finishing the race decreases. Before the Soviet collapse, realists seemed to be the 'right' ones. In the 1990's, the liberal interpretation seemed likely. In modern day, realist theory again sounds most fitting. Yet Vladimir Putin could die tomorrow and Medvedev could have a change of heart, trading out Novorossiia for a new Uskoreniie plan. Or China could install democratic reforms. These outcomes are unlikely, but the point the future is unknowable. At any given time a particular theory will seem correct. In the 1990's NATO expansion seemed like a fine idea, few were worried about a resurgent Russia, many feared its demise.

The only thing that seems absolutely true is that the side of the international relations debate that is right at any given time changes. This, above all else, ought to be kept in mind when policies are being implemented and grand strategy is being crafted. Embracing this reality too strongly threatens inaction - choices do have to be made - but crafting a grand strategy around what *must* be done rather than what *can* be done will likely prove to be a more valuable endeavor.

Liberals and realists conceive of the path of history as a march toward stability. I suggest that the further down the path we get the slower the march becomes, due to the reciprocal nature of the increased limitations that we refer to as "stability." As such, it seems foolhardy to accept either

theory in full and apply it to policy. It is easy to use hindsight to critique liberalism, just as it was convenient to use the end of the Cold War as proof of liberalism's value. To claim that NATO expansion was a mistake simply because of what we know now is a weak argument. For one, that claim can be refuted swiftly by any number of 'what ifs' or criticisms of policy implementation. The problem with NATO expansion was that it was a policy fueled by the belief that a conclusion had been reached, but as our world becomes more stable that conclusion is farther and farther out of reach. As our ability to destroy enemies in totality is lessened, we should operate under the assumption that our actions can always be confronted at a later time. Because of stability we live in a world where defeat is more and more consistently a temporary evil. In particular, for a state with a defensive military strategy such as the United States, this means that the actions that prompt military response against great or nuclear powers must be significant; schisms.

War is a defensive choice, and in a stable world the list of what justifies this choice is short. It is made up of vital interests and realistically nothing else. The reciprocal modification of will is at the heart of political contests, be they violent or diplomatic. This is what makes the situation of unipolarity and NATO so difficult. The problem is not necessarily the dominance of ideology, nor is it even unipolarity itself. The problem is that both liberals and realists seek out policy prescriptions that revolve around the assumption that the international system, in being stable, is nearing a conclusion and that the dominance of some 'thing' will become permanent. For liberals, it is ideology. For realists, it is a particular power. This is not to say that the position the United States enjoys as the unipolar power is in danger or that it won't continue to enjoy said position for the foreseeable future, but simply that as military conflict amongst state actors becomes less of a possibility, the value a state assigns to various political objects remains incredibly important. Whether it is through ideology or raw power, a unipolar power is defined by its ability to exert its will over the entire international system, not without fail, but without threat. Because a unipolar

power does not have to consider the balance of power or security threats in the same way that states in more precarious positions must, it has the ability to make its voice heard in many contexts. This is a symptom of power.

When the unipolar power is on the offensive, expanding through alliance making or state-building, smaller, weaker states often make the calculus that denying the unipole of its ambition is an unattractive option. They are, in Clausewitzian terms, deciding to not make that first defensive act of war. When the unipole is acting defensively, or content with the status quo, the benefit can fall to the state that determines that the unipole will not make that same first defensive move. In the 1990's and early 2000's, the United States actively pursued expansionist policies. Later on, it slid into more status quo-seeking behavior. States could go against the United States' aims and it would be the burden of the United States to stop them. During the 1990's and early 2000's, when liberalism seemed correct and the spread of liberal ideology was an active agenda item, the United States functioned as an offensive-dominant unipolar power. The United States' list of vital interests expanded beyond its closest allies, its homeland, and essential resources. The United States, as the unipole in a post-historical world, added liberal democracy to that list. Of course ideology was always on said list; that it was is central to the narrative of the Cold War. At the same time, though, there was a divide between rhetoric and strategy that tempered the pursuit of this goal.¹³⁹

The divide between rhetoric and action faded away during the unipolar moment. Perhaps not entirely, but enough so that NATO evolved from an alliance to a community. The organization still lists its "core tasks" as being "collective defence [sic]...crisis management...[and] cooperative security,"¹⁴⁰ but its mission post-fall shifted from explicit counter-balancing to the protection and promotion of democracy. In the 2016 Warsaw-Summit guide, the organization specifies that it "recommits to NATO enlargement as the best way of achieving 'our goal of a Europe whole and

¹³⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 25

¹⁴⁰ NATO Warsaw-Summit Guide 2016, 300-301

free, and sharing common values.”¹⁴¹ NATO enlargement is explicitly intended to spread the West’s set of values. In a way this is strategic, it follows the liberal logic that democracies interact with one another peacefully so more democracy will mean more peace. At the same time, the organization makes it clear that “the Alliance does not consider any country to be its adversary,” yet “it provides a comprehensive list of capabilities the Alliance aims to maintain and develop to counter existing and emerging threats.”¹⁴² Russia isn’t an enemy of NATO so long as it isn’t an enemy to democracy. However Russia as it exists today is in opposition to the liberal democratic project.

While NATO isn’t explicitly balanced against Russia, it exists as a community of states with shared values dedicated to the spread of democracy and the defense of it. For all intents and purposes, its strained relationship with Russia is a defining feature of the organization. As such, there will be times when the entities clash. During the 2000’s when NATO was expanding, Russian officials condemned and protested the act. It was an ideological mission propelled by a strategic mechanism. That strategic mechanism, alliances, is a tool of liberalism and at the time it seemed like a valid option. The problem is that there needs to be a reason for members to exist in an alliance. Even though that reason was reestablished as the protection of a shared set of values, that alone is not enough. Alliances are by nature tools for balancing. Regardless of intent on the West’s part, the expansion of an exclusionary alliance up to Russia’s borders would be perceived as balancing against Russia. In Russia, it is still perceived and publicized as such. In February of 2017, Putin was quoted saying that, “NATO’s new mission is the containment of Russia...The alliance was running expansionist policies before, but now they have found a different, as they believe, a more serious reason for it.”¹⁴³ That quote comes from a story the markedly biased *Pravda Report* ran, and Putin has his own motivations for propagating such a narrative. Still, he is not entirely wrong and whether that

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 301

¹⁴² Ibid., 301

¹⁴³ Pravda Report, “*Putin: NATO Wants Russia to Confront the West*,” February 16, 2017.

is his legitimate interpretation of the NATO-Russia dynamic or not, NATO's expressed mission is somewhat congruent with that interpretation.

“The Alliance does not consider any country to be its adversary,”¹⁴⁴ but there are states that by nature or action have an adversarial relationship with the alliance; Russia is one of them. As stated before, there must be some justification for a member's presence in an alliance. Without dissolving into the Trump-ian argument that some states get more out of NATO than they put in, it should be noted that there are many small Eastern-European member states that rely on the alliance for security but are of little strategic consequence to the great Western powers. Nearly two-thirds of NATO's military expenditures are paid for by the United States. While Estonia may be a vital interest to Germany, and Germany to the United States, and thus Estonia a secondary interest to the United States, its sovereignty and the health of its democracy is ultimately of little strategic consequence to the United States. In an age of war fatigue and in the aftermath of a recession, the effect of which is still perceived if not still as heavily felt, many of the United States' citizens fail to see the value in paying to protect these states. Clausewitz writes,

“one and the same political object can in different nations, and even in one and the same nation at different times, produce different reactions. We can therefore allow the political object to serve as the standard only insofar as we bear in mind its influences on the masses which it is to affect. So the character of these masses must be considered.”¹⁴⁵

A consideration of the character of the United States' masses would indicate that, today, the value assigned to NATO and its expansion project as political objects has decreased. A large portion of the United States' population seems to fail to see the reason for including NATO's easternmost member states in the alliance. Competition over political objects is a perpetual balancing act, as Clausewitz notes. The state with a greater will vis a vis a particular object will fight more voraciously for ownership of it. Power dynamics play an important role in this balance; a state may wish to

¹⁴⁴ NATO Warsaw-Summit Guide 2016, 301

¹⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 9

contest the United States' foreign policy, but if it is powerless to do so its will, no matter how great, means little. Power, in the Clausewitzian sense, is a combination of will and means. In different ratios this combination of will and means will result in particular outcomes. A state inferior in means but superior in will can win a certain contest. And, more relevant to the United States' unipolar situation, the opposite can occur. NATO expansion was carried out during a time when the geopolitical game seemed to be over; as already noted, this analysis relied on the faulty assumption that the path toward increased stability has an end other than a slowing of pace and a reduction of acceptable behaviors.

Realists and liberals alike based their unipolar theories and policy prescriptions on the belief that the utter supremacy of the United States' power meant that no state could reasonably contest it. This belief is grounded in the mistaken conclusion that preponderance of power can subordinate the effect of political will's unpredictable and fickle nature. There is little reason to think that the United States will suffer a decline in military power at any point in the near future. However, the will behind NATO and the liberal democratic project has diminished over time, in part due to the future of the project being peripherally threatened. For some of the United States' citizens, NATO itself does not seem "worth it." For policymakers, Russia's revisionist behavior serves as a warning signal that further pursuit of expansion may result in conflict. NATO hasn't added new members since 2009, it doesn't seem likely that it will add any more Eastern European states to its roster any time soon. Some states, like Ukraine, that were included in discussions of possible expansion a decade ago are, for obvious reasons, no longer. It seems that the NATO expansion project has been put on hold, and that the West's goal now is to preserve the status quo. The issue is that today's status quo spheres of influence are starkly different from those of the 1990's. The will of the West is no longer to pursue expansion, with its responsibility then being the protection its recent acquisitions. Putin has not gone so far as to directly call into question the strength or validity of NATO's security

assurances. Nonetheless, allied states are far more nervous about a Russian threat than they were at the turn of the millennium.

The NATO expansion project has stalled, the protection project is underway. This is the question of whether or not NATO over-expanded. I would argue that due to the intemperance of the unipolar power, - the United States - the alliance did over-expand. As already stated, the belief that history could and did end, combined with the evolution of the international system into a unipolar one, the United States pursued a grand strategy that failed to properly consider the strategic implications of its actions. During the unipolar moment, the spread of liberal democracy became a vital interest of the United States. In an absolute strategic sense of course it wasn't, but it was pursued as such in terms of policy. Russia's revisionist behavior has influenced the West's behavior, and a shift occurred in which expansion slowed and the protection of the status quo became the predominant concern. Strategy and geopolitics are once again acknowledged as enduring concerns. What makes NATO expansion a particularly interesting case is that the organization itself has been a vital interest of the United States since its founding and its renewed mission, as a community with shared values, is intimately connected with the vital interest, at least on a rhetorical level, of the protection and advancement of democracy. As such, the validity of the United States' claim that it holds these two interests as vital is inseparable from its commitment to NATO's newest members. This is the stranglehold of stability and the reason why NATO expansion contributed to the United States' current predicament.

Unless a vital interest is threatened, the United States will likely not respond to Russia's revisionist behavior with military force. It may not even do so if a vital interest were threatened. Putin's "salami-slicing"¹⁴⁶ undermines the United States' validity, but there is little that United States seems likely to do in direct response to it, since he has yet to actually threaten any state that the

¹⁴⁶ See Schelling, Thomas., *Arms and Influence*.

United States has a concrete commitment to. The provocation must be great to prompt direct response; so long as the actions Putin takes do not breach the United States' red line, the United States' credibility is vulnerable to being chipped away at. I can't pretend to know what the United States would do if Putin endangered a recent NATO member's sovereignty or posit that such a situation is plausible or even possible. If we take Russia to be a rational, security-seeking actor, attacking an ally of the United States that is backed with the security assurance of Article V wouldn't be a possibility. Yet because of his success with revisionism in other, non-protected parts of Eastern Europe, that scenario is thought about and discussed often. A Russian invasion of a Baltic state, or, more likely, a domestically-spawned coup or rejection of the government announced by a regional official with Russian military personnel in the frame - to protect civil order during the transitory period - might be met with condemnations and inaction from the United States. That this is an outcome seems even possible should be considered is a victory for Putin.

Just as it's unclear what the United States *would* do, it is unclear what the United States *should* do. There is no easy solution to the United States' problem. Due to the nature of NATO as a vital interest in itself and as a connecting association to many of the United States' vital interests, protecting the organization's legitimacy is essential. It would severely damage the United States' reputation and its relationship with its allies if it pulled out of NATO. Supporting NATO's easternmost members against a Russian attack is an equally unattractive option, but one that seems relatively distant from the realm of possibility. Taking the current situation, in which Russia has an adversarial relationship to NATO and the West, and has made aggressive steps toward undermining the sovereignty of Eastern European states, it is difficult to think of a plan of action that avoids the re-ignition of the Cold War.

I won't attempt to offer a solution to this problem here, since it would be purely speculative. The cause of the problem, the reason why this United States is in this situation, seems to be that

scholars and policymakers' hubris aligned with a point in time when the United States could operate without considering strategy. Unipolar powers undermine themselves by expanding beyond their vital interests. Doing so would not be a problem if defeated states were permanently defeated, and each victory had a final and enduring outcome. Liberals and realists alike take this as either truth or possibility, but in the stable modern world the absolute destruction of an enemy is impossible. As such, there can never be any guarantee that the consequences of one's victory will be lasting. Crafting a grand strategy with the belief that such a guarantee can exist will create difficulties for the state at a later time.

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