Preface

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When the Cold War ended, many commentators declared that the United States was the “sole surviving superpower.” Others hailed the beginning of a “unipolar moment” in international politics. During the 1990s the United States appeared to enjoy unchallenged global primacy. Some countries complained about excessive U.S. power, but most seemed to grudgingly accept that the United States was, in the words of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, “the Indispensable Nation.” In the new millennium, however, global resentment of U.S. power grew as the George W. Bush administration responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with a series of unilateral and military actions. In many countries, the public and the government sought ways to counter the exercise of U.S. power.

This volume focuses on three key questions. First, what are the sources, limits, and prospects of U.S. primacy? Second, will other countries attempt to balance the power of the United States by forming alliances and building up their own capabilities? Third, have other countries already started to engage in “soft balancing” against the United States? These questions lie at the intersection of theory and policy. They are not the only questions raised by the emergence of U.S. primacy, but they are likely to be at the center of discussions of the structure of international politics and the global role of the United States for many years.

The first two essays in this volume examine the sources, implications, and durability of U.S. primacy. In “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” William Wohlforth argues that the United States enjoys an unprecedented margin of superiority over its potential great-power rivals and that the resulting unipolar world is both peaceful and stable. He suggests that the United States can and should adopt a grand strategy of active engagement in world politics to maintain order and to prolong unipolarity.

Wohlforth contends that the current international system is “unambiguously unipolar.” Although many commentators have argued that the United States lacks the power to shape world politics decisively, Wohlforth presents evidence to show that the United States has extraordinary advantages over all other major states. No great power in the past two centuries has enjoyed such a wide advantage in every component of power—economic, military, technological, and geopolitical. The U.S. lead appears even wider when measured against information-age indicators such as high-technology manufacturing and research and development. The “unipolar moment” that emerged at the end of the Cold War may well become a unipolar era.

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Several scholars have argued that unipolarity is inherently unstable, conflict-ridden, and transitory, because other great powers will challenge the preponderant power.¹ Wohlforth, however, contends that unipolarity is peaceful and stable, for two reasons. First, because the United States has such a large advantage in raw power, no other state can hope to challenge it. Hegemonic rivalry will not emerge in the current international system; no major power can afford to incur U.S. enmity. In addition, the other major powers are unlikely to go to war or engage in intense security competitions because the United States has the capabilities to ease and prevent local security conflicts.

Second, unipolarity is peaceful because in a unipolar world states never miscalculate or misperceive the resolve of alliances or the distribution of power. In multipolar systems, the complexity and uncertainty of alliance systems and the importance of shifts in relative power often cause leaders to blunder into war. When one state is dominant, however, other states cannot form alliances against it, so there is no need to assess the resolve, power, and solidarity of rival alliances. In conflicts, the side that the dominant state takes will probably prevail.

Wohlforth argues that unipolarity is likely to last. In addition to having an overwhelming advantage in raw power, the United States is in the favorable position of being the only actual or potential pole that is not in or around Eurasia. This geographical fact means that other potential poles that seek to increase their power will provoke nearby countries to balance against them. If, for example, Germany, Japan, or Russia were to attempt to challenge U.S. preeminence, their geographical neighbors would resist this attempt—much as they have resisted earlier German, Japanese, and Russian bids for hegemony.

Some observers believe that other states are already balancing against what they see as the arrogance of U.S. power,² but Wohlforth points out that most of this balancing remains rhetorical. States may complain about U.S. preponderance, but in the late 1990s, at least, most of them reduced their military spending and aligned themselves implicitly or explicitly with the United States.

U.S. preeminence will not last forever, but U.S. policymakers should focus on strategies for a unipolar world instead of making premature plans for a transition to a new international system. Wohlforth recommends that the United States should attempt to prolong unipolarity by playing a major role in

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¹ See, for example, the essays by Christopher Layne and Kenneth Waltz in this volume.
² The essays by Robert Pape and T.V. Paul in this volume argue that other countries are already engaging in “soft balancing” against the United States. Stephen Brooks and Wohlforth present their rebuttal of this argument in their essay, as do Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander in their essay.
providing regional security, thereby forestalling the emergence of great struggles for power and security. Although some critics of U.S. foreign policy complain that the United States intervenes in too many overseas conflicts, Wohlforth argues that the United States should continue to use its capabilities to provide order and security. This strategy need not be too costly, because it does not require limitless commitments. The United States should focus on "managing the central security regimes in Europe and Asia, and maintaining the expectation on the part of other states that any geopolitical challenge to the United States is futile."

In "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," Barry R. Posen develops an innovative argument about the sources, nature, limitations, and implications of U.S. military hegemony. Whereas Wohlforth looks at the economic, military, technological, and geopolitical sources of U.S. power, Posen focuses exclusively on military capabilities. One of the keys to U.S. military preeminence, Posen says, is the country’s unprecedented "command of the commons—command of the sea, space, and air." Although command of the commons gives the United States tremendous strategic advantages, it does not mean that the United States will go unchallenged everywhere. Posen notes that adversaries will be able to "fight U.S. forces with "some hope of success" in several contested zones. These are arenas—"on land, in the air at low altitudes, and at sea in the so-called littorals"—where geography, knowledge of the local terrain, strong political motivations, and access to weaponry will enable adversaries to mount stiff resistance to U.S. military actions.

Posen argues that the U.S. command of the commons and the persistence of contested zones have important implications for U.S. grand strategy: "Even before the September 11 terrorist attacks, the foreign policy debate had narrowed to a dispute between primacy and selective engagement, between a nationalist, unilaterialist version of hegemony, and a liberal, multilateral version of hegemony. U.S. command of the commons provides an impressive foundation for selective engagement. It is not adequate for a policy of primacy." The Bush administration’s embrace of primacy is problematic, Posen argues, because it creates unease among allies and "may cause others to ally against the United States." A policy of selective engagement, on the other hand, would be more effective and more sustainable because it would help to "make U.S. military power appear less threatening and more tolerable."

The next four essays in this volume offer contending perspectives on whether other countries are likely to balance against the United States, either
by forming anti-U.S. alliances or by building up their own military capabilities. They contribute to a long-standing debate over the balance of power in international relations theory. Do countries attempt to balance the power of states that threaten them? Do they balance against threat or against power? Do balances form rapidly and reliably? Does a balance of power foster peace and stability? These questions have been central in realist theories of international relations and most realists have upheld the validity of balance of power theory.

Two authors—Christopher Layne and Kenneth Waltz—argue that the predictions of realist theory will be realized: other countries will sooner or later align against the United States and begin to develop the capabilities to challenge U.S. primacy.

In “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” Christopher Layne explores in detail the implications of the United States’ predominant international position in the aftermath of the Cold War. Unlike Wohlforth, Layne argues that a “strategy of predominance,” aimed at perpetuating the singular status of the United States in the new international order, is unlikely to succeed and could be counterproductive. The reason, Layne suggests, is that both theory and history indicate that “unipolar moments” are fleeting: new great powers inevitably rise to challenge the power and standing of the hegemon.

The theoretical underpinnings of this argument are grounded in realism. Layne notes that differential economic growth rates result over time in substantial shifts in relative power—shifts that are usually reflected in the conduct of international diplomacy and eventually in the structure of the international system. He emphasizes also the structural incentives for states that have the potential to do so to seek great power status, and the tendency for other states to attempt to balance against the power of the hegemon, even if the hegemon is relatively benign. In the post–Cold War era, Layne argues, these factors will act to erode U.S. predominance. He augments this theoretical argument with historical evidence that leads to the same conclusion: both French hegemony in the late seventeenth century and British hegemony in the mid-nineteenth century were completely undermined within a few decades. In Layne’s view, just as earlier unipolar moments were temporary, so too will U.S. hegemony wither with the passage of time.

Layne believes that the United States is mistakenly pursuing a strategy of preponderance, attempting to preserve its “benign hegemony.” The inevitable rise of new great powers—notably Germany and Japan—dooms this approach to failure, and the aggressive quest to preserve primacy could provoke and hasten the unavoidable challenges to U.S. power. Layne advocates instead an
approach that combines a focus on correcting internal sources of relative decline with an international strategy that takes multipolarity as its starting point. A multipolar world can be difficult and potentially dangerous, and Layne refuses to dismiss the possibility even of great power war. But if multipolarity is inescapable, as Layne asserts, then the United States must adapt to it. Accordingly, he urges that U.S. strategy concentrate first on preserving U.S. interests during the transition from the unipolar to the multipolar world, and second on maximizing U.S. prospects in a multipolar world.

Layne’s “Unipolar Illusion” was published in 1993. In a new postscript, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of American Hegemony,” Layne considers how well the arguments have stood the test of time. He recognizes that he exaggerated the power of Japan and concedes that his prediction of a multipolar world in 2010 is unlikely to be borne out. Layne nevertheless argues that new great powers are emerging to challenge the United States. China, India, and the European Union will become strong enough to make the international system multipolar.

According to Layne, the United States is too powerful to be regarded as a benign hegemon, even if it repeatedly proclaims its benevolent intentions. The war in Iraq makes clear that the United States can and will act essentially unilaterally in the face of significant international opposition. Other countries are likely to mistrust and fear the United States. Some, including China, India, and Russia, are already starting to balance against U.S. power by building up their own economic and technological capabilities, which can eventually be converted into military power. Members of the European Union are developing the military capability to act autonomously against the United States.

Layne concludes that U.S. hegemony will not last forever. The only question is, when will it end?

In “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” Kenneth Waltz offers a general defense of realist theory against several varieties of criticism and then provides a realist analysis of the likely pattern of international politics in the era of unipolarity. Waltz notes that criticisms of realism often emerge when “peace breaks out,” as it did for a time after the end of the Cold War. He argues that realist theory remains the best guide to understanding international politics and the future of U.S. primacy.

Waltz defends realist theory by refuting several of the major theoretical challenges to realism. He contends that the democratic peace thesis, which argues that democracies have never gone to war with one another and are unlikely to do so, is a flawed challenge to realism. In his view, many of the causes of war are rooted in the anarchic structure of the international system. Changing the domestic political systems of states by turning them all into democracies will not eliminate war. Waltz accepts that “democracies seldom fight democracies,” but points out that wars between democracies have been few. Citing the example of perceptions of Germany before and after the beginning of World War I, he notes that countries defined as democracies are quickly redefined as nondemocracies when they go to war with democracies. Waltz also notes that democracies are often more likely to initiate wars against nondemocracies, because they believe that they need to defeat nondemocratic states and make them democratic. The spread of democracy may thus increase the amount of war in the world.

Waltz argues that a second challenge to realist theory—the claim that economic interdependence promotes peace—is flawed. He notes that close interdependence can breed war as well as peace. Moreover, economic interdependence has weak effects. Economic interdependence reached high levels in the nineteenth century, but in 1914 quickly collapsed into war, autarky, and more war. In international politics, strong states are not losing control to global economic markets.

Turning to the claim that the rise of international institutions challenges realist theory, Waltz argues that the structure of power in the international system determines the role of institutions. NATO, for example, is often cited as a significant institution that outlived its original anti-Soviet purpose to play an important post–Cold War role. In Waltz’s view, however, the continued existence of NATO “nicely illustrates how international institutions are created and maintained by stronger states [e.g., the United States] to serve their perceived and misperceived interests.” Waltz sees NATO’s expansion not as evi-

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dence of the institution’s strength, but as another example of how the United States can act foolishly in the era of primacy: “In the absence of counterweights, a country’s internal impulses prevail, whether fueled by liberal or by other urges.” More generally, any effects attributed to international institutions “are but one step removed from the capabilities and intentions of the major state or states that gave them birth and sustain them.”

Waltz then turns to the question of international politics in a unipolar world and applies realist theory to understand the future of U.S. primacy. He argues that the unipolarity that began with the demise of the Soviet Union will not last, for two reasons. First, dominant powers such as the United States weaken themselves by misusing their power internationally. During the Cold War, the Soviet threat constrained U.S. policy. In the absence of any major threat, the United States has “wide latitude in making policy choices” and may act capriciously on the basis of “internal political pressure and national ambition.”

Second, even if the United States acts with moderation, other states will worry about U.S. behavior and therefore balance against it. Waltz points out that “unbalanced power leaves weaker states feeling uneasy and gives them reason to strengthen their positions.” The leading candidates to become great powers are China, Japan, and the European Union, although Europe is unlikely to become a great power unless Germany decides to lead. China and Japan already have begun to take steps to counter U.S. power.

Waltz concludes that “the American aspiration to freeze historical development by working to keep the world unipolar is doomed. . . . Multipolarity is developing before our eyes.”

The next two essays in this volume offer perspectives on U.S. primacy through the lens of liberal theories of international relations. Most liberal theories recognize that power matters in international politics, but they also point to the importance of international institutions, economics, and states’ forms of government.

In “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order,” John Ikenberry offers an institutional argument for why other great powers did not balance against the United States after the end of the Cold War. In his view, realist predictions of great power balancing have not been borne out because after World War II the United States decided to engage in strategic restraint and thereby reassured weaker states that it was more interested in cooperation than in domination. This reassurance enabled weaker states to participate in the postwar order. The institutions created and supported by the United States limited the opportunities for the United States to exploit its
power for momentary advantages. Although the United States could have unilaterally exploited its huge advantage in power during the immediate post-1945 years, it instead decided to “lock in” its advantage by creating a durable institutional order based on U.S. restraint. Weaker states agreed to participate in this order because it limited the U.S. exercise of power.

The institutions of the postwar order have served to reduce the returns to power in international politics, “which lowers the risks of participation by strong and weak states alike.” Institutions not only provide a functional basis for cooperative solutions to international problems by reducing uncertainty and lowering transactions costs, but also mitigate the security dilemma and restrain the arbitrary exercise of power.

Ikenberry argues that the liberal basis of U.S. hegemony made it easier for other countries to accept the postwar order. Because the United States has an open and transparent domestic political system, it has been able to remain at the center of “a large and expanding institutionalized and legitimate political order.” The postwar order actually has become more stable over time, and its institutions have become “firmly embedded in the wider structures of politics and society.”

Ikenberry’s analysis finds that “the United States agrees to operate within an institutionalized political process and, in return, its partners agree to be willing participants.” Writing in 1998, he suggests that the postwar order had remained remarkably stable in the face of repeated shocks such as the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1970s energy crisis, and the controversy over U.S. “Euro-missiles” in the 1980s.

Ikenberry concludes that “American hegemony is reluctant, open, and highly institutionalized—or in a word, liberal.” In his view, these features increase the likelihood that it will endure: “Short of large-scale war or a global economic crisis, the American hegemonic order appears to be immune to would-be hegemonic challengers.”

In “Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy,” John Owen offers another liberal explanation for why the rest of the world has not formed a balancing coalition to counter U.S. power. He accepts that U.S. primacy and the unipolar structure of the international system is likely to endure because the United States enjoys a large advantage in economic and military power.5 It may take many years for other countries to catch up. Nevertheless, the magnitude of

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U.S. power does not fully explain why the rest of the world is not counterbalancing the United States. Owen notes that several major powers are showing signs of such balancing. China’s increased military spending is partly directed against the United States and grew after U.S. military successes in Iraq in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999. Russia also has opposed U.S. policies and has cooperated with China to limit U.S. influence. For Owen, the key question is why some countries have engaged in incipient balancing against the United States while others have not.

Owen argues that “the degree to which a state counterbalances U.S. power is a function of how politically liberal that state is.” He defines liberalism as “an ideology that seeks to uphold individual autonomy and prescribes a particular set of domestic institutions as a means to that end” and he distinguishes between liberalism and the related concept of democracy, which is “the rule of the majority.” In Owen’s view, the absence of an anti-U.S. counterbalancing coalition suggests that most potential challenger states are at least somewhat liberal and therefore believe the United States is relatively unthreatening. For their part, U.S. leaders regard liberal regimes as benign. On the other hand, states that are not liberal consider the United States a potential threat, and the United States reciprocates this suspicion. Hence disagreements between the United States and liberal states do not provoke military counterbalancing, unlike similar disagreements between the United States and countries with antiliberal regimes.

Owen cites the pattern of military spending in the 1990s to support his argument. In Britain, France, and Germany, military spending remained constant or fell, indicating that these countries are not counterbalancing U.S. power. Japanese military spending followed a similar pattern in the 1990s, during which Japan also strengthened its alliance with the United States. According to Owen, European and Japanese acquiescence to U.S. power reflects the predominance of liberalism in each society. Although their governments may criticize U.S. policy, they do not regard the United States as a military threat.

When countries do not share liberal values, the pattern becomes more complicated. Owen points out that Russia’s military spending declined in the late 1990s, but Russian policies became more anti-Western on issues such as Kosovo. He argues that these ambiguous policies reflect Russia’s oscillations between authoritarianism and democracy under Presidents Boris Yeltsin and

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Vladimir Putin. As liberals have lost influence in Russia, relations with the United States have deteriorated, and Russia has attempted to frustrate U.S. policies in the Balkans.

Owen regards China’s foreign policy in the 1990s as a prime case of antiliberal counterbalancing. China’s military spending increased during the 1990s as China acquired new capabilities that appeared to be directed against the United States. China’s institutions remained antiliberal. Although China has abandoned Marxist ideology, the ruling elite remains committed to a single-party dictatorship. Support for political liberalization has waned, partly because China’s rulers have seen how reform led to the collapse of the communist system in the Soviet Union. Chinese elites fear transnational liberalism and U.S. military power. The United States’ anti-Chinese rhetoric and its commitment to Taiwan’s security reinforce these fears.

Owen considers several objections to his arguments. First, he examines the claim that hostile policies—not regime type—account for the relatively poor relations between the United States and China. Owen suggests that the divergent ideologies of the two countries explain why, for example, the May 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was regarded so differently in each country.

Second, Owen responds to the argument that the European Union is balancing against the United States by forming a rapid reaction force. He argues that the force was created not to counter U.S. power, but to intervene in the Balkans at a time when the United States seemed reluctant to do so.

Third, in response to claims that French leaders complain about American “hyperpower” because they are deeply concerned about U.S. primacy, Owen points out that such complaints have been prominent in French foreign policy for years. They reflect a desire for cultural independence and a strong tradition of nationalism, but they have not led to actual policies that would balance U.S. power.

Fourth, Owen notes that some scholars argue that China is not actually balancing against the United States. He asserts that China’s current relative weakness and need to cooperate economically with the United States do not mean that China is not an antiliberal revisionist power.

Finally, in response to claims that liberal India is counterbalancing the United States, Owen (writing in 2001) detects the beginnings of a potential strategic partnership between the two countries. Even in 2001, Indian concerns about U.S. hegemony seemed much more muted than those of France.
Owen recommends several steps that the United States should take to preserve its preponderance of power. Most important, it should try to maximize the “number and influence of liberal elites in potential challenger countries.” The United States will need to help liberalism preserve its promises. In practice, this means maintaining prosperity in Western Europe and Japan and encouraging liberalism in Russia, even if its prospects seem bleak. In addition, the United States should avoid threatening the vital interests of potential challengers. Doing so could encourage antiliberals in such countries or even turn liberals against the United States. Given China’s illiberalism and apparent absence of domestic liberals, however, the United States will need to adopt a realpolitik approach to China and treat it as “any adversary with whom cooperation is possible, but alignment is not.” Owen concludes that attempting to preserve U.S. primacy to advance the cause of liberalism and maintain U.S. security is worthwhile, even if the ultimate triumph of global liberalism would remove the rationale for U.S. primacy.

The final four essays in this volume examine whether the rest of the world already has started to balance against the United States. Theories of international relations offer different predictions about whether other countries will engage in balancing. These essays present empirical and analytical assessments of how the world is actually reacting to U.S. power. The first two assert that “soft balancing,” in which states seek to undermine and restrain a potential hegemon in ways that fall short of traditional military balancing, against the United States already has begun.

In “Soft Balancing against the United States,” Robert Pape argues that other countries’ soft balancing is a response to the George W. Bush administration’s “profoundly new U.S. national security strategy.” Pape argues that the Bush strategy is one of the most aggressively unilateral U.S. postures ever taken. Since 2001 U.S. unilateral actions have included abandoning the Kyoto accords on global warming, rejecting participation in the International Criminal Court, pulling out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, and, most significantly, invading Iraq in 2003. Pape contends that the United States now asserts that it has the right to attack and conquer sovereign countries that pose no observable threat, and to do so without international support. In his view, these new policies will have momentous long-term implications.

Pape argues that the Bush administration’s aggressive unilateralism is changing the international reputation of the United States. Other countries previously believed that the United States had nonaggressive intentions. Even though the United States has been powerful for decades and has fought nu-
merous wars, it was regarded as a benign force in world politics and few states balanced against it. In a unipolar world such as the one that emerged after the end of the Cold War, perceptions of the leading power are crucial in determining how other countries will react. There is little doubt that the United States enjoys a large advantage in power, but there is much more uncertainty about U.S. intentions. Whether other countries will balance against the United States depends on whether U.S. policies are seen as benign or threatening. As Pape puts it, “Because the United States is already so powerful, even a small change in how others perceive the aggressiveness of U.S. intentions can cause other major powers to be concerned about their security.” Public opinion polls suggest that the populations of other countries, including many long-time U.S. allies such as Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, have a much less favorable image of the United States. This change is largely the result of the Bush administration’s foreign and security policies—particularly its willingness to resort to unilateral preventive war in Iraq and its decision to build a national missile defense system.

Pape sees ample evidence that other countries are starting to balance against the United States. This balance has not taken the traditional forms of military buildups and alliances, because directly confronting the United States remains too risky. Instead, countries are resorting to soft balancing to delay, frustrate, and undermine U.S. policies. States that opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq acted to ensure that the United States lacked the legitimacy that would have been conferred by United Nations Security Council support. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey refused to allow the United States to use their territory for U.S. ground forces that were deployed in the Iraq war. China and South Korea have played an expanded diplomatic role in negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear status. In the short run, soft balancing can make it harder for the United States to use its extraordinary power. In the longer run, this form of balancing might establish the basis for more forceful opposition to the United States.

Soft balancing against the United States will become more intense if Washington continues to pursue aggressively unilateral security policies. According to Pape, “Unless the United States radically changes its avowed national security strategy, it risks creating a world in which a broad, if loose, coalition of major powers (including most of its nominal allies) is more motivated to constrain the United States than to cooperate with it.” To avoid this outcome, the United States should renounce the systematic use of preventive war, as well as other aggressive unilateral military policies; return to its traditional policy governing
the use of force; and participate vigorously in multipolar diplomatic initiatives to resolve critical security problems.

T.V. Paul offers another perspective in “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy.” Paul argues that second-tier powers such as China, France, Germany, India, and Russia have not resorted to traditional balancing—arms buildups and alliance—against the United States because they believe that they are safe from direct U.S. attacks. They have, however, begun to form diplomatic coalitions against the United States.

Paul begins by refuting the common explanations for the lack of balancing against the United States. He disputes the liberal argument that other liberal states do not balance against the United States because they do not fear a liberal superpower. This argument assumes that states prefer wealth acquisition over military security or status, but this may not be true. Moreover, a liberal superpower might abandon its liberal ideals and become a threat if left unchecked.

Paul notes the realist arguments that other states eventually balance against preponderant powers or that such powers suffer from overstretch and decline as their commitments exceed their capabilities. He faults the realist arguments for indeterminacy and points out that leading powers may be able to stave off decline for decades or even centuries. The United States, in particular, enjoys a significant lead in modern weapons systems that will not be challenged in the near future.

Paul argues that other states are not engaging in traditional balancing against the United States because they do not believe that it threatens their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Until the George W. Bush administration, at least, the United States had not sought to expand its power through direct conquest. It may not be a benign hegemon, but it has not been a major military threat. The United States rarely has needed to conquer territory to achieve its economic goals; it has not supported secessionist movements in Russia and China; and second-tier powers can rely on nuclear deterrence to constrain it.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has adopted a doctrine of preventive and preemptive war that challenges the norm of territorial integrity. This doctrine, which is exemplified by the invasion of Iraq, has not provoked other states to balance militarily against the United States, but it has prompted them to adopt soft-balancing strategies. Most of this type of balancing has consisted of coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions. Actions taken by others—particularly China and Russia—in response to U.S. military intervention in the Kosovo
conflict of 1999 and the Iraq war of 2003 offer examples of soft balancing against the United States.7

The next two essays in this volume take issue with the arguments of Pape and Paul. These essays contend that the rise of soft balancing is greatly exaggerated.

In “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth point out that the development of the concept of soft balancing is an attempt to stretch balance of power theory to encompass an international system in which traditional counterbalancing among the major powers is absent. They reject the claim that soft balancing is a new manifestation of the old pattern of balance of power politics. In their view, “balancing is action taken to check a potential hegemon. It reflects systemic incentives to rebalance power, rather than the specifics of a given issue. . . . The key point is that balance of power theory is not relevant to state behavior unrelated to systemic concentrations of power, which is arguably much of what goes on in international politics.”

Having defined balancing behavior, Brooks and Wohlforth argue that many attempts to complicate U.S. foreign policy should not be regarded as balancing, soft or otherwise. At least four alternative explanations account for “unipolar politics as usual.” First, states may attempt to hinder U.S. foreign policy to advance their economic interests. Second, regional security concerns and the desire for regional policy coordination may drive states to reduce U.S. freedom of action. Third, states may disagree with U.S. policy and oppose it because they think it is misguided, not because they think it threatens their security or because they think that resistance will limit U.S. power in the long run. Fourth, domestic factors may be the source of policies that complicate U.S. foreign policy: “Opposing the United States may be strongly compatible with long-standing historical, political, or cultural understandings—either for the nation as a whole or for individual political parties—that predate any recent shift in U.S. foreign policy, or indeed the rise of unipolarity.”

Brooks and Wohlforth contend that their four alternative explanations account for what other analysts claim is soft balancing. A detailed comparison of soft balancing and the four alternative explanations in the main cases highlighted by proponents of the concept—Russia’s strategic partnerships with China and India, Russian assistance to Iran’s nuclear program, the European Union’s efforts to enhance its defense capability, and opposition to the U.S.-led

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Iraq war in 2003—reveals no empirical support for the soft-balancing explanation. The lack of evidence for the relevance of balancing dynamics in contemporary great-power relations indicates that further investments in adapting balance of power theory to today’s unipolar system will not yield analytical dividends.

Brooks and Wohlforth conclude that soft balance is not taking place. States are engaging in diplomacy and bargaining; they are not responding to a perceived U.S. threat to their security in a way that balance of power theory would predict. Attempts to constrain the United States do not vindicate balance of power theory. Nevertheless, the United States needs to heed the views of other major powers. It cannot deal with issues such as the environment, weapons of mass destruction, disease, migration, and the global economy on its own. In many cases, the United States will need to act with restraint, but this imperative for restraint reflects U.S. self-interest, not a response to expected counterbalancing.

Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander offer additional reasons for skepticism about whether soft balancing is taking place. In “Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back,” they note that many observers predicted a rise in balancing against the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that some claim that soft balancing emerged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. These claims are rooted in traditional theories of international politics.

Lieber and Alexander find little credible evidence that major powers are engaging in either hard or soft balancing against the United States. Other states have the economic capability to engage in military balancing, but they have not increased their military spending in recent years. They also have not formed new alliances against the United States. According to Lieber and Alexander, the absence of hard balancing is explained by the lack of underlying motivation to compete strategically with the United States under current conditions.

Lieber and Alexander evaluate claims that soft balancing is taking place against the United States. They find that specific predictions of soft balancing are not supported by the evidence. Other states are not seeking to entangle the United States in a web of international institutions. No efforts are being made to exclude it from regional economic cooperation. Notwithstanding Turkey’s decision to deny U.S. forces transit rights for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the overall status of U.S. overseas basing rights seems to look brighter than it did a few years ago. Finally, other states are not aligning with rogue states to oppose the United States.
Lieber and Alexander also argue that the soft balancing argument is flawed conceptually and amounts to much ado about nothing. The concept is difficult to define or operationalize, and the behavior seems identical to traditional diplomatic friction. Lieber and Alexander conclude that balancing against the United States is not occurring because contemporary U.S. grand strategy, despite widespread criticism, poses a threat to only a very limited number of regimes and terrorist groups. Most countries either share U.S. strategic interests in the war on terrorism or do not have a direct stake in the conflict. As such, balancing behavior is likely only among a narrowly circumscribed list of states and actors being targeted by the United States.

The essays in this volume do not exhaust the debate over U.S. primacy and its implications for international politics. For many years—perhaps decades—the question of U.S. power will dominate the headlines and the pages of scholarly journals. We hope that these essays frame the important issues and will serve as a basis for further discussion and analysis. The suggested readings at the end of the volume provide a brief list of additional works for those who want to explore these topics further.