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ABSTRACT

Despite a few persistent, high-profile conflicts in the Middle East, the world is experiencing an era of unprecedented peace and stability. Many scholars have offered explanations for this “New Peace,” to borrow Steven Pinker’s phrase, but few have devoted much time to the possibility that US hegemony has brought stability to the system. This paper examines the theoretical, empirical, and psychological foundations of the hegemonic-stability explanation for the decline in armed conflict. Those foundations are rather thin, as it turns out, and a review of relevant insights from political psychology suggests that unipolarity and stability are probably epiphenomenal. The New Peace can in all likelihood continue without US dominance and should persist long after unipolarity comes to an end.

On 22 June 2016, President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Rodrigo Londoño-Echeverri, commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), shook hands in Havana, ending the longest-running civil war in the world. At long last, after more than 220,000 deaths over half a century, peace had come to Colombia.¹ The agreement survived its first roadblock a few months later—a substantial roadblock, rejection by Colombian voters—and entered into force after passing through the Congress in late November. By the end of 2016, for the first time since at least the 1600s, and possibly for the first time ever, there were no active armed conflicts in the entire Western Hemisphere.² The remarkably under-celebrated end to the fifty-year-old Colombian Civil War is just the latest data point for what Steven Pinker has called the “New Peace,” the current era of unprecedented inter- and intranational stability.³ Although war is hardly gone from the world, and a number of high-profile conflicts still rage across the Middle East, peace is more widespread today than at any time in history.

Why has armed conflict declined to historically low levels? What accounts for the post-Cold War peace, and how long is it likely to last? Surely no questions are more

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¹Nicholas Casey, “FARC Rebels in Colombia Reach Cease-Fire Deal with Government,” *New York Times*, 22 June 2016, A10.

²Armed conflict may have been absent for a few months at a time in the early 1920s and late 1930s. The evidence gets sketchier as one goes further back in the historical record, but it is good enough to make clear that there have been no extended periods of hemispheric peace since at least the seventeenth century.

³Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

important for either the theory or practice of international relations, and few are harder to answer. Only by understanding the causes of the New Peace can we extrapolate its likely future, however, and plan accordingly. Of the many possible independent variables, none is more controversial than the suggestion that hegemonic stability is at work. The possibility that the United States, wittingly or not, has essentially established a global Pax Americana is generally overlooked by the major scholarly works on the subject. This stands in stark contrast to the policy world, where the many positive aspects of unipolarity and/or US hegemony are articles of faith, rarely discussed and never seriously questioned. Scholar and public intellectual Michael Lind spoke for many when he wrote, “in my experience, most members of the U.S. foreign policy elite sincerely believe that the alternative to perpetual U.S. world domination is chaos and war.”⁴ One of those is certainly Robert Kagan, who noted, “Pinker traces the beginning of a long-term decline in deaths from war to 1945, which just happens to be birthdate of the American world order. The coincidence eludes him, but it need not elude us.”⁵

This paper examines the theoretical, empirical, and psychological foundations of that widespread belief. The first section discusses the New Peace and its potential explanations; the second explains the difference between unipolarity and hegemony, and examines the logic of the hegemonic-stability argument; the third turns to the evidence, comparing both US power and grand strategy to conflict levels; the fourth examines the political psychology of hegemony and reviews some major findings that provide insight into how international order can be misperceived. Insights from that field are crucial in any discussion of the relationship between US power and global stability, which is built far more on belief and perception than evidence.

The New Peace does not appear to be the result of unipolarity or US hegemony. While that conclusion might not sit well with many US analysts, the news is not all bad, for if the current generation of declinists is right and unipolarity’s days are numbered, the odds are good that the world will not descend into the atavistic chaos that haunts the neoconservative imagination. The United States can adjust its grand strategy without fear in the Trump years, perhaps even letting the “unipolar moment” expire, because the New Peace may well be unrelated to its dominance.⁶

The New Peace

The “New Peace” usefully describes the well-known, unprecedented, system-wide decline in warfare since the end of the Cold War.⁷ Although not appreciated by

⁴Michael Lind, “The End of Pax Americana?” *Salon*, 29 September 2009, available at http://www.salon.com/2009/09/29/obama_pax_americana/.

⁵Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 50.

⁶A phrase generally credited to Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/1991): 23–33.

⁷The “Long Peace” is also occasionally used, but that phrase can also refer to the period of great power peace that followed World War II. See John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* 10, no. 4 (Spring 1986): 99–142.

the public at large, empirical analyses have consistently shown that the incidence and magnitude of warfare—interstate, civil, ethnic, revolutionary, etc.—have declined steadily since the end of the Cold War and into the new century.⁸ Raw conflict numbers tell only part of the story: by almost any measure the world has become significantly more peaceful, with measurable declines in coups, repression, the chances of dying in battle, territorial and border disputes, conquest, genocide, and violence against civilians. Each is at an all-time low.⁹ Peace settlements have proven more durable over time, and fewer new conflicts are breaking out than ever before.¹⁰ Whether these trends represent a fundamental change in the rules that govern state behavior or a temporary respite between cataclysms is not yet clear, but there is no doubt that—thus far at least—the post-Cold War era has been more stable and peaceful than any that preceded it.

Absolute numbers of conflicts and other acts of violence are dropping in a system with far more states (the League of Nations had fifty-eight members at its peak, while the UN today has 193) and people (global population has more than tripled since World War II). Rather than fuel Malthusian competition for resources, runaway global population growth has been accompanied by a drastic decline in violence. Furthermore, while some statistics regarding the rate of battle deaths take population growth into account, none attempt to capture the greater number of years people are living. Current life spans are, on average, about twenty years longer than they were in 1950.¹¹ Citizens of the twenty-first century have nearly 30 percent more time to experience warfare. Yet the numbers still decline.

⁸Other categories of warfare, especially great-power and colonial wars, all but disappeared long before the Soviet Union did. For the most up-to-date reviews of the data, see the Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report 2013: The Decline in Global Violence: Evidence, Explanation, and Contestation* (Vancouver: Human Security Press 2013); Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, *Global Report 2014: Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility* (Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, 2014). The most comprehensive review of the New Peace remains Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, but see also, John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) and idem., *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (March 2002), 1–14; Raimo Väyrynen, ed., *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Christopher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010); Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Joshua Goldstein, *Winning the War on War* (New York: Dutton, 2011); John Horgan, *The End of War* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2012).

⁹In addition to Pinker's magnum opus, see Ivan Perkins, *Vanishing Coup: The Pattern of World History Since 1310* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013); Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 2 (March 2011): 249–59; Lotta Harbom, Stina Högladh, and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflict and Peace Agreements," *Journal of Peace Research* 43, no. 5 (September 2006), 617–31; Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 215–50; Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Bethany Lacina, Nils Peter Gleditsch and Bruce Russett, "The Declining Risk of Death in Battle," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (September 2006): 673–80; Victor Asal and Amy Pate, "The Decline of Ethnic Political Discrimination 1990–2003," in Ted Robert Gurr and Monty G. Marshall, eds., *Peace and Conflict 2005: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy* (College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, 2005), 28–38; Andrew Mack, *Global Political Violence: Explaining the Post-Cold War Decline* Coping with Crisis Working Paper Series (International Peace New York: Academy, March 2007); and those cited below.

¹⁰Nils Petter Gleditsch, "The Liberal Moment Fifteen Years On," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (December 2008), 694; and Harbom, Högladh and Wallensteen, "Armed Conflict and Peace Agreements."

¹¹See data maintained by the World Bank, "Life Expectancy at Birth," available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN/countries/1W>.

Not everyone is convinced by the data, however. Skeptics have raised four objections to the idea that this peace is particularly new, each worthy of consideration. First, some have asserted that it is simply too soon to know whether or not these trends in armed conflict are statistically anomalous. Bear Braumoeller has suggested that a minimum of 150 more years needs to pass before we can say with confidence whether war is actually declining.¹² His work focuses exclusively on major, great power wars, however, and excludes both minor and internal conflicts. While it is certainly true that the New Peace is a relatively new phenomenon, perhaps too new to convince everyone, it is also so pervasive across so many measures of violence, and so potentially significant, that surely it is worthy of consideration, even at this early stage.

Second, a number of scholars object to the assertion that “peace” is merely the absence of war, drawing upon Johan Galtung’s well-known distinction between “negative peace” (the absence of war) and “positive peace” (the “integration of human society,” or the presence of justice, cooperation, equality, and/or other indicators).¹³ The New Peace concerns only the former. Surely negative peace has value by itself, but there is also evidence that positive peace is on the rise as well.¹⁴ The current era thus contains good news even for those who take a more expansive view of what exactly it means to be free of conflict.

Third, there is evidence that the last few years have been marginally more violent than the ones that preceded them. The war in Syria has driven global battle deaths up from 25,000 in 2011 to more than 100,000 in 2014, and has certainly contributed to perceptions of a crumbling international security structure. While that one measure has begun to move in opposite direction, however, the other major trends discussed above remain unchanged.¹⁵ Pinker has noted the increase in battle deaths, but also has pointed out that the overall level of deaths remains far below those of the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s, “when the world was a *far* more dangerous place.”¹⁶ There is variation during the New Peace, but levels of violence remain lower than ever before.

¹²Bear Braumoeller, “Is War Disappearing?” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 28 August–1 September 2013). Other critics of the data include Anita Gohdes and Megan Price, “First Things First: Assessing Data Quality before Model Quality,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 6 (December 2013): 1090–108; Pasquale Cirillo and Nassim Nicholas Taleb, “What Are the Chances of a Third World War?” (unpublished manuscript, October 2015), available at www.fooledbyrandomness.com/longpeace.pdf. For responses, see Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, “The Waning of War is Real: A Response to Gohdes and Price,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 6 (December 2013): 1109–127 and Steven Pinker, “Fooled by Belligerence,” June 2015, http://stevenpinker.com/pinker/files/comments_on_taleb_by_s_pinker.pdf, respectively.

¹³Johan Galtung, “An Editorial,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (1964): 1–4.

¹⁴Gary Goertz, Paul F. Diehl, and Alexandru Balas, *The Puzzle of Peace: The Evolution of Peace in the International System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵See Joshua S. Goldstein, “World Backsliding on Peace,” *Huffington Post*, 3 August 2015, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joshua-s-goldstein/world-backsliding-on-peace_b_7924964.html; Steven Pinker and Andrew Mack, “The World is Not Falling Apart,” *Slate*, 22 December 2014, available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/12/the_world_is_not_falling_apart_the_trend_lines_reveal_an_increasingly_peaceful.html.

¹⁶Steven Pinker, “Has the Decline of Violence Reversed since *The Better Angels of Our Nature* was Written?” (unpublished manuscript, August 2014), available at <http://stevenpinker.com/has-decline-violence-reversed-better-angels-our-nature-was-written>, emphasis in original.

The last major objection to the New Peace argues not that the statistics are wrong, but that they fail to capture the reality of modern armed conflict. Perhaps the form taken by post-Cold War violence is different from earlier versions, making it harder to detect by traditional measures. In her influential *New and Old Wars*, Mary Kaldor warned of the rise of “new wars,” which tend to be intrastate, disorganized, unstructured, and deadlier for civilians than those of previous eras.¹⁷ By her widely repeated estimate, new wars result in eight civilian deaths for every one combatant, a much higher ratio than in any previous era. Old wars may be on the decline, in other words, but perhaps new wars, which kill more innocents and are more disruptive to society, have taken their place.

Time and increased scrutiny have not been kind to Kaldor’s ideas, however. A number of researchers have found that the ratio of civilian-to-combatant casualties has not changed markedly over time.¹⁸ If anything, the wars of the post-Cold War era have been less deadly for civilians.¹⁹ Proponents of the “new wars” thesis are surely correct when pointing out that civilians suffer horrifically during post-Cold War conflicts, but those fighting in Guatemala, Cambodia, Mozambique, and the other Cold War hotspots were hardly gentlemen following the battlefield version of the Marquis of Queensberry rules. There is no reason to believe that today’s wars are particularly “new” or worse for civilians than those of the 1960s or 1970s. If anything, combat-related mortality is probably lower today, due to the increase in relief agency activity, refugee aid, and emergency medical services. Worldwide attention is focused more on civilian suffering because we are far more aware of it, thanks in part to the ubiquitous smart phone, not because it has necessarily increased.

To say that this empirical reality does not match popular perception would be to understate the case. The tragic mess in Syria in particular has blinded many observers to the broader trends, which remain essentially unchanged. Security is, after all, relative; absolute safety is an illusion, something promised by leaders but unattainable in a world of imperfect actors. Safety has meaning only in comparison to other times. And when the current era—as dangerous as it may seem—is compared to any other, the verdict is clear: ours is a golden age of peace and security, one in which the odds of dying in warfare

¹⁷Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸Stathis N. Kalyvas, “New’ and ‘Old’ Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?” *World Politics* 54, no. 1 (October 2001): 99–118; Christopher J. L. Murray, et al., “Armed Conflict as a Public Health Problem,” *British Medical Journal* 324, no. 7333 (9 February 2002): 346–49; Errol Henderson and J. Singer, “New Wars’ and Rumors of ‘New Wars’,” *International Interactions* 28, no. 2 (April 2002): 165–90; Kelly M. Greenhill, “Counting the Costs: The Politics of Numbers in Armed Conflicts,” in Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill, eds., *Sex, Drugs and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 127–58; Taylor B. Seybolt, “Significant Numbers: Civilian Casualties and Strategic Peacebuilding,” in Taylor B. Seybolt, Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff, eds., *Counting Civilian Casualties: An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15–28.

¹⁹Erik Melander, Magnus Öberg, and Jonathan Hall, “Are ‘New Wars’ More Atrocious? Battle Severity, Civilians Killed and Forced Migration before and after the End of the Cold War,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 3 (September 2009): 505–36. Kaldor herself has now backed off some of her claims of 1999, especially the 8-to-1 civilian-to-combatant casualty ratio; see her *New and Old Wars*, 3rd ed., esp. 202–21.

are lower than ever before. Rarely have popular perceptions of the international security environment been at such stark odds with reality.

The era of New Peace is hardly without problems, challenges, or lingering violence. Declining conflict does nothing to mitigate climate change, inequality, ISIS, the Ebola virus, or cyberterrorism. However, the number of people who dispute the world's general stability should shrink as more and more relatively peaceful years go by. Why these welcome trends are occurring is not nearly as clear, although a number of attempts have been made to account for it.

Competing Explanations

The publication of Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* in 2011 brought the New Peace into popular consciousness to some degree, but general recognition remains rather low. The data might suggest that the world is much safer, but Americans know better: a 2009 poll found that nearly 60 percent of the public—and fully half of the membership of the elite Council on Foreign Relations—actually considered the world more dangerous than it was during the Cold War.²⁰ Among academic and policy experts, however, the phenomenon is well known, if controversial, and a debate over potential explanations has been raging for some time. A number of major and minor factors have been cited over the years that might help account for the New Peace.

First, nuclear weapons came into existence about the same time that the great powers stopped fighting one another, which a number of scholars suggest is no coincidence.²¹ Faith in the pacifying effect of nuclear weapons led a few prominent realists to suggest that an efficient way to spread stability would be to encourage controlled proliferation to non-nuclear states.²² This idea found little purchase. Instead, proliferation momentum slowed considerably after the end of the Cold War: the world has the same number of nuclear states in 2016 that it did in 1991 (eight), having lost one (South Africa) and gained another (North Korea). Perhaps that number is sufficient to generate widespread fear of generalized war and overall systemic stability.

Second, modern integrated markets contain powerful incentives for peace. While economic considerations are not the only ones that states must weigh when war

²⁰Another quarter (and a fifth of CFR members) consider the dangers to be equivalent. Pew Center for the People and the Press, "America's Place in the World in 2009: An Investigation of Public and Leadership Opinion about International Affairs," (3 December 2009), available at <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/569.pdf>. See also Micah Zenko and Michael A. Cohen, "Clear and Present Safety: The United States is More Secure than Washington Thinks," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 79–93.

²¹Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics before and after Hiroshima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Martin van Creveld, "The Waning of Major War," in Väyrynen, ed., *The Waning of Major War*, 97–112; Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (September 1990): 730–45; Gaddis, "The Long Peace"; Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay," *International Security* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1990): 42–64; Lawrence Freedman, "Stephen Pinker and the Long Peace: Alliance, Deterrence and Decline," *Journal of Cold War History* 14, no. 4 (2014): 657–72; Robert Rauchhaus, "Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis: A Quantitative Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (April 2009): 258–77.

²²See Waltz's contribution to Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1995) and John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 5–56.

looms, to the extent that they affect decisions, in this postmercantilist age they do so in a uniformly pacific direction. In the 1970s, neoliberal institutionalists argued that modern levels of economic interdependence provide strong incentives for states to resolve disputes peacefully.²³ It is almost always in the interest of states today, if they are rational and self-interested, to cooperate rather than run the risk of ruining their economies, and those of their main trading partners, with war. The globalization of production, as Stephen G. Brooks has argued, is a powerful force for stability among those countries that benefit from the actions of multinational corporations.²⁴ Furthermore, today's highly mobile investment dollars flee instability, providing strong incentives for states to settle both external and internal disputes peacefully. As Secretary of State Colin Powell once told a Ugandan audience, "money is a coward."²⁵ Overall, globalization has been accompanied by an evolution in the way national wealth is accumulated. The major industrial powers, and perhaps many of their less-developed neighbors, seem to have reached the rather revolutionary conclusion that territory is not directly related to national power and prestige.²⁶

Third, the new peace has risen alongside the number of democracies in the world. While the widely tested and debated democratic peace theory is not universally accepted in the field, the hundreds of books and articles that have been written on the subject over the past thirty years have been sufficient to convince many that democracies rarely fight one another.²⁷ Since most of today's great powers practice some form of democracy, perhaps it should be unsurprising that conflict has been absent in the global north.

Fourth, a number of scholars have suggested that regimes, law, and institutions shape state behavior, and can serve to inhibit aggression.²⁸ Some major theorists of

²³Robert O. Keohane, and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little Brown Pub., 1977); idem., "Power and Interdependence Revisited," *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 725–53. See also Dale C. Copeland, "Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 5–41; John R. Oneal and Bruce M. Russett, "The Kantian Peace: The Pacific Benefits of Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations, 1885–1992," *World Politics* 52, no. 1 (October 1999): 1–37; Edward D. Mansfield and Brian M. Pollins, ed., *Economic Interdependence and International Conflict: New Perspectives on an Enduring Debate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

²⁴Stephen G. Brooks, *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁵Quoted by David S. Fick, *Entrepreneurship in Africa: A Study of Success* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2002), 289. See also Jonathan Kirshner, *Appeasing Bankers: Financial Caution on the Road to War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁶Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); idem., *The Rise of the Virtual State: Wealth and Power in the Coming Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Erik Gartzke, "The Capitalist Peace," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 166–91. For a dissenting view, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "Globalization and Governance," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 4 (December 1999): 693–700.

²⁷The modern democratic peace debate began in earnest with Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1985): 1151–70. A useful review of its first twenty years can be found in the forum involving David Kinsella, Branislav L. Slantchev, Anna Alexandrova, Erik Gartzke, Michael W. Doyle, and Sebastian Rosato in *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (August 2005): 453–472.

²⁸For representative works, see Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (December 1988): 379–96; Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, "The Promise of Institutional Theory," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 39–51; Patrick M. Morgan, "Multilateral Institutions as Restraints on Major War," in Väyrynen, ed., *The Waning of Major War*, 160–84.

the New Peace, including both Andrew Mack and Joshua S. Goldstein, give UN peacekeeping primary credit for the decline in warfare.²⁹ At the very least, there is convincing evidence that wars do not recur with the same frequency as in the past, a phenomenon for which the UN can certainly take a degree of credit.

These potential explanations suffer from the same general weakness: stability exists where the influence of their independent variable is weak or absent. There are no nuclear states in Central or South America, for example, but those regions have been virtually free of interstate war for many decades. The relative decline of civil wars and ethnic conflict around the globe since the end of the Cold War also is not a product of nuclear deterrence. The democratic peace theory might help explain why there have been no intra-West wars, but it cannot account for the pacific trends among and within nondemocratic states. Africa and other areas of the Global South are also experiencing historically low levels of armed conflict, which suggests that economic growth and interdependence might not be the sole determinants of peaceful choices by leaders.³⁰ With many of these potential explanations, there is another problem: the direction of causality is not clear. It is just as plausible to suggest that peace preceded, and then abetted, the rise of the other factors.³¹ Democracy and economic growth might be the results of stability, rather than the other way around. The rise in peacekeeping has only been possible because of increased great power cooperation. These phenomena may well be related, but just not in the way that their proponents suggest.

A number of other explanations have been proposed. Pinker discussed a series of “rights revolutions,” especially including those of children and women that, in addition to several other factors, may well have contributed to the decline of war.³² Others have suggested that demographics may be playing a decisive role, either through aging populations or declining birthrates in the Global North.³³ Finally, perhaps the most prominent explanation for the decline of war integrates all of the above, suggesting that they contribute to a change in the way people view conflict itself. Together

²⁹Mack, “Global Political Violence”; Goldstein, *Winning the War on War*. For the efficacy of peacekeeping, see the work of Virginia Page Fortna, especially *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents’ Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) and “Is Peacekeeping ‘Winning the War on War?’” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2 (June 2013): 566–70.

³⁰By any reasonable measure, the last decade has been the most peaceful in African history, even when taking into account booming populations and a heavy dose of chronological bias. Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), chap. 2; Scott Straus, “Wars Do End! Changing Patterns of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *African Affairs* 111, no. 443 (March 2012): 179–201; David T. Burbach and Christopher J. Fettweis, “The Coming Stability? The Decline of Warfare in Africa and the Implications for International Security,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 421–45.

³¹Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (October 1978): 881–912; William R. Thompson, “Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart before the Horse?” *International Organization* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 141–74; Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 5–49; John Mueller, “War Has Almost Ceased to Exist: An Assessment,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 297–321; Mark E. Pietrzyk, *International Order and Individual Liberty: Effects of War and Peace on the Development of Governments* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).

³²Pinker, *Better Angels of Our Nature*.

³³Mark L. Haas, “A Geriatric Peace? The Future of U.S. Power in a World of Aging Populations,” *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 112–47; Edward N. Luttwak, “Where Are the Great Powers? At Home with the Kids,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 4 (July/August 1994): 23–28.

these factors may have combined to alter the way people think about warfare, removing the romance and glory and replacing it with revulsion and dishonor. Ideas, when widely held, can become norms that shape and limit state behavior.³⁴

There is yet another potential explanation, one that is far more common in the policy community than in scholarship. The possibility that the United States is essentially responsible for the New Peace, either through its military power or the institutional order it created, is the subject of the rest of this paper.

Polarity, Hegemony and Stability

For fifty years, scholars have been debating the relative merits—stability, durability, peacefulness—of systemic structures. During the Cold War, such work generally focused on multipolar and bipolar systems, since it seemed unlikely that unipolarity had much chance to emerge.³⁵ The Soviet collapse left the world with one great power towering over all others in every traditional (and most nontraditional) measures of power. Though it took a while for some to agree, by century's end most scholars of international relations had accepted the notion that the world had become unipolar.³⁶

The statistics are familiar, but worthy of brief review: the United States spends as much on its military as the next eight or ten countries combined, depending on how such things are calculated, and accounts for some 70 percent of global spending on defense research and development.³⁷ While the Chinese economy has been growing at a faster rate, in many other ways the dominance of the US economy has expanded since the financial crisis of 2008. Confidence in the dollar is high, and the potential for the Euro or renminbi (RMB) to take its place as the primary reserve currency is low. Treasury bills remain the most trusted global financial instrument. As Fareed Zakaria pointed out in a recent piece, nearly all leading, cutting-edge industries are dominated by US companies, from social networks to mobile telephony to nano- and biotechnology.³⁸ The last few years have witnessed America's growth as an energy superpower, becoming the world's leader in the production of both fossil fuel and green energy. All this is also coming at a time when the rest of the world is slowing down, not just economically but demographically, while the United States continues to grow. Overall, twenty-five

³⁴Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday and The Remnants of War*; Evan Luard, *War in International Society: A Study in International Sociology* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1986); James Lee Ray, "The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War," *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (July 1989): 405–39; Fettweis, *Dangerous Times?*; Pinker, *Better Angels of Our Nature*.

³⁵Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (April 1964): 390–406; Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (Summer 1964): 881–909; Ted Hopf, "Polarity, the Offense-Defense Balance, and War," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 2 (June 1991): 475–93.

³⁶See especially Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁷The latter figure is by necessity an estimate. See William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolar Stability: The Rules for Power Analysis," *Harvard International Review* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 45.

³⁸Fareed Zakaria, "America is Still Great—But It Needs to Stay Strong," *Washington Post*, 26 May 2016.

years after the collapse of its only superpower competitor, the United States remains far more powerful in a comparative sense than any country has ever been. China may be gaining in raw capabilities, but it remains a far second; Vladimir Putin has a great deal of work to do before Russia returns to peer competitor status; and a challenge from a united Europe seems farther off than ever. Robert Jervis's pithy observation is just as relevant today as it was a decade ago: "To say that the world is now unipolar," he argued, "is to state a fact."³⁹

Not everyone is as convinced. Two main objections have arisen to the suggestion that ours is a unipolar world. First, the Russians are roughly the equal of the United States when it comes to nuclear weapons, which strikes some as indicative of a bipolar structure.⁴⁰ Rough nuclear parity is indeed a continuing feature of the new order. Even though a credible case could be made that US nuclear weapons are substantially more reliable and accurate than those of Russia, quantity has a quality all its own. When it comes to nuclear weapons, the world is bipolar. Polarity is a reflection of power in the aggregate, however, and unipolarity does not depend on asymmetry in every single category. Nuclear weapons are certainly one of the most important measures of power, but only one, and their political utility is not necessarily obvious.⁴¹ In all other categories, the US military has essentially achieved its long-standing dream of full-spectrum dominance. Its hard-power capabilities are without peer.

Second, some scholars argue that the economic and political influence wielded by the United States is limited, and not indicative of a unipolar structure.⁴² This objection highlights a longstanding debate in the literature on hegemony. If one examines only raw US potential power, the world is unambiguously unipolar; if power is thought to be control over outcomes, a bit more ambiguity appears to rise, since the United States certainly cannot achieve all its goals.⁴³ To suggest that power contributes to systemic structure only to the extent that it affords influence is to conflate polarity with hegemony. This objection can therefore be addressed by making terms clear.

Although usage of these terms is inconsistent and somewhat contested, for these purposes polarity is a description of the distribution of power across the system, while hegemony is the outcome of an active attempt to create and sustain a set of rules. Unipolarity describes a system with one dominant power, irrespective of its

³⁹Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009), 188. See also Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴⁰John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 381.

⁴¹See John Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Post War World," *International Security* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 55–79.

⁴²Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: What Happens When No One Leads the World* (New York: Portfolio, 2012); Richard N. Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May–June 2008): 44–56; Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁴³Bruce Russett discusses this distinction in "The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony: Or, Is Mark Twain Really Dead?" *International Organization* 39, no. 2 (April 1985): 207–31. See also Susan Strange, "The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony," *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (October 1987): 551–74.

grand strategy. Power, whether potential or kinetic, creates structure, while grand strategy, or the choices about what to do with that power, creates (or does not create) hegemony.⁴⁴ Unipolarity is a fact; hegemony is (or is not) a goal.

Power cannot be directly translated into influence, especially in situations when the reasonable threat of violent coercion is absent. This is especially clear in economic terms, where the United States is not the behemoth it once was, relatively speaking. The fact that the United States cannot, at least in times of peace, use its massive power asymmetry to achieve its goals does not mean that the system is less unipolar. Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow are not wrong, in other words, when they say that the United States is not a global hegemonic power.⁴⁵ Its influence is certainly limited. But the world remains unipolar, and will until another pole rises to challenge the United States.

While in theory unipolarity can be distinct from hegemony, in practice it is difficult to imagine the former unaccompanied by some form of the latter, since central to the very definition of polarity is the willingness to exert power. A unipolar state that chooses not to develop and then exercise its military potential risks ceding the title. Not just capability but actual bellicosity has traditionally been central to most conceptions of great power.⁴⁶ The United States had what was by many measures the largest economy in the world by the 1880s, but was not considered a major power until it chose to build a proportionately large military and play a more active role in the international issues of the day. Great power status—and ultimately unipolarity—requires more than merely potential power. The willingness to make power kinetic is central to the concept, which means that in practice it would be very difficult to have a unipolar world without some degree of hegemony.

The United States has not attempted to institute a global imperium, but it has constructed a set of rules for the system that it has sought to enforce, if in a desultory way. With substantial variations by region, the unipolar power has indeed articulated norms that other states violate at their peril. In this way, it can be reasonably suggested that the United States does indeed attempt to exert a hegemonic influence on the system, one that is at least substantial enough to convince some scholars, and most policy professionals, that it is responsible for the New Peace.

Two Versions of Hegemonic Stability

The basic logic behind the hegemonic-stability argument is straightforward: the anarchic international system will be unstable unless one power is able to create and enforce rules. While the theory is centuries old, the modern version was first articulated to describe the Bretton Woods international economic order and the

⁴⁴This distinction is explained further by David Wilkinson in "Unipolarity without Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 141–72.

⁴⁵Reich and Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony!*

⁴⁶John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 37.

stabilizing force played by the dollar.⁴⁷ In security studies, hegemonic dominance is thought to ease security dilemma pressures by decreasing unpredictability in the system. The hegemon essentially provides three services: establishment of the rules of global order, enforcement of those rules, and reassurance for other members.⁴⁸ The logic of the theory may be uncontroversial, but the suggestion that the United States plays such a role—and that it brings stability to the system—is not.

The hegemonic-stability explanation for the New Peace comes in two distinct versions that differ concerning the role played by US hard power. To some liberal internationalists, the current order is based on the institutions, rule-based regimes, and law promoted by the United States, which create a positive-sum system that provides incentives for other states to cooperate.⁴⁹ Rational, self-interested actors soon realize that the advantages of cooperating with the established order far outweigh those of remaining outside it. This liberal version of hegemonic-stability theory posits an order with no obvious enemies, one that is not dependent on continued US hard-power dominance. It is also nearly self-sustaining. If and when the relative military capability of the United States declines, according to one of this version's primary proponents, "the underlying foundations of the liberal international order will survive and thrive."⁵⁰ Diplomatic and economic engagement, rather than military power, are the primary tools of US hegemony.

Others are more skeptical of institutions' potential to shape behavior, and believe instead that stability is dependent upon the active application of the hegemon's military power.⁵¹ The second version of the hegemonic-stability explanation is based upon a different view of human nature than is the liberal, one less sanguine about the potential for voluntary cooperation. Actors respond to concrete incentives, according to this outlook, and will ignore rules or law if transgressions are not punished. The would-be hegemon must

⁴⁷Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); David A. Lake, "Leadership, Hegemony, and the International Economy: Naked Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?" *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 1993): 459–89.

⁴⁸Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), xix.

⁴⁹See the vast corpus of G. John Ikenberry, most recently *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); John Gerald Ruggie, *Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Michael Ignatieff, "The American Empire: The Burden," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2003, 22–27, 50–54; Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy and the American Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Georg Sørensen, *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing between Imposition and Restraint* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁵⁰G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of The Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011), 58.

⁵¹William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996): 18–33; Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath*; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire," *Orbis* 53, no. 1 (January 2009): 23–40; Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," 23–33; Idem., "In Defense of Democratic Realism," *National Interest* 77 (Fall 2004): 15–25; Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *Weekly Standard* 7, no. 5 (15 October 2001): 27–35; and almost anything by Robert Kagan, including most recently *The World America Made* and "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire," *New Republic* 244, no. 29 (26 May 2014): 14–31.

enforce stability, therefore, not merely establish it. Policing metaphors are common in this literature, with the United States playing the role of sheriff or globocop charged with keeping the peace.⁵² Take away the police, or damage their credibility, and instability would soon return. “The present world order,” according to Robert Kagan, “is as fragile as it is unique,” and would collapse without sustained US efforts.⁵³ “In many instances,” add Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, “all that stands between civility and genocide, order and mayhem, is American power.”⁵⁴ Though this argument is commonly associated with neoconservatism⁵⁵—and will be referred to as the neoconservative explanation from here on in—it is also accepted by a number of scholars and observers generally considered outside of that ideological approach.⁵⁶

The two versions are united on this point: it is not unipolarity in general that accounts for the New Peace, but American unipolarity in particular. US hegemony is essentially benevolent, according to both liberals and neoconservatives. The United States has constructed an order that takes the interests of other states into account, which decreases revisionist impulses. At the very least, it is nonthreatening, and does not generate the kind of balancing behavior that might be expected to bring it to an end.⁵⁷ In the liberal version, the order constructed by the United States is beneficial to all its members, who have a stake in its maintenance. Adherents of the more muscular version, whether neoconservative or not, assume that the default position of smaller states in a unipolar system is to bandwagon with the center.⁵⁸ No one seems to suggest that there is an irenic structural logic of unipolarity independent of US behavior. The question is therefore not so much about the connection between unipolarity and the New Peace as much as it is whether US behavior, in one form or another, has brought it about.

⁵²Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States after the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1997); Colin S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

⁵³Kagan, *The World America Made*, 134.

⁵⁴Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003), 118.

⁵⁵It is worth noting that while neoconservatives believe that the United States is the primary force for global stability, they also maintain that the world remains a very dangerous place. As a group, they reject the New Peace, or claim that it is fated to be brief. For a discussion of both neoconservatism and its exceptionally high perceptions of threat, see Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶Samuel P. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 68–83; William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5–41; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath*; Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (March–April 2002): 2–7; Robert Kaplan, “Supremacy By Stealth: Ten Rules for Managing the World,” *Atlantic Monthly* 292, no. 1 (July/August 2003): 65–83.

⁵⁷Stephen M. Walt, in *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), explained the imperative of balancing threat.

⁵⁸Wohlforth in particular has argued that balancing only makes sense when it is possible to do so; cost prohibits smaller countries from trying to catch up to hegemonic powers that have a major head start, especially when they are not likely to be able to do so anyway. See “The Stability of Unipolar World.”

Hegemonic stability is in some ways more theoretically elegant than the other possible explanations for the New Peace. For one thing, it does not suffer from questions regarding its causal direction. While it may be reasonable to suggest that peace produced the expansion of democracy and/or economic development rather than the other way around, peace did not produce unipolarity. In fact, if the United States is indeed supplying the global public good of security, it might be able to take credit for a number of these positive trends. Not just peace but democracy, economic stability, and development all might be beneficial side effects of unipolarity.⁵⁹ “A world without U.S. primacy,” argued Samuel P. Huntington, “would be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth.”⁶⁰

There is a great deal at stake here, for both scholarship and practice. If hegemony is responsible for the New Peace, then its peaceful trends are unlikely to last much beyond the unipolar moment. The other proposed explanations described above are essentially irreversible: nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented, and no defense against their use is ever going to be completely foolproof; the pace of globalization and economic interdependence shows no sign of slowing; democracy seems to be firmly embedded in the cultural fabric of many of the places it currently exists, and may well be in the process of spreading to the few places where it does not. The UN, while oft criticized, shows no signs of disappearing. And finally, history contains precious few examples of the return of institutions deemed by society to be outmoded, barbaric, and/or futile.⁶¹ In other words, liberal normative evolution is typically unidirectional. Few would argue, for instance, that either slavery or dueling is likely to reappear in this century; illiberal normative recidivism is exceptionally rare.⁶² If the neoconservatives are correct and US hard power is primarily responsible for the New Peace, however, then it cannot be expected to last long after US hegemonic decline, or adjustment in its grand strategy toward retrenchment. If liberal internationalists are right and the New Peace is largely a product of the world order that the United States has forged, then it may have a bit more staying power beyond unipolarity, but not necessarily much.

Determining the relationship between hegemony and the New Peace has importance that goes beyond the academy. Whether or not decline is on the immediate horizon, unipolarity is unlikely to last forever. If the New Peace is essentially an American creation, that post-unipolar future is likely to be quite a bit more violent than the present.

⁵⁹Bradley A. Thayer, “Humans, Not Angels: Reasons to Doubt the Decline of War Thesis,” *International Studies Review* 15, no. 3 (September 2013): 405–11.

⁶⁰Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” 83.

⁶¹Jervis, “Theories of War in an Era of Leading Power Peace,” 9; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 312.

⁶²See Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday* and Fettweis, *Dangerous Times?*

Evidence for and against Pax Americana

Since the world had never experienced system-wide unipolarity prior to the end of the Cold War, judgments about its relative stability and likely duration are necessarily speculative.⁶³ Extrapolations can be made from regional unipolar systems, like the Roman Mediterranean, but definitive system-wide statements cannot be made from one case. Still, if US power were primarily responsible for the New Peace, one would expect that it would leave some clues about its effects. This section reviews three kinds of evidence regarding Pax Americana in order to determine whether an empirical relationship can be said to exist between various kinds of US activity and global stability.

Conflict and Hegemony by Region

Even the most ardent supporters of the hegemonic-stability explanation do not contend that US influence extends equally to all corners of the globe. The United States has concentrated its policing in what George Kennan used to call “strong points,” or the most important parts of the world: Western Europe, the Pacific Rim, and Persian Gulf.⁶⁴ By doing so, Washington may well have contributed more to great power peace than the overall global decline in warfare. If the former phenomenon contributed to the latter, by essentially providing a behavioral model for weaker states to emulate, then perhaps this lends some support to the hegemonic-stability case.⁶⁵ During the Cold War, the United States played referee to a few intra-West squabbles, especially between Greece and Turkey, and provided Hobbesian reassurance to Germany’s nervous neighbors. Other, equally plausible explanations exist for stability in the first world, including the presence of a common enemy, democracy, economic interdependence, general war aversion, etc. The looming presence of the leviathan is certainly among these plausible explanations, but only inside the US sphere of influence. Bipolarity was bad for the non-aligned world, where Soviet and Western intervention routinely exacerbated local conflicts. Unipolarity has generally been much better, but whether or not this was due to US action is again unclear.

Overall US interest in the affairs of the Global South has dropped markedly since the end of the Cold War, as has the level of violence in almost all regions. There is less US intervention in the political and military affairs of Latin America compared to any time in the twentieth century, for instance, and also less conflict. Warfare in Africa is at an all-time low, as is relative US interest outside of counterterrorism and security assistance.⁶⁶ Regional peace and stability exist where there

⁶³One effort to identify applicable precedents is David Wilkinson, “Unipolarity without Hegemony.”

⁶⁴John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁶⁵The belief that behavioral norms, especially advantageous ones, can spread throughout the system is shared by many scholars; see Kenneth N. Waltz’s discussion of “sameness” in *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 76 and 127.

⁶⁶See footnote 30 above.

Table 1. Post-Cold War US intervention and violence by region.

	High Violence	Low Violence
High US Intervention	Middle East South and Central Asia	Europe Pacific Rim North America South America
Low US Intervention	Africa Former Soviet Union	

is US active intervention, as well as where there is not. No direct relationship seems to exist across regions.

If intervention can be considered a function of direct and indirect activity, of both political and military action, a regional picture might look like what is outlined in Table 1.

These assessments of conflict are by necessity relative, because there has not been a “high” level of conflict in any region outside the Middle East during the period of the New Peace. Putting aside for the moment that important caveat, some points become clear. The great powers of the world are clustered in the upper right quadrant, where US intervention has been high, but conflict levels low. US intervention is imperfectly correlated with stability, however. Indeed, it is conceivable that the relatively high level of US interest and activity has made the security situation in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East worse. In recent years, substantial hard power investments (Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq), moderate intervention (Libya), and reliance on diplomacy (Syria) have been equally ineffective in stabilizing states torn by conflict. While it is possible that the region is essentially unpacifiable and no amount of police work would bring peace to its people, it remains hard to make the case that the US presence has improved matters. In this “strong point,” at least, US hegemony has failed to bring peace.

In much of the rest of the world, the United States has not been especially eager to enforce any particular rules. Even rather incontrovertible evidence of genocide has not been enough to inspire action. Washington’s intervention choices have at best been erratic; Libya and Kosovo brought about action, but much more blood flowed uninterrupted in Rwanda, Darfur, Congo, Sri Lanka, and Syria. The US record of peacemaking is not exactly a long uninterrupted string of successes. During the turn-of-the-century conventional war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, a high-level US delegation containing former and future National Security Advisors (Anthony Lake and Susan Rice) made a half-dozen trips to the region, but was unable to prevent either the outbreak or recurrence of the conflict. Lake and his team shuttled back and forth between the capitals with some frequency, and President Clinton made repeated phone calls to the leaders of the respective countries, offering to hold peace talks in the United States, all to no avail.⁶⁷ The war ended

⁶⁷Jane Perlez, “U.S. Did Little to Deter Buildup as Ethiopia and Eritrea Prepared for War,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2000.

in late 2000 when Ethiopia essentially won, and it controls the disputed territory to this day.

The Horn of Africa is hardly the only region where states are free to fight one another today without fear of serious US involvement. Since they are choosing not to do so with increasing frequency, something else is probably affecting their calculations. Stability exists even in those places where the potential for intervention by the sheriff is minimal. Hegemonic stability can only take credit for influencing those decisions that would have ended in war without the presence, whether physical or psychological, of the United States. It seems hard to make the case that the relative peace that has descended on so many regions is primarily due to the kind of heavy hand of the neoconservative leviathan, or its lighter, more liberal cousin. Something else appears to be at work.

Conflict and US Military Spending

How does one measure polarity? Power is traditionally considered to be some combination of military and economic strength, but despite scores of efforts, no widely accepted formula exists. Perhaps overall military spending might be thought of as a proxy for hard power capabilities; perhaps too the amount of money the United States devotes to hard power is a reflection of the strength of the unipole. When compared to conflict levels, however, there is no obvious correlation, and certainly not the kind of negative relationship between US spending and conflict that many hegemonic stability theorists would expect to see.

During the 1990s, the United States cut back on defense by about 25 percent, spending \$100 billion less in real terms in 1998 than it did in 1990.⁶⁸ To those believers in the neoconservative version of hegemonic stability, this irresponsible “peace dividend” endangered both national and global security. “No serious analyst of American military capabilities doubts that the defense budget has been cut much too far to meet America’s responsibilities to itself and to world peace,” argued Kristol and Kagan at the time.⁶⁹ The world grew dramatically more peaceful while the United States cut its forces, however, and stayed just as peaceful while spending rebounded after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The incidence and magnitude of global conflict declined while the military budget was cut under President Clinton, in other words, and kept declining (though more slowly, since levels were already low) as the Bush administration ramped it back up. Overall US military spending has varied during the period of the New Peace from a low in constant dollars of less than \$400 billion to a high of more than \$700 billion, but war does not seem

⁶⁸Michael O’Hanlon, “America’s Military, Cut to the Quick,” *Washington Post*, 9 August 1998, C1.

⁶⁹Kristol and Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” 24.

to have noticed. The same nonrelationship exists between other potential proxy measurements for hegemony and conflict: there does not seem to be much connection between warfare and fluctuations in US GDP, alliance commitments, and forward military presence. There was very little fighting in Europe when there were 300,000 US troops stationed there, for example, and that has not changed as the number of Americans dwindled by 90 percent. Overall, there does not seem to be much correlation between US actions and systemic stability. Nothing the United States actually does seems to matter to the New Peace.

It is possible that absolute military spending might not be as important to explain the phenomenon as relative. Although Washington cut back on spending during the 1990s, its relative advantage never wavered. The United States has accounted for between 35 and 41 percent of global military spending every year since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ The perception of relative US power might be the decisive factor in decisions made in other capitals. One cannot rule out the possibility that it is the perception of US power—and its willingness to use it—that keeps the peace. In other words, perhaps it is the grand strategy of the United States, rather than its absolute capability, that is decisive in maintaining stability. It is that to which we now turn.

Conflict and US Grand Strategy

The perception of US power, and the strength of its hegemony, is to some degree a function of grand strategy. If indeed US strategic choices are responsible for the New Peace, then variation in those choices ought to have consequences for the level of international conflict. A restrained United States is much less likely to play the role of sheriff than one following a more activist approach. Were the unipole to follow such a path, hegemonic-stability theorists warn, disaster would follow. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski spoke for many when he warned that “outright chaos” could be expected to follow a loss of hegemony, including a string of quite specific issues, including new or renewed attempts to build regional empires (by China, Turkey, Russia, and Brazil) and the collapse of the US relationship with Mexico, as emboldened nationalists south of the border reassert 150-year-old territorial claims. Overall, without US dominance, today’s relatively peaceful world would turn “violent and bloodthirsty.”⁷¹ Niall Ferguson foresees a post-hegemonic “Dark Age” in which “plunderers and pirates” target the big coastal cities like New York and Rotterdam, terrorists attack cruise liners and aircraft carriers alike, and the “wretchedly poor citizens” of Latin America are unable to resist the Protestantism brought to them by US evangelicals. Following the multiple (regional, fortunately) nuclear wars and plagues, the few remaining airlines would be forced to suspend

⁷⁰From SIPRI figures, available at <http://first.sipri.org>. The upper levels of that range were reached during the peak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lower ranges during the mid-90s as well as after the wars ended.

⁷¹Zbigniew Brzezinski, “After America,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 191 (January/February 2012): 1–4.

service to all but the very richest cities.⁷² These are somewhat extreme versions of a central assumption of all hegemonic-stability theorists: a restrained United States would be accompanied by utter disaster. The “present danger” of which Kristol, Kagan, and their fellow travelers warn is that the United States “will shrink its responsibilities and—in a fit of absentmindedness, or parsimony, or indifference—allow the international order that it created and sustains to collapse.”⁷³

Liberals fear restraint as well, and also warn that a militarized version of primacy would be counterproductive in the long run. Although they believe that the rule-based order established by United States is more durable than the relatively fragile order discussed by the neoconservatives, liberals argue that Washington can undermine its creation over time through thoughtless unilateral actions that violate those rules. Many predicted that the invasion of Iraq and its general contempt for international institutions and law would call the legitimacy of the order into question. G. John Ikenberry worried that Bush’s “geostrategic wrecking ball” would lead to a more hostile, divided, and dangerous world.⁷⁴ Thus while all hegemonic-stability theorists expect a rise of chaos during a restrained presidency, liberals also have grave concerns regarding primacy.

Overall, if either version is correct and global stability is provided by US hegemony, then maintaining that stability through a grand strategy based on either primacy (to neoconservatives) or “deep engagement” (to liberals) is clearly a wise choice.⁷⁵ If, however, US actions are only tangentially related to the outbreak of the New Peace, or if any of the other proposed explanations are decisive, then the United States can retrench without fear of negative consequences. The grand strategy of the United States is therefore crucial to beliefs in hegemonic stability.

Although few observers would agree on the details, most would probably acknowledge that post-Cold War grand strategies of American presidents have differed in some important ways. The four administrations are reasonable representations of the four ideal types outlined by Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross in 1996.⁷⁶ Under George H. W. Bush, the United States followed the path of “selective engagement,” which is sometimes referred to as “balance-of-power realism”; Bill Clinton’s grand strategy looks a great deal like what Posen and Ross call “cooperative security,” and others call “liberal internationalism”; George W. Bush, especially in his first term, forged a strategy that was as close to “primacy” as any president is

⁷²All these and more can be found in Niall Ferguson, “A World Without Power,” *Foreign Policy* 143 (July–August 2004): 32–39. The most frightening page is 39.

⁷³Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “Introduction: National Interest and Global Responsibility,” in Robert Kagan and William Kristol, ed., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), 4.

⁷⁴The quotation is from G. John Ikenberry, “The End of the Neo-Conservative Moment,” *Survival* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 7; the argument is explained better in his “America’s Imperial Ambition,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 5 (September–October 2002): 44–60. Many realists worried about the damage the war would do to American legitimacy; see especially Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

⁷⁵Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13): 7–51.

⁷⁶Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97): 5–53.

Table 2. US grand strategy and conflict.

	Grand Strategy	Active Conflicts/Year
George H. W. Bush	Selective Engagement	55
Bill Clinton	Cooperative Security	43
George W. Bush	Primacy	31
Barack Obama	Restraint	24

likely to get; and Barack Obama, despite some early flirtation with liberalism, has followed a restrained realist path, which Posen and Ross label “neo-isolationism” but its proponents refer to as “strategic restraint.”⁷⁷ In no case did the various anticipated disorders materialize. As Table 2 demonstrates, armed conflict levels fell steadily, irrespective of the grand strategic path Washington chose.

Neither the primacy of George W. Bush nor the restraint of Barack Obama had much effect on the level of global violence. Despite continued warnings (and the high-profile mess in Syria), the world has not experienced an increase in violence while the United States chose uninvolvedness. If the grand strategy of the United States is responsible for the New Peace, it is leaving no trace in the evidence.

Perhaps we should not expect a correlation to show up in this kind of analysis. While US behavior might have varied in the margins during this period, neither its relative advantage over its nearest rivals nor its commitments wavered in any important way. However, it is surely worth noting that if trends opposite to those discussed in the previous two sections had unfolded, if other states had reacted differently to fluctuations in either US military spending or grand strategy, then surely hegemonic stability theorists would argue that their expectations had been fulfilled. Many liberals were on the lookout for chaos while George W. Bush was in the White House, just as neoconservatives have been quick to identify apparent worldwide catastrophe under President Obama.⁷⁸ If increases in violence would have been evidence for the wisdom of hegemonic strategies, then logical consistency demands that the lack thereof should at least pose a problem.

As it stands, the only evidence we have regarding the relationship between US power and international stability suggests that the two are unrelated. The rest of the world appears quite capable and willing to operate effectively without the presence of a global policeman. Those who think otherwise have precious little empirical support upon which to build their case. Hegemonic stability is a belief, in other words, rather than an established fact, and as such deserves a different kind of examination.

⁷⁷For other taxonomies of grand strategy, see Alexander Nacht, “U.S. Foreign Policy Strategies,” *Washington Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 195–210; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Colin Dueck, “Ideas and Alternatives in American Grand Strategy, 2000–2004,” *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 4 (October 2004): 511–35. Art identifies and evaluates seven different grand strategies; the rest, four.

⁷⁸For liberal expectation of chaos, in addition to the Ikenberry work cited above, see Thomas M. Nichols, *Eve of Destruction: The Coming Age of Preventive War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). Neoconservative tocsins are not hard to find; for a well-known one, see Dick and Liz Cheney, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

The Political Psychology of Unipolarity

Evidence supporting the notion that US power is primarily responsible for the New Peace is slim, but belief in the connection is quite strong, especially in policy circles. The best arena to examine the proposition is therefore not the world of measurable rationality, but rather that of the human mind. Political psychology can shed more light on unipolarity than can any collection of data or evidence. Just because an outcome is primarily psychological does not mean that it is less real; perception quickly becomes reality for both the unipolar state and those in the periphery. If all actors believe that the United States provides security and stability for the system, then behavior can be affected. Beliefs have deep explanatory power in international politics whether they have a firm foundation in empirical reality or not.

Like all beliefs, faith in the stability provided by hegemony is rarely subjected to much analysis.⁷⁹ Although they almost always have some basis in reality, beliefs need not pass rigorous tests to prove that they match it. No amount of evidence has been able to convince some people that vaccines do not cause autism, for example, or that the world is more peaceful than at any time before, or that the climate is changing due to human activity. Ultimately, as Robert Jervis explains, “we often believe as much in the face of evidence as because of it.”⁸⁰ Facts may change, but beliefs remain the same.

When leaders are motivated to act based on unjustified, inaccurate beliefs, folly often follows. The person who decides to take a big risk because of astrological advice in the morning’s horoscope can benefit from baseless superstition if the risk pays off. Probability and luck suggest that successful policy choices can sometimes flow from incorrect beliefs. Far more often, however, poor intellectual foundations lead to suboptimal or even disastrous outcomes. It is worthwhile to analyze the foundations of even our most deeply held beliefs to determine which ones are good candidates to inspire poor policy choices in those who hold them.

People are wonderful rationalizers. There is much to be said for being the strongest country in the world; their status provides Americans both security and psychological rewards, as well as strong incentives to construct a rationale for preserving the unipolar moment that goes beyond mere selfishness. Since people enjoy being “number one,” they are susceptible to perceiving reality in ways that brings the data in line with their desires. It is no coincidence that most hegemonic stability theorists are American.⁸¹ Perhaps the satisfaction that comes with being the unipolar power has inspired Americans to misperceive the positive role that their status plays in the world.

⁷⁹In their simplest form, beliefs are ideas that have become internalized and accepted as true, often without much further analysis. See Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power*, 5–10.

⁸⁰Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs and Threat Inflation,” in A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, ed., *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation Since 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 18.

⁸¹Of the few hegemonic-stability theorists from elsewhere, most hail from the United Kingdom and counsel the United States to follow the lead of the British Empire. See Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Gray, *The Sheriff*.

Three findings from political psychology can shed light on perceptions of hegemonic stability. They are mutually supportive, and, when taken together, suggest that it is likely that US policymakers overestimate the extent to which their actions are responsible for the choices of others. The belief in the major US contribution to world peace is probably unjustified.

The Illusion of Control

Could 5 percent of the world's population hope to enforce rules upon the rest? Would even an internationally hegemonic United States be capable of producing the New Peace? Perhaps, but it also may be true that believers in hegemonic stability may be affected by the very common tendency of people to overestimate their ability to control events. A variety of evidence has accumulated over the past forty years to support Ellen J. Langer's original observations about the "illusion of control" that routinely distorts perception.⁸² Even in situations where outcomes are clearly generated by pure chance, people tend to believe that they can exert control over events.⁸³ There is little reason to believe that leaders are somehow less susceptible to such illusions than subjects in controlled experiments.

The extensive research on the illusion of control has revealed two further findings that suggest US illusions might be even stronger than average. First, misperceptions of control appear to be correlated with power: individuals with higher socioeconomic status, as well as those who are members of dominant groups, are more likely to overestimate their ability to control events.⁸⁴ Powerful people tend to be far more confident than others, often overly so, and that confidence leads them to inflate their own importance.⁸⁵ Leaders of superpowers are thus particularly vulnerable to distorted perceptions regarding their ability to affect the course of events. US observers had a greater structural predisposition than others, for example, to believe that they would have been able to control events in the Persian Gulf following an injection of creative instability in 2003. The skepticism of less powerful allies was easily discounted.

Second, there is reason to believe that culture matters as well as power. People from societies that value individualism are more likely to harbor illusions of control than those from collectivist societies, where assumptions of group agency are more common. When compared to people from other parts of the world, Westerners tend to view the world as "highly subject to personal control," in the words of

⁸²Ellen J. Langer, "The Illusion of Control," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32, no. 2 (August 1975): 311–28.

⁸³For a review of the first two decades of research, see Paul K. Presson and Victor A. Benassi, "Illusion of Control: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality* 11, no. 3 (September 1996): 493–510.

⁸⁴Nathanael J. Fast et al., "Illusory Control: A Generative Force Behind Power's Far-Reaching Effects," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 4 (April 2009): 502–8.

⁸⁵Nathanael J. Fast et al., "Power and Overconfident Decision-Making," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 117, no. 2 (March 2012): 249–60; Leigh Plunkett Tost, Francesca Gino, and Richard P. Larrick, "Power, Competitiveness and Advice Taking: Why the Powerful Don't Listen," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Making Processes* 117, no. 1 (January 2012): 53–65.

Richard Nisbett.⁸⁶ North Americans appear particularly vulnerable in this regard.⁸⁷ Those who come from relatively powerful countries with individualistic societies are therefore at high risk for misperceiving their ability to influence events.

For the United States, the illusion of control extends beyond the water's edge. An oft-discussed public good supposedly conferred by US hegemony is order in those parts of the world uncontrolled by sovereign states, or the "global commons."⁸⁸ One such common area is the sea, where the United States maintains the only true blue-water navy in the world. That the United States has brought this peace to the high seas is a central belief of hegemonic-stability theorists, one rarely examined in any serious way. Indeed the maritime environment has been unusually peaceful for decades; the biggest naval battles since Okinawa took place during the Falklands conflict in 1982, and they were fairly minor.⁸⁹ If hegemony is the key variable explaining stability at sea, maritime security would have to be far more chaotic without the US Navy.

It is equally if not more plausible to suggest, however, that the reason other states are not building blue-water navies is not because the United States dissuades them from doing so but rather because none feels that trade is imperiled.⁹⁰ In earlier times, and certainly during the age of mercantilism, zero-sum economics inspired efforts to cut off the trade of opponents on occasion, making control the sea extremely important. Today the free flow of goods is vital to all economies, and it would be in the interest of no state to interrupt it.⁹¹ Free trade at sea may no longer need protection, in other words, because it essentially has no enemies; the sheriff may be patrolling a crime-free neighborhood. The threat from the few remaining pirates hardly requires a robust naval presence, and is certainly not what hegemonic-stability advocates mean when they compare the role played by the US Navy in 2016 to that of the Royal Navy in 1816. It is at least possible that shared interest in open, free commons keeps the peace at sea rather than the United States. Oceans unpatrolled by the US Navy may be about as stable as they

⁸⁶Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 100.

⁸⁷Li-Jun Ji, Kaiping Peng, and Richard E. Nisbett, "Culture, Control, and Perception of Relationships in the Environment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 5 (May 2000): 943–55; John R. Weisz, Fred M. Rothbaum, and Thomas C. Blackburn, "Standing Out and Standing In: The Psychology of Control in America and Japan," *American Psychologist* 39, no. 9 (September 1984): 955–69; Miriam Hernandez and Sheena S. Iyengar, "What Drives Whom? A Cultural Perspective on Human Agency," *Social Cognition* 19, no. 3 (June 2001): 269–94; Hannah Faye Chua, Janxin Leu, and Richard E. Nisbett, "Culture and Divergent Views of Social Events," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31, no. 7 (July 2005): 925–34. For a general discussion of the differences in cultural psychology drawn from anthropology, see Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1991): 224–53.

⁸⁸Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 5–46.

⁸⁹Minor naval clashes occurred during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, the 1973 Yom Kippur War and near the Falklands in 1982. At other times one small ship was sunk here or there.

⁹⁰China is the only country that can be said to have plans to challenge the US Navy at some future date. Their efforts in this direction, though much-discussed in Navy and Air Force circles, have been rather desultory and half-hearted. A good, balanced analysis is by Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 17 June 2016), available at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>.

⁹¹For more on this idea, see Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State*.

are with the presence of its carriers. The degree to which 273 active-duty ships exert control over vast common parts is not at all clear.

People overestimate the degree to which they control events in their lives. Furthermore, if these observations from political psychology are right about the factors that influence the growth of illusions of power, then US leaders and analysts are particularly susceptible to misperception. They may well be overestimating the degree to which the United States can affect the behavior of others. The rest of the world may be able to get along just fine, on land and at sea, without US attempts to control it.

Ego-Centric and Self-Serving Biases in Attribution

It is natural for people, whether presidents or commoners, to misperceive the role they play in the thinking process of others. Jervis was the first to discuss this phenomenon, now known as the “ego-centric bias,” which has been put to the test many times since he wrote four decades ago. Building on what was known as “attribution theory,” Jervis observed that actors tend to overestimate their importance in the decisions of others. Rarely are our actions as consequential upon their behavior as we believe them to be.⁹² This is not merely ego gratification, though that plays a role; actors are simply more conscious of their own actions than the other factors central to the internal deliberations in other capitals. Because people are more likely to remember their contributions to an outcome, they naturally grant themselves more causal weight.⁹³

Two further aspects of the ego-centric bias make US analysts even more susceptible to its effects. First, the bias is magnified when the behavior of others is desirable. People generally take credit for positive outcomes and deflect responsibility for negative ones. This “self-serving bias” is one of the best-established findings in modern psychology, supported by many hundreds of studies.⁹⁴ Supporters of Ronald Reagan are happy to give him credit for ending the Cold War, for instance, even though evidence that the United States had much influence on Premier

⁹²Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 343–55. See also Allan Fenigstein, “Self-Consciousness and the Overperception of Self as a Target,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47, no. 4 (October 1984): 860–70; John R. Chambers and Carsten K. W. De Dreu, “Egocentrism Drives Misunderstandings in Conflict and Negotiation,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 51 (March 2014): 15–26; and the other works cited in this section.

⁹³This is related to what has become known as the “availability heuristic.” Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability,” *Cognitive Psychology* 5, no. 2 (September 1973): 207–32. See also Michael Ross and Fiore Sicolu, “Egocentric Biases in Availability and Attribution,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 3 (March 1979): 322–36.

⁹⁴The phenomenon was first described by Fritz Heider in *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1958). Meta-analyses of the research on it since include Robert Arkin, Harris Cooper, and Thomas Kolditz, “A Statistical Review of the Literature Concerning the Self-Serving Attribution Bias in Interpersonal Influence Situations,” *Journal of Personality* 48, no. 4 (December 1980): 435–48; Brian Mullen and Catherine A. Riordan, “Self-Serving Attributions for Performance in Naturalistic Settings: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 18, no. 1 (January 1988): 3–22; W. Keith Campbell and Constantine Sedikides, “Self-Threat Magnifies the Self-Serving Bias: A Meta-Analytic Integration,” *Review of General Psychology* 3, no. 1 (March 1999): 23–43.

Gorbachev's decision making is scant at best.⁹⁵ Today, since few outcomes are more desirable than global stability, it stands to reason that perceptions of the New Peace are prime candidates for distortion by ego-centric, self-serving biases. When war breaks out, it is not the fault of US leaders; when peace comes to a region, Washington is happy to take credit.

There was for some time a debate among psychologists over just how universal self-serving biases were, or whether their effects varied across cultures. Extensive research has essentially settled the matter, to the extent that academic questions can ever be settled: a direct relationship appears to exist between cultural individualism and susceptibility to the bias, perhaps because of the value individualistic societies place on self-enhancement (as opposed to self-effacement).⁹⁶ Actors from more collectivist societies tend to have their egos rewarded in different ways, such as through contributions to the community and connections to others. People from Western countries are far more likely to take credit for positive outcomes than those from Eastern, in other words, and subjects in the United States tower over the rest of the West. US leaders are therefore more culturally predisposed to believe that their actions are responsible for positive outcomes like peace.

Second, self-perception is directly related to egocentric attributions. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to believe that they are at the center of the decision-making process of others than those who think somewhat more modestly.⁹⁷ Leaders of any unipolar state may well be more likely to hold their country in high regard, and therefore are more vulnerable to exaggerated egocentric perceptions, than their contemporaries in smaller states. It might not occur to the lead diplomat of other countries to claim, as did Madeleine Albright, that "if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future."⁹⁸ It is not unreasonable to suspect that the US security community may be even more vulnerable to this misperception than the average group of people.

For example, many in that community believed that the United States played a decisive role in Vladimir Putin's decisions regarding Crimea and eastern Ukraine. President Obama's various critics argued that perceptions of American weakness inspired or even invited Russian aggression. The refusal to act in Syria in particular emboldened Moscow (despite the fact that in 2008, in the face of ample displays of US action in the Middle East, Moscow had proven sufficiently bold to invade Georgia). Other critics suggested that a variety of provocative US behaviors since the

⁹⁵See Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁹⁶Two-hundred sixty-six studies on culture and the self-serving bias were analyzed by Amy H. Mezulis et al. in "Is there a Universal Positivity Bias in Attributions? A Meta-Analytic Review of the Individual, Developmental, and Cultural Differences in the Self-Serving Attributional Bias," *Psychological Bulletin* 130, no. 5 (September 2004): 711–47.

⁹⁷Miron Zuckerman et al., "The Ego-Centric Bias: Seeing Oneself as Cause and Target of Others' Behavior," *Journal of Personality* 51, no. 4 (December 1983): 621–630; Fenigstein, "Self-Consciousness and the Overperception of Self as a Target."

⁹⁸Madeleine K. Albright, Interview on NBC's The Today Show, 19 February 1998, available at <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

end of the Cold War, especially the expansion of NATO and dissolution of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, poisoned US–Russian relations and led to an increase in Kremlin paranoia and eventually to the invasion.⁹⁹ So, either through provocative weakness or bullying, we were responsible for their actions.

Egocentric misperceptions are so ubiquitous and pervasive that they generate something of a law of political psychology: we are probably less influential in others' decision making than we think we are. This extends to their decisions to resolve contentious issues peacefully. While it may be natural for US policymakers to interpret their role as crucial in the maintenance of world peace, it is very likely that Washington exaggerates its importance in the decision making of others, and in the maintenance of international stability.

The effect of the ego-centric bias may be especially difficult for the unipolar United States to resist, because other countries do regularly take Washington's position into account before acting. But US leaders—and the people who analyze them—should keep in mind that they are still probably less important to calculations made in other capitals than they believe. They may well be especially unlikely to recognize the possibility that hegemony is epiphenomenal, that it exists alongside, but does not affect, global stability and the New Peace.

Overestimated Benevolence

After three years in the White House, Ronald Reagan had learned something surprising: “Many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans,” he wrote in his autobiography. He continued: “Perhaps this shouldn't have surprised me, but it did ... I'd always felt that from our deeds it must be clear to anyone that Americans were a moral people who starting at the birth of our nation had always used our power only as a force for good in the world.... During my first years in Washington, I think many of us took it for granted that the Russians, like ourselves, considered it unthinkable that the United States would launch a first strike against them.”¹⁰⁰ Reagan is certainly not alone in believing in the essential benevolent image of his nation. While it is common for actors to attribute negative motivations to the behavior of others, it is exceedingly difficult for them to accept that anyone could interpret their actions in negative ways. Leaders are well aware of their own motives and tend to assume that their peaceful intentions are obvious and transparent.

Both strains of the hegemonic-stability explanation assume not only that US power is benevolent, but that others perceive it that way. Hegemonic stability depends on the perceptions of other states to be successful; it has no hope to succeed if it encounters resistance from the less powerful members of the system, or even if they simply refuse to follow the rules. Relatively small police forces require the

⁹⁹John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89.

¹⁰⁰Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 588.

general cooperation of large communities to have any chance of establishing order. They must perceive the sheriff as just, rational, and essentially nonthreatening. The lack of balancing behavior in the system, which has been puzzling to many realists, seems to support the notion of widespread perceptions of benevolent hegemony.¹⁰¹ Were they threatened by the order constructed by the United States, the argument goes, smaller states would react in ways that reflected their fears. Since internal and external balancing accompanied previous attempts to achieve hegemony, the absence of such behavior today suggests that something is different about the US version.

Hegemonic-stability theorists purport to understand the perceptions of others, at times better than those others understand themselves. Complain as they may at times, other countries know that the United States is acting in the common interest. Objections to unipolarity, though widespread, are not “very seriously intended,” wrote Kagan, since “the truth about America’s dominant role in the world is known to most observers. And the truth is that the benevolent hegemony exercised by the United States is good for a vast portion of the world’s population.”¹⁰² In the 1990s, Russian protests regarding NATO expansion—though nearly universal—were not taken seriously, since US planners believed the alliance’s benevolent intentions were apparent to all. Sagacious Russians understood that expansion would actually be beneficial, since it would bring stability to their western border.¹⁰³ President Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher were caught off guard by the hostility of their counterparts regarding the issue at a summit in Budapest in December 1994.¹⁰⁴ Despite warnings from the vast majority of academic and policy experts about the likely Russian reaction and overall wisdom of expansion itself, the administration failed to anticipate Moscow’s position.¹⁰⁵ The Russians did not seem to believe American assurances that expansion would actually be good for them. The United States overestimated the degree to which others saw it as benevolent.

Once again, the culture of the United States might make its leaders more vulnerable to this misperception. The need for positive self-regard appears to be particularly strong in North American societies compared to elsewhere.¹⁰⁶ Western egos tend to be gratified through self-promotion rather than humility, and independence rather than interdependence. Americans are more likely to feel good if they

¹⁰¹For essays exploring underbalancing, see G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). See also Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰²Robert Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire,” *Foreign Policy* 111 (Summer 1998), 32.

¹⁰³Zbigniew Brzezinski was one of the strongest proponents of this position. See his “A Plan for Europe: How to Expand NATO,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 1 (January–February 1995): 26–42.

¹⁰⁴James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 86–87.

¹⁰⁵Historians and political scientists had been nearly united in opposition, a phenomenon that John Lewis Gaddis called “uncharacteristic,” which was surely an understatement. J. Caddis, “History, Grand Strategy and NATO Enlargement,” *Survival* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 145–51. See also Michael Mandelbaum, *The Dawn of Peace in Europe* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996), 45–65.

¹⁰⁶See the extensive review in Steven J. Heine et al., “Is there a Universal Need for Positive Self-Regard?” *Psychology Review* 106, no. 4 (October 1999): 766–794.

are unique rather than a good cog in society's wheel, and uniquely good. The need to be perceived as benevolent, though universal, may well exert stronger encouragement for US observers to project their perceptions onto others.

The United States almost certainly frightens others more than its leaders perceive. A quarter of the 68,000 respondents to a 2013 Gallup poll in sixty-five countries identified the United States as the "greatest threat to world peace," which was more than three times the total for the second-place country (Pakistan).¹⁰⁷ The international community always has to worry about the potential for police brutality, even if it occurs rarely. Such ungratefulness tends to come as a surprise to US leaders. In 2003, Condoleezza Rice was dismayed to discover resistance to US initiatives in Iraq: "There were times," she said later, "that it appeared that American power was seen to be more dangerous than, perhaps, Saddam Hussein."¹⁰⁸ Both liberals and neoconservatives probably exaggerate the extent to which US hegemony is everywhere secretly welcomed; it is not just petulant resentment, but understandable disagreement with US policies, that motivates counterhegemonic beliefs and behavior.

To review, assuming for a moment that US leaders are subject to the same forces that affect every human being, they overestimate the amount of control they have over other actors, and are not as important to decisions made elsewhere as they believe themselves to be. And they probably perceive their own benevolence to be much greater than do others. These common phenomena all influence US beliefs in the same direction, and may well increase the apparent explanatory power of hegemony beyond what the facts would otherwise support. The United States is probably not as central to the New Peace as either liberals or neoconservatives believe.

In the end, what can be said about the relationship between US power and international stability? Probably not much that will satisfy partisans, and the pacifying virtue of US hegemony will remain largely an article of faith in some circles in the policy world. Like most beliefs, it will remain immune to alteration by logic and evidence. Beliefs rarely change, so debates rarely end.

For those not yet fully converted, however, perhaps it will be significant that corroborating evidence for the relationship is extremely hard to identify. If indeed hegemonic stability exists, it does so without leaving much of a trace. Neither Washington's spending, nor its interventions, nor its overall grand strategy seem to matter much to the levels of armed conflict around the world (apart from those wars that Uncle Sam starts). The empirical record does not contain strong reasons to believe that unipolarity and the New Peace are related, and insights from political psychology suggest that hegemonic

¹⁰⁷Gallup International, "End of Year Survey 2013," January 2014, available at http://www.wingia.com/en/services/end_of_year_survey_2013/7/.

¹⁰⁸David E. Sanger, "The President in Europe: Death Camp; Witness to Auschwitz Evil, Bush Draws a Lesson," *New York Times*, 1 June 2003. Discussed in Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 385.

stability is a belief particularly susceptible to misperception. US leaders probably exaggerate the degree to which their power matters, and could retrench without much risk to themselves or the world around them. Researchers will need to look elsewhere to explain why the world has entered into the most peaceful period in its history.

The good news from this is that the New Peace will probably persist for quite some time, no matter how dominant the United States is, or what policies President Trump follows, or how much resentment its actions cause in the periphery. The people of the twenty-first century are likely to be much safer and more secure than any of their predecessors, even if many of them do not always believe it.

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