

**THEORY OF UNIPOLAR POLITICS**  
forthcoming at  
Cambridge University Press

Nuno P. Monteiro  
Assistant Professor  
Political Science  
Yale University  
nuno.monteiro@yale.edu

July 9, 2013

**Rationale and Scope**

Since the Soviet Union collapsed more than two decades ago, the United States has enjoyed unparalleled power in the international system. U.S. preponderance is particularly marked in the military realm. This means our world is unipolar.

Despite abundant research on important features of the security environment in the post-Cold War era, we possess no integrated theory of how unipolar international systems work. My book aims at filling that gap. It does so by addressing the three most important questions we can ask about how a world with a sole military great power works. Is it durable? Is it peaceful? What is the best grand strategy a unipolar power such as the contemporary United States can implement?

This means that despite being mostly a theoretical book, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* also answers a crucial question in the formulation of U.S. grand strategy: what are the effects of U.S. actions on the odds and type of interstate war, and of the continuation of U.S. military power preponderance?

The core argument of the book is straightforward. In our nuclear world, the absence of a global military balance of power is potentially durable but likely to produce significant conflict. Both the durability of unipolarity and the type of conflict it will witness depend on the grand strategy of the preponderant power. This, in turn, depends on the costs of war and the benefits it extracts from power preponderance.

Under current circumstances, conflicts with minor powers are relatively low cost for the United States. At the same time, Washington enjoys significant benefits from its *primus inter pares* international position. Consequently, the best grand-strategic option for the United States would be to defend the military *status quo* while accommodating the economic rise of other powers. Although this would require U.S. involvement in frequent conflict against recalcitrant

minor powers, it would maximize the chances that U.S. power will remain unmatched for decades to come, stymieing incentives for rising states such as China to launch a military challenge to it.

I therefore differ both from those that portray unipolarity as an unalloyed good and from those that view it as a fleeting moment. Unipolarity brings with it significant benefits for the United States, but, at the same time, its durability requires frequent U.S. involvement in peripheral wars.

In sum, the book makes three central contributions. First, it shows that a unipolar world may be durable -- or not -- depending on the grand strategy of the preponderant power. Second, it questions the notion that unipolarity is peaceful, showing how power preponderance is likely to produce frequent conflict. Third, it lays out the optimal strategy that allows a preponderant power to maximize the benefits and durability of unipolarity while minimizing its costs.

## **Table of Contents**

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Unipolarity

Chapter 3: The Scope of Unipolar Strategic Choice

Chapter 4: The Sources of Competition under Unipolarity

Chapter 5: Competition in the Post-Cold War World

Chapter 6: The Sources of Conflict under Unipolarity

Chapter 7: Conflict in the Post-Cold War World

Chapter 8: Conclusion

## **Chapter Summaries**

### ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

The introduction to *Theory of Unipolar Politics* accomplishes three goals. First, it summarizes the key features of the military power preponderance the United States enjoys since the end of the Cold War, establishing that the past two decades have indeed been unipolar.

Second, it summarizes the overall argument of the book, specifying the conditions under which a preponderant power will choose each of the strategies available to it as well as the consequences of these strategies for the durability and peace of a unipolar world.

Third, it nests the book in the existing literature on unipolarity and structural theory, laying out the benefits of possessing a comprehensive theory of how a unipolar world works. In this context, I also elaborate on the role of IR theory, defending it as a valid form of scholarship even -- or perhaps particularly -- on topics on which we possess little empirical evidence, provided such topics have vast political consequences. This leads me to detail the role of a theory of unipolarity such as the one to which the book is devoted and to specify how the book makes use of the scant historical evidence available on unipolarity. The chapter concludes by foreshadowing the theoretical and policy implications of my arguments, which will be developed in the concluding chapter; and by laying out a brief roadmap for the remaining chapters.

## ***Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Unipolarity***

This chapter clears up some theoretical and meta-theoretical underbrush and sets up the scaffolding for my theory. It does so by performing three functions. First, I lay out the basic IR theory underlying my arguments on unipolarity, most of which I take off-the-shelf from existing realist work. This requires me to elaborate on the relationship between unipolarity and structural-realist thinking and to introduce the basic assumptions of the theory -- namely on the role of anarchy, state survival, and rationality -- in shaping state action and, therefore, international outcomes.

Second, I provide definitions of the key concepts in my theory: structure, great power, unipolarity. These are particularly important because the literature uses many different definitions of each, generating considerable confusion and a pattern of "talking past each other" among competing positions. I therefore hope this discussion will stand as a contribution on its own.

Finally, I conduct some groundwork on a number of important issues that underpin the arguments on unipolarity I make in the following chapters. I begin by distinguishing between latent and military power in their relation to systemic polarity. Although latent power is crucial to long-term state survival and many other state functions, it is not sufficient to produce a great power. Therefore, a shift in latent power is also not sufficient to produce a shift in the polarity of the system, which further requires a transformation of the distribution in military power. Then, I turn to a discussion of the important differences between conventional and nuclear power, especially in how they shape systemic polarity. Next, I discuss the relationship between latent power, military power, and state balancing as a form of purposive action. Once the main concepts I will use in the theory are well defined, I turn to a discussion of the relationship between peace, durability, and systemic stability -- the latter being another concept that is particularly fuzzy in the existing literature. This allows me to specify further the scope of the book's argument. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how

international structure shapes state behavior and, through it, international outcomes. This makes room for a brief discussion of how variables I do not incorporate in my theory -- such as domestic politics or international norms -- may be articulated with my arguments.

### ***Chapter 3: The Scope of Unipolar Strategic Choice***

In this chapter, I lay out the several grand-strategic options available to a unipolar power and specify the variables based on which it is likely to make its strategy choice.

The grand strategy of any great power, I argue, has two dimensions: economic and military. By maximizing simplification, we can trim down the economic choices of the unipole to two. A preponderant power can either accommodate or try to contain the economic growth of other major powers. At the same time, the unipole has three options in terms of its military strategy. It can disengage from the world, defend the international *status quo*, or try to revise it in its own favor.

Once these strategies have been laid out, I turn to the criteria based on which the unipole is likely to choose one. There are three: the cost of major-power war, the costs of war against minor powers, and the benefits of power preponderance. Within a unipolar structure of international politics, there is wide scope for variation in all three dimensions. When the costs of war are lower than the benefits the preponderant power extracts from its position, I expect the unipole to implement the strategy that is most likely to maintain its power preponderance, even if it will entail regular conflict. When, on the contrary, the costs of war are higher than the benefits the unipole enjoys from its power preponderance, I expect the unipole to disengage from the world or attempt to revise the *status quo* further in its own favor. The chapter elaborates on all these options, laying the ground for evaluating the consequences of each in terms of peace and the durability of power preponderance, which are the subject of the remaining chapters.

### ***Chapter 4: The Sources of Competition in a Unipolar World***

In this chapter, I argue that, in a nuclear world, unipolarity has the potential to be durable, but whether in fact it lasts depends on the strategy of the unipole. The chapter lays out the reasons why unipolarity may be durable, and the conditions under which its durability is more likely.

The key argument here is that whether a unipolar world is durable depends on two variables -- one systemic and one strategic. At the systemic level, the possibility of maintaining one state's preponderance in military power depends on the expected costs of a war between the unipole and a rising challenger. The higher these costs,

the narrower the range of situations that will prompt the rise of a military challenge. This means that unipolarity is in principle durable, and indeed more likely to last in a nuclear world like ours, in which the expected costs of great-power war are terrifically high.

Durability is not guaranteed by high costs of war, however. On the contrary, it depends on the strategy of the unipole regarding the economic growth of major powers. If the unipole accommodates the continuing growth and regional security interests of a rising economic power, it gives the latter fewer incentives to militarize. In order to avoid a military challenge, then, the unipole must refrain from attempting to extend its global dominance and it must also eschew policies that would jeopardize the economic development of other important states. If, however, the unipole implements a strategy that contains the economic growth or disregards the security interests of a rising power, then the latter has greater incentives to invest in additional military capabilities beyond those that assure its immediate security and survival, putting up a military challenge to the unipole.

Depending on these two factors, then, rising powers in a unipolar world may continue to convert their growing latent power into military power beyond the point at which their survival is guaranteed by a nuclear deterrent; or they may become satisfied *status quo* (military) powers once they acquire the ability to deter any state including the unipole by developing a nuclear deterrent.

### ***Chapter 5: Competition in the Post-Cold War World***

The theory laid out in the previous chapter yields several empirical implications for contemporary world politics. This chapter shows how these implications dovetail with the empirical record of the past two decades. It does so in four sections. It starts out by looking at the evolution of U.S. power since the outset of the current unipolar age in 1989-91 and establishes that, despite recent strong declinist views, the world has remained unipolar till now. I then show that the rapid economic rise of China has been made possible by a strategy of U.S. accommodation. The third section looks at the likely trajectory of potential challengers to the United States and singles out China as the most likely. Finally, I look at the evolution of Chinese military power, showing how China's survival is guaranteed by a relatively small nuclear arsenal and how, at the same time, Beijing has eschewed a strategy of militarization and global armed competition with the United States on the conventional level.

Until now, the United States has pursued a strategy of economic accommodation. Major powers, all of which today possess survivable nuclear arsenals, have not pursued further balancing against it. This includes rising economic powers such as China, on which I focus much of my analysis. Although the post-Cold War empirical record is insufficient for a definitive test of my theory, the absence of full-

blown militarization by the foremost U.S. economic competitor -- China -- provides support for my qualified-durability thesis in contrast with declinist views.

According to my argument -- and in contrast with primacist explanations -- China has not balanced against the United States because its nuclear arsenal guarantees its survival and its long-term economic prospects are facilitated by a U.S. strategy of accommodation. Primacists argue that the absence of a Chinese balancing effort against the United States results from the insurmountable power gap between the two countries, which heightens the difficulty -- in terms of inefficiency, cost, and collective-action problems -- of balancing, to the point at which it stops making sense. Yet based on a comparison with prior instances of major military challenges, I show how this cannot be the case.

### ***Chapter 6: The Sources of Conflict in a Unipolar World***

This chapter demonstrates that a unipolar world is not peaceful. Despite frequent U.S. involvement in military conflicts throughout the last two decades, not much has been written on the question of unipolar peace.

My view is that unipolarity generates significant conflict. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, neither the structure of a unipolar world nor U.S. strategic choices have a clear beneficial impact on the overall prospects for peace. The absence of a balance of power, while eliminating great-power competition, makes room for significant conflict beyond relations among the most important states. Unipolarity will generate abundant opportunities for war between the unipole and recalcitrant minor powers that do not have the capabilities or allies necessary to deter it. Unipolarity will also create ample room for conflict among minor powers, which are less likely to be disciplined by great-power allies, as is the case when an overall balance of power is present. As a result, unipolarity will be prone to produce asymmetric and peripheral conflicts.

The chapter lays out the consequences of each military strategy of the unipole for the overall level of peace in the system as well as for the preponderant power's own participation in wars. For each strategy, I extract pathways to conflict that are specific -- or at least particularly likely to be present -- when a systemic balance of power is absent.

Specifically, an engaged unipole will place recalcitrant minor powers in a particularly dire predicament: extreme self-help. This is likely to lead recalcitrant minor powers to attempt to develop further military -- if possible, nuclear -- capabilities in secret. Fear that this will happen, however, may prompt the unipole to launch preventive military strikes against them. Additionally, minor powers' uncertainty about the willingness of the unipole to accept small revisions to the

*status quo* may also be a source of conflict. This means that an engaged unipole is likely to be involved in frequent conflicts. At the same time, a unipolar world from which the preponderant military power disengages is also likely to experience significant conflict, up to and including wars among major powers. Either way, unipolarity makes room for specific conflict-producing mechanisms to work.

### ***Chapter 7: Conflict in the Post-Cold War World***

In this chapter, I illustrate the mechanisms through which unipolarity produces conflict that were developed in the previous chapter. The short historical post-Cold War period is not sufficient to test these conflict-producing mechanisms conclusively. Moreover, the United States has consistently implemented a strategy of either defensive or offensive dominance in the main regions of the globe since the fall of the Soviet Union. Our ability to illustrate the effects of a global disengagement strategy is therefore limited. Nonetheless, in this chapter I substantiate my theory with empirical examples from the first two decades of unipolarity.

The chapter is organized according to the strategic options laid out above. First, I illustrate the conflict-producing mechanisms stemming from a strategy of defensive dominance using the cases of the Gulf (1991), Kosovo (1999), and Kargil (1999) wars. Second, I turn to an illustration of the conflict-generating dynamics resulting from offensive dominance using the case of the 2003 Iraq war. I then lay out the practical impact of both dominance strategies on attempts at nuclear proliferation by looking at the cases of North Korea and Iran. I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which disengagement leads to conflict, which, though perhaps hard to see in world politics given U.S. strategic choices, are well understood by policy analysts.

### ***Chapter 8: Conclusion***

This final chapter ties together the arguments made throughout the book, fulfilling three goals. I start by summarizing my arguments and highlighting the role played by the nuclear revolution in my theory. Next, I summarize the implications of my arguments on peace and durability by delineating what, in my view, is the ideal grand strategy for a unipole such as the United States. I argue that U.S. interests are best served by a grand strategy of defensive accommodation. This strategy has both pluses and minus, however. On the upside, it is the only strategy that allows for the durability of U.S. military power preponderance. On the downside, it will lead to frequent U.S. involvement in military conflicts.

Before concluding, the book puts forth a few prospective scenarios for the evolution of the current international system. In my view, the most likely scenario for the coming decades is the continuation of a U.S. strategy of defensive accommodation, allowing for the maintenance

of U.S. military power preponderance in the conventional realm, despite the continued economic rise of a few key states, the largest among which are Brazil, China, and India. This means that as far as the eye can see, the most probable structure of international politics will be unipolar, though underpinned by a multipolar distribution of economic power. It is possible, however, that the United States decides to disengage from the world or, conversely, attempts to transform it according to its own goals. The chapter details the consequences of these strategic shifts.

The book closes with some elaboration on what I call a "paradox of power preponderance." A preponderance of power is not an unalloyed good. In fact, unparalleled relative power requires unequalled self-restraint. This paradox highlights the mixed view of unipolarity that percolates through the book. While military power preponderance certainly allows the unipole to shape the system in ways one great power among several is unable to, it is not without peril. Minor powers who find themselves in opposition to the unipole will have great incentives to acquire nuclear weapons. Relations with such powers will be harder to manage and, at least before they do acquire a robust deterrence, more likely to devolve into armed conflict. At the same time, a unipole must balance the international demands of global management with the domestic investments required to maintain its power preponderance. Whether the United States will be able to do so remains one of its greatest challenges.