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Unipolar politics as usual

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Abstract *This short comment seeks to clarify what unipolar politics as usual is, and how it differs from politics as usual under alternative systemic conditions, especially bipolarity. This is an assessment 'from within', accepting Brooks and Wohlforth's description of unipolar politics as well as their central premises that America's lonely superpower status faces no immediate threat and that there is little evidence that powerful states are actively seeking to overthrow the current unipolar system. I suggest that a comparative assessment of how alternative distributions of power create different incentive structures for states yields different conclusions and policy prescriptions than those advanced by Brooks and Wohlforth. Most notably, Brooks and Wohlforth do not fully appreciate how the 'unipolar politics as usual' that they describe provides states with few incentives to cooperate with their policy prescription that the US reshape the world's institutional architecture.*

Introduction

The United States has unprecedented material preponderance over any other state or likely combination of states. Yet, international relations (IR) theorists caution that the international environment imposes considerable constraints on the US ability to use said material advantage. In their path-breaking book, Brooks and Wohlforth forcefully argue that these systemic constraints are not nearly as impressive as IR scholars make them out to be. There is little evidence of either hard or soft balancing while economic interdependence, legitimacy and international institutions offer at best modest sources of restraint. If there are any constraints on US power, they stem from non-systemic sources such as insurgency, terrorism, oil dependency and domestic politics, not from the condition of unipolarity.

Can systemic arguments be salvaged from this tour-de-force demolition? Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 67) imply as much when they argue that most of the examples analysts put forth as evidence for systemic constraints are in fact examples of 'unipolar politics as usual'. This suggests that the normal conduct of unipolar politics is somehow different from bipolar or multipolar politics. Yet, they do not develop this comparison. Brooks and Wohlforth, like much of the literature, focus their inquiry on whether states are motivated by a desire to change the distribution of capabilities either because a unipolar distribution of power necessitates balancing (the realist claim) or because alleged legitimacy or reputational deficits lead states to take actions that undermine US dominance. Yet, systemic factors may also matter because different distributions of capabilities

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offer different incentives and opportunities to both the powerful and the less powerful, regardless of whether states are motivated by a desire to affect the current distribution of capabilities.

This short comment seeks to clarify what unipolar politics as usual is and how it differs from politics as usual under alternative systemic conditions, especially bipolarity. This is an assessment 'from within', accepting Brooks and Wohlforth's central premises that America's lonely superpower status faces no immediate threat and that there is little evidence that powerful states are actively seeking to overthrow the current unipolar system. I also resist the temptation to resurrect the liberal and constructivist arguments that Brooks and Wohlforth criticize. I argue that Brooks and Wohlforth do not fully appreciate how their own description of unipolar politics leaves not just the United States but also other states much freer to pursue their short-term objectives than the condition of bipolarity did. This creates opportunities and incentives to build up capacities or resist the United States even if this behaviour is not necessarily motivated by a desire to affect the distribution of power. This has important implications for Brooks and Wohlforth's main policy prescription that the United States reshape the world's institutional architecture. Under unipolar politics as usual there are no systemic reasons for states to go along with plans to cement the US power advantage into a new institutional order.

Does unipolarity matter? And does it impose constraints?

Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 67) rightly claim that the 'balancing metaphor encourages analysts to interpret any behavior that complicates US foreign policy as an effort to check US power'. Consequentially, they examine the actions of states that seemingly frustrate US foreign policy against a counterfactual: what would these states have done in the absence of a balancing impulse? This is a sound empirical strategy to evaluate whether there is evidence of balancing behaviour in the unipolar era (which is, to be fair, their goal). It is, however, not a good way to evaluate whether and how polarity affects state behaviour. Answering that question requires consideration of a different counterfactual: would states have behaved differently under a different distribution of capabilities? Unipolarity with a counterbalancing coalition may well be more difficult for the United States than unipolarity without counterbalancing. Yet, this does not mean that it is easier or harder for the United States to get what it wants under unipolarity than under some alternative distribution of capabilities. The most obvious base for comparison is the bipolar system from which the world emerged only recently, although alternative (hypothetical) bases for comparison could also be useful.

Properly performing such a counterfactual analysis is a task of enormous proportions that I cannot do justice to in this forum.[1] A good start is to create some theoretical expectations about the types of behaviours one would expect to observe under different systemic configurations. To Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 68–69),

[1] For example, I am going to ignore the obvious problem that the United States may want different things depending on the distribution of capabilities. This is an issue with any assessment of the causal effect of polarity on outcomes.

unipolar politics is essentially politics as usual: states are trying to satisfy economic and regional security interests, they are seeking to get the best possible deal in bargaining situations, and they are responding to domestic political incentives. The implication is that in a unipolar system states can simply go about their business while presumably they cannot do so in a bipolar or multipolar system. Under bi- or multipolarity, states have to evaluate not just whether an action is in their short-term national interests but also how their preferred course of action affects the overall balance of power. In a 'world out of balance' states have no opportunity to affect the global balance of power so it should be of no concern to them.

The logic of this argument suggests that under unipolarity, the absence of systemic constraints applies not just to the United States but also to the rest of the world. Even if states rarely take major foreign policy initiatives that actively seek to undermine the United States, they also lack systemic reasons to side with the United States if doing so is not in their short-term interests. The absence of systemic constraints for other states may well complicate life for the United States. When pointing to the looming danger of communist world domination is no longer a credible option, the United States has to find new existential threats that create common interests (for example, terrorism), offer policy choices that are attractive *sui generis*, or rely on costly coercive methods to get states to do what it wants. It would be silly to argue that offering attractive policy options and using coercive methods are not important under bipolarity. They clearly are and the history of the Cold War provides ample documentation for this. What is missing under unipolarity is some of the glue[2] that bipolar competition provided to alliances and coalitions.

For example, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 84–85) are right when they argue that German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder intensified his opposition to the Iraq war in the summer of 2002 for domestic political reasons. What is less clear is whether these incentives would not have been counterbalanced at least somewhat if Germany were allied with the United States against a great power that was perceived to threaten Germany's existence. Schröder was afforded the luxury of not having to think about how his actions would impact a bipolar power struggle. Brooks and Wohlforth point to the vocal domestic opposition over the deployment of Pershing II missiles in West Germany in the early 1980s to argue that analysts overstate the glue that the Cold War provided. Yet with contested elections on the horizon, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl decided to support the US position even though a vast majority of Germans and a majority of Kohl's supporters favoured postponement of the deployment (Painton et al 1983). It is at least plausible that although Schröder was not motivated by a balancing rationale, the different incentive structure of unipolarity led him to act in a way that was less favourable to the United States than his actions might have been under an alternative distribution of power. That is, while the international system imposed at least some constraints on Kohl's abilities to pursue his short-term interests (re-election), it did not similarly constrain Schröder.

[2] I do not mean to say here that there is no glue that encourages cooperation under unipolarity (for example, ideology, shared values), just that the particular source of glue provided by bipolar competition has dissipated.

Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 80–83) may also be correct that that concerns about balancing US power played little role in motivating the European Union's (EU) to increase its defence cooperation. Yet, the changed incentive structure of unipolarity almost surely did provide an impetus for collective defence efforts. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 81) approvingly cite Charles Kupchan (2002, 152) who argues that the Europeans were motivated by the 'prospect of an America that is losing interest in being the guarantor of European security'. This perception is surely fuelled by the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. Moreover, the Europeans became increasingly convinced that they could not necessarily count on the United States to deal with their short-term security concerns (such as Kosovo). In making the decisions to enhance their own capabilities, concerns about a divided command structure were much less prevalent than they would have been under bipolarity, when signs of a divided (and thus weak) coalition carried much greater potential consequences.

It is not clear that the development of these capabilities provides an immediate constraint on US power. In the short term, the EU's enhanced defence capabilities are entirely compatible with the US military alliance and do not impose a constraint. Yet, once a capability is created it is there and it could be used for purposes that the United States is less than enthusiastic about. More directly, it reduces the dependency of the Europeans on the United States and thereby US leverage over its European allies.

Similarly, Brooks and Wohlforth may well be right that China is primarily interested in growing economically and protecting its regional security interests rather than balancing US power on a global scale. Yet, it again pays to ponder whether China would have been able to pursue these courses of action under the conditions of bipolarity? The demise of the Soviet Union and the attractiveness of communism as an alternative spurred China to adopt economic reforms. China's export-oriented economy has depended entirely on access to world markets. China acquired this through bilateral deals and especially by becoming a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the creation of which was very much linked to post-Cold War dynamics. The apparent (relative) absence of concerns about the long-term impact of facilitating China's growth surely did not hurt when trying to convince US Congress and others that China should indeed be granted preferential access to world markets. Conversely, the impossibility of challenging the United States on the security front (either alone or with allies) may well have spurred Chinese decision makers to focus on economic development.

Again, this development may not directly impose immediate constraints on the United States, at least outside of East Asia. Indeed, the United States has benefited greatly from China's economic development. China's interests are now so intertwined with those of the United States that the Chinese government is currently propping up the US economy such that US consumers will resume buying their products and will not start demanding protectionism. Moreover, it is not clear that the enormous debt the United States has to China provides China much geopolitical leverage (Drezner 2009) or that the projections will materialize that China's gross domestic product (GDP) will outsize US GDP within 15 years. Yet, China has the world's largest population and is one of the world's wealthier nations (although not in per capita terms). History suggests that nations that have both these properties will at some point assert their influence (Gilpin 1981).

At the very least, despite its lonely superpower status the United States does not have much leverage to get China to change its policies.

These examples are merely illustrative and their implications should not be exaggerated. For example, non-aligned states had ample opportunities during the Cold War period to play off the two superpowers and thus pursue their short-term interests. Moreover, even under unipolarity regional power balances are often on the minds of actors when they evaluate alternative courses of action. Finally, it is not necessarily clear that it is necessarily a bad thing for the United States if other states feel relatively unconstrained by the international system. Under the constraints of the bipolar Cold War, Germany may have been more likely to cooperate with US security initiatives but the prospect for Poland agreeing to supply troops in support of a US initiated military action would have been rather bleak. I doubt that it is feasible to make an aggregate assessment of whether the constraints are greater or smaller under unipolarity than bipolarity or multipolarity. The important point here is that in the world Brooks and Wohlforth describe balancing is not an important motivation for states but neither is bandwagoning. States and leaders are simply trying to maximize their short-term interests. I argue in the following section that this has important implications for the policy prescriptions Brooks and Wohlforth offer regarding the creation of a new institutional architecture.

Coalition formation and institutional innovation

In their book and in a subsequent *Foreign Affairs* article, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 2009) argue that the United States is in an unprecedented position to remake the world's institutions to reflect its preferences. This prescription follows from their conclusions that the US advantage in capabilities is both unparalleled and unchecked. Yet, they do not sufficiently answer the question why other states have incentives to go along with proposals to institutionalize the US power advantage? Advantages in relative capabilities do not automatically make other states do what you want them to do.

First, absolute power matters. A crucial difference between the end of World War II and the Cold War is that neither the US allies nor most defeated countries are in a position of desperate dependence. The United States may well be disproportionately powerful but European states have sufficient resources to support or even to create institutions they like, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). After the Asian financial crisis, Asian countries sought to reduce their dependence on the US dominated IMF by creating the Chiang Mai Initiative, aided by the large reserves held by many Asian states. Sure, other states often look for US leadership but if this leadership does not come or is not appreciated many states find ways to manage on their own.

Second, as argued above, the systemic conditions are permissive for conflicts over institutional design. Even if divisions between the Europeans and the United States over international institutions are commonly perceived as frictions in the transatlantic alliance, the consequences of such frictions are much less severe under unipolarity than under bipolarity.

Third, Brooks and Wohlforth cannot base their argument on the same kind of trade-off between restraint and institutional design that liberal institutionalists such as Ikenberry (2001) rely on. Liberal institutionalists argue that a superpower agrees to constrain potential (ab)uses of its asymmetric power by binding itself to institutions in exchange for an institutional configuration that reflects its long-term interests. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that institutions impose no meaningful constraints on US power. So, a desire to check US power cannot be an incentive for other states to go along with US plans to reshape the international institutional order to its liking, unless we assume that the leaders of other states are delusional.

Under unipolar politics as usual, then, the United States has to offer institutional reforms that everyone likes or persuade/coerce/pay off others to accept institutional reforms they do not like. The first type of reform is fine but can happen under any distribution of capabilities. Unipolarity may help under the familiar argument that it may be easier to solve the collective action problem if the sole superpower is willing to take on the lion share of the burden, allowing other states to free-ride. This may have helped in the creation of the WTO, which is really the only major global institutional reform that has taken place since the end of the Cold War.

Persuasion too is independent of the distribution of capabilities, unless one believes that sitting on top somehow makes one more persuasive, an assertion for which there is little recent evidence.[3] One may argue that in a world out of balance, the United States has unique opportunities to coerce others and offer side-payments. This is partially true. However, while under 'unipolar politics as usual' coercion and side-payments are good tools to use institutions to achieve short-term goals, they are less conducive to the long-term and broad-based institutional reform that Brooks and Wohlforth advocate.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) can serve as a useful example of this point. While scholars such as Michael Glennon (2003) have argued that unipolarity has killed the UNSC, the evidence suggests the opposite. The UN had little or no say in the major Cold War interventions, such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US military action in Vietnam, nor in smaller interventions, such as the US military actions in Grenada and Panama. Between 1977 and the start of the Gulf War, the UNSC adopted only two resolutions under Chapter VII; resolutions that are binding upon all UN member states and that are used to authorize sanctions as well as uses of force by UN troops, regional organizations, or individual member states (Voeten 2005). By contrast, between 1990 and 2004, the Council approved 304 Chapter VII resolutions; many of which had meaningful consequences.

So, the UNSC became more active without meaningful institutional reform and despite the antiquated nature of the UNSC's decision-making structure. Elsewhere I have argued that unipolarity was responsible for this reversal in activity (Voeten 2001). During the Cold War, the UNSC could only be used for operations that maintained a status quo, for example by creating a buffer between warring forces. After the Cold War, the United States was often able to use the UNSC in order to move the status quo in its preferred direction, such as in the Haiti intervention, Bosnia, and many resolutions on Iraq. The United States used its asymmetric power to credibly communicate outside options (unilateral or

[3] For example, the United States has become increasingly isolated in the UN General Assembly (Voeten 2004).

NATO interventions) that others did not have and/or to offer side-payments such as World Bank loans. This type of coalition building obviously failed partially in the 1999 Kosovo intervention and almost fully on the 2003 Iraq intervention, perhaps because it had become harder to pay off crucial actors that were weak in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War or because the diplomatic execution left something to be desired. Yet, this type of strategic coalition building has been successfully applied with some regularity during the post-Cold War period. In the UN General Assembly, which mostly has symbolic resolutions, the US almost never gets its way (Voeten 2004). In the UNSC, where heavy-handed tactics are more common, the United States has for the most part been quite successful.

While the United States has thus been reasonably successful in throwing around its weight to achieve its short-term goals in international institutions, this strategy has not led to much institutional reform that solves long term issues. It is one thing to pay off China or Russia in order to persuade them not to exercise their veto when the United States wants to invade Haiti. It is quite another thing to buy off these countries to institutionalize US interests on a new global security regime or on nuclear proliferation (one of the core issues that Brooks and Wohlforth address). The outside options are not always clear in institutional design[4] and it is more generally unclear why states have an incentive to go along with a great plan in which the US institutionalizes its power advantages, at least not if, as Brooks and Wohlforth argue, this institutionalization does not constrain US power. If 'unipolar politics as usual' is all about states pursuing their short-term interests and unipolar institutional politics follows very much the same pattern.

Conclusions

This note has sought to stay within the main premises laid out by Brooks and Wohlforth. As such I have resisted temptations to argue with their claims that US dominance is unthreatened, even by the current financial crisis or the rise of China, or to try and resurrect liberal or constructivist theoretical treatments. I have also stuck to systemic arguments. Brooks and Wohlforth appear to realize full well that the United States is perfectly capable of causing its own demise (as were past hegemons). The choice to do so reflects my admiration for the accomplishments of *World out of balance* at both a theoretical and an empirical level.

The main argument that I advanced here is that Brooks and Wohlforth do not fully appreciate how their own description of unipolar politics leaves not just the United States but also other states much freer to pursue their short-term objectives than the condition of bipolarity did. This creates opportunities and incentives to build up capacities or resist the United States even if this behaviour is not necessarily motivated by a desire to affect the distribution of power. Moreover, if unipolar politics is characterized by states pursuing their short-term self-interests, then coalitions under unipolarity need to be constructed on an issue-by-issue

[4] There may be some examples where this may work. For example, it is not unreasonable to presume that the prospect of being relieved from the threat of bilateral section 301 sanctions led some countries to prefer the multilateral WTO to bilateral trade interactions with the United States. Yet, this involves a liberal trade-off where the United States agrees to constrain itself in exchange for institutionalizing its preferences.

basis. There are few reasons for states to be enthusiastic about US plans to cement their preferences into a new institutional order. It is important to appreciate that having more capabilities than another state does not immediately confer leverage. Even if the United States sits on top, it remains very expensive to coerce China to change its currency policy or Germany to alter its Iraq policy. These points do not undermine many of the core claims that Brooks and Wohlforth make, such as that the reputational cost of acting unilaterally may not be nearly as large as many international relations scholars have claimed. They do, however, challenge their key policy prescription that given that US power is both uniquely dominant and unchecked; the United States also has a unique opportunity to reshape the world's institutional architecture to its liking. This conclusion misses the point that other states are also in a unique position to simply say no.

Notes on contributor

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