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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

BALANCING U.S. POWER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

CORE COURSE 5601 ESSAY

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The (neo)realist balance of power model stipulates that states seek to provide for their own security in an essentially anarchic international system by balancing the power of other states that pose or could pose a threat to their national interests.ⁱ Consistent with that proposition, this essay endeavors to show that the United States' current status as the world's sole superpower is impelling other states, including some U.S. allies, to seek to balance U.S. power. This dynamic likely will contribute to the reemergence of a multi-polar or bipolar world in the 21st Century. The U.S. should prepare for this likelihood.ⁱⁱ

This thesis raises several questions that will be addressed in turn. First, what other states view the U.S. as a current or potential threat such that they seek to balance U.S. power, and why? Second, how do these states seek to balance U.S. power? Third, what do these efforts portend for the nature of the next century's international system? Finally, what are the implications for U.S. statecraft?

On Power

The United States is the sole superpower today because it is the only state that currently possesses great power in all the main categories of power (economic, military, informational, and political) and the will to exercise such power to advance its national interests and provide global leadership.ⁱⁱⁱ The EU has economic strength (its GDP exceeds that of the U.S.) and two of its members have strategic nuclear weapons, but it currently lacks the unity and will to acquire a state of the art military with substantial power projection capability. Russia and China have strategic nuclear weapons, but lack economic strength, though China's economic trends are impressive. Russia's instability and economic crisis also have greatly weakened its previously formidable conventional military power capabilities. China's military is large but antiquated. The United States is

the world leader in soft power—given the pervasiveness of American culture around the world and the ascendancy of the American-championed ideas of democracy and capitalism—as well as in the information technologies through which such ideas and culture are so widely disseminated.^{iv} (Globalization, therefore, tends to reinforce U.S. power.) To challenge U.S. dominance, a state or alliance of states must above all be able to rival the U.S. militarily, for which economic strength is essential.

Who is Seeking to Balance U.S. Power and Why?

Among major powers, Russia and China feel threatened by U.S. dominance, while most members of the European Union (EU), particularly France, are at least uncomfortable with such dominance. Each of these power centers perceives it to be in their interest to be able to balance U.S. power and are taking steps in that direction, though they differ in their motives and in their capacity for success.^v Japan currently does not appear to be seeking to balance U.S. power, though there are elements within Japan that have voiced support for doing so. Japan may choose to do so in the future. India's size and nuclear weapons give it great power potential, but it is likely to be preoccupied and constrained by internal challenges for the foreseeable future.

Russian antipathy toward U.S. dominance stems both from hurt pride and perceived threats to real interests. Universal recognition of the United States as the world's sole superpower since the Soviet Union's demise is a constant, bitter reminder to the Russians of just how far they have fallen. Early hopes held by Russia that the United States would continue to treat them like a superpower, and those held by the United States that Russia would support the U.S. vision for a New World Order—hopes that made possible the broad coalition that dispatched Iraq from Kuwait in 1991—have since

been dashed. Russia's debilitated military and heavy dependence on Western lending have compelled it to give ground to U.S. pressure on a number of issues important to it, most recently Kosovo, which has only intensified Russian resentment.

Beyond pride, Russia recognizes that the United States is the essential proponent for NATO expansion, a development that Russians widely perceive as threatening to their national interests. Cash-strapped Russia, with its few internationally competitive industries, also resents and is economically constrained by U.S. pressure not to make lucrative arms and commercial nuclear power sales to U.S.-defined rogue states, e.g. Iran.

For China, the United States is the primary foreign obstacle to the achievement of some of China's most important foreign policy goals, including reunification with Taiwan and membership, on Chinese terms, in the World Trade Organization (WTO). U.S. criticism of China's human rights performance is a continuing source of tension. China also has made clear its concern about the recent strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese security relationship and U.S. theater missile defense cooperation with Japan and Taiwan.^{vi} Pride is likely another motivating factor for China, given its great power past and more recent humiliations by stronger powers.

Less immediately apparent is what motivates Europeans to balance U.S. power. Does not the U.S. accord its European allies a high level of security, which they could provide for themselves only with far greater investment in their own defense? Are not the values and systems that the U.S. promotes and protects shared by and beneficial to the Europeans? The answers to these questions are yes, but with costs and risks.

One cost is psychological. As with Russia and China, pride partly motivates Europe's antipathy toward U.S. dominance. This great power envy is most pronounced

in France, but is not limited to that European power. Consider Luxembourg's Foreign Minister Jacques Poos' prideful (and ultimately wrong) assertion, on behalf of the European Community, at the start of the Bosnian crisis in 1991 that "the hour of Europe has dawned" and that Europe could handle that crisis without America's assistance.^{vii}

One risk perceived by the Europeans is not that the U.S. will exercise its power in a threatening manner but that it will cease to exercise it at all, or at least reliably. This is the fear of an American return to isolationism or of an American turn eastward as Asia's economic importance to the U.S. increases relative to that of Europe. Kosovo and Bosnia have underscored, to many Europeans' concern, how utterly dependent the Europeans remain upon U.S. political leadership and military muscle to respond effectively to crises in their own region, much less to those further afield.

The Europeans also recognize that there are opportunities associated with being in a position to rival U.S. power and leadership. EU member states have increased their leverage vis-à-vis the United States on economic matters by negotiating as a single entity vice many. If the euro eventually displaces the dollar as the international reserve currency of choice, the associated benefits of seignorage and being able to sustain higher budget and current account deficits will accrue more to Europe than to America.

How Are They Seeking to Balance U.S. Power?

Power can be balanced in two ways. The first way is for a state to seek to enhance its indigenous power. The second is for a state to aggregate its power with that of other states through alliances. A state also can pursue both ways concurrently.

Russia, China, and the EU each are seeking to develop their own power, but only the EU (Japan, too, should it choose to do so) currently possesses the economic strength

necessary to rival U.S. power solely through its own efforts. Russia and China's economic under-development mean that they have far to go before they can rival U.S. power individually, so they will need to align with others to better balance U.S. power.

Europe's drive to closer integration, currently manifested in the EU and the euro, can be understood to an important extent as a means to balance U.S. power. The initial drive for union was driven by a desire to bring together the European states in a way that would preclude future wars among them, particularly between France and Germany. By the 1970s, however, that goal could be viewed as largely achieved. Enhanced prosperity is another, continuing motive as EU member states seek to achieve greater economic efficiencies by eliminating barriers to trade among themselves and improving their international negotiating position. But if prosperity is the EU member states' only other purpose, why do they pursue political integration, particularly the achievement of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP, or PESC, by its French abbreviation)?^{viii}

While EU member states together now deal with the United States on economic matters as a peer, they remain far from that status with regard to political matters, particularly those involving the use of force. This reflects the greater reticence of some major EU member states to pool sovereignty on matters of blood, which are more serious than matters of treasure. It also reflects a failure to invest in leading edge defense capabilities, such as precision guided munitions, reconnaissance, and strategic lift.

EU members, however, have undertaken to redress at least partially their military dependence upon the United States. The vehicle has come to be known as the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) initiative.^{ix} France originated the concept of developing a stronger and more cohesive European military instrument than the Western

European Union (WEU) that could act independently of the United States. The United States feared that the development of a European military capability outside of NATO would weaken the transatlantic alliance. The United States worked intensively and successfully with other allies to place ESDI within a NATO context.

The United States now supports ESDI, but views it differently than do the Europeans. The U.S. views ESDI primarily as a means to spur Europeans into strengthening their defense capabilities in order to enhance the European contribution to the U.S.-led NATO alliance. The Europeans view ESDI primarily as a means to gain access to NATO assets in support of European-only military operations. The European leaders recognize their need to close the capability gap with the U.S. but also the formidable domestic political obstacles to making the requisite increased defense investment. Thus, the Europeans are focusing initially on building the institutional structure of a European defense capability—by absorbing the WEU into the EU.

Russia and China currently lack the level of development and, particularly in Russia's case, internal stability to be able to rival U.S. power, military or economic, in the near term. They will, of course, seek to raise their level of development as do all nations for reasons both domestic and international. In the meantime, however, their only option for balancing U.S. power is through alliance with other powers. Accordingly, we see evidence of Russia and China moving closer to one another for just that purpose.

Since the Cold War's end, Russian and Chinese leaders have discussed their need to cooperate to balance U.S. power.^x They have moved to resolve outstanding border disputes and to reduce the forces each stations along that border^{xi}. Russia is again selling

and China is again buying sophisticated combat aircraft and other arms from Russia.

Such developments contrast sharply with their previous difficult, even hostile, relations.

A weak Russia, unlike a strong Soviet Union, is not a strategic threat to China but a potential strategic partner against the only country currently able to seriously obstruct China's international interests, the United States. For Russia, alliance with China gives it greater weight vis-à-vis the U.S. and Europe at a time of exceptional weakness and it does so at relatively little current risk. China currently lacks a modern military, and it is giving priority to its domestic economic development over modernizing its armed forces. Russia must be the more careful partner in this alignment, however. On current trends, and given their relative population resource bases (people, after all, are the ultimate resource, if properly developed and organized), China looks likely to emerge eventually as a much stronger power than Russia. With more territory than any other country in the world, a population roughly a tenth of China's (and concentrated in the west), and the only major power with a ground border with China, Russia could one day become China's strategic target instead of its strategic partner. Down the road, Russia may need to align with others, including possibly Europe and the United States, against China.

What are the Implications for the 21st Century International System?

Russian, Chinese, and European efforts to balance U.S. power promise significant change for the international system in the next century. The specific changes will depend upon the success of these balancing efforts as well as on the United States' own actions.

It is uncertain whether the European Union will muster the unity and will necessary to rival the United States militarily. Defense is more central to sovereignty than economics, and it is in the area of defense that EU member states have ceded the

least sovereignty to Brussels. Yet, with the launching of the CFSP and ESDI, EU member states have at least made a rhetorical commitment to achieve such unity at some future date. Even if they succeed, there is another serious question as to whether the European publics will support the increased investment in military capabilities that the EU must make to close the gap in this area with the United States. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that the EU's progress toward a genuine CFSP and ESDI and, thereby, increased independence of action vis-à-vis the United States, will be slow, absent a dramatic outside stimulus.^{xii}

The severity of Russia's current political and economic problems and the diminishment of its great power potential as a result of the loss of population and territory following the Soviet Union's demise make it unlikely that Russia will reemerge as a global rival to the United States. Russia may yet achieve internal stability and turn its economy around, but even then will likely depend on alliance in some form with another power center to protect its vital interests in the future. Its initial alliance is likely to be with China, but as previously discussed, it may later need to look west to balance China.

China, in the near-term, is likely to increase its strategic cooperation with Russia in order to mitigate U.S. power, as discussed above. Unlike Russia, China has the potential over the longer term to challenge U.S. preeminence directly—indeed, to emerge as a power like the world has never seen. Of course, China may never realize this potential; such a large population may prove more obstacle than opportunity or China's communist authorities may try to deny the greater political freedom and economic flexibility that continued high economic growth rates may require. Nonetheless, it appears that China has turned a corner that promises greater prosperity and a more

influential position in the world. Thus, a prudent estimate is that China's power will grow, and, over time, China increasingly will become a country that other major powers balance against vice versa.

While it is not possible to predict future power line-ups with certainty, the motive and resource potential available to a few other power centers to balance U.S. power does suggest that the current period of U.S. dominance is transitory. It is likely that China's power will grow. It also is likely that China and Russia will deepen their strategic cooperation to offset U.S. power, at least initially. It is possible that Russia will achieve stability and strong economic growth such that it can end its dependence on Western aid and rebuild its military power, thereby enhancing its independence of action vis-à-vis all other powers. It is also possible that the European Union will demonstrate sufficient unity and will be able to resolve or manage conflict within Europe and along its periphery without U.S. participation. In such an increasingly multi-polar world, the United States is likely to remain the most powerful country in the world for years to come, but its independence of action outside of the Western Hemisphere will decline.

Should China begin to emerge as a potential hegemon, the dynamic should be toward a more rigid alliance among the other great powers, perhaps led by the U.S., to balance China. This would produce a bi-polar situation. Should the U.S. or other bloc leader retreat, implode, or be defeated in war, China could emerge as a global hegemon.

Multi-polar and bipolar systems each offer advantages and disadvantages for the United States, but a multi-polar system would appear to be the more advantageous, particularly if rising Chinese power is the key differential. The Cold War experience suggests that a bipolar system is highly stable, at least in terms of great power conflict. A

bipolar system also may be more conducive than a multi-polar system to sustaining U.S. public support for the costs and risks of an active international role by giving the man in the street a single threat or challenge upon which to fixate. Yet, the Cold War experience also suggests that the black-and-white nature of bipolar systems tends to drive up the costs of an active international role. The starkness and rigidity of bipolar systems foster tendencies to demonize one's rival, to view competition in zero sum terms, and to adopt expensive symmetrical strategies to contain the rival's power.

A multi-polar system, with its gray hues, tends less toward these extremes than a bipolar system, making it easier for the United States to pursue less costly asymmetric strategies to keep power balanced in the international system. Multi-polar systems, however, are more complex and require more skillful statecraft to maintain the system's stability. Some will conclude from the United States' swings this century between Wilsonian idealism and isolationist retrenchment that the United States is incapable of playing its proper role in a multi-polar system and that a multi-polar system thereby will be unstable. However, it also is reasonable to believe that the United States' 20th Century experiences—so much different and more global than its 19th Century ones—have taught Americans enough about *realpolitik* and their need to remain actively engaged abroad.

There is another salient reason to favor multi-polarity over bipolarity if the force that would give rise to bipolarity is a rising China. If almost one quarter of the world's population could be so effectively developed and mobilized under one state as to impel all the other major powers to align against that state, only a similarly developed and mobilized India perhaps could counter it. The United States could find itself a second-

tier power, like the great powers of western Europe found themselves after the Second World War brought the continental-sized powers of America and the USSR to the fore.

What are the Implications for U.S. Statecraft?

The United States should prepare for the emergence of a multi-polar international system so as to maximize its position within it. Power is essential to the defense and advancement of states' national interests. The greater a state's power relative to that of its actual and potential rivals and adversaries, the more able it will be to secure outcomes in the anarchic international system that maximize its interests. The weaker the country, the more compromised its interests will be. The United States enjoys unparalleled power today, and naturally will want to enjoy that situation for as long as possible. However, it must also recognize that its current preeminent position and its efforts to maintain or enhance that position stimulate other powers to exert themselves to balance U.S. power. The international system is always churning.

Thus, the United States, above all other things, should take care to perpetuate those internal attributes that have made it the superpower it is today. In particular, it should safeguard the open and highly competitive nature of its political and economic systems, which reward drive, talent and innovation and provide the country with the flexibility to adjust to ever changing circumstances. Change is inevitable, but its nature is hard to predict, so it is most important to remain able to adjust quickly and successfully.

In a multi-polar world, the United States will be more reliant upon allies and partners to protect and advance its national interests. The United States' strongest and most natural allies are the European democracies, with whom we share strong ties in many areas. As discussed above, the European's ongoing efforts to balance U.S. power

can be viewed more in terms of their concern about the future reliability of the U.S. superpower to protect their interests than in terms of the U.S. exercising its powers with the intent of harming those interests. The Europeans are unlikely to break with the United States and go it alone unless we give them cause to do so. It is important, therefore, that we avoid acting in ways that the Europeans will perceive as abandonment or as having insufficient regard to their interests and perspectives. The same logic applies to Japan, though those ties are less long and deep.

The United States needs to be patient with and tolerant of Russia. While Russia's current situation is likely to move it toward strategic cooperation with China in the near term, its long-term strategic interests are likely to lie in strategic alignment with the West, if Chinese power grows as assumed. There may be rough times ahead for U.S.-Russian relations as Russia struggles to find its way in the early 21st Century. The United States must avoid equating the Russians with the Soviet threat—in effect, demonizing the Russians—so as not to complicate and possibly preclude the likely longer-term realignment of Russia with the West. Russia could be a key swing power in the West's potential emerging strategic competition with an increasingly powerful China.

Likewise, the United States does not want to make a fear of an emerging, hostile Chinese superpower a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is little that the United States or any other power can do, over the long-term, to prevent China from emerging as a great power, if the Chinese take the appropriate economic, political and military approaches toward that end. The United States and other powers can only hope to constrain or channel the exercise of Chinese power as it emerges. We should not hasten Chinese power development or aggravate their existing resentment of U.S. power by preemptively

containing a serious threat to U.S. interests that has not yet emerged. We should also should be mindful that in a multi-polar world, particularly should Russia prove more resurgent than expected or if a strong challenge should emerge from Japan or India, we may find common cause with the Chinese on matters of vital importance to us. Hence, our goal must be to avoid, through our own efforts, making a permanent enemy of China.

Conclusion

Consistent with the (neo)realist balance of power, the United States' current status as the world's sole superpower is impelling at least Russia, China, and the EU member states to seek to balance U.S. power. Their motives vary, but the likely net result is to move the international system of the 21st Century toward multi-polarity, perhaps even bipolarity, though the former would be preferable for the United States. The precise composition of this emerging multi-polar system will depend largely on the success of the various power centers' efforts to balance U.S. power as well as the skill with which the U.S. adjusts to the emerging new power centers. The United States should: 1) strive to preserve its alliance with its EU allies (and Japan), which are its most natural allies; 2) approach Russia as a likely future strategic partner against an emerging Chinese superpower, even as Russia is likely to turn toward China in the near term; and 3) avoid making fear of a potentially emerging, hostile Chinese superpower a self-fulfilling prophecy by engaging China pragmatically rather than trying to contain it preemptively. Since the only certain thing about the next century's international system is that there will be change, the United States must above all safeguard the attributes that have made it a superpower, primarily the open, competitive nature of its political and economic systems.

ⁱ Stephen M. Walt, "One World, Many Theories," Foreign Policy (Spring 1998): 31.

ⁱⁱ This essay benefits from and is largely in agreement with the perspectives reflected in Samuel Huntington's article "The Lonely Superpower," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 78 (March/April 1999): 35-49. In that article, Huntington postulates that the international system currently is in an unusual uni-multipolar situation, where there exists one superpower and a number of major regional powers. The superpower's ability to resolve international problems requires the cooperation of one or more of the major powers. The major powers view the United States' status as sole superpower as threatening, and seek to balance U.S. power, though for different reasons. Huntington foresees the uni-multipolar situation transitioning to a multipolar system within one or two decades.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are numerous determinants or sources of power. David Jablonsky's article, "National Power," in Parameters, 27 (Spring 1997), pp. 34-48, distinguishes between natural determinants (geography, population, and natural resources) and social determinants (economic, military, political, psychological, and informational). Jablonsky also observes that power is contextual. Bernard Cole and Terry Diebler identify up to four principal instruments of statecraft by which power is exercised: political (or diplomatic), economic, military, and information (See Bernard D. Cole and Terry L. Diebler, "Means," Syllabus, Course 5601, Fundamentals of Statecraft, The National War College, (Academic Year 1999-2000), p. 24.)

^{iv} Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 77, Issue 5 (September/October 1998): 81-94.

^v Some commentators are struck by how little evidence they see of such balancing efforts in this period of unparalleled U.S. power. One such commentator, G. John Eikenberry, attributes this "puzzling" situation to U.S. "strategic restraint," or its relatively benign exercise of its power (G. John Eikenberry, "America's Liberal Hegemony," Current History, Vol 98 (January 1999): 26). Perceived intentions and threat are significant and do bear on other powers' balancing efforts. The fact that the United States, historically speaking, is exercising its dominant position benignly—it obviously is not bent on the conquest or other subjugation of other states—removes the other major powers' sense of urgency in moving to balance U.S. power. However, as this essay argues, at least several other major powers do still have sufficient reasons of pride and national interest to seek to balance U.S. power, even if they do not currently feel a need to scramble toward that desired end state.

^{vi} Some Chinese leaders may recognize that U.S. power currently plays an essential stabilizing role in Asia, given China's own military shortcomings, Japan's latent military potential, and the Korean peninsula's volatility. However, this only gives China more cause to develop its own power so that it can both supplant the U.S. as regional power broker and more freely pursue its national interests.

^{vii} Anonymous, "Why the Troops Should Go," The New Republic, Vol. 213, Issue 25 (18 December 1995): 8.

^{viii} The EU has most recently advanced the PESC through appointment of former NATO Secretary General Solana as the first "Mr. PESC."

^{ix} Author addressed ESDI issues while working in European Policy, Office of the Secretary of Defense.

^x On the fringes of a 26 August 1999 summit among the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgystan, and Tajikistan in Bishkek, Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin reportedly discussed ways to broaden their strategic cooperation, including adopting a common stance against NATO (read the United States). See Ahmed Rashid, "Unstable Fringe," Far Eastern Economic Review, Vol. 162, Issue 36 (9 September 1999): 28.

^{xi} Anonymous, "China and Russia Agree on Troop Levels at Border," New York Times, 19 November 1996, sec. A, p. 15, and Lee Hockstader, "Russia, China, Affirm 'Strategic Partnership'; Border Troops to be Reduced, Bilateral Trade Expanded," The Washington Post, 28 December 1996, sec. A, p. A19.

^{xii} Such a stimulus could be a clear U.S. turn toward isolationism, particularly if it occurred during a period of growing European insecurity. An alternative development would be the exercise of U.S. power in a way that Europeans perceived as highly adverse to their interests, such as a reckless adventure that threatened to unwillingly drag them into a major war due to alliance obligations.