The Lonely Superpower

Samuel P. Huntington

THE NEW DIMENSION OF POWER

DURING THE past decade global politics has changed fundamentally in two ways. First, it has been substantially reconfigured along cultural and civilizational lines, as I have highlighted in the pages of this journal and documented at length in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* Second, as argued in that book, global politics is also always about power and the struggle for power, and today international relations is changing along that crucial dimension. The global structure of power in the Cold War was basically bipolar; the emerging structure is very different.

There is now only one superpower. But that does not mean that the world is *unipolar.* A unipolar system would have one superpower, no significant major powers, and many minor powers. As a result, the superpower could effectively resolve important international issues alone, and no combination of other states would have the power to prevent it from doing so. For several centuries the classical world under Rome, and at times East Asia under China, approximated this model. A *bipolar* system like the Cold War has two superpowers, and the relations between them are central to international politics. Each superpower dominates a coalition of allied states and competes with the other superpower for influence among nonaligned countries. A *multipolar* system has several major powers of comparable strength that cooperate and compete with each other in shifting patterns. A coalition

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of major states is necessary to resolve important international issues. European politics approximated this model for several centuries.

Contemporary international politics does not fit any of these three models. It is instead a strange hybrid, a *uni-multipolar* system with one superpower and several major powers. The settlement of key international issues requires action by the single superpower but always with some combination of other major states; the single superpower can, however, veto action on key issues by combinations of other states. The United States, of course, is the sole state with preeminence in every domain of power—economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological, and cultural—with the reach and capabilities to promote its interests in virtually every part of the world. At a second level are major regional powers that are preeminent in areas of the world without being able to extend their interests and capabilities as globally as the United States. They include the German-French condominium in Europe, Russia in Eurasia, China and potentially Japan in East Asia, India in South Asia, Iran in Southwest Asia, Brazil in Latin America, and South Africa and Nigeria in Africa. At a third level are secondary regional powers whose interests often conflict with the more powerful regional states. These include Britain in relation to the German-French combination, Ukraine in relation to Russia, Japan in relation to China, South Korea in relation to Japan, Pakistan in relation to India, Saudi Arabia in relation to Iran, and Argentina in relation to Brazil.

The superpower or hegemon in a unipolar system, lacking any major powers challenging it, is normally able to maintain its dominance over minor states for a long time until it is weakened by internal decay or by forces from outside the system, both of which happened to fifth-century Rome and nineteenth-century China. In a multipolar system, each state might prefer a unipolar system with itself as the single dominant power but the other major states will act to prevent that from happening, as was often the case in European politics. In the Cold War, each superpower quite explicitly preferred a unipolar system under its hegemony. However, the dynamics of the competition and their early awareness that an effort to create a unipolar system by armed force would be disastrous for both enabled bipolarity to endure for four decades until one state no longer could sustain the rivalry.

In each of these systems, the most powerful actors had an interest in maintaining the system. In a uni-multipolar system, this is less true. The United States would clearly prefer a unipolar system in which it would be the hegemon and often acts as if such a system existed. The major powers, on the other hand, would prefer a multipolar system in which they could pursue their interests, unilaterally and collectively, without being subject to constraints, coercion, and pressure by the stronger superpower. They feel threatened by what they see as the American pursuit of global hegemony. American officials feel frustrated by their failure to achieve that hegemony. None of the principal power-wielders in world affairs is happy with the status quo.

The superpower's efforts to create a unipolar system stimulate greater effort by the major powers to move toward a multipolar one. Virtually all major regional powers are increasingly asserting themselves to promote their own distinct interests, which often conflict with those of the United States. Global politics has thus moved from the bipolar system of the Cold War through a unipolar moment—highlighted by the Gulf War—and is now passing through one or two uni-multipolar decades before it enters a truly multipolar 21st century. The United States, as Zbigniew Brzezinski has said, will be the first, last, and only global superpower.

NOT SO BENIGN

AMERICAN OFFICIALS quite naturally tend to act as if the world were unipolar. They boast of American power and American virtue, hailing the United States as a benevolent hegemon. They lecture other countries on the universal validity of American principles, practices, and institutions. At the 1997 G-7 summit in Denver, President Clinton boasted about the success of the American economy as a model for others. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright has called the United States "the indispensable nation" and said that "we stand tall and hence see further than other nations." This statement is true in the narrow sense that the United States is an indispensable participant in any effort to tackle major global problems. It is false in also implying that other nations are dispensable—the United States needs the cooperation of some major countries in handling any issue—and that American indispensability is the source of wisdom.

Addressing the problem of foreign perceptions of American "hegemonism," Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott set forth this rationale: "In a fashion and to an extent that is unique in the history of Great Powers, the United States defines its strength—indeed, its very greatness—not in terms of its ability to achieve or maintain dominance over others, but in terms of its ability to work *with* others in the interests of the international community as a whole. . . . American foreign policy is consciously intended to advance *universal* values [his italics]." The most concise statement of the "benign hegemon" syndrome was made by Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence H. Summers when he called the United States the "first nonimperialist superpower"—a claim that manages in three words to exalt American uniqueness, American virtue, and American power.

American foreign policy is in considerable measure driven by such beliefs. In the past few years the United States has, among other things, attempted or been perceived as attempting more or less unilaterally to do the following: pressure other countries to adopt American values and practices regarding human rights and democracy; prevent other countries from acquiring military capabilities that could counter American conventional superiority; enforce American law extraterritorially in other societies; grade countries according to their adherence to American standards on human rights, drugs, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, missile proliferation, and now religious freedom; apply sanctions against countries that do not meet American standards on these issues; promote American corporate interests under the slogans of free trade and open markets; shape World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies to serve those same corporate interests; intervene in local conflicts in which it has relatively little direct interest; bludgeon other countries to adopt economic policies and social policies that will benefit American economic interests; promote American arms sales abroad while attempting to prevent comparable sales by other countries; force out one U.N. secretary-general and dictate the appointment of his successor; expand NATO initially to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic and no one else; undertake military action against Iraq and later maintain harsh economic sanctions against the regime; and categorize certain countries as "rogue states," excluding them from global institutions because they refuse to kowtow to American wishes.

In the unipolar moment at the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was often able to impose its will on other countries. That moment has passed. The two principal tools of coercion that the United States now attempts to use are economic sanctions and military intervention. Sanctions work, however, only when other countries also support them, and that is decreasingly the case. Hence, the United States either applies them unilaterally to the detriment of its economic interests and its relations with its allies, or it does not enforce them, in which case they become symbols of American weakness.

At relatively low cost the United States can launch bombing or cruise missile attacks against its enemies. By themselves, however, such actions achieve little. More serious military interventions have to meet three conditions: They have to be legitimated through some international organization, such as the United Nations where they are subject to Russian, Chinese, or French veto; they also require the participation of allied forces, which may or may not be forthcoming; and they have to involve no American casualties and virtually no "collateral" casualties. Even if the United States meets all three conditions, it risks stirring up not only criticism at home but widespread political and popular backlash abroad.

American officials seem peculiarly blind to the fact that often the more the United States attacks a foreign leader, the more his popularity soars among his countrymen who applaud him for standing tall against the greatest power on earth. The demonizing of leaders has so far failed to shorten their tenure in power, from Fidel Castro (who has survived eight American presidents) to Slobodan Milošević and Saddam Hussein. Indeed, the best way for a dictator of a small country to prolong his tenure in power may be to provoke the United States into denouncing him as the leader of a "rogue regime" and a threat to global peace.

Neither the Clinton administration nor Congress nor the public is willing to pay the costs and accept the risks of unilateral global leadership. Some advocates of American leadership argue for increasing defense expenditures by 50 percent, but that is a nonstarter. The American public clearly sees no need to expend effort and resources to achieve American hegemony. In one 1997 poll, only 13 percent said they preferred a preeminent role for the United States in world affairs, while 74 percent said they wanted the United States to share power with other countries.

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Burning the American flag: in India . . .

Other polls have produced similar results. Public disinterest in international affairs is pervasive, abetted by the drastically shrinking media coverage of foreign events. Majorities of 55 to 66 percent of the public say that what happens in western Europe, Asia, Mexico, and Canada has little or no impact on their lives. However much foreign policy elites may ignore or deplore it, the United States lacks the domestic political base to create a unipolar world. American leaders repeatedly make threats, promise action, and fail to deliver. The result is a foreign policy of "rhetoric and retreat" and a growing reputation as a "hollow hegemon."

THE ROGUE SUPERPOWER

IN ACTING as if this were a unipolar world, the United States is also becoming increasingly alone in the world. American leaders constantly claim to be speaking on behalf of "the international community." But whom do they have in mind? China? Russia? India? Pakistan? Iran? The Arab world? The Association of Southeast Asian Nations? Africa? Latin

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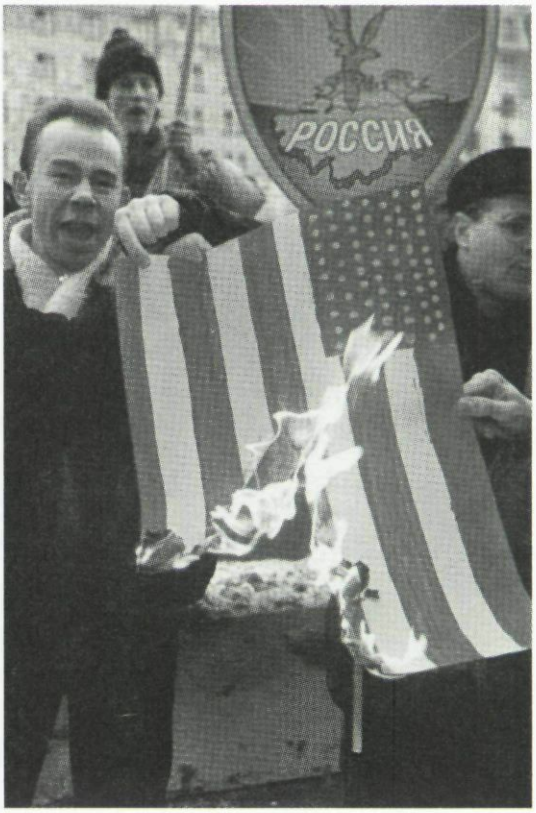

CORBIS-BETTMANN

. . . South Africa, and Russia

America? France? Do any of these countries or regions see the United States as the spokesman for a community of which they are a part? The community for which the United States speaks includes, at best, its Anglo-Saxon cousins (Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) on most issues, Germany and some smaller European democracies on many issues, Israel on some Middle Eastern questions, and Japan on the implementation of U.N. resolutions. These are important states, but they fall far short of being the global international community.

On issue after issue, the United States has found itself increasingly alone, with one or a few partners, opposing most of the rest of the world's states and peoples. These issues include U.N. dues; sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and Libya; the land mines treaty; global warming; an international war crimes tribunal; the Middle East; the use of force against Iraq and Yugoslavia; and the targeting of 35 countries with new economic sanctions between 1993 and 1996. On these and other issues, much of the international community is on one side and the United States is on the other. The circle of governments who see their inter-

ests coinciding with American interests is shrinking. This is manifest, among other ways, in the central lineup among the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. During the first decades of the Cold War, it was 4:1—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and China against the Soviet Union. After Mao's communist government took China's seat, the lineup became 3:1:1, with China in a shifting middle position. Now it is 2:1:2, with the United States and the United Kingdom opposing China and Russia, and France in the middle spot.

In the eyes of many countries America is the rogue superpower.

While the United States regularly denounces various countries as "rogue states," in the eyes of many countries it is becoming the rogue superpower. One of Japan's most distinguished diplomats, Ambassador Hisashi Owada, has argued that after World War II, the United States pursued a policy of "unilateral globalism," providing public goods in the form of security, opposition to communism, an open global economy, aid for economic development, and stronger international institutions. Now it is pursuing a policy of "global unilateralism," promoting its own particular interests with little reference to those of others. The United States is unlikely to become an isolationist country, withdrawing from the world. But it could become an isolated country, out of step with much of the world.

If a unipolar world were unavoidable, many countries might prefer the United States as the hegemon. But this is mostly because it is distant from them and hence unlikely to attempt to acquire any of their territory. American power is also valued by the secondary regional states as a constraint on the dominance of other major regional states. Benign hegemony, however, is in the eye of the hegemon. "One reads about the world's desire for American leadership only in the United States," one British diplomat observed. "Everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism."

Political and intellectual leaders in most countries strongly resist the prospect of a unipolar world and favor the emergence of true multipolarity. At a 1997 Harvard conference, scholars reported that the elites of countries comprising at least two-thirds of the world's people—Chinese, Russians, Indians, Arabs, Muslims, and Africans—see the

United States as the single greatest external threat to their societies. They do not regard America as a military threat but as a menace to their integrity, autonomy, prosperity, and freedom of action. They view the United States as intrusive, interventionist, exploitative, unilateralist, hegemonic, hypocritical, and applying double standards, engaging in what they label "financial imperialism" and "intellectual colonialism," with a foreign policy driven overwhelmingly by domestic politics. For Indian elites, an Indian scholar reported, "the United States represents the major diplomatic and political threat. On virtually every issue of concern to India, the United States has 'veto' or mobilizational power, whether it is on nuclear, technological, economic, environmental, or political matters. That is, the United States can deny India its objectives and can rally others to join it in punishing India." Its sins are "power, hubris, and greed." From the Russian perspective, a Moscow participant said, the United States pursues a policy of "coercive cooperation." All Russians oppose "a world based on a dominant U.S. leadership which would border on hegemony." In similar terms, the Beijing participant said Chinese leaders believe that the principal threats to peace, stability, and China are "hegemonism and power politics," meaning U.S. policies, which they say are designed to undermine and create disunity in the socialist states and developing countries. Arab elites see the United States as an evil force in world affairs, while the Japanese public rated in 1997 the United States as a threat to Japan second only to North Korea.

Such reactions are to be expected. American leaders believe that the world's business is their business. Other countries believe that what happens in their part of the world is their business, not America's, and quite explicitly respond. As Nelson Mandela said, his country rejects another state's having "the arrogance to tell us where we should go or which countries should be our friends. . . . We cannot accept that a state assumes the role of the world's policeman." In a bipolar world, many countries welcomed the United States as their protector against the other superpower. In a uni-multipolar world, in contrast, the world's only superpower is automatically a threat to other major powers. One by one, the major regional powers are making it clear that they do not want the United States messing around in regions where their interests are predominant. Iran, for instance, strongly opposes the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf. The current bad relations between the

United States and Iran are the product of the Iranian revolution. If, however, the Shah or his son now ruled Iran, those relations would probably be deteriorating because Iran would see the American presence in the Gulf as a threat to its own hegemony there.

FLEXIBLE RESPONSES

COUNTRIES RESPOND in various ways to American superpowerdom. At a relatively low level are widespread feelings of fear, resentment, and envy. These ensure that when at some point the United States suffers a humiliating rebuff from a Saddam or a Milošević, many countries will think, "They finally got what they had coming to them!" At a somewhat higher level, resentment may turn into dissent, with other countries, including allies, refusing to cooperate with the United States on the Persian Gulf, Cuba, Libya, Iran, extraterritoriality, nuclear proliferation, human rights, trade policies, and other issues. In a few cases, dissent has turned into outright opposition as countries attempt to defeat U.S. policy. The highest level of response would be the formation of an antihegemonic coalition involving several major powers. Such a grouping is impossible in a unipolar world because the other states are too weak to mount it. It appears in a multipolar world only when one state begins to become strong and troublesome enough to provoke it. It would, however, appear to be a natural phenomenon in a uni-multipolar world. Throughout history, major powers have tended to balance against the attempted domination by the strongest among them.

Some antihegemonic cooperation has occurred. Relations among non-Western societies are in general improving. Gatherings occur from which the United States is conspicuously absent, ranging from the Moscow meeting of the leaders of Germany, France, and Russia (which also excluded America's closest ally, Britain) to the bilateral meetings of China and Russia and of China and India. There have been recent rapprochements between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Iran and Iraq. The highly successful meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference hosted by Iran coincided with the disastrous Qatar meeting on Middle Eastern economic development sponsored by the United States. Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov has promoted Russia, China, and India as a "strategic triangle" to coun-

terbalance the United States, and the "Primakov doctrine" reportedly enjoys substantial support across the entire Russian political spectrum.

Undoubtedly the single most important move toward an antihegemonic coalition, however, antedates the end of the Cold War: the formation of the European Union and the creation of a common European currency. As French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine has said, Europe must come together on its own and create a counterweight to stop the United States from dominating a multipolar world. Clearly the euro could pose an important challenge to the hegemony of the dollar in global finance.

Despite all these antihegemonic rumblings, however, a more broad-based, active, and formal anti-American coalition has yet to emerge. Several possible explanations come to mind.

First, it may be too soon. Over time the response to American hegemony may escalate from resentment and dissent to opposition and collective counteraction. The American hegemonic threat is less immediate and more diffuse than the prospect of imminent military conquest posed by European hegemons in the past. Hence, other powers can be more relaxed about forming a coalition to counter American dominance.

Second, while countries may resent U.S. power and wealth, they also want to benefit from them. The United States rewards countries that follow its leadership with access to the American market, foreign aid, military assistance, exemption from sanctions, silence about deviations from U.S. norms (as with Saudi human rights abuses and Israeli nuclear weapons), support for membership in international organizations, and bribes and White House visits for political leaders. Each major regional power also has an interest in securing U.S. support in conflicts with other regional powers. Given the benefits that the United States can distribute, the sensible course for other countries may well be, in international-relations lingo, not to "balance" against the United States but to "bandwagon" with it. Over time, however, as U.S. power declines, the benefits to be gained by cooperating with the United States will also decline, as will the costs of opposing it. Hence, this factor reinforces the possibility that an antihegemonic coalition could emerge in the future.

Third, the international-relations theory that predicts balancing under the current circumstances is a theory developed in the context of the European Westphalian system established in 1648. All the countries in that system shared a common European culture that dis-

tinguished them sharply from the Ottoman Turks and other peoples. They also took the nation-state as the basic unit in international relations and accepted the legal and theoretical equality of states despite their obvious differences in size, wealth, and power. Cultural commonality and legal equality thus facilitated the operation of a balance-of-power system to counter the emergence of a single hegemon, and even then it often operated quite imperfectly.

Global politics is now multicivilizational. France, Russia, and China may well have common interests in challenging U.S. hegemony, but their very different cultures are likely to make it difficult for them to organize an effective coalition. In addition, the idea of the sovereign legal equality of nation-states has not played a significant role in relations among non-Western societies, which see hierarchy rather than equality as the natural relation among peoples. The central questions in a relationship are: who is number one? who is number two? At least one factor that led to the breakup of the Sino-Soviet alliance at the end of the 1950s was Mao Zedong's unwillingness to play second fiddle to Stalin's successors in the Kremlin. Similarly, an obstacle to an anti-U.S. coalition between China and Russia now is Russian reluctance to be the junior partner of a much more populous and economically dynamic China. Cultural differences, jealousies, and rivalries may thwart the major powers from coalescing against the superpower.

Fourth, the principal source of contention between the superpower and the major regional powers is the former's intervention to limit, counter, or shape the actions of the latter. For the secondary regional powers, on the other hand, superpower intervention is a resource that they potentially can mobilize against their region's major power. The superpower and the secondary regional powers will thus often, although not always, share converging interests against major regional powers, and secondary regional powers will have little incentive to join in a coalition against the superpower.

THE LONELY SHERIFF

THE INTERPLAY of power and culture will decisively mold patterns of alliance and antagonism among states in the coming years. In terms of culture, cooperation is more likely between countries with cultural com-

monalties; antagonism is more likely between countries with widely different cultures. In terms of power, the United States and the secondary regional powers have common interests in limiting the dominance of the major states in their regions. Thus the United States has warned China by strengthening its military alliance with Japan and supporting the modest extension of Japanese military capabilities. The U.S. special relationship with Britain provides leverage against the emerging power of a united Europe. America is working to develop close relations with Ukraine to counter any expansion of Russian power. With the emergence of Brazil as the dominant state in Latin America, U.S. relations with Argentina have greatly improved and the United States has designated Argentina a non-NATO military ally. The United States cooperates closely with Saudi Arabia to counter Iran's power in the Gulf and, less successfully, has worked with Pakistan to balance India in South Asia. In all these cases, cooperation serves mutual interests in containing the influence of the major regional power.

Most of the world does not want America to be its policeman.

This interplay of power and culture suggests that the United States is likely to have difficult relations with the major regional powers, though less so with the European Union and Brazil than with the others. On the other hand, the United States should have reasonably cooperative relations with all the secondary regional powers, but have closer relations with the secondary regional powers that have similar cultures (Britain, Argentina, and possibly Ukraine) than those that have different cultures (Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan). Finally, relations between major and secondary regional powers of the same civilization (the EU and Britain, Russia and Ukraine, Brazil and Argentina, Iran and Saudi Arabia) should be less antagonistic than those between countries of different civilizations (China and Japan; Japan and Korea; India and Pakistan; Israel and the Arab states).

What are the implications of a uni-multipolar world for American policy?

First, it would behoove Americans to stop acting and talking as if this were a unipolar world. It is not. To deal with any major global issue, the United States needs the cooperation of at least some major

powers. Unilateral sanctions and interventions are recipes for foreign policy disasters. Second, American leaders should abandon the benign-hegemon illusion that a natural congruity exists between their interests and values and those of the rest of the world. It does not. At times, American actions may promote public goods and serve more widely accepted ends. But often they will not, in part because of the unique moralistic component in American policy but also simply because America is the only superpower, and hence its interests necessarily differ from those of other countries. This makes America unique but not benign in the eyes of those countries.

Third, while the United States cannot create a unipolar world, it is in U.S. interests to take advantage of its position as the only superpower in the existing international order and to use its resources to elicit cooperation from other countries to deal with global issues in ways that satisfy American interests. This would essentially involve the Bismarckian strategy recommended by Josef Joffe, but it would also require Bismarckian talents to carry out, and, in any event, cannot be maintained indefinitely.

Fourth, the interaction of power and culture has special relevance for European-American relations. The dynamics of power encourage rivalry; cultural commonalities facilitate cooperation. The achievement of almost any major American goal depends on the triumph of the latter over the former. The relation with Europe is central to the success of American foreign policy, and given the pro- and anti-American outlooks of Britain and France, respectively, America's relations with Germany are central to its relations with Europe. Healthy cooperation with Europe is the prime antidote for the loneliness of American superpowerdom.

Richard N. Haass has argued that the United States should act as a global sheriff, rounding up "posses" of other states to handle major international issues as they arise. Haass handled Persian Gulf matters at the White House in the Bush administration, and this proposal reflects the experience and success of that administration in putting together a heterogeneous global posse to force Saddam out of Kuwait. But that was then, in the unipolar moment. What happened then contrasts dramatically with the Iraqi crisis in the winter of 1998, when France, Russia, and China opposed the use of force and America assembled an Anglo-Saxon posse, not a global one. In December 1998

support for U.S. and British air strikes against Saddam was also limited and criticism widespread. Most strikingly, no Arab government, including Kuwait, endorsed the action. Saudi Arabia refused to allow the United States to use its fighter planes based there. Efforts at rallying future posses are far more likely to resemble what happened in 1998 than what happened in 1990–91. Most of the world, as Mandela said, does not want the United States to be its policeman.

As a multipolar system emerges, the appropriate replacement for a global sheriff is community policing, with the major regional powers assuming primary responsibility for order in their own regions. Haass criticizes this suggestion on the grounds that the other states in a region, which I have called the secondary regional powers, will object to being policed by the leading regional powers. As I have indicated, their interests often do conflict. But the same tension is likely to hold in the relationship between the United States and major regional powers. There is no reason why Americans should take responsibility for maintaining order if it can be done locally. While geography does not coincide exactly with culture, there is considerable overlap between regions and civilizations. For the reasons I set forth in my book, the core state of a civilization can better maintain order among the members of its extended family than can someone outside the family. There are also signs in some regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and perhaps even the Balkans that countries are beginning to develop collective means to maintain security. American intervention could then be restricted to those situations of potential violence, such as the Middle East and South Asia, involving major states of different civilizations.

In the multipolar world of the 21st century, the major powers will inevitably compete, clash, and coalesce with each other in various permutations and combinations. Such a world, however, will lack the tension and conflict between the superpower and the major regional powers that are the defining characteristic of a uni-multipolar world. For that reason, the United States could find life as a major power in a multipolar world less demanding, less contentious, and more rewarding than it was as the world's only superpower.