

Dartmouth College

Dartmouth Digital Commons

Dartmouth Scholarship

Faculty Work

9-2005

International Relations Theory and the Case Against Unilateralism

Stephen Brooks
Dartmouth College

William C. Wohlforth
Dartmouth College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa>



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#)

Dartmouth Digital Commons Citation

Brooks, Stephen and Wohlforth, William C., "International Relations Theory and the Case Against Unilateralism" (2005). *Dartmouth Scholarship*. 2973.
<https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa/2973>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Work at Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dartmouth Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism

Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth

What are the general costs associated with a U.S. shift toward unilateralism? According to the overwhelming majority of international relations (IR) scholars, the costs are very high. We evaluate the key arguments that underlie this assessment, namely that increased U.S. unilateralism will: (1) spur the formation of a coalition to check U.S. power; (2) reduce efficiency gains through lost opportunities for institutionalized cooperation; and (3) undermine the legitimacy of the American-led international order. We conclude that the theoretical arguments that IR scholars advance do not show that a shift toward unilateralism necessarily has high costs. Our analysis reveals the need to, first, distinguish clearly between criticisms of unilateral policies based on procedure and those based on substance and, second, to recognize the weakness of current procedural arguments.

U.S. policy makers have long been ambivalent about unilateralism. “The United States has been the greatest champion of multilateral institutions in the twentieth century,” observes G. John Ikenberry, but it has also “been reluctant to tie itself too closely to these multilateral institutions and rules.”¹ International relations (IR) scholars, by contrast, have typically touted the benefits of multilateralism in general and for the United States in particular, while stressing the heavy costs of unilateralism. Scholarly concerns about the costs of unilateralism came to the fore in 2003, when it appeared that President George W. Bush had made a strategic decision to reduce the United States’ general commitment to international institutions in favor of assembling “coalitions of the willing” on an as needed, case-by-case basis.² Cutting across issue areas and individual cases, this seemed to represent a fundamentally

new foreign policy approach, which analysts dubbed the “new unilateralism.”³

The heightened salience of the debate over unilateralism among scholars, policy makers, and pundits shows every sign of becoming a permanent feature of the American political scene. While the debate encompasses many different issues, it was the sagacity of going it alone in security affairs that was most salient in the 2004 election and is now poised to become the defining foreign policy distinction between the Democratic and Republican parties. Important though it is, the distinction is one of degree. Unilateralism and multilateralism are best understood as two ends of a continuum, and it is a mistake to view any politician or party as being at one end or the other. The debate is not about a wholesale abandonment of all multilateral commitments, but rather about the wisdom of moving to a more strategic approach to unilateralism. During the post–World War II period, American policy makers commonly saw unilateralism as a last resort, to be pursued only when multilateralism carried great costs or was impossible. The Bush administration, in contrast, advertised a greater willingness to go it alone, seeming to view multilateralism much more instrumentally—as a strategy to be followed when doing so is easy or especially advantageous, but never as an end in itself, and certainly not one whose pursuit merits bearing high costs.

This raises a fundamental question: What are the general costs associated with a shift toward unilateralism? President Bush escaped the most salient, short-term domestic downside—electoral defeat. John Kerry focused his critique of Bush’s foreign policy on the argument that American foreign policy had been insufficiently multilateral over the past four years. Bush not only emerged the victor, but did so in large part because voters judged him

Stephen G. Brooks is assistant professor (Stephen.G.Brooks@Dartmouth.edu), and William C. Wohlforth is professor (William.C.Wohlforth@Dartmouth.edu) in the Department of Government at Dartmouth. They are currently writing a book entitled The Challenge of American Primacy. The authors thank the three anonymous reviewers for Perspectives on Politics and, especially, Erik Voeten for detailed critical comments. They are also grateful to Mlada Bukovansky, Ian Hurd, Martha Finnemore, Ben Valentino, Nina Tannenwald, Alex Wendt, and participants at seminars at the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College, the Olin Institute at Harvard University, the Mershon Center at Ohio State University, and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Thanks also to Dartmouth’s Rockefeller and Dickey Centers for supporting research on which this article draws.

to be superior on foreign policy issues.⁴ This underscores the significance of unilateralism's international costs, long a preoccupation of international relations scholars. Our purpose in this article is to determine what leverage IR theory gives us on this crucial issue.

Notwithstanding their vigorous debates over theory, methodology, epistemology, ontology, not to mention other aspects of U.S. foreign policy, the overwhelming bulk of IR scholars who express views on the subject stress the high international costs of unilateralism, particularly for the United States today. Stanley Hoffman's warning that "nothing is more dangerous for a 'hyperpower' than the temptation of unilateralism" is typical of scholarly assessments.⁵ Significantly, recent criticisms of this kind come not just from institutionalists and constructivists—whose scholarly writings highlight the importance of international institutions—but also from prominent representatives of the realist theoretical tradition as well.⁶ To anyone familiar with this normally squabbling scholarly community, such widespread agreement is noteworthy.

The sections that follow evaluate the key arguments that analysts have advanced, namely, that increased U.S. unilateralism will (1) spur the formation of a coalition to check U.S. power; (2) reduce efficiency gains through lost opportunities for institutionalized cooperation; and (3) undermine the legitimacy of the American-led international order. These claims roughly correspond to the three major schools of IR theory: realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Although we discuss analysts whose writings are emblematic of the arguments associated with each theoretical school, our goal is not to classify and analyze individuals. Many scholars cross theoretical boundaries. Moreover, discussions of international relations theories have become common in the larger foreign policy debate among policy makers and nonacademic public commentators,⁷ yet the respective theories are often employed very differently depending upon the partisanship of the individual in question.⁸ Nevertheless, policy makers often make the same general arguments about the costs of unilateralism that scholars stress in their analyses.

We conclude that the current theoretical arguments do not show that a shift toward unilateralism necessarily has high costs. Needless to say, this conclusion is not an endorsement of all unilateral policies. Any policy may be wise or unwise, and many policies followed by the Bush administration doubtless fall into the latter category. The question is whether punishing general costs accrue to policies that are unilateral regardless of their substance. On that

question, current scholarship has no persuasive answer, although scholars routinely write as if it does. The same goes for the related issue of the benefits of multilateralism. Nothing in this article denies that there are areas, such as the environment, where the United States should be more multilateral. Rather, the point is that the case for acting multilaterally rests on the substance of a given issue, not on the purported costs of not doing so.

Realism: Counterbalancing and the Costs of Unilateralism

The most pervasive argument against unilateralism is that it will spark or hasten counterbalancing by other major powers. The argument is derived from balance-of-power theory, long a staple of realist thinking and practice. Realism's focus on relative power does explain why the United States has the opportunity to act unilaterally, and, moreover, some realists discount the importance of international institutions. Nevertheless, influential contemporary formulations of the theory yield the argument that by strongly demonstrating its multilateral credentials, the United States can signal benign intent and thus forestall counterbalancing. In making this argument, contemporary realists are in distinguished historical company, for anticipated counterbalancing has long been the strongest realist argument for restraint.⁹ More than any other intellectual factor, this accounts for the similarity between many realists' preferences regarding unilateralism and those of their institutionalist and constructivist counterparts.

Balance-of-power theory posits that because states have an interest in maximizing their long-term odds on survival, they will coordinate to check dangerous concentrations of power.¹⁰ If the security threat to others inheres in power potential alone, as Kenneth Waltz maintains, then there is nothing Washington can do to affect the proba-

The question is whether punishing general costs accrue to policies that are unilateral regardless of their substance. On that question, current scholarship has no persuasive answer, although scholars routinely write as if it does.

bility and rate of counterbalancing.¹¹ If, however, other states assess America's intentions as well as its capabilities when deciding whether to balance, as Stephen Walt and many other realists argue, then U.S. policy makers can use support for international institutions to demonstrate

their satisfaction with the status quo and dampen other states' security fears, thus forestalling the emergence of a counterbalancing coalition.¹²

Many self-described realists accept the proposition that the United States can and should reduce the probability

of counterbalancing by maintaining a general disposition toward multilateralism. Walt argues that “the United Nations and other international institutions help the United States exercise its power in a way that is less threatening (and therefore more acceptable) to others.”¹³ Michael Mastanduno explicitly derives from Walt’s balance of threat theory the proposition that “the dominant state in a unipolar setting will rely on multilateralism in its international undertakings.”¹⁴ Randall Schweller and David Priess agree, noting that “if the hegemon adopts a benevolent strategy and creates a negotiated order based on legitimate influence and management, lesser states will bandwagon with rather than balance against it.”¹⁵

The importance of the balancing proposition cannot be overstated, for it also figures crucially in the arguments of nonrealist scholars. When institutionalists and constructivists assess the costs of unilateralism, expected counterbalancing by other states often figures prominently.¹⁶ Moreover, the balance-of-power metaphor is a staple of punditry, both in the United States and abroad, in which each new effort at coordination among major powers that excludes Washington is routinely hailed as an epoch-making “axis.” Indeed, the leaders of other major powers—notably the presidents of France, Russia, and China—periodically seem to invoke the balancing proposition themselves, arguing that their policies are intended to foster a multipolar world.

This confluence of theoretical expectations, journalistic commentary, and political rhetoric lends initial plausibility to the balancing proposition and partly explains its popularity as an argument against unilateralism. The argument hinges on the proposition that the more the United States backs away from multilateralism, the greater the probability of counterbalancing. The problem is that there is no counterbalancing against the United States, nor is there likely to be any time soon. Indeed, the remarkable thing about the current international system is that three key causal factors highlighted by realist balance-of-power theory itself are configured so as to make the reemergence of traditional balancing dynamics among the major powers highly improbable.¹⁷

First is geography. The counterbalancing coalitions of the past all emerged against centrally located land powers that constituted existential threats to nearby major states. The United States, by contrast, lies far from the shores of Eurasia, where the other major powers are all clustered. Distance mutes the potential security threat U.S. power poses to others, while proximity magnifies the potential threat their power poses to one another and thus increases the salience of local as opposed to global counterbalancing.

The geographical uniqueness of the current international system and its implications for balancing are now widely appreciated.¹⁸ This is partly true of the second key factor: the distribution of material capabilities. It is now commonplace to observe that the gap in overall

power between the United States and all other states is larger now than any analogous gap in the history of the modern states system.¹⁹ Analysts are also sensitive to decisive U.S. advantages in the individual components of national power: military, technological, economic, and even demographic.²⁰ Historically minded observers are aware that all preceding leading states were dominant militarily or economically, but never both simultaneously. Less widely appreciated is the gap in latent power.²¹ States make choices about balancing depending on their expectations of the capabilities prospective balancers could produce *in extremis*. The United States is in a better position than past leading states to enhance its capabilities vis-à-vis putative rivals for two reasons: it obtains its currently dominant military capabilities by devoting a historically small proportion of its economy to national defense (less than 4 percent of GDP in 2004 as compared to 5–14 percent during the cold war); and its historically large technological lead is a potential resource that could be further exploited. And these underlying advantages interact with the perennial problem would-be balancers face: they must coordinate policies in complex ways to increase capabilities against a hegemon whose response is coordinated by a single government.

The third key factor is that American primacy is an accomplished fact rather than a revisionist aspiration. Many observers now recognize that other key powers derive benefits from the status quo and so may be reluctant to pay costs to overthrow it.²² Less recognized is that for three centuries no balance-of-power theorist ever developed propositions about a system in which hegemony is the status quo. All the historical experience of balancing from the seventeenth century until 1991 concerns efforts to check a rising power from attaining hegemony. While both history and balance-of-power theory clearly suggest that a rising potential hegemon needs to be concerned about the counterbalancing constraint, neither yields this implication for a hegemon that is already firmly established. On the contrary, both theory and historical experience suggest that when hegemony is the status quo, all the familiar obstacles to balancing will be dramatically magnified. Chief among these are the much higher coordination challenges putative counterbalancers would face today, in comparison with their predecessors. Classical balancing coalitions were always vulnerable to the collective action problem, as members would seek to ride free on the efforts of others. Those challenges would be multiplied in any attempt to counterbalance the United States today.

These factors characterize an international system that is already primed against traditional power balancing due to nuclear weapons and the declining economic and military value of territory. All the major powers have or can quickly produce nuclear weapons. With a secure second-strike capability, their territorial integrity is better secured than that of any past great power, and the security threat

inherent in concentrated power is diminished.²³ Moreover, the economic and military benefits of owning specific bits of land have declined dramatically, reducing the incentives for conquest and diminishing the core security threat posed by concentrated power.²⁴

Taken individually, each of these factors militates against counterbalancing. Together they make it exceedingly unlikely, for there is considerable positive interaction among them. American preponderance in the material scales of world power feeds the collective action and coordination problems, as do geography and the status quo barrier. Other schools of IR research yield additional reasons to doubt the salience of counterbalancing today.²⁵ But the key is that all of the factors highlighted here lie within the realist system of explanation that highlights anarchy and its attendant security problems. Even discounting the importance of factors such as shared democratic norms and institutions, there is no reason to expect the reemergence of traditional balancing dynamics in the current international system. It follows that whatever the costs of unilateralism are, counterbalancing is not among them.

Looking for “soft balancing”

IR scholars are increasingly coming to recognize the absence of traditional great-power balancing since the end of the cold war.²⁶ In response, realists have shifted their argument, claiming that under unipolarity, balancing dynamics emerge more subtly in the form of “soft balancing,” as it is typically called.²⁷ T. V. Paul provides a concise definition of this concept:

Soft balancing involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms buildup, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening.²⁸

Judging by recent scholarship and commentary, soft balancing is beginning to replace conventional “hard” balancing as the most popular argument for U.S. restraint in the face of the temptations of power. Scholars who cite soft balancing to explain their opposition to U.S. unilateral actions defend their prescription as flowing from a venerable line of theory and empirical research, not just from different policy preferences. For the many analysts who now use the concept, soft balancing is not just a tactic for issue-specific policy disputes and diplomatic bargaining, but a reflection of the fact that the United States has so much power within the international system. They argue that by undermining confidence in America’s willingness to bind its power, unilateralism brings to the fore otherwise latent concerns about the security threat that

U.S. capabilities pose. These security fears then drive other states’ willingness to absorb costs to check the United States.

Many conceptual and empirical issues remain to be addressed concerning soft-balancing. There is no dispute that many actions adopted by other states end up constraining Washington, that is, they make it harder for the United States to advance its foreign policy goals, including military security. But what is driving these actions? Are they really responses to U.S. unilateralism? Have unilateral U.S. actions actually triggered other states’ sensitivity to the underlying security threat represented by the concentration of power in the United States? According to the many realists who have developed the soft-balancing concept, the answer to these questions is yes. The problem is that these scholars reached this judgment without examining alternative explanations for the behavior they attribute to soft balancing. States have many reasons besides fear of U.S. power to enhance their capabilities—to address regional security issues, for example. To evaluate the soft-balancing argument, other state motivations need to be analyzed to avoid reaching biased conclusions.²⁹

In our review of the evidence and the experts’ literature, we found no indication that U.S. unilateral policies figured in three of the four key cases cited by soft-balancing proponents: Russian assistance to Iranian nuclear efforts, European military coordination, and Russia’s strategic partnerships with India and China. Russia’s nuclear sales to Iran are driven by economic concerns. Profit is also a key motive in Russia’s relationships with its Asian partners, though mutual efforts to enhance security on local and regional issues such as drug trafficking and terrorism also figure. And the European Union’s efforts to beef up its joint military capability is almost entirely a response to a perceived need to be able to address regional security issues along the lines of the 1990s crisis in the Balkans.

Only in the fourth case—opposition to the Iraq war—can one credibly argue that U.S. unilateralism may have contributed to a soft-balancing response. After all, much of the issue ostensibly hinged on whether or not the UN Security Council would put its multilateral imprimatur on a U.S.-led invasion. One feature that distinguished this transatlantic dispute from all predecessors during the post-1945 era was the position of Germany, traditionally among the most stalwart of Washington’s European allies. Germany’s early and adamant opposition was crucial in propelling other states’ resistance to U.S. policy. The key is that Germany’s Gerhard Schroeder made it clear he would work against an invasion whether the Security Council approved it or not.³⁰ In short, it was not the procedure, but the substance of the policy that resonated with the German opposition. Moreover, Germany’s uncompromising stance was propelled by long-standing domestic political dynamics. Facing defeat at the polls, Schroeder used his antiwar stance to recapture two key left-wing constituencies, both of which had always had strong antiwar

preferences: core Social Democratic Party activists, and left-wing voters in eastern Germany who were defecting to the pacifist and anti-American Party of Democratic Socialism (the former Communists).³¹

Ultimately, the soft-balancing argument seems plausible in this case mainly because France did state its opposition to U.S. policy in procedural terms, insisting on the need for a multilateral approach through the Security Council. However, even for France, U.S. unilateralism was hardly the only factor in play. President Jacques Chirac and most of the French policy establishment opposed regime change on policy grounds. They expected that an occupation of Iraq would be so bloody and long as to make the problem of al Qaeda style terrorism worse, with potentially baleful implications for France's own security, especially given its substantial Moslem minority.³² Moreover, having just weathered a touch-and-go reelection in which he won only 19 percent in the first round, Chirac detected political advantages in adopting an extremely popular policy position. Standing up to the United States generally gains support in France, and opposing the Iraq war was especially popular with Muslim voters.

European regional dynamics also argued for an antiwar stance. At a time when the European Union faced numerous new challenges stemming from its expansion, Chirac could not afford to lose the policy initiative to Schroeder. Notwithstanding these incentives for opposing U.S. policy, there were also reasons to compromise. French leaders preferred a low-key approach to this issue and did actively seek to avoid the discord they knew would accompany an attempt at a second UN resolution. The inter-allied wrangling over Iraq ended up playing itself out in the UN Security Council not because France sought to enlist that institution in a soft-balancing strategy, but because Tony Blair insisted on seeking a second resolution for domestic reasons of his own.³³ Had it not been for this unique domestic contingency, a Washington-Paris deal might have been struck, thereby avoiding a dramatic diplomatic contretemps.

In sum, both hard and soft balancing initially appears as a strong argument rooted in IR theory for the high costs of unilateralism. Closer examination reveals its weakness. There is no indication that other states are going to coordinate to check American power to force Washington to be multilateral.

Institutionalist Theory: Risking the Efficiency Gains of an Institutionalized Hegemony

The second scholarly argument against increased unilateralism is that it threatens major reductions in the efficiency gains that can be realized from institutionalized cooperation. The theoretical underpinnings of this argument lie mainly in institutionalist theory (or liberal insti-

tutionalism, as it is sometime called).³⁴ Highly relevant to the debate over unilateralism is a general proposition that emerges from this literature: multilateral institutions facilitate efficient hegemony. To the extent that the tendency to go it alone erodes cooperation within such institutions, critics allege, it imposes significant costs, or, more accurately, results in foregone gains. It follows that a rational hegemon might be willing to forsake some autonomous decision-making power in favor of multilateral institutions in exchange for cooperation on issues it simply cannot address on its own, as well as for lower overall costs in maintaining order.

Institutionalist theory builds on the observation that global problems beyond the control of individual countries cannot be managed in the absence of institutional structures that establish standards for state action and monitor compliance.³⁵ Even though U.S. power is unprecedented, the argument goes, so too is the level of interdependence, which means that the list of global problems that America cannot resolve on its own will continue to grow, increasing the benefits of multilateralism over the long run.³⁶ The argument that institutions are efficient is strengthened to the extent that effective cooperation on an issue requires binding rules where state compliance must be monitored.³⁷

The theory also identifies ways by which multilateral institutions can make cooperation more efficient even on matters that the United States could conceivably resolve on its own or by using ad hoc bilateral arrangements or loose coalitions. For example, having an institution in place to facilitate cooperation on one issue makes it easier, and more likely, that the participating states will be able to achieve cooperation rapidly on a related issue.³⁸ Consider the intelligence sharing network within NATO, which was originally designed to gather information on the threat from the Soviet Union: once in place, it could later quickly be adapted to deal with new unforeseen issues, such as the threat from terrorism.

Institutionalist theory provides a compelling argument that the United States derives significant efficiency gains from the web of international institutions in the world today, much of which was created at the behest of U.S. policy makers in the decades following World War II.³⁹ However, even if we accept the essential propositions of institutionalist theory at face value, they represent only one side of the equation: institutionalization also has potential downsides for the United States. Skeptics argue that institutionalization entails major costs. For example, just before he joined the Bush administration, John Bolton warned:

The costs [of global governance] to the United States—reduced constitutional autonomy, impaired popular sovereignty, reduction of our international power, and limitations on our domestic and foreign policy options and solutions—are too great, and the current understanding of these costs far too limited, to be acceptable. Whether we are ready or not, the debate over global

governance, fought at the confluence of constitutional theory and foreign policy, is the decisive issue facing the United States internationally.⁴⁰

Analysts and practitioners who defend unilateralism are particularly concerned that international institutions might reduce the effectiveness of U.S. military operations. Many writings by IR scholars assume that the benefits of multilateralism in military operations outweigh the costs.⁴¹ The potential benefits clearly are substantial: common war plans, specialization of military tasks, sharing of burdens and risks, economies of scale, common equipment and interchangeable parts, and so on. But defenders of unilateralism argue that those benefits have declined with the dramatic increase in U.S. military power, which devalues the substantive contributions of other states and renders joint operations involving military units from the United States and many of its allies difficult or even impossible.⁴² And this new “inter-operability” problem is in addition to the well-known costs of slow decision making, loss of secrecy, cumbersome systems of command and control, and circumscribed freedom of action. Defenders of unilateralism cite the 1999 war in Kosovo as a key example: because the United States had to coordinate with NATO, they argue, the operational effectiveness of this mission was compromised.⁴³ It is in large part due to the legacy of Kosovo that U.S. policy makers decided to spurn virtually all offers of military assistance from NATO countries during the 2001 war in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

Critics also argue that multilateralism has significant credibility costs. Deterrence demands a reputation for resolve and a credible threat of a swift response to an adversary’s transgression. As Ruth Wedgwood puts the critics’ case: “If adversaries (including rogue regimes) were able to rely on the blocking mechanisms of multilateral machinery, the global regime for governing the use of force could end up causing international conflict rather than quelling it.”⁴⁵ In Kosovo, for example, NATO’s cumbersome procedures meant that it was impossible for Slobodan Milosevic to determine whether a military response was forthcoming.⁴⁶ Given America’s capability and apparent willingness to deal with security issues throughout the globe, Wedgwood argues, other states and nonstate actors might be wise to exempt it from accepted multilateral rules governing the use of force in some cases.

Assessing the costs and benefits of institutionalization

It is thus clear that institutionalization has both costs and benefits for the United States. Critics of unilateralism stress the efficiency gains of multilateral cooperation, the growing list of global issues that the United States cannot address without such cooperation, and the corrosive effects of Washington’s selective disengagement from multilateral institutions. Supporters stress the coordination costs of multilateralism and assert that the United States’ massive

military and economic preponderance means that in their own self interest other states cannot afford to withdraw cooperation in issue areas the U.S. favors, such as trade, in retaliation for Washington’s “a la carte” approach to multilateralism. This debate raises two key questions.

First, how large are the coordination costs highlighted by advocates of unilateralism? More specifically, how great are these coordination costs relative to the efficiency gains of institutionalized cooperation? There is strong theoretical and empirical support for the notion that the gains from institutionalized cooperation are dramatic: this is made clear in the countless examinations by IR scholars and others of issues such as the global economy, the environment, disease, space, and global communications networks. In comparison, we have almost no theoretical and empirical base on which to judge the significance of coordination costs. Scholars have long recognized that coordination costs exist within international institutions,⁴⁷ but there has been very little attention to this issue in the most recent theoretical work on international institutions.⁴⁸ Concerning empirical cases, defenders of unilateralism routinely cite the experience of Kosovo as clear evidence that coordination costs are now very large relative to the benefits of cooperation in security issues. But this case may be unrepresentative and, moreover, the strong conclusions that they draw from it have not gone unchallenged.⁴⁹ The more general problem is that the two sides in the debate are largely talking past each other: those who stress the efficiency gains of institutionalized cooperation generally highlight economic matters and not security issues, while those who emphasize the significance of coordination costs do the opposite.⁵⁰

The second question concerns bargaining power. Supporters of unilateralism advance several arguments based on the proposition that the United States is so powerful that it can have just the international institutions it wants and need not defer to any it does not want. They assert that the United States can reduce its commitment to international institutions it does not favor, such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, without having other countries reduce their commitments to institutions Washington does favor, like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. They also assume that the United States is so powerful that it can generate the multilateral cooperation it needs precisely on its own terms, as long as it is willing to go it alone if necessary. This line of argument places great stock in a “fait accompli” strategy for achieving international cooperation: in this view, when a hegemon (in this case, the United States) stakes out a clear position and says it will act, others will ultimately fall in line. As Charles Krauthammer puts it,

[U]nilateralism is the high road to multilateralism. When George Bush senior said of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, “this will not

stand,” and made it clear that he was prepared to act alone if necessary, that declaration—and the credibility of American determination to act unilaterally—in and of itself created a coalition . . . No one wants to be left at the dock when the hegemon is sailing.⁵¹

This is the underlying basis for Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz’s statement that “the difference is not unilateralist versus multilateralist, it’s whether you lead or not.”⁵²

These may well be the central claims of those who champion the unilateral option. If the United States can selectively alter or pull back from those particular international institutions that it finds overly constraining and force the multilateral cooperation it needs at or near its “ideal point”—all without other states imposing significant costs by withdrawing cooperation in other areas—then it can enjoy the perquisite of the powerful: to have its cake and eat it too, by getting the efficiency gains of multilateral institutions without paying the costs of reduced policy autonomy. The United States, in this view, would not exit the institutional order altogether, but rather use its go-it-alone power to shape international institutions more to its advantage.

In the current context, the United States often has asymmetric bargaining power: it frequently suffers the least if multilateral cooperation fails. Faced with a set of bargaining games over the shape of post-cold war institutions, America’s recent unilateralism can be seen as an attempt to establish the credibility of its asymmetric bargaining power. In this view, it sometimes must demonstrate its “asymmetric outside option” in order to influence the bargaining that takes place within multilateral institutions.⁵³

The critics’ reply is that the Bush team radically overestimated its capabilities, as other states will use issue linkage to exact retribution for U.S. unilateralism. Can IR theory help determine who is right? On the crucial question of bargaining power, current scholarship unfortunately does not provide much help. The literature is rich with case studies that suggest different answers to the question of U.S. bargaining power. Some cases suggest very high costs for U.S. unilateralism, while others reach the opposite finding.⁵⁴ The problem may be that this research is done without a theoretical framework that directly addresses the fundamental issue of America’s asymmetric bargaining power.⁵⁵ Institutional theory has tended to neglect how institutions act as “forums for bargaining to resolve distributional conflicts between states.”⁵⁶ Moreover, institutional theory is still coming to grips analytically with the implications of unipolarity: the rise of American primacy happened to coincide with a general wane in interest among institutionalist scholars about the role of hegemonic power in institutionalized cooperation.⁵⁷ As a result, the current debate is framed by fairly certain findings derived from established theory and based on empirical research from earlier periods that is challenged by new and as yet untested arguments about the

implications of American power. Even the latest and most sophisticated efforts of institutionalists have not yet risen to this analytical challenge.⁵⁸ The larger problem is that relative bargaining power may ultimately be hard to measure except in the context of actual costly political struggles.

Where does this leave us? It is clear that certain collective goods may be underprovided in the absence of hegemonic leadership and, moreover, that it can help to promote multilateral cooperation.⁵⁹ This would seem to support the basic position of Krauthammer and Wolfowitz. That being said, institutionalists stress that a hegemon must maintain a reputation for multilateralism in order to gain cooperation from weaker states.⁶⁰ A hegemon must credibly bind itself, the argument goes, for a simple reason: “The more that a powerful state is capable of dominating or abandoning weaker states, the more the weaker states will care about constraints on the leading state’s policy autonomy.”⁶¹ If America’s ability to secure cooperation from other states does depend upon the extent to which it maintains a strong reputation for multilateralism, then a *fait accompli* strategy will only be effective at promoting international cooperation when America has made a strong commitment to the very international institutions that serve to constrain and bind its power. This might explain why the strong leadership position taken by George H. W. Bush vis-à-vis Iraq in 1991 facilitated multilateral cooperation, yet the opposite result occurred when George W. Bush did the same in 2003.

Looking beyond the implications for the *fait accompli* strategy, the significance of reputation within institutionalist theory points to a powerful admonition against unilateralism. As Ikenberry notes, the fundamental danger is that by “violating core multilateral rules and norms, the credibility of American commitment to the wider array of agreements and norms becomes suspect and the entire multilateral edifice crumbles.”⁶² According to some prominent institutionalists, this is far from being a remote prospect. As Lisa Martin argues,

Reputations can be squandered quickly, and the reputation for multilateralism surely has been. Turning to multilateral organizations only under duress and when it appears convenient demonstrates a lack of commitment, even explicit rejection, of the principles of multilateralism. This in turn leads other states to expect the United States to renege on agreements or operate outside the constraints of multilateral organizations when it is convenient to do so. This hollows out the core of such organizations. . . . Without self-binding by the hegemon, multilateral organizations become empty shells. . . . The U.S. reputation for self-binding has been largely destroyed and will need to be rebuilt if these organizations are to regain their effectiveness.⁶³

This argument that the institutional order is imperiled if the United States does not strongly invest in maintaining a multilateral reputation is a potentially powerful caution against succumbing to the unilateral temptation, but it ultimately rests on weak theoretical foundations. Despite

the fact that reputation “now stands as the linchpin of the dominant neoliberal institutionalist theory of decentralized cooperation,” it remains woefully underdeveloped as a concept.⁶⁴ In the most detailed theoretical analysis to date of the role that reputation plays within international institutions, George Downs and Michael Jones decisively undermine the institutionalist conception of reputation. As they note, institutionalist theory rests on the notion that “states carry a general reputation for cooperativeness that determines their attractiveness as a treaty partner both now and in the future . . . A defection in connection with any agreement will impose reputation costs that affect all current and future agreements.”⁶⁵ But, they object, no theoretical justification has been provided in the literature to back up this institutionalist view that a state possesses “a single reputation for cooperation that characterizes its expected reliability in connection with every agreement to which it is party.”⁶⁶

Drawing on rational choice theory, Downs and Jones show that a far more compelling theoretical case can be made that states have multiple reputations—each particular to a specific agreement or issue area. For this reason, they find that “the reputational consequences of defection are usually more bounded” than institutionalist scholarship currently presumes.⁶⁷ If America has, for example, one reputation associated with the UN and another regarding the WTO, then lack of compliance with the former organization will in no way directly undercut its ability to gain cooperation in the latter. As Downs and Jones note, viewing states as having multiple reputations “helps to explain why, despite the prevalence of the unitary reputation assumption, examples of a state’s defection from an agreement in one area (for example, environment) jeopardizing its reputation in every other area (for example, trade and security) are virtually nonexistent in the literature.”⁶⁸ This conclusion is consistent with the two most detailed studies of reputation in IR, which decisively undercut the notion that states have a general reputation that will strongly influence how other states relate across different issue areas.⁶⁹

In the end, the current lack of an empirical or theoretical justification for the notion that states carry a single reputation means that we have no basis for accepting the institutionalists’ argument that America must endorse multilateralism across the board because to do otherwise has consequences that endanger the entire institutional order. That, together with theory’s lack of purchase on the issues of coordination costs and bargaining power, invalidates the institutionalist argument about the high cost of unilateralism.

Constructivism: Legitimate Hegemony and the Dangers of Unilateralism

The third main argument scholars have advanced against U.S. unilateralism is that it undermines the legitimacy of

the American-led international order, threatening escalating costs for Washington.⁷⁰ Within IR scholarship this argument follows seamlessly from writings in the constructivist school, which highlights the social and psychological foundations of any power relationship.⁷¹ Christian Reus-Smit succinctly summarizes the core claims, namely, “that all political power is deeply embedded in webs of social exchange and mutual constitution; that stable political power—the sort that escapes the short-term vagaries of coercion and bribery to assume a structural, taken-for-granted form—ultimately rests on legitimacy; and that institutions play a crucial role in sustaining such power.”⁷²

More generally, constructivists argue that institutions are “the chief legitimizing agents of global politics.”⁷³ The precise mechanisms by which institutions perform this role are not always clearly specified, but the signature constructivist argument is that institutions shape the environment in which actors are socialized to the existing order, fostering actors’ internalization of the norms and precepts underlying it.⁷⁴ They do this by inculcating theories of reality, establishing the frames of reference by which actors define the problems they face, and shaping the range of solutions they consider. Over time, these cognitive and social patterns become habitual, leading actors—in the case at hand—to accept the premises of the U.S.-led international order as their own.⁷⁵ Actors may so internalize cognitive and social habits supporting the status quo that it becomes unquestioned and taken for granted. Thus as long as hegemony is widely seen as legitimate, constructivist scholarship stresses, a large range of possible anti-hegemonic behaviors and strategies are never considered.

The bottom line is that hegemony without legitimate authority is likely to be nasty, brutish, and short. “Coalitions of the willing” are not permanent; they last only as long as the carrots and sticks necessary to maintain them. Unless it is ready to bear the long-term costs of a world in which every act of deference must be purchased or coerced, the United States must seek to maintain legitimacy. But legitimacy is not free. Constructivists emphasize that the United States has to earn it by acting in accordance with the institutions and rules of the order it fostered, even—indeed, especially—when so doing contradicts its own immediate interests.⁷⁶ When it goes unilateral, Bruce Cronin explains, the United States “fails to act within the boundaries established by its role, [and] the credibility of the institutions it helped establish weakens . . . When these organizations are undermined, the legitimacy of the international order is threatened. If this persists over time, the hegemonic order declines.”⁷⁷

If going it alone threatens to reduce the legitimacy of the international order, then how can we explain the appeal of unilateralism to U.S. policy makers? Constructivists have only just begun to examine recent American unilateralism, but their scholarship does suggest two possible answers to this question.

First, a logical extension of constructivist writings is that U.S. policy makers are liable to underestimate the value of the current institutional order and hence the downside risks of unilateralism. The habitual quality of a legitimate institutional order that constructivists highlight obviously has implications not only for subordinate states, but also for the hegemon itself. Just as subordinate actors may come to take for granted the many ways in which the existing order benefits the hegemon, the hegemon may do so as well. More specifically, the hegemon may be prone to focus on the bothersome aspects of the institutional-legal-normative order at the expense of its manifold benefits. Bush administration officials often chafe at the ways international institutions hamstring the United States.⁷⁸ To make this argument, they highlight institutions such as the International Criminal Court, the Ottawa Treaty on landmines, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty—all of which, they correctly argue, restrict U.S. foreign policy autonomy.

But such arguments fail to appreciate the full range of institutions, including those long-standing, informal ones so deeply embedded that their role in the efficient operation of U.S. hegemony is scarcely even considered by the nation's policy makers. It matters greatly, for example, that Germany and Japan generally follow the U.S. lead in the IMF; there is no necessary reason that this long-standing pattern of deference needs to continue in the future. Not surprisingly, policy makers do not spend much mental energy cataloging why events go well with little or no effort. As a result, the ways in which the institutional structure stymies or thwarts U.S. policy get much more attention than its role in enabling the United States to achieve cooperation with many countries efficiently.

Second, constructivists emphasize that if U.S. policy makers neglect the social wellsprings of power, they are likely to regard the institutional order as being more stable than it actually is—and hence to underestimate unilateralism's risks. As Ned Lebow warns, "[T]he standing of the United States may be much more precarious than most. . . . members of the national security community recognize."⁷⁹ The specter of a hegemonic legitimacy crisis looms especially large for constructivists because of the ways they depart from rational choice assumptions. For them, the existing order is not sustained by self-interested cost-benefit calculations alone. Rather, it is accepted as an unquestioned social fact. If actors were to revert to a case-by-case, cost-benefit approach to cooperating under each aspect of the existing order, it would be far more costly to all concerned. More importantly, the institutional-legal-normative order influences how states define their interests in the first place. Once the legitimacy of the order is in question, interests may shift quickly and unpredictably.

Constructivists' core claim is that subordinate states do not necessarily maximize their current material interests when acting according to the precepts of an accepted order.

Although constructivists do not draw this inference, it follows that states also may not heed immediate material self-interest when they begin to question that order. If the hegemon tramples upon deeply held conventions, others might retaliate in ways that are very costly in terms of their near-term material interests. The result could be a cascading crisis in all or at least part of the order, leading, at best, to much higher leadership costs for the hegemon or, worse, to its downfall.

Assessing the legitimacy costs of unilateralism

Constructivist scholarship thus renders a starkly negative verdict for unilateralism: going it alone is dangerous for the legitimacy of the international order, and this behavior can only be explained by an American failure to appreciate the order's benefits or its fragility, or both. That a hegemon needs legitimacy is undeniable. All of history's powerful states have sought it, and there is no reason to believe that the United States is somehow exempt from this rule. Nevertheless, the existing constructivist literature does not provide an adequately specified argument for why unilateralism is costly. Put simply, the connection between unilateralism and legitimacy is much more complex than the current constructivist treatments allow. Though constructivism is the branch of scholarship most concerned with legitimacy, thus far only a few scholars working in this tradition have directly addressed the question of how hegemons in general, and the United States in particular, can acquire and lose it. As a result, the precise connections between legitimacy and American unilateralism have yet to be addressed.

Three crucial aspects of the potential legitimacy costs of American unilateralism have so far been neglected in constructivist scholarship. The first is obvious but often overlooked: some kinds of unilateral actions threaten legitimacy more than others. If the unilateral act itself eventually comes to be seen as having produced a public good, then its legitimacy costs might be negligible or nonexistent. Indeed, the more positively the relevant states evaluate the consequences of unilateralist behavior, the smaller the legitimacy costs are likely to be, and vice versa. More generally, unilateral acts come in many forms and occur in many circumstances.⁸⁰ A hegemon may act unilaterally by doing something others do not want it to do, or by not doing something they expect it to do. A unilateral act may be a one-shot response to special circumstances with no likelihood of setting a precedent, or it may represent an attempt to create a new rule. It may occur on an issue that is deeply institutionalized or one where relatively few strong institutions exist. All of these factors will influence whether and to what degree a unilateral act is legitimacy-reducing.

Second, to the extent that a unilateral act does reduce legitimacy, compensating strategies may mitigate the damage. Constructivist scholarship outlines a set of

mechanisms that sustain legitimate hegemony. Unrecognized in this literature thus far is that these same mechanisms could serve the hegemon as strategies to mitigate any legitimacy costs of unilateralism. Compensating mechanisms come in both cheap and expensive forms. An example of the former is diplomatic process. A hegemon might, for example, try to persuade others of the necessity or sagacity of the unilateral act, or to frame it as consistent with legitimate norms other than multilateralism.⁸¹ It might also demonstrably reaffirm other salient norms associated with the order—for example, by consulting with allies. The key issue here is not whether the hegemon ultimately gets to decide what to do; rather, it is whether it is willing to take the time and effort to inform others, especially its allies, and listen to and discuss their concerns. A more expensive way a hegemon can reaffirm the benefits of its leadership is by enhancing the provision of public goods.⁸² Even if a unilateral action is not viewed positively, its effect on the hegemon's legitimacy may be counterbalanced if it undertakes efforts to provide public goods in other areas. The less self-interested the United States seems in general, the less likely other states are to question the entire international order in response to specific unilateral actions.

In the view of many critics, the Bush administration fell short on both kinds of compensating strategies. Even as the administration was widely seen to be increasingly unilateral in 2001–3, U.S. officials frequently used “a language and diplomatic style that seemed calculated to offend the world.”⁸³ Moreover, international travel by senior Bush administration officials to consult with key allies sank to an unprecedented low compared to the experience of the previous several administrations.⁸⁴ Bush did seek to persuade others that the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were public goods. But other actions—such as the steel tariffs imposed in 2002 or the attempt in early 2003 to single-handedly block an agreement to allow poor countries to purchase generic medicines to fight diseases such as AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis—undermined that message. It follows that the apparent legitimacy losses suffered by the United States in recent years may result less from unilateralism itself than from a failure to pursue compensating strategies energetically enough.

Related to this is the third and most important point: unilateralism can potentially produce legitimacy benefits for the hegemon. Standards of legitimacy can change. Powerful states can sometimes create new rules to legitimate new practices that they find meet their interests. If the hegemon wants to renegotiate parts of the institutional-normative-legal order, but other states disagree with the new rules it supports, the stage is set for high-stakes bargaining. In such bargaining, one way for the hegemon to exploit its asymmetric power is to threaten to go it alone. As Lloyd Gruber demonstrates, powerful states can sometimes use go-it-alone power to create a new status quo, which other states initially do not agree with but eventu-

ally decide they want to participate in.⁸⁵ Because constructivist scholarship highlights the potentially powerful “lock-in” effects that follow from general acceptance of a new norm, rule, or institution, it magnifies the stakes in this general bargaining game. The massive potential long-term benefits of winning legitimacy for the new practices it favors may induce a far-sighted hegemon to accept considerable near-term costs and risks. Hence even if acting unilaterally seems costly in the short run, if it helps lead to new rules, norms, or institutions the hegemon favors, then it might pay off in the long term.

The United States' response to the 9/11 terror attacks is instructive on this point. The Bush administration deliberately eschewed the most rule-based responses, such as demanding that the Taliban regime turn Osama bin Laden over to the International Court of Justice or suffer UN sanctions. Instead, it opted for an ultimatum backed up by a threat to invade Afghanistan. Although there were numerous ways to justify the invasion in terms of settled international law, the administration chose instead to act under an expanded definition of self-defense that encompassed attacks on countries that harbor terrorists.⁸⁶ It did not request a UN Security Council resolution specifically authorizing the invasion, but reached for something far bolder: Resolution 1373, which endorsed the new general rule legalizing the use of force against states that harbor terrorists and transformed a raft of U.S.-sponsored antiterrorism measures into formal international commitments legally binding on all member states. This was widely seen as an effort to revise accepted customary international law in a manner that advantages the United States, which has the military capacity to attack nearly anywhere, and potentially disadvantages weaker states, which lack such capabilities and could find themselves accused of harboring terrorists and thus subject to lawful invasion by the powerful. The United States, in short, exploited the unusual circumstances surrounding the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as well as its go-it-alone power to push through a new rule that opened the door for a wider range of actions that could eventually be seen as legitimate.

The connection between unilateralism and legitimacy is, in short, complex and uncertain. What makes it now seem straightforward and obvious to so many constructivists and other analysts is not insight from scholarship, but hindsight over the Iraq war. The problem with using Iraq to demonstrate the legitimacy costs of unilateralism is that many other aspects of the case besides its perceived unilateral nature are obviously corrosive of legitimacy. Unlike the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq came to be seen by many as producing not a public good, but a major public bad. Moreover, the administration sought to promulgate a much more dramatic rule change—the Bush Doctrine of preventive war—that was more threatening to other actors' core security interests. Although it engaged in some efforts at consultation and persuasion with allies concerning the decision

for war, this was not done for the most part through direct personal interactions. And consultation was almost nonexistent concerning the rule change the Bush administration was propounding. One French diplomat recalled that in the old days, high-level U.S. officials would travel to Paris for extensive consultations over any new NATO doctrine, even though it was clear that the change had been approved in Washington and no further substantive alterations were possible. "We found out about the Bush Doctrine by downloading it from the White House website," he noted. "The Doctrine has much to recommend it, but that is not the way to communicate with allies."

Scholars and analysts may well believe that they could have predicted that Iraq would sap U.S. legitimacy. However, even if this is true, it tells us little about the prospective legitimacy consequences of other unilateral acts that do not have as many overlapping factors all pointing in the direction of reduced legitimacy. In short, neither constructivists nor other IR scholars have specified and evaluated hypotheses about the sets of conditions and types of unilateral acts that are most likely to corrode legitimacy, or the degree to which compensating strategies might mitigate the legitimacy costs of unilateralism.⁸⁷ As a result, there are as yet no scholarly grounds for determining *ex ante* the legitimacy costs of anticipated unilateralism.

Conclusion

Ultimately, much of the scholarly criticism directed at George W. Bush's foreign policy decisions is motivated by their substance rather than the procedure followed to implement them. But IR scholarship, which generally reflects a search for universal, systematic knowledge rather than insights into the details of specific policy matters, largely provides weak leverage on policy substance. As a result, recent scholarly criticism has gravitated toward the procedural issue of unilateralism, on whose general costs it is thought—wrongly, we have shown—that IR scholarship does offer leverage.

The propensity to criticize unilateral policies does appear to vary with the substance at issue. When the substance was different—as in Kosovo—the membership and size of the cast of critics was different as well. This suggests that if Bush had, for example, unilaterally increased aid to the developing world, lowered barriers to the exports of developing countries, reduced nuclear stockpiles, limited greenhouse gas emissions, or pursued humanitarian intervention on the Kosovo model, it is unlikely that his actions would have attracted the outpouring of criticism on procedural grounds.

This is not to impugn all scholarly criticisms of unilateral U.S. policies. Rather, it is to insist upon clearly distinguishing between criticisms of procedure and those of substance, and to recognize the weakness of current procedural arguments. Scholarly criticism leading up to the

Iraq war, for example, fell roughly into three categories: those focused primarily on the merits of the policy given the specific details of the situation (implicitly acknowledging IR theory's lack of purchase);⁸⁸ those that mixed assessments of case-specific costs and benefits with theoretically derived assessments of the expected costs of unilateralism;⁸⁹ and those focused mainly on the general procedural criticism based on theoretically derived estimates of unilateralism's expected costs.⁹⁰ Only the first approach is currently defensible intellectually.

The story need not end here. Unilateralism may well have general costs that IR theory could identify if it were developed further. Indeed, for each theoretical school, there are obvious next steps for researchers. Research in the realist tradition, for example, might have a great deal to add if it paid more attention to how great-power bargaining occurs in today's unipolar system. Institutionalist scholarship could usefully develop a more finely grained understanding of reputation and coordination costs, as well as focus in more detail on how power asymmetries influence bargaining over and within international institutions. Finally, it would be useful to develop theory and research along constructivist lines on why some forms of unilateralism impose more legitimacy costs than others and the degree to which a hegemon can mitigate the legitimacy costs of going it alone by deploying compensating strategies.

In short, the fact that IR scholarship currently cannot identify general costs of unilateralism does not mean that it will never do so. Its shortcomings in this regard may be an artifact of slow updating. "Instead of radical change," Jack Snyder notes, "academia has adjusted existing theories to meet new realities."⁹¹ When confronted with novel explanatory challenges, scholars' first step is naturally to exploit old findings and concepts in search of answers. With nearly fifteen years' experience in a novel unipolar system, however, it is clearly time to develop new concepts and evaluate them against recent evidence. IR scholars thus have much work ahead of them. Given that there is every reason to expect that unipolarity—and hence the temptations of unilateralism—will last for a long time, they also have a strong incentive to do so. Unless and until such updating occurs, however, scholarly grounds for a general stance against U.S. unilateralism on the basis of its purported international costs do not exist.

Notes

- 1 Ikenberry 2003b, 49.
- 2 Outlines of the administration's approach to these issues include Bolton 2000 and Rumsfeld 2002.
- 3 For a discussion of why "new unilateralism" is a useful term, see Krauthammer 2002–3.
- 4 In a poll conducted in September 2004, 53 percent of adults said that Bush would "do the best job making wise decisions about foreign policy," as

- compared to 37 percent for Kerry (Survey by Pew Research Center and Princeton Survey Research Associates International, September 8–14, 2004, retrieved June 16, 2005, from the iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html>). On the more specific issue of handling “terrorism and homeland security,” 55 percent of adults trusted Bush to do a better job, while 37 percent trusted Kerry to do a better job (Survey by *Newsweek* and Princeton Survey Research Associates International, October 21–22, 2004, retrieved June 16, 2005, from the iPOLL Databank).
- 5 Hoffmann 2002, 3. For a representative general treatment, see Ruggie 1993.
- 6 For critiques of American unilateralism grounded in realist, institutionalist, and constructivist theory, see, respectively, Walt 2004; Martin 2003; Reus-Smit 2004.
- 7 President Bush, for example, argued in a speech that “some who call themselves realists question whether the spread of democracy in the Middle East should be any concern of ours. But the realists in this case have lost contact with a fundamental reality. . . . America is always more secure when freedom is on the march.” Quoted in Marie Horrigan, “Bush foreign policy speech knocks realists,” *Washington Times*, June 2, 2004. Examples of theory-informed punditry include Kaplan 2004; Krauthammer 2004; Fukuyama 2004; Berger 2004; and Jackson Diehl, “Kerry the realist,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2004, A23. For a general discussion, see Snyder 2004.
- 8 With reference to realism, for example, Charles Krauthammer talks of “democratic realism,” while Sandy Berger refers to “forward-looking realism.”
- 9 The danger of imperial overstretch is another argument for restraint that is also commonly associated with realism. See, for example, Gilpin 1981. Counterbalancing is one of the most important causes of overstretch and therefore often largely subsumes it in realist writings. And even the most vociferous critics of U.S. “fiscal overstretch” stress that it is occurring “not as a result of America’s overseas military commitments . . . [but] is the result of chronically unbalanced domestic finances” (Ferguson and Kotlikoff 2003, 22). Perhaps for these reasons, overstretch has so far figured much less prominently than counterbalancing in scholarly writings as an argument for the high costs of unilateralism.
- 10 A state may also build up military power in response to a hegemon (“internal balancing”). Because this type of balancing has not figured importantly in realists’ assessments of the costs of unilateralism, we do not treat it here.
- 11 Waltz 1979.
- 12 See Walt 2002, and, for the general theoretical argument, Walt 1987.
- 13 Walt 2002, 143.
- 14 Mastanduno 1999, 147.
- 15 Schweller and Priess 1997, 24.
- 16 Nye 2002–3; Cronin 2001; Reus-Smit 2004.
- 17 The paragraphs that follow amplify arguments and research presented in Wohlforth 1999, 2002; and Brooks and Wohlforth 2002.
- 18 See, for example, Walt 2004.
- 19 See, for example, Ikenberry 2003a.
- 20 See, for example, Emmot 2002.
- 21 Mearsheimer 2001. Chapter 3 discusses the distinction between latent and extant power.
- 22 See, for example, Lemke 1997.
- 23 Waltz 1993.
- 24 Brooks 2005, chap. 6.
- 25 Jervis 2002.
- 26 Ikenberry 2002; Paul 2004.
- 27 The best treatments of the general soft balancing argument are Pape 2004; Paul, 2004; Walt 2002; Joffe 2002.
- 28 Paul 2004, 14.
- 29 In Brooks and Wohlforth 2005 we outline a series of general alternative explanations that need to be considered, which we then test against soft balancing in the four cases mentioned below.
- 30 Gordon and Shapiro 2004; and Pond 2004.
- 31 Pond 2004.
- 32 Ibid., chap. 3.
- 33 Gordon and Shapiro 2004.
- 34 For brief overviews of institutionalist theory, see Keohane and Martin 1995; Keohane and Martin 2003; Simmons and Martin 2002.
- 35 Keohane 2002, chap. 13.
- 36 Patrick 2002; Nye 2002; Ikenberry 2003a.
- 37 The best general treatment of these various arguments is Keohane 1984.
- 38 On this “transaction costs” mechanism, see Keohane 1984.
- 39 Ikenberry 2001.
- 40 Bolton 2000.
- 41 Abbot and Snidal 1998.
- 42 Krauthammer 2002–3.
- 43 Charles Krauthammer, “Bush Blows away Multilateralist Blather,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 2001. For a general discussion of coordination difficulties among NATO members during the Kosovo operation, see Stigler 2002–3, especially 144–47.
- 44 Woodward 2002.
- 45 Wedgewood 2002, 186.
- 46 Daalder and O’Hanlon 2000.

- 47 Gallarotti 1991. This issue resonates with various arguments advanced in collective security theory (Claude 1984, 245–311).
- 48 A notable exception is Abbot and Snidal 2000.
- 49 Two detailed studies that undermine the standard unilateralist reading of Kosovo are Brenner 2002; and Lindley-French 2002.
- 50 See, for example, Krauthammer 2002–3; Ikenberry 2003a.
- 51 Krauthammer 2002–3, 14; see also Zelikow 2003.
- 52 Nathan Gardels, “Wolfowitz Refutes Unilateralism Charges, Cites U.S. Leadership,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2002.
- 53 Voeten 2001.
- 54 Malone and Khong 2003; Patrick 2002.
- 55 A noteworthy exception is Voeten 2001.
- 56 Voeten 2001, 845. See also Fearon 1998; Krasner 1991; Morrow 1994.
- 57 Lake 1993, especially 460.
- 58 As Voeten 2001 notes, “Institutionalists believe that power asymmetries are important, but their consequences are rarely explicitly modeled.” (p. 845). Unfortunately, this defect has yet to be remedied. For example, according to the organizers of a prominent team of scholars seeking to move the institutionalist research program forward, the analytical framework that guided their collective research of “did not emphasize power” because “the formal literature does not offer compelling results” (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001, 1067). See also the exchange between Duffield (2003, 417–18) and Koremenos and Snidal (2003, 437).
- 59 Lake 1993; Keohane 1984.
- 60 Keohane 1984, 105–8; Martin 2003.
- 61 Ikenberry 2003a, 535.
- 62 Ibid, 539
- 63 Martin 2003, 370.
- 64 Downs and Jones 2002, S95.
- 65 Ibid., S99
- 66 Ibid., S100
- 67 Ibid., S102.
- 68 Ibid., S109.
- 69 Mercer 1996; Press 2005.
- 70 Lebow 2003; Cronin 2001; Reus-Smit 2004. Examples of this argument in the larger foreign policy debate include Tucker and Hendrickson 2004; Kagan 2004; and Fukuyama 2004.
- 71 An influential rendering of constructivism in international relations is Wendt 1999. See also Hopf 1998.
- 72 Reus-Smit 2004, 41.
- 73 Cronin 2001, 113, citing Inis Claude. Of course, institutions are not the only legitimating agents, but they are the ones most salient regarding the costs of unilateralism.
- 74 Johnston 2001 argues that socialization also takes place in part through processes that do not require internalization: persuasion (convincing actors that their interests align with the hegemon’s) and social influence (inculcating pro-norm behavior by dispensing social rewards, such as status, and punishments, such as exclusion or shaming). See also Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.
- 75 Hurd 1999.
- 76 Lebow 2003. See also Cronin 2001; Reus-Smit 2004.
- 77 Cronin 2001, 113.
- 78 Bolton 2000. See also Moens 2004, chap. 4.
- 79 Lebow 2003, 311.
- 80 Chinkin 2000.
- 81 This is an extension to the hegemon of constructivists’ writings on what Rodger Payne calls “strategic social construction” by non-state “norm entrepreneurs.” Payne 2001. See also Johnston 2001; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.
- 82 This is a logical inference from the basic postulate that legitimacy inheres in part in reciprocal benefit. As Lebow (2003) puts it: to sustain legitimacy, a hegemon’s “capabilities must be used to the perceived benefit of allies and third parties to help reconcile them to their subordinate status” (p. 314).
- 83 Zakaria 2003.
- 84 Ibid., and Glenn Kessler, “Powell Flies in the Face of Tradition: The Secretary of State is Least Traveled in 30 years,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2004, A1.
- 85 Gruber 2000. See also Voeten 2001.
- 86 Our discussion here draws on Byers 2003.
- 87 Conducting such research is no easy matter, for it is notoriously hard to separate legitimacy itself from its purported effects. See, for example, Grafstein 1981.
- 88 See, for example, Mearsheimer and Walt 2003, which focuses on the question of whether Saddam Hussein could be deterred and contained, as well as the expected costs of occupying Iraq.
- 89 See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, “The UN Is Right for the Job,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 14, 2003. Nye argues that the unilateral nature of the war will be costly in part because it will contribute to soft balancing against the United States.
- 90 See, for example, Martin 2003, which holds that the unilateral nature of the war will undercut America’s multilateral reputation.
- 91 Snyder 2004, 53.

References

Abbot, Kenneth W., and Duncan Snidal. 1998. Why states act through formal international organizations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42 (1): 3–32.

- . 2000. Hard and soft law in international governance. *International Organization* 54 (3): 436–41.
- Berger, Samuel R. 2004. Foreign policy for a democratic president. *Foreign Affairs* 83 (3): 47–63.
- Bolton, John. 2000. Should we take global governance seriously? *Chicago Journal of International Law* 1 (2): 205–22.
- Brenner, Michael J. 2002. *Europe's new security vocation*. Washington, DC: National Defense University.
- Brooks, Stephen G. 2005. *Producing security: Multinational corporations, globalization, and the changing calculus of conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. 2002. American primacy in perspective. *Foreign Affairs* 81 (4): 20–33.
- . 2005. Hard times for soft balancing. *International Security* 30 (1).
- Byers, Michael. 2003. Preemptive self defense: Hegemony, equality and strategies of legal change. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11 (2): 171–90.
- Chinkin, Christine. 2000. The state that acts alone: Bully, good samaritan or iconoclast? *European Journal of International Law* 11 (2): 34–41.
- Claude, Inis. 1984. *Swords into plowshares: The problem and progress of international organization*. 4th ed. New York: Random House.
- Cronin, Bruce. 2001. The paradox of hegemony: America's ambiguous relationship with the United Nations. *European Journal of International Relations* 7 (1): 103–30.
- Daalder, Ivo H., and Michael E. O'Hanlon. 2000. *Winning ugly: NATO's war to save Kosovo*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Downs, George W., and Michael Jones. 2002. Reputation, compliance, and international law. *Journal of Legal Studies* 31, pt. 2: S95–S114.
- Duffield, John. 2003. The limits of rational design. *International Organization* 57 (2): 411–30.
- Emmot, Bill. 2002. Present at the creation: A survey of America's world role. *The Economist*, June 29, 2002.
- Fearon, James D. 1998. Bargaining, enforcement, and international cooperation. *International Organization* 52 (2): 269–305.
- Ferguson, Niall and Lawrence Kotlikoff. 2003. Going critical: American power and the consequences of fiscal overstretch. *National Interest* 73:22–33.
- Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization* 52 (4): 887–917.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2004. The neoconservative moment. *National Interest* (76): 57–69.
- Gallarotti, Giulio. 1991. The limits of international organization: Systematic failure in the management of international relations. *International Organization* 45 (2): 183–211.
- Gilpin, Robert. 1981. *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gordon, Philip H., and Jeremy Shapiro. 2004. *Allies at war: America, Europe, and the crisis over Iraq*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Grafstein, Robert. 1981. The failure of Weber's conception of legitimacy: Its causes and implications. *The Journal of Politics* 43 (2): 456–72.
- Gruber, Lloyd. 2000. *Ruling the world: Power politics and the rise of supranational institutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hoffmann, Stanley. 2002. Clash of globalizations. *Foreign Affairs* 81 (4): 104–14.
- Hopf, Ted. 1998. The promise of constructivism in international relations theory. *International Security* 23 (1): 171–200.
- Hurd, Ian. 1999. Legitimacy and authority in international politics. *International Organization* 53 (2): 379–408.
- Ikenberry, G. John. 2001. *After victory: Institutions, strategic restraint and the rebuilding of order after major wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- , ed. 2002. *America unrivaled: The future of the balance of power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2003a. Is American multilateralism in decline? *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (3): 533–50.
- . 2003b. State power and the institutional bargain: America's ambivalent economic and security multilateralism. In *U.S. Hegemony and international organizations: The United States and multilateral institutions*, ed. Rosemary Foot, S. Neil MacFarlane and Michael Mastanduno, 49–72. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jervis, Robert. 2002. Theories of war in an era of leading-power peace. Presidential address, American Political Science Association, 2001. *American Political Science Review* 91 (1): 1–14.
- Joffe, Josef. 2002. Defying history and theory: The United States as the "last superpower." In *America unrivaled: The future of the balance of power*, ed. G. John Ikenberry, 155–80. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2001. Treating international institutions as social environments. *International Studies Quarterly* 45 (4): 487–515.
- Kagan, Robert. 2004. America's crisis of legitimacy. *Foreign Affairs* 83 (2): 65–87.
- Kaplan, Lawrence. 2004. Washington's new worldview: Springtime for realism. *The New Republic*, June 21, 2004.
- Keohane, Robert O. 1984. *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- . 2002. *Power and governance in a partially globalized world*. London: Routledge.
- Keohane, Robert, and Lisa Martin. 1995. The promise of institutionalist theory. *International Security* 20 (1): 39–52.
- . 2003. Institutional theory as a research program. In *Progress in International Relations Theory*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Koremenos, Barbara, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal. 2001. Rational design: Looking back to move forward. *International Organization* 55 (4): 1051–82.
- Koremenos, Barbara, and Duncan Snidal. 2003. Moving forward, one step at a time. *International Organization* 57 (2): 411–44.
- Krasner, Stephen D. 1991. Global communications and national power: Life on the Pareto frontier. *World Politics* 43 (3): 336–66.
- Krauthammer, Charles. 2002–3. The unipolar moment revisited. *National Interest* 70:5–18.
- . 2004. In defense of democratic realism. *National Interest* 77:15–26.
- Lake, David. 1993. Leadership, hegemony, and the international economy: Naked emperor or tattered monarch with potential? *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (4): 459–89.
- Lebow, R. Ned. 2003. *The tragic vision of politics: Ethics, interests, and orders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lemke, Douglas. 1997. The continuation of history: Power transition theory and the end of the Cold War. *Journal of Peace Research* 34 (1): 23–36.
- Lindley-French, Julian. 2002. Terms of engagement: The paradox of American power and the transatlantic dilemma post-11 September. Chaillot Papers, no. 52. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies.
- Malone, David M., and Yuen Foong Khong. 2003. *Unilateralism and U.S. foreign policy: International perspectives*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Martin, Lisa. 2003. Multilateral organizations after the U.S.-Iraq war. In *The Iraq war and its consequences: Thoughts of Nobel peace laureates and eminent scholars*, ed. Irwin Abrams and Wang Gungwu, 359–74. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co.
- Mastanduno, Michael. 1999. Preserving the unipolar moment: Realist theories and U.S. grand strategy after the cold war. In *Unipolar politics: Realism and state strategies after the cold war*, ed. Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael M. Mastanduno, 138–81. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. 2003. An unnecessary war. *Foreign Policy* 134:50–59.
- Mercer, Jonathan. 1996. *Reputation and international politics*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Moens, Alexander. 2004. *The foreign policy of George W. Bush: Values, strategy, and loyalty*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- Morrow, James. 1994. Modeling the forms of international cooperation: Distribution versus information. *International Organization* 48 (3): 387–423.
- Nye, Joseph S., Jr. 2002. *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. London: Oxford University Press.
- . 2002–3. Limits of American power. *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (4): 545–59.
- Pape, Robert. 2004. Soft balancing: How states pursue security in a unipolar world; American Political Science Association 100th Annual Meeting, September 2–5, 2004. Chicago.
- Patrick, Stewart. 2002. Multilateralism and its discontents: The causes and consequences of U.S. ambivalence. In *Multilateralism and U.S. foreign policy: Ambivalent engagement*, ed. Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman, 1–44. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Paul, T. V. 2004. The enduring axioms of balance of power theory. In *Balance of power theory and practice in the twenty-first century*, eds. T. V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, 1–28. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Payne, Rodger. 2001. Persuasion, frames and norm construction. *European Journal of International Relations* 7 (1): 37–61.
- Pond, Elizabeth. 2004. *Friendly fire: The near death of the transatlantic alliance*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Press, Daryl G. 2005. *Calculating credibility: How leaders assess threats during crises*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Reus-Smit, Christian. 2004. *American power and world order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ruggie, John Gerard, ed. 1993. *Multilateralism matters: The theory and praxis of an institutional form*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rumsfeld, Donald. 2002. Transforming the military. *Foreign Affairs* 81 (3): 13–33.
- Schweller, Randall L., and David Priess. 1997. A tale of two realisms: Expanding the institutions debate. *Mershon International Studies Review* 41 (1): 1–32.
- Simmons, Beth A., and Lisa L. Martin. 2002. International organizations and institutions. In *Handbook of international relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, 192–211. London: Sage.
- Snyder, Jack L. 2004. One world: Rival theories. *Foreign Policy* (145): 53–62.

- Stigler, Andrew L. 2002–3. A clear victory for air power: NATO's empty threat to invade Kosovo. *International Security* 27 (3): 124–57.
- Tucker, Robert W., and David C. Hendrickson. 2004. The sources of American legitimacy. *Foreign Affairs* 83 (6): 18–32.
- Voeten, Erik. 2001. Outside options and the logic of Security Council action. *American Political Science Review* 95 (4): 845–58.
- Walt, Stephen M. 1987. *The origins of alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2002. Keeping the world “off balance”: Self-restraint in U.S. foreign policy. In *America unrivaled: The future of the balance of power*, ed. G. J. Ikenberry. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 121–54.
- . 2004. Can the United States be balanced? If so, how? American Political Science Association Annual Convention, Chicago, September 2–4, 2004.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of international politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- . 1993. The emerging structure of international politics. *International Security* 18 (2): 44–79.
- Wedgewood, Ruth. 2002. Unilateral action in a multilateral world. In *Multilateralism and U.S. foreign policy: Ambivalent engagement*, in ed. Stewart Patrick and Shephard Forman. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner: 167–89.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wohlforth, William C. 1999. The stability of a unipolar world. *International Security* 24 (1): 5–47.
- . 2002. U.S. strategy in a unipolar world. In *America unrivaled: the future of the balance of power*, ed. G. John Ikenberry, 98–120. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Woodward, Bob. 2002. *Bush at war*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Zakaria, Fareed. 2003. The arrogant empire. *Newsweek*. March 24, 2003.
- Zelikow, Philip. 2003. The transformation of national security. *National Interest* 71:17–29.