

Ideas

Boston Sunday Globe

JANUARY 22, 2012

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The Internationalist
BY THANASSIS CAMBANIS

THE LONELY SUPERPOWER

A new theory argues that being a solo heavyweight
is not all it's cracked up to be



AFTER DECADES OF nuclear brinkmanship, Americans felt profound relief when the Cold War ended. The Soviet Union's collapse in 1989 transformed the world almost overnight from a battleground between two global giants—a bipolar world, in scholarly parlance—to a unipolar world, in which the United States outstripped all other powers.

In foreign policy circles, it was taken for granted that this dominance was good for America. Experts merely differed over how long the “unipolar moment” could last, or how big a peace dividend America could expect. Some even argued that the end of the arms race between Moscow and Washington had eliminated the threat of world war.

Now, however, with a few decades of experience to

study, a young international relations theorist at Yale University has proposed a provocative new view: American dominance has destabilized the world in new ways, and the United States is no better off in the wake of the Cold War. In fact, he says, a world with a single superpower and a crowded second tier of distant competitors encourages, rather than discourages, violent conflict—not just among the also-rans, but even involving the single great power itself.

In a paper that appeared in the most recent issue of the influential journal *International Security*, political scientist Nuno P. Monteiro lays out his case. America, he points out, has been at war for 13 of the 22 years since the end of the Cold War, about double the proportion of time it spent at war during the previous two centuries. “I’m trying to de-

bunk the idea that a world with one great power is better,” he said in an interview. “If you don’t have one problem, you have another.”

Sure, Monteiro says, the risk of apocalyptic war has decreased, since there’s no military equal to America’s that could engage it in mutually assured destruction. But, he argues, the lethal, expensive wars in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and Afghanistan have proved a major drain on the country.

Even worse, Monteiro claims, America’s position as a dominant power, unbalanced by any other alpha states actually exacerbates dangerous tensions rather than relieving them. Prickly states that Monteiro calls “recalcitrant minor powers” (think Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan), whose interests or regime types clash

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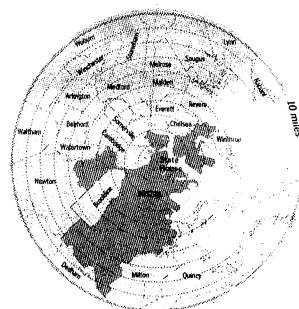
BUREAUCRATS WITH TORCHES

What the Inquisition really
announced about the world

BY CULLEN MURPHY



INSIDE



Internationalist

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with the lone superpower, will have an incentive to provoke a conflict. Even if they are likely to lose, the fight may be worth it, since concession will mean defeat as well. This is the logic by which North Korea and Pakistan both acquired nuclear weapons, even during the era of American global dominance, and by which Iraq and Afghanistan preferred to fight rather than surrender to invading Americans.

Of course, few Americans long for the old days of an arms race, possible nuclear war, and the threat of Soviet troops and missiles pointed at America and its allies. Fans of unipolarity in the foreign policy world think that the advantages of being the sole superpower far outweigh the drawbacks—a few regional conflicts and insurgencies are a fair price to pay for eliminating the threat of global war.

But Monteiro says that critics exaggerate the distinctions between the wars of today and yesterday, and many top thinkers in the world of security policy are finding his argument persuasive. If he's right, it means that the most optimistic version of the post-Cold War era—a “pax Americana” in which the surviving superpower can genuinely enjoy its ascendancy—was always illusory. In the short term, a dominant United States should expect an endless slate of violent challenges from weak powers. And in the longer term, it means that Washington shouldn't worry too much about rising powers like China or Russia or the European Union; America might even be better off with a rival powerful enough to provide a balance. You could call it the curse of plenty: Too much power attracts countless challenges, whereas a world in which power is split among several superstates might just offer a paradoxical stability.

FROM THE 1700s until the end of World War II in 1945, an array of superpowers competed for global influence in a multipolar world, including imperial Germany and Japan, Russia, Great Britain, and after a time, the United States. The world was an unstable place, prone to wars minor and major.

The Cold War era was far more stable, with only two pretenders to global power. It was, however, an age of anxiety. The threat of nuclear Armageddon hung over the world. Showdowns in Berlin and Cuba brought America and the Soviet Union to the brink, and the threat of nuclear escalation hung over every other superpower crisis. Generations of Americans and Soviets grew up practicing survival drills; for them, the nightmare scenario of thermonuclear winter was frighteningly plausible.

It was also an age of violent regional conflicts. Conflagrations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America spiraled into drawn out, lethal wars, with the superpowers investing in local proxies (think of Angola and Nicaragua as well as Korea and Vietnam). On the one hand, superpower involvement often made local conflicts far deadlier and longer than they would have been otherwise. On the other, the balance between the United States and the USSR reduced the likelihood of world war and kept the fighting below the nuclear threshold. By tacit understanding, the two powers had an interest in keeping such conflicts contained.

When the Soviet Union began its collapse in 1989, the United States was the last man standing, wielding a level of global dominance that had been unknown before in modern history. Policy makers and thinkers almost universally agreed that dominance would be a good thing, at least for America: It removed the threat of superpower war, and lesser powers would presumably choose to concede to American desires rather than provoke a regional war they were bound to lose.

That is what the 1991 Gulf War was about: establishing the new rules of a unipolar world. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Monteiro believes, because he miscalculated what the United States was willing to accept. After meeting Saddam with

overwhelming force, America expected that the rest of the world would capitulate to its demands with much less fuss.

Monteiro compared the conflicts of the multipolar 18th century to those of the Cold War and current unipolar moment. What he found is that the unipolar world isn't necessarily better than what preceded it, either for the United States or for the rest of the world. It might even be worse. “Uncertainty increases in unipolarity,” Monteiro says. “If another great power were around, we wouldn't be able to get involved in all these wars.”

In the unipolar period, a growing class of minor powers has provoked the United States, willing to engage in brinkmanship up to and including violent conflict. Look no further than Iran's recent threats to close the Strait of Hormuz to oil shipping and to strike the American Navy. Naturally, Iran wouldn't be able to win such a showdown. But Iran knows well that the United States wants to avoid the significant costs of a war, and might back down in a confrontation, thereby rewarding Iran's aggressive gambits. And if (or once) Iran

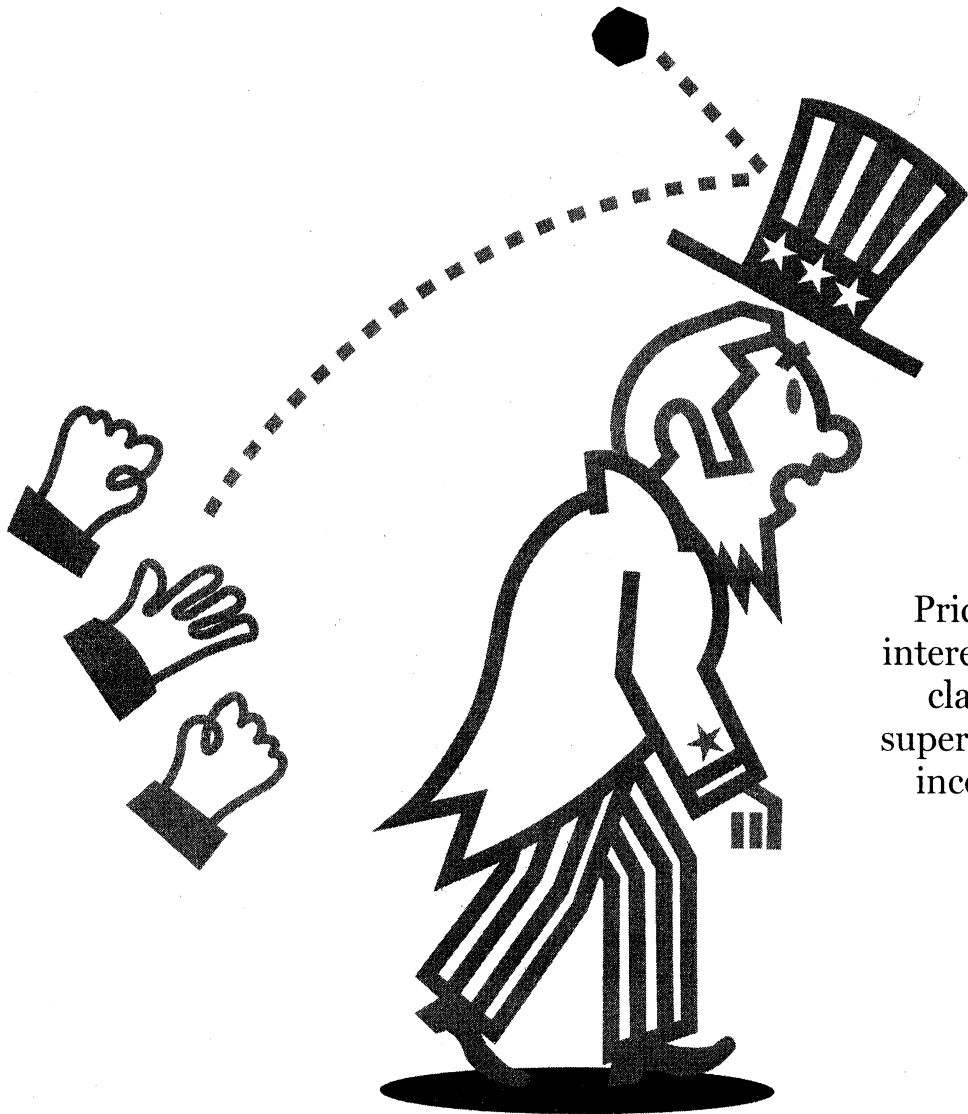
world was supposed to be much safer for a unipolar superpower, not more costly and hazardous.

NOT EVERYONE AGREES that the United States would benefit from having a major rival. The best-known academic authority on American unipolarity, Dartmouth College political scientist William C. Wohlforth, argues that it's still far better to be alone at the top. Overall, Wohlforth says, America spends less of its budget on defense than during the Cold War, and fewer Americans are killed in the conflicts in which it does engage. “Those who wish to have a peer competitor back are mistaken,” he said. “They forget the huge interventions of the Cold War.”

Between 1945 and 1989, Wohlforth says, proxy wars between America and the Soviet Union killed hundreds of thousands of people, against the backdrop of a very real and terrifying threat of nuclear annihilation. Today, he says, the world is still dangerous, but it's much less deadily and frightening

States can reduce its involvement in costly conflict is to shift its strategy from what he calls “global dominance” to “disengagement,” a posture in which America would keep out of regional conflicts and let minor powers fight each other. The one thing that might restrain a problem state like Iran or North Korea, according to Monteiro, is an assurance that the United States won't seek to overthrow their regime.

The debate has direct bearing on a question that increasingly preoccupies policy makers in Washington: How should the United States respond to China's rising power? Conventional wisdom, with its aversion to a bipolar or multipolar world, would counsel the United States to do all it can to forestall or even thwart China's ascension to superpower status. By Monteiro's logic, however, America should consider China's rise a potential boon, something to be managed with an eye toward minimizing friction. “We might not like it, but in many ways China's rise is not very dangerous,” says Charles Glaser, an influential political scientist at The George Washington University who also writes about unipolarity, and who shares



DAVID FLAHERTY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Prickly states, whose interests or regime types clash with the lone superpower, will have an incentive to provoke a conflict.

crosses the nuclear threshold, it will have an even greater capacity to deter the United States. During the Cold War, on the other hand, regional powers tended to rely on their patron's nuclear umbrella rather than seeking nukes of their own, and would have had no incentive to defy the United States by developing them.

Absent a rival superpower to check its reach, the United States has felt unrestrained, and at times even obligated, to intervene as a global police officer or arbiter of international norms against crimes such as genocide. Time and again in the post-Cold War age, minor countries that were supposed to meekly fall in line with American imperatives instead defied them, drawing America into conflicts in the Balkans, Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This wasn't what was supposed to happen: The

than it was in the time of the nuclear arms race.

For his part, Monteiro agrees that the Cold War was nasty and scary; he just wants to debunk the notion that what came next was any better. According to Monteiro, bipolarity and unipolarity pose different kinds of dangers, but are equally problematic.

Accepting this theory would have stark implications. For one thing, it would mean that America shouldn't be afraid of emerging superpowers. In a unipolar world, America faces the temptation to overextend itself, perhaps wasting its resources in conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan rather than protecting its core national interests; having another superpower to contend with could change that focus. “It's not a bad thing to have a peer competitor,” Monteiro says.

His analysis suggests that the one way the United

much of Monteiro's skepticism about its benefits.

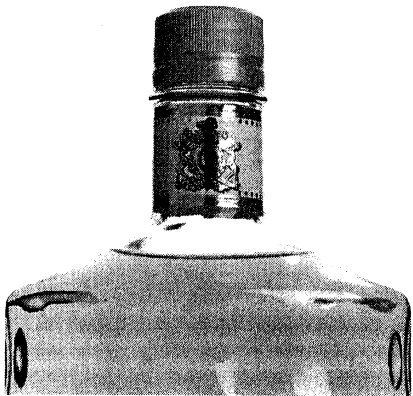
Monteiro's most radical insight concerns what he considers the dim likelihood of stability in a world where the United States is dominant. “Regardless of US strategy, conflict will abound,” Monteiro writes. What does lie in America's control, he argues, is the choice between laboring to extend that dominance or merely maintaining an edge while disengaging from most conflicts. If America continues to involve itself in the constant ebb and flow of regional wars, as it has during two decades as unipolar giant and global police officer, it will exhaust its treasury and military resources, and feel threatened when rising powers like China approach parity. If, on the other hand, it chooses to disengage, it can husband its military might for the more important task of facing the new superpowers that inevitably will emerge.

The Word

By Erin McKean

Meet the weeper

Extrudel, urbigator, and other new words we need now



a blend of *voluptuous* and *lump*, but with Snooki, who can be sure?) on the Jimmy Kimmel show. But words used by less-prominent individuals tend to be unfairly overlooked.

To help level the playing field for noncelebrity neologizers (those who create new words) everywhere, I recently put out a call on Twitter, asking for submissions of favorite new words. And, based on the rich haul of responses I received, there are plenty of new words that just need a little public relations boost to take hold.

Some new words make you wonder how you lived without them. Why call something just super when you could use Baheru Mengistu's *superbulon*? Who hasn't encountered the unpleasant practice of *nukepicking*, the combination of nitpicking and blowing things out of proportion, submitted by Vlad Marian Birladianu? I plan to be a frequent user of

Other new words are worth knowing for their sounds alone. Tom Oster reports that his mother's uneven bang-trimming sometimes resulted in *snizzled* hair; Twitter user @TheFoolJoss passes along an Irish friend's word for being overcome by sleepiness after an afternoon's drinking: getting *cafagaggied*. And Anne Connell has a marvelous-sounding word for those bores who pretend to more cultural knowledge than they actually possess: They're *fauxsisticates*. Fauxsisticates might be more inclined to *awkwordplay*, “Microstyle” author Christopher Johnson's word for when new words' sounds don't go together well, especially because of syllable emphasis mismatch.

Some new words are more technical. Kate Greene uses the word *technoschmerz*, the emotional pain (*schmerz* comes from a German word meaning “pain”) caused by difficult interactions