

America's Unipolar Moment

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The crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward . . . a new world order . . . freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace.

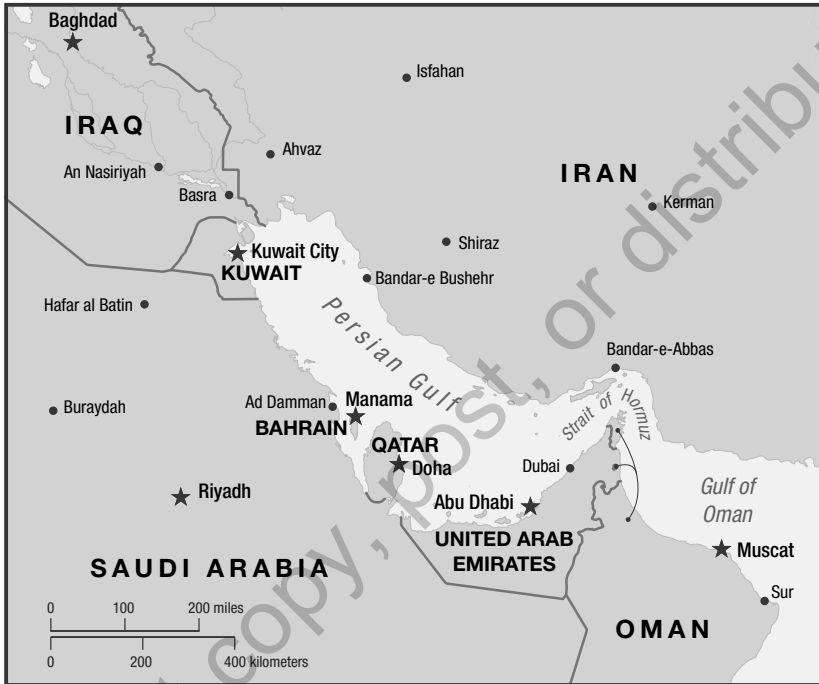
—GEORGE H. W. BUSH,
U.S. PRESIDENT

Early on the morning of August 2, 1990, columns of T-72 tanks from Iraq's elite Republican Guard crossed their country's southern border and raced down a six-lane highway toward Kuwait City. Alleging that his military had been invited by Kuwaiti revolutionaries to help liberate the tiny, oil-rich emirate from the corrupt Al-Sabah family, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein declared that he would annex Kuwait and threatened to turn the territory into a graveyard if anyone tried to stop him (see Map 5.1). No one dismissed his threat. Not only did Iraq possess the world's fourth largest army, it also was well-equipped, seasoned by eight years of war with Iran, and possessed the ability to mount a tenacious defense. According to the conventional wisdom, the Iraqis could only be evicted from Kuwait by a costly, protracted war.

Despite apprehension over the toll of waging war against Iraq, America's response to the invasion was strong and unequivocal. U.S. president George Herbert Walker Bush, a pilot whose aircraft had been shot down during battle in World War II, saw the crisis through the lens of the 1930s. Iraq's aggression, he declared, was "a throwback to another era, a dark relic from a dark time."¹ In his eyes, Saddam Hussein was like Adolf Hitler, a rapacious tyrant bent on conquering defenseless neighbors. "A half century ago," Bush told those attending the 91st Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) National Convention, "the world had a chance to stop a ruthless dictator and missed it. I pledge to you: We will not make that mistake again."²

MAP 5.1 THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

Iraq is situated in the strategic center of the oil-rich and politically unstable Middle East—a region composed of states with a history of recurrent rivalries and episodic warfare. The Persian Gulf War erupted after Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein sent his army into Kuwait in 1990 to obtain territory that he claimed was within the traditional boundaries of his country.



The president's lofty rhetoric masked his concern over maintaining access to Middle Eastern oil, a commodity on which daily life in the twentieth century had become dependent. While Bush preferred to emphasize the importance of upholding international law, he admitted in a speech to Pentagon employees on August 15 that energy resources were also on his mind. As one of his advisers quipped, he wouldn't get involved if Kuwait exported oranges.³ What especially troubled Bush was the possibility that Saddam Hussein might also attempt to subjugate Saudi Arabia, which would give him control of almost half of the planet's known petroleum reserves. If he succeeded, much of the industrialized world would be beholden for its energy needs to a callous, untrustworthy dictator. The ramifications were

unsettling. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger summarized the administration's thinking: It was "absolutely essential that the U.S.—collectively, if possible, but individually, if necessary—not only put a stop to this aggression but roll it back."⁴

Washington's immediate response to the invasion centered on military containment and economic **compellence**. To contain Iraqi aggression, President Bush forged a large multinational coalition to deter Baghdad from undertaking further expansion, and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney secured permission from King Fahd to allow elements of the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) to be stationed in Saudi Arabia. To compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, American diplomats lobbied the United Nations to organize a global arms and economic embargo against Saddam Hussein's regime. On August 6, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 661, which spelled out a list of **economic sanctions** to be levied against Iraq; furthermore, in Resolution 665, it called upon member states with a maritime presence in the region to enforce those sanctions by inspecting the cargoes of any ships thought to be assisting the Iraqis.

Iraq seemed to be an ideal target for **coercive diplomacy**. Saddam Hussein was politically isolated, sanctions would be applied decisively, and Iraq's economy was vulnerable to external pressure because it exported a single natural resource, imported most of its finished goods, and relied heavily on foreign sources for technical services. Yet there were reasons for skepticism over whether economic sanctions would work. According to one historical survey, they tended to succeed only a third of the time, requiring an almost 2.5 percent impact on the target's gross national product (GNP) for three years to have meaningful results.⁵ The longer Iraq endured trade disruptions and economic deprivation, the greater the likelihood that the diverse coalition so carefully assembled by President Bush would erode. Friction from the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Islamic fundamentalist resentment over the growing number of non-Arab soldiers in the region, and the staggering cost of maintaining troops in a distant and inhospitable environment were just some of the problems that threatened to weaken coalition resolve as the months wore on. Additionally, because Saddam Hussein remained indifferent to the hardships borne by his own people, there was no guarantee that tightening the economic screws would compel him to withdraw from Kuwait.

By late fall, few American policymakers retained hope that the economic vice around Iraq would induce Saddam Hussein to give up Kuwait. As the White House began finalizing plans for offensive military action, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 678 authorizing member states "to use all necessary means" to expel Iraq from Kuwait if it did not leave voluntarily by January 15, 1991. Meanwhile, a joint resolution was approved in the U.S. Senate by 52 to 47 and in the House of Representatives by 250 to 183 authorizing the president to wrest control of Kuwait from Iraq. "What is

at issue,” President Bush wrote in a letter delivered to Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz on January 9, “is not the future of Kuwait . . . but rather the future of Iraq.”

Eight days later, the Bush administration unleashed Operation Desert Storm, its plan for emancipating Kuwait. In contrast to the incrementalism that characterized earlier American thinking about **limited war**, Desert Storm was designed to overwhelm the Iraqis in a fast and furious campaign. During the 1960s, policymakers in Washington had been seduced by simplistic theories suggesting threats of impending harm after brief pauses in fighting would induce enemy forces to stand down, thus sparing the United States from costly pitched battles. When reflecting on the failure of this strategy in the Vietnam War, the succeeding generation of U.S. military officers doubted that political leaders would be any more successful at fine-tuning a program of progressively rising pressure to persuade Saddam Hussein to relinquish territory his army had seized. Rather than attempting to orchestrate an alternating pattern of escalations and pauses, U.S. general Colin Powell’s “doctrine of invincible force” sought to marshal all of the resources necessary to crush an adversary straightaway, using mobility and firepower to win a swift and decisive victory. “I don’t believe in doing war on the basis of macroeconomic, marginal-analysis models,” the general said. “I’m more of the mind-set of a New York street bully: ‘Here’s my bat, here’s my gun, here’s my knife, I’m wearing armor. I’m going to kick your ass.’”⁶

Operation Desert Storm unfolded in two phases: a relentless air assault (January 17–February 24) followed by a devastating ground offensive (February 24–28). The objectives of the first phase were to achieve air superiority, cripple Iraq’s defenses, and destroy its supply network. The second phase involved convincing Saddam Hussein that the ground offensive would be aimed directly at Kuwait City, while in actuality the bulk of America’s forces would make an end run deep into Iraq, pivot, and then circle back to outflank and envelop the Iraqis who were dug in for a frontal assault. The combined impact was devastating. Exhausted by weeks of aerial pounding and encircled by formidable armored and mechanized infantry divisions, Iraqi soldiers surrendered in droves. Those who tried to fight were pummeled into submission. What Saddam Hussein predicted would be the “mother of all battles” quickly degenerated into the mother of all retreats. The United States and its coalition allies had achieved one of the most lopsided engagements in military history. Speaking from the Oval Office on February 27, 1991, President Bush proclaimed a triumph “for all mankind, for the rule of law, and for what is right,” and spoke about constructing a new world order. “We must now begin to look beyond victory in war,” he explained. “We must meet the challenge of securing the peace.”

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AMERICAN PRIMACY

Saddam Hussein had pinned his hopes on a war of attrition, believing that his adversaries lacked the patience and tenacity to fight a protracted war. If U.S. forces could be lured into heavily fortified “killing zones,” he assumed mounting casualties would prompt the Americans to yield. Just as they had done in their earlier eight-year war with Iran, the Iraqis constructed an elaborate system of minefields, bunkers, antitank guns, and fire trenches all surrounded by concertina wire. Slowed by these barriers, a direct American assault would come under a heavy artillery barrage, followed by a counterattack by mechanized divisions of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard. Rumors circulated in Washington that the Pentagon ordered sixteen thousand body bags in preparation for the war.

Much to the astonishment of onlookers, the United States and its coalition partners won a resounding victory with minimal casualties. Journalists likened the action to a computer game. By taking advantage of navigational data from global positioning satellites and the lethal accuracy of heat-seeking sensors and laser-guided munitions, coalition forces ravaged the Iraqis with wave after wave of swarming aircraft. On the ground, sophisticated American technology allowed nimble armored units to outmaneuver the Iraqis, fire accurately while on the move, and attack at night. It was a war of twenty-first-century electronics against twentieth-century mechanics.

American prowess on the battlefields of the Persian Gulf War signaled to the other great powers that a new era had dawned. Unipolarity was superseding the Cold War bipolar system. With the collapse of the Soviet Union roughly nine months after a cease-fire was established in Iraq, the United States enjoyed unquestioned dominance. It was no longer a superpower; it had become, in the words of former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine, a “hyperpower.” The U.S. military was not just stronger than anybody—it was stronger than everybody. American military expenditures exceeded the combined total of all other great powers. Beyond supporting a formidable strategic arsenal, these funds allowed Washington to build a conventional military capability without peer: On the ground, U.S. forces possessed awesome speed, agility, and firepower; in the skies, they combined innovative stealth technology with precision-guided munitions; and at sea, they faced no serious blue-water challenge. With eight operational Nimitz-class aircraft carriers, over 700 overseas military bases, and unparalleled strategic airlift capability, the United States had the singular capacity to project its power rapidly over vast distances.

Complementing U.S. military muscle was its economic strength. During the opening years of the new century, America accounted for over 40 percent of the world’s production and 50 percent of its research and development. In 2004, the United States ranked first in global competitiveness, was home of 29 of the 50 largest companies in the world, served as the source of 62 of the top

100 international brands, and comprised roughly 33 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP). Remarkably, America's military prowess was being maintained by spending only four percent of its \$12 trillion GDP, less than a third of that spent during the Second World War.

Aside from the military and economic sources of its power, the United States wielded tremendous soft power as an open, alluring society located at the hub of global telecommunications. American music, films, and television programs commanded wide attention, and U.S. institutions of higher education attracted students from throughout the world. As a dynamic country that blended personal freedom with cutting-edge technology, the United States was positioned in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War to lead through the attractiveness of its culture.

Astonished by the magnitude and scope of American power, it became fashionable for the foreign policy commentariat to write about "the end of history." Francis Fukuyama, for example, saw the collapse of the Soviet Union as the completion of humanity's political evolution, with Western liberal democracy triumphing as the final form of government.⁷ Intoxicated by its victories over communism and Saddam Hussein, a self-congratulatory mood enveloped the United States. "We stand tall and therefore we can see further [than other countries]," boasted Madeleine Albright, President Bill Clinton's secretary of state.⁸ Heartened by a conviction that the United States was an "indispensable nation," many people in Washington expected the country's preeminent status to continue indefinitely. According to the leaked draft of a 1992 Department of Defense strategic planning document, one of the aims of various U.S. officials after the Soviet Union dissolved was to prevent the rise of a future great-power competitor. As President George W. Bush explained, "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace."⁹

PRIMACY AND WORLD ORDER

As described in preceding chapters, the architecture of contemporary world order evolved from several sources. One was the Westphalian peace settlement of the mid-seventeenth century, based on international anarchy and state sovereignty. The second source was the set of liberal rules and institutions that were endorsed by the Western Allies at the end of World War II, ranging from the economic agreements of Bretton Woods to the collective security principles embedded in the United Nations system. A third major source was the series of tacit understandings and formal conventions on arms control and related strategic issues that developed between the rival superpowers during the Cold War. On the eve of the twenty-first century, with the United States

ensconced at the head of a unipolar global system, government officials in Washington felt they had the leverage to uphold this amalgamated structure of world order.

Periods of international primacy provide opportunities for the dominant great power to induce others to accept its conception of what is fitting behavior and how the international system should operate. In the wake of the Persian Gulf War, American policymakers wanted to entrench the liberal rules and multilateral institutions that successive administrations had endorsed since the Second World War. Open markets and nondiscriminatory trade, augmented by monetary stability and financial assistance for states under duress, continued to be hailed as antidotes to economic depression and political extremism. Furthermore, U.S. leaders wished to build on the arms control agreements that were reached over the past few decades. But now that the Cold War was over, decision makers in Washington sought to make several additions to this framework of world order, as chronicled in Table 5.1. First, they strove to bring former adversaries into the fold, gradually making them democratic stakeholders in an expanded liberal world order. Second, they sought to redefine the concept of sovereignty, allowing outside powers to intervene into the domestic affairs of those regimes that were flagrantly violating human rights and civil liberties. Finally, they pushed for a more permissive interpretation of self-defense, which would authorize preventive military action against potential security threats. Let us explore each of these policy initiatives in turn.

TABLE 5.1 MAJOR EVENTS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE COLD WAR

Date	Event
1991	U.S.-led coalition launches air war on Iraq in Operation Desert Storm on January 17; ground offensive begins on February 24; Iraq accepts cease-fire on February 28 Slovenia declares independence from Yugoslavia in June and successfully defends its territory against the Yugoslav federal army; Croatia declares independence Hard-line opponents of Soviet president and general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev attempt to seize power on August 19; Gorbachev resigns on December 25; independence granted to the former republics of the Soviet Union
1992	Bosnia and Herzegovina declares independence from Yugoslavia; civil war erupts among Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats; Serbia and Montenegro form a new, smaller Yugoslav federation
1994	North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) formed; Rwandan genocide

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TABLE 5.1 (CONTINUED)

Date	Event
1995	The presidents of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia meet in Dayton, Ohio, and sign a peace agreement
1999	The Rambouillet peace talks between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians collapse; North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air strikes against Serbia begin on March 24 and continue until June 10; UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is established on June 13 and the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) is assigned peacekeeping duties
2001	Al Qaeda operatives crash hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11; United States responds by launching Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7 against Al Qaeda and Taliban positions in Afghanistan
2003	U.S.-led invasion of Iraq begins on March 19; Baghdad falls on April 9, ending the government of Saddam Hussein; Iraqi insurgency begins
2008	Global financial crisis; Russo-Georgian War
2010	Anti-government protests erupt in Tunisia in December and spread across North Africa and the Middle East during the following year China declares that the South China Sea is an area of core interest
2011	NATO-led coalition undertakes military intervention in Libya on March 19; civil war begins in Syria; Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden killed
2013	China announces that it is establishing an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea
2014	Crimean Peninsula annexed by Russia; armed conflict erupts between Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists in the eastern part of the country
2015	Full diplomatic relations reestablished between the United States and Cuba; United States and five other great powers reach an agreement with Iran on limiting that country's nuclear program

DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Widening the liberal order to include countries recently ruled by communist governments with command economies posed an enormous challenge. In addition to privatizing their state-owned enterprises, they had to embrace democratic values and support efforts to construct a civil society. Increasing citizen involvement in public affairs seldom unfolds in a smooth, linear process. Democratization takes time and relapses are common. Sometimes countries shed autocracy only to become populist regimes, adopting the trappings of democratic rule but spurning civil liberties. Although they may hold regular elections,

participation and contestation are limited, and few restraints exist on executive power. For American policymakers, backsliding toward authoritarianism would undermine the stability of the post–Cold War world order. Democratization, they concluded, was the key to future peace and security.

As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, liberal theory assumes that the type of political regime governing a country has a significant impact on its international behavior. Believing autocracies are prone to wage war, Wilsonian liberals at the end of World War I called for replacing the kaiser in Germany, insisting that a democratic regime would be more peaceful than its authoritarian predecessor. Were they right? Are democracies less apt to start wars than other governments?

Today social scientists possess a large body of research that supports **democratic peace theory**. Although constitutionally secure democracies experience foreign conflict as often as nondemocracies and are only slightly less likely than nondemocratic states to initiate wars, they almost never wage war against one another.¹⁰ Scholars advance two overlapping explanations. In the first place, the shared norms of peaceful conflict resolution within democratic political cultures foster a non-zero-sum view of politics and a spirit of compromise. In the second place, institutional checks and balances combine with the hurdle of enlisting public support to constrain decision makers in democratic states from rashly launching large-scale foreign wars. Disputes between mature democracies rarely result in the use of armed force because each side respects the legitimacy of the other and expects it to adopt amicable methods of conflict resolution.

Democracy Promotion as a Goal of U.S. Foreign Policy

A corollary to democratic peace theory postulates that the amount of war globally would diminish as the proportion of democratic states within the international system grew. The claim resonated with Bill Clinton, who had surprisingly defeated George H. W. Bush in the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Democracy promotion—working to increase the ratio of open to closed polities worldwide—ultimately became a cornerstone of his administration’s foreign policy. “The best strategy to ensure our security and build a durable peace,” he declared in his 1994 State of the Union address, “is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.” Providing technical assistance and other forms of aid to **nongovernmental organizations** that were trying to strengthen civil society in countries previously controlled by authoritarian regimes would enlarge the zone of peace. As Anthony Lake, Clinton’s first-term national security adviser, put it, “The successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world’s free community.”¹¹

Democratic peace theory also appealed to President George W. Bush. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when Al Qaeda operatives flew hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Bush announced his “forward strategy for freedom,” whose objective was to

bring about regime change in autocratic states that were regarded as hostile and dangerous. U.S. national security, he believed, would benefit if these countries became democracies. “We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion,” Bush declared on January 20, 2005, in his second inaugural address. “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.” Spreading democracy throughout the world is “the calling of our time.” The goal of U.S. foreign policy must be to “support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture.”

Democracy promotion coincided with a long-standing missionary impulse to spread America’s civic culture, exporting representative government and converting others to liberal values. Ever since John Winthrop declared in 1630 that the immigrants to the New World would establish a “city on the hill,” many Americans believed that they were fated to become a moral beacon for humanity. The United States was different from other countries; it was the “First Universal Nation,” animated by a unique set of ideals and institutions that others would emulate. When Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1777 that “our Cause is the Cause of Mankind,” he foreshadowed Woodrow Wilson’s 1919 proclamation that “the idea of America is to serve humanity.” It was this same messianic spirit that led Harry Truman to proclaim that “the United States should take the lead in running the world the way the world ought to be run.”

“Exceptionalism”—the belief that the United States is not an ordinary country—embodies the conviction that Americans have a higher purpose to serve in the world. Theirs is a special charge to champion freedom and expand liberty. Earlier in U.S. history, most of America’s political leaders thought that purpose was served best by remaining aloof from the rest of the world and serving as an example of how a free society should conduct its domestic affairs. Now, with the United States standing at the pinnacle of world power, its leaders embraced an activist foreign policy that promoted democratic values throughout the world. With the Soviet Union gone, senior members of the Clinton administration believed that America had a unique opportunity to solidify democratic gains in countries that had formerly been behind the Iron Curtain.

Consolidating Fledgling Democracies

When Bill Clinton became the U.S. commander in chief on January 20, 1993, the idea of bringing the newly formed democracies of Central and Eastern Europe into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had already been circulating in Washington. After debating for nearly a year about whether this would antagonize Russia, Clinton decided to proceed with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative, which established a mechanism for bilateral cooperation between NATO and over twenty European and central Asian countries, most of which had been Warsaw Pact members or republics within the former Soviet Union. For the Russians, who staunchly opposed the NATO expansion and believed that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had agreed to German

reunification based on the understanding that it would not push NATO defenses forward, the PfP plan seemed to provide a pan-European structure that would give Moscow a voice in geostrategic deliberations over the future of Europe. Clinton's foreign policy team had a different view. They conceived of PfP as a way to channel Eastern Europe's nascent democracies into the Atlantic Alliance.¹²

Whereas Russian leaders initially interpreted PfP as an alternative to NATO enlargement, they soon realized that it actually was the precursor to a bigger American-led bloc. Suspicious that NATO remained a mechanism aimed at isolating and containing Russia, many officials in Moscow believed that their counterparts in Washington were taking advantage of Russia's momentary weakness rather than sincerely working to build a new, inclusive structure for European security. In a speech delivered in Budapest on December 5, 1994, Russian president Boris Yeltsin harshly criticized NATO expansion, though he refrained from taking any actions to dissuade neighboring countries from **bandwagoning** with the United States. After the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland acquired NATO membership in 1999, five years later Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia were added to the alliance. Embittered by what he perceived as brazen encroachments by NATO into Russia's sphere of influence, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, described the collapse of the Soviet Union in his 2005 state of the nation address as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the twentieth century. At the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, he elaborated on his interpretation of the post-Cold War world, calling unipolarity unacceptable, describing NATO expansion as a provocation, and complaining that placing frontline military forces along Russia's border created new divisions across the continent.

Despite protests that the United States and its NATO allies had been condescending toward Russia and generally ignored its security interests, at the alliance's Bucharest conference in 2008, NATO leaders proceeded to invite Albania and Croatia to begin accession talks, held out the prospect of accession talks to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, welcomed Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to develop Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP), encouraged Serbia to do the same, and supported the aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine for eventual membership. From Moscow's point of view, the United States did not grasp that Russia was no longer the chaotic, revenue-strapped country of the early 1990s. Russia once again began to act as an assertive, self-confident great power, and vociferously proclaimed that it would not countenance further NATO expansion into former Soviet republics.

Expanding NATO, cautioned George Kennan, "would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era." It would "inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion" and "restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations."¹³ His prediction came to pass in the small, mountainous country of Georgia. Ever since Mikheil Saakashvili became its president, Georgia had adopted a pro-American foreign policy. While not a military threat to Russia, the November 2003 "Rose

Revolution” (so named because anti-government protestors carried roses) that brought Saakashvili to power was perceived to be a political threat. Kremlin leaders saw it (and similar protest movements in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan) as foreign-sponsored efforts to instigate regime change, which, if not stopped, might one day destabilize Russia.

On August 8, 2008, after military units of the Republic of Georgia attacked South Ossetia, a secessionist region that had been seeking to withdraw from Georgia and align itself with Russia, Moscow intervened, routing the Georgian army and subsequently recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another breakaway region. In justifying Russia’s actions, President Dmitry Medvedev emphasized that “Russia, just like other countries in the world, has regions where it has its privileged interests.” Moscow could not idly stand by, he explained, while events in Georgia endangered Russian citizens in the area. Implicit in his comments was a message that the Kremlin would not acquiesce to further NATO expansion eastward.

RETHINKING STATE SOVEREIGNTY IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

The second major addition that the United States advocated for the post-Cold War world order called for a reconceptualization of state sovereignty. Until the fifteenth century, most civilizations remained relatively isolated from one another. Circumscribed by slow, costly, and often dangerous transportation routes, international intercourse tended to occur within self-contained regions of the world. Except for intermittent trade, occasional waves of migrants, and periodic clashes with invaders, contact with distant nations was rare.

By the late twentieth century, the process of **globalization** began changing age-old conceptions about geographic distance and international frontiers. Advances in telecommunication technology were reshaping the world. Markets, for example, no longer corresponded with national boundaries. Rather than commodities being produced by and for people living within a single territorial state, they were increasingly made by people living in different parts of the world for a global marketplace. Cross-border financial flows—borrowing, lending, investing, and currency trading—were also rapidly expanding, leading many economists to ask whether it was still meaningful to think of the nation-state as the basis for organizing economic activity. Concurrently, ethicists wondered whether it made sense to think about sovereignty, nonintervention, and **human rights** from a Westphalian perspective.

From the end of the Thirty Years’ War through the Second World War, the twin principles of sovereignty and nonintervention framed how people thought about human rights in international politics. Sovereignty denoted that no authority stood above the state, and nonintervention meant that states could manage affairs inside their borders without external interference. Rights, from

this standpoint, were prerogatives granted by rulers to their subjects, whose plight was a matter of domestic politics, not the concern of outsiders. How a state treated its citizens was its own business.

Whereas human rights were rarely part of traditional diplomatic discourse, by the second half of the twentieth century international society began to recognize the inherent moral status of humans and the concomitant obligation of states to protect that status. Pundits and policymakers now questioned the relevance of a framework of world order built upon Westphalian footings (see Box 5.1). Was sovereignty sacrosanct? Did it safeguard rogue leaders who abused the civil liberties of their citizens? What could foreign powers do if a state failed in its responsibility to protect its population?

Box 5.1 You Decide

The Republic of Somalia, a poor, predominantly agricultural country located on the Horn of Africa, was commonly described as a “failed state” during the latter part of the twentieth century. It descended into civil war in January 1991, when the government of Mohamed Siad Barre was ousted by a coalition of rebel groups, who subsequently clashed with each other over which clan-based warlord would seize political control. As factional conflict increased, economic disruption and famine spread throughout the country. Responding to reports of mass starvation, on December 3, 1992, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 794, which characterized the situation as a “threat to international peace” and authorized the secretary-general “to use all possible means to establish as soon as possible a secure environment for humanitarian relief operations.” In a televised speech to the nation on the following day, U.S. president George H. W. Bush announced that he was sending troops to Somalia to open supply routes that would allow food to reach those who were suffering. While avowing that “some crises cannot be resolved without American involvement,” Bush underscored the limited objectives of the mission. American forces would be deployed to provide humanitarian assistance, not to pacify the country.

Despite Bush’s reluctance to police Somalia, the U.S. military soon found itself patrolling the capital city of Mogadishu and disarming gunmen. When Bill Clinton replaced Bush in the Oval Office, he began reevaluating America’s role in the region, weighing the alternatives for dealing with the disintegrating Somali state. Three options appeared viable. First, he could order the U.S. troops to continue guarding relief convoys but stipulate that they not take forceful action against militias from the warring clans. Second, he could expand the mission beyond humanitarian relief by attempting to capture the warlords who were carving the country into

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personal fiefdoms. Third, he could withdraw American combat forces and place Somalia's security and well-being in the hands of the United Nations. Each option had potential advantages and drawbacks. The first option would keep supplies flowing to people in need, but it would not remove those who were undermining the country's stability. The second option would directly target the perpetrators of Somalia's political chaos but could grow into an open-ended military operation with significant American casualties. Finally, the third option would prevent the United States from wading into a military quagmire, but it was unlikely that UN forces would be able to maintain peace.

Lurking beneath these options were several thorny questions. Do national leaders have a moral obligation to ameliorate acute deprivation in other countries? What duties does the preeminent power in a unipolar world have for providing humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping forces to failing states? As the architect of the current world order, was the United States responsible for enforcing internationally recognized human rights? The answers to these questions were not self-evident to Clinton and his staff. Controversy abounded. If you were a high-ranking adviser to the president, how would you answer them? Which option would you recommend?

One response to these questions was that Westphalian principles of state sovereignty were still germane. From the perspective of **communitarianism**, human rights were a matter of national jurisdiction. National leaders did not have duties to people outside of their country and should not intervene into the domestic affairs of other states. In a world populated by diverse cultures, where no widely accepted basis existed for choosing among different value systems, communitarians held that references to universal moral obligations were problematic.

Another response came from adherents to **cosmopolitanism**, who insisted that national leaders had a moral obligation to alleviate human suffering no matter where it occurred. All individuals, solely by virtue of being human, had inalienable rights that warranted international protection. If a national leader had the power to prevent insufferable harm from traumatizing people living in another country, action should be taken on the grounds of common humanity. Not only was **humanitarian intervention** legally justified but it was morally necessary in situations where governments flagrantly violated the human rights of their citizens.

While communitarian theories had their adherents, following the Cold War many people gravitated toward the cosmopolitan view that all individuals held fundamental rights and sovereignty should not shield national leaders from outside efforts to stem flagrant violations of those rights. Their stance rested on three

propositions: (1) human rights are an international entitlement; (2) governments committing grave violations of human rights lose their legitimacy and forfeit protection under international law; and (3) the international community has legal and moral obligations to stop human rights violations. During the first quarter century of its existence, the UN developed a detailed list of the inherent rights possessed by all human beings. The most important legal formulation of these rights is expressed in the so-called International Bill of Human Rights, the informal name given to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which was passed by a vote of the UN General Assembly in 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (which were both opened for signature in 1966 and entered into force a decade later). Although Article 2 (7) of the UN Charter prevents members from interfering in the domestic matters of other states, the UN Charter's legal protection does not extend to **genocide** or other horrific abuses of human rights that are shocking to the conscience of the international community.

Human Rights and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia

During the Clinton administration, American policymakers applied this cosmopolitan, post-Westphalian line of thought to the Balkans as Yugoslavia began disintegrating. Yugoslavia initially had been stitched together after the defeat of the Central powers in the First World War with the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Renamed Yugoslavia in 1929, the new country faced several grave problems. Externally, its boundaries were challenged by Italy in the west and Bulgaria in the east. Internally, it was divided by heritage, religion, and alphabet: Serbs had lived under Ottoman rule, they were Orthodox Christians, and they used the Cyrillic alphabet; Croats and Slovenes had lived under Austro-Hungarian rule, they were Roman Catholics, and they used the Latin alphabet. Further complicating matters, parts of Yugoslavia contained significant Muslim populations, composed of the descendants of people who had converted to Islam during the centuries of Ottoman rule. Sharp disagreements over how the country should be governed magnified these divisions. Reeling from ethnic discord and political bickering, Yugoslavia collapsed soon after the Germans invaded in April 1941.

The country was reconstituted after the Second World War as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Throughout the war, a resistance movement known as the Partisans conducted a guerrilla campaign against German garrisons. Led by Josip Broz (who used the pseudonym "Tito"), they proposed building a political system that would transcend the territory's historical divisions. When the fighting ended, Tito established a federation composed of six equal republics: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro. To assuage the feelings of Hungarian and Albanian minorities, two "autonomous regions" were created within the Serbian Republic: Vojvodina and Kosovo, respectively (see Map 5.2). The ethnic composition of the republics

MAP 5.2 THE DISINTEGRATION OF YUGOSLAVIA

The Yugoslav state forged by Tito after World War II began disintegrating a decade after his death. In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence. They were followed later that year by Macedonia and by Bosnia and Herzegovina the subsequent year, which then experienced a civil war among Muslims, Croats, and Serbs living in the territory. During April 1992, the two remaining republics of Serbia and Montenegro formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the remnant of the much larger Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia established by Tito. Armed conflict in the province of Kosovo between the Serbian government and ethnic Albanians began escalating during 1996 and led a military intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) three years later.



Source: Data courtesy of the University Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

varied widely. Whereas 93 percent of Slovenia's population was Slovenian, only 43 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina consisted of Bosniaks (as the Slavic Muslims of the region were called), while another 34 percent were Serbs, and roughly 17 percent were Croats. In addition to variations in the ethnic composition of the republics, levels of economic development also differed. The northern third of the country (Slovenia, Croatia, and the autonomous region of Vojvodina within Serbia) had twice the per capita income of the rest of Yugoslavia, an inequality exacerbated by the desire of northerners to invest their earnings locally rather than have them used to subsidize the less industrialized southern republics.

Civil War in Bosnia

During his years in power, Tito used a blend of personal diplomacy, political decentralization, and brute force to muzzle ethnic discord. However, following his death in 1980, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began falling apart. Having borrowed heavily to finance salary increases for state employees and projects that duplicated in one republic what already existed in others, policymakers in the capital city of Belgrade faced rising inflation and declining productivity. Owing to a wave of regional grievances that accompanied the economic downturn, the Slovene and Croatian parliaments declared independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991. Belgrade responded by sending armored units into the breakaway republics. A negotiated settlement ended hostilities between the Slovenes and the Yugoslav National Army in July, and a cease-fire was reached with the Croats six months later. However, Macedonia declared independence in December, and armed conflict erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina the following year.

On April 27, 1992, the two remaining republics—Serbia and Montenegro—created a new federation known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This third incarnation of Yugoslavia possessed approximately 45 percent of the population and 40 percent of the territory of Tito's Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with Serbia accounting for roughly 94 percent of the new federation's inhabitants and 87 percent of its area.

Almost immediately, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia became embroiled in the civil strife that was tearing Bosnia apart. With sizable Serb and Croat minorities living among a largely Muslim population, Bosnian leaders had feared that the republic would be dismembered by the pull of **irredentism**, with Serbia absorbing territory populated by Bosnian Serbs and Croatia incorporating territory inhabited by Bosnia Croats. In a futile attempt to prevent partition along ethnic lines, they declared independence. Bosnia's Serbs responded by proclaiming the formation of their own state, which they called the Serb Republic of Bosnia. Hostilities soon followed. By early 1993, two-thirds of Bosnia was under Serb control and the capital city of Sarajevo suffered a brutal siege. Meanwhile, Bosnian Croats began attacking Muslim positions around the medieval city of Mostar.

During the summer of 1995, Bosnian Serbs seized the Muslim town of Srebrenica, which had been declared a “safe area” by the UN Security Council. Over the next week, they massacred 7,000 inhabitants in the most gruesome mass execution in Europe since World War II. As the world recoiled in horror, several developments began to turn the tide of battle. First, the Croat minority in Bosnia agreed to join with Bosnia’s Muslims in a coalition that would fight alongside the Republic of Croatia against the Serbs. Second, the combat effectiveness of the Bosnian and Croatian armies began improving: The former was now obtaining desperately needed weapons from Iran, while the latter was receiving military training from retired American officers of Croatian descent. Third, to supplement the economic sanctions already in place against Yugoslavia, increased diplomatic pressure was brought to bear on Belgrade by the so-called Contact Group (the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia) to restrain the Bosnian Serbs. Finally, on August 30, over sixty NATO warplanes began a massive assault on Serb positions around Sarajevo.

As a result of these developments, the Bosnian Serbs faced a joint Croat-Bosnian offensive in August and September, which pushed the Serbs out of the Krajina region of Croatia and toward Banja Luka, the largest Serb city in Bosnia. By October, the United States concluded that the time was ripe for a cease-fire. A rough balance of power existed among the combatants and disagreements between the Croats and Bosnian Muslims threatened to jeopardize their fragile coalition. By stopping the fighting before anyone had to capitulate, peace talks could commence without a shroud of humiliation draped over one or more of the combatants. None of them had achieved all they might have wished on the battlefield, but they were not so dissatisfied with the military status quo that they would balk at negotiating a peace agreement.

In November 1995, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base on the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio, President Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Franjo Tudjman of Croatia, and Slobodan Milošević of Serbia met to sign a peace accord. Under the terms of the agreement, a single Bosnian state was established. It possessed a central government in Sarajevo and two regional entities: a Muslim-Croat Federation encompassing 51 percent of the country’s territory and a Serb Republic of Bosnia comprising 49 percent of the territory. An International Protection Force (IFOR) of 60,000 NATO troops would oversee the disengagement of the rival armies and their withdrawal to predesignated locations. In addition, free elections would be held within nine months, displaced persons were allowed to recover lost property, and all citizens were guaranteed the right to move freely throughout the country. These accords did not provide the foundation for a stable, multiethnic Bosnia, however. Hardly anyone felt allegiance to the state cobbled together at Dayton. Washington had the clout to pressure Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs to sign an agreement, but it underestimated the allure of nationalism and the difficulty of transplanting liberal principles to foreign soil. Being a unipolar power did not facilitate state

building in a land whose culture and history differed profoundly from the American political experience.

Humanitarian Intervention in Kosovo

At the same time that the United States was trying to end the civil war in Bosnia, conflict erupted in Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians began pressing for independence. An autonomous province within Serbia, Kosovo was seen by Serbs as their ancient homeland and the heart of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Roughly the size of Connecticut, it contained the Patriarchate of Pec and many other important religious sites, including the Monastery of Michael the Archangel near Prizren and the fourteenth-century Gracanica and Decani Monasteries. Following the victory of the Ottoman Empire over the Serbs in 1389, many Serbs migrated to lands north of Kosovo and ethnic Albanians began moving into the region. By the last decade of the twentieth century, 90 percent of Kosovo's 2 million inhabitants were Albanians, who had the highest birth rate in Europe and a population largely under the age of thirty.

Friction between Serbs and Kosovo's ethnic Albanians had existed since the founding of Yugoslavia. After Tito's death, it threatened to tear the country apart. On April 24, 1987, Slobodan Milošević, the head of the Serbia branch of the League of Yugoslav Communists, traveled to Kosovo to hear grievances from Serbs living in the province. Assembled where the epic battle had been fought against the Ottomans centuries earlier, the Serbs clashed with local Kosovo Albanian police. Milošević, in a brief but electrifying speech, told the crowd, "No one will ever beat a Serb again." His popularity soared. In May 1989 he was elected to the presidency of Serbia and, a few months later, he rescinded the provisions of the 1974 Constitution that had provided autonomy to Kosovo. Predictably, ethnic Albanians assailed Serbs living in the province. Milošević, who as president of Serbia dominated the newly formed Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, then proposed to force the Albanians out of Kosovo, a policy known euphemistically as "ethnic cleansing."

Although some Kosovar Albanians believed that the best way to oppose Milošević was through passive resistance, others disagreed. In May 1993 several of them gunned down a group of Serb police officers in Glogovac. The incident was the opening salvo in a guerrilla campaign waged by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). For the next two years, the KLA launched sporadic attacks against Serbs, provoking reprisals against villages suspected of sheltering the insurgents, which radicalized even more ethnic Albanians. Beginning in the late spring of 1998, the intermittent sniping and skirmishing of previous years escalated to fierce fighting. After weeks of KLA gains, the Serbs launched a counteroffensive that drove the guerrillas back into hiding. The fighting displaced some 200,000 ethnic Albanians, forcing many to seek refuge in the hills along Kosovo's border with Albania.

Responding to images of burning homes and frightened villagers on the nightly news, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1199, which insisted that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia cease all hostilities affecting the civilian population and alluded to the possibility of further action if it did not obey. NATO made similar demands. When violence erupted again in early 1999, members of the Contact Group summoned the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians to peace talks in Rambouillet, a small town located about thirty miles from Paris. The peace proposal offered to the delegates at Rambouillet called for the disarmament of the KLA, the withdrawal of Yugoslav military units from Kosovo, deployment of a NATO-led peacekeeping force, restoration of Kosovo's autonomy, and a referendum in three years on the region's political future. Much to the surprise of the United States, neither side accepted the proposal. With negotiations at an impasse, the talks were suspended for nineteen days and then resumed in Paris. Tremendous pressure was placed on the Kosovar Albanians during the recess to accept the peace proposal. Although they eventually relented, the Serbs remained intransigent. In a final effort to convince the Serbs to accept the peace proposal, U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke flew to Belgrade to meet with Slobodan Milošević. If anyone had a chance to salvage the situation, it was Holbrooke. Labeled "the Muhammad Ali" of diplomacy by other foreign service officers for being able to wear down even the most difficult opponent, he bluntly informed the Serbian leader that unless he accepted the Rambouillet proposals, NATO would bomb Serbia. Speaking in a firm deliberate tone, Holbrooke promised, "It will be swift, it will be severe, it will be sustained."¹⁴

In a televised address to the nation on March 24, President Bill Clinton argued that "ending this tragedy was a moral imperative." The United States had learned a lesson in Bosnia: Firmness saves lives. "We must apply that lesson in Kosovo," he continued, "before what happened in Bosnia, happens there, too." Clinton's advisers believed that NATO airstrikes against the Bosnian Serbs during the summer of 1995 forced them to negotiate at Dayton. Another dose of air power would presumably compel Milošević to accept the Rambouillet accords.

The NATO air campaign lasted for 78 days. The United States flew 60 percent of the more than 37,000 sorties against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and was responsible for over 90 percent of the electronic warfare missions and over 95 percent of the cruise missiles that were fired. In addition to attacking Serbian military units, the portfolio of targets included oil refineries, radio and television broadcasting facilities, key elements in the transportation infrastructure, and the national power grid. Once the grid went down, Milošević's support began to erode as the civilian population became increasingly demoralized.

Following intense negotiations, Milošević agreed to terminate hostilities. The war did not end with Serbian officials from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia accepting the same proposal they previously rejected at Rambouillet. The United Nations rather than NATO assumed political authority over Kosovo. Following the withdrawal of Yugoslav military forces, civil administration in the province was turned over to the United Nations Interim Administration Mission

in Kosovo (UNMIK), and peacekeeping was undertaken by a 45,000-strong Kosovo Force (KFOR), a NATO-led body that included contingents from twenty non-NATO countries, including Russia. Within days of the establishment of KFOR, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians began returning to Kosovo while Serbs, threatened by KLA members bent on revenge, departed. Unrest continued to plague Kosovo as the economy sputtered, organized crime became rampant, and different factions of ex-KLA guerrillas fought among themselves.

Milošević remained in power when the war ended, but he was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a court in The Hague, Netherlands, created by the UN Security Council to prosecute those who committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide during the armed conflicts that led to the breakup of Tito's Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia. After being defeated in the fall 2000 presidential election and subsequently linked to the theft of state funds, Milošević was taken into custody by Yugoslav authorities and transferred to The Hague to stand trial. Although he died before a verdict was reached, Carla del Ponte, the ICTY chief prosecutor, noted that the indictment of an incumbent head of state for war crimes conveyed an important post-Westphalian principle: National leaders could not evade legal accountability for their actions by invoking state sovereignty.

Others drew a different lesson from the U.S. experience in Bosnia and Kosovo. They believed that too many policymakers in Washington concluded that America only had to throw its weight around to get results. These observers drew a straight line from the Balkans to Iraq.¹⁵

ANTICIPATORY SELF-DEFENSE AND PREVENTIVE WAR

Promoting democracy and reconceptualizing state sovereignty were not the only modifications in the post-Cold War order that the United States sponsored while it stood at the pinnacle of world power. It also sought to redefine the concept of self-defense.

Following Al Qaeda's 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, American aircraft and special operations forces struck the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had harbored Osama bin Laden and furnished his operatives with a place to train future terrorists. Suspicious of possible ties between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, President George W. Bush next turned his sights on Iraq. When the 1991 Persian Gulf War ended, Saddam Hussein was allowed to remain in power, ostensibly because the United States did not want to become entrapped in a prolonged occupation of a fragmented, unstable country. The 9/11 attacks prompted a reevaluation of that decision. Modern technology allowed transnational terrorist networks to strike almost anywhere with devastating consequences. Saddam, it was now feared, was developing weapons of

mass destruction and might provide them to Al Qaeda. Without fixed territory or a population to protect, Osama bin Laden could not be deterred by threats of retaliation; consequently, Bush advocated a third amendment to the prevailing ideas about world order—changing the way that the international community interpreted self-defense. Identifying Iraq as a potential source of terrorist activity, he ordered a massive air campaign against Baghdad on March 19, 2003. In short order, the U.S. military removed Saddam Hussein from power, dismantled his security apparatus, and began redesigning the Iraqi political system. America, the Bush administration explained, had acted in anticipatory self-defense.

Since the earliest days of the modern international system, self-defense has been understood as a sovereign right, one that every state possessed in order to protect itself in the rough and tumble world of international politics. Specifying when this right could be invoked has always been controversial, however. International law authorized states to use armed force once they had been attacked, so long as their military actions were proportionate and they avoided targeting noncombatants. But was force also warranted against potential future dangers? Was it lawful to assail threats that are not wholly formed? Most legal analysts agreed that it was acceptable to preempt an impending strike. If a state had insufficient time for an effective nonmilitary response, national leaders need not wait until an advancing enemy had crossed their country's borders before taking military action. Preemptive defense, as U.S. secretary of state Daniel Webster put it in the 1837 *Caroline* incident, was justified in situations of “instant, overwhelming necessity” that leave “no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation.”¹⁶

The horrific events of September 11, 2001, led the Bush administration to push for a more proactive conception of self-defense. **Terrorism** was no longer a rare and relatively remote threat. Not only did groups like Al Qaeda have global reach, but stealth, ingenuity, and fanaticism made them frighteningly lethal. Emphasizing the peril posed by violent extremists armed with weapons of mass destruction, Bush argued for the right to take preventive military action against any states that supported, trained, or harbored terrorists. Whereas **preemption** involves the use of force to intercept a military strike that is about to occur, a **preventive war** entails the use of force to eliminate any possible future strike—even if there is no reason to believe that the capacity to mount an attack currently existed. In short, the grounds for preemption lie in evidence of a credible, imminent threat, whereas the basis for prevention rests on suspicions of an incipient, contingent threat.

The logic underpinning Bush's call for preventive, anticipatory self-defense was built on the premise that waiting for dire threats to fully materialize was waiting too long. America could not afford to stand idly in the face of grave and gathering dangers. Even if there was just a 1 percent chance of a catastrophic terrorist attack, insisted Vice President Dick Cheney, the United States had to act as if it were a certainty.¹⁷ As he and others in the administration saw it, absolute proof of an enemy's capabilities and intentions should not be a precondition for

preventive military action; that would be too high a threshold in a world where warnings of a devastating attack would be limited and confirmation of the perpetrator's identity unattainable in operational time. As President Bush's September 17, 2002, report, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* concluded, in these circumstances "the best defense is a good offense."

Despite the allure of revising the framework of world order to allow swift, decisive attacks against budding threats, the Bush administration's position on anticipatory self-defense did not gain widespread international acceptance. Critics feared that such a permissive doctrine would set a risky precedent. If mere suspicions about an opponent become a justifiable cause for military action, every truculent leader would have a pretext for ordering first strikes against prospective foes. Critics further argued that preventive wars could easily be triggered by unreliable intelligence reports. Predicting another state's future behavior is difficult because leadership intentions are hard to discern, information on long-term goals may be shrouded in secrecy, and signals about its policy plans may be distorted or missed due to background noise. A major policy dilemma facing national leaders contemplating preventive war is the ratio of "false positives" to "false negatives." How can leaders avoid unleashing preventive wars against states that are wrongly suspected to be planning aggression without foregoing action against states that are indeed planning aggression?

Finally, those opposing anticipatory self-defense also noted that foreign policymakers must be attentive to how addressing one problem may lay the foundation for more challenging problems. The 2003 invasion of Iraq ousted Saddam Hussein, but it unexpectedly entangled Washington in a protracted insurgency that led to numerous casualties, drained resources, and frustrated the U.S. effort to build a new democracy in the volatile Middle East.

THE TWILIGHT OF UNIPOLARITY

Ever since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, war has been less frequent when an unambiguous rank order existed among the principal members of the international system and a single dominant state held a decisive advantage over its nearest challenger. However, throughout modern history these conditions have been rare and fleeting due to differential growth rates among the major powers. When relative productivity and investment in the dominant state decline, when the costs of maintaining its military superiority and underwriting international institutions soar, and when challengers develop greater capacity to extract resources and become more technologically innovative, unipolarity begins to wane.

Leading From Behind

Changes in the configuration of the global system surfaced as the presidency of George W. Bush drew to a close. America's unipolar moment was ending. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had imposed by this time an enormous economic

burden on the United States, which was funded through deficit spending rather than bonds or tax increases. Estimates of the war-related costs ranged between \$1 trillion and \$5 trillion, when such factors as lifetime care of wounded soldiers and the economic value of lost productivity of National Guard and Reserve troops were included in the calculations. Instead of the \$5.6 trillion surplus projected by the Congressional Budget Office for the first decade of the new century, the level of federal debt exceeded \$8.9 trillion by 2007.

The financial crisis of 2008–2009 added to the country's woes. Plummeting values in the housing market triggered a collapse in financial assets that were collateralized by real estate wealth. The economic carnage spread from highly leveraged investment banks to the insurance industry and commercial banking and then to corporations such as Chrysler and General Motors, which relied on easily accessible consumer credit to sell their products. The Dow Jones Industrial Average lost roughly a third of its value in 2008, household wealth dropped by more than 20 percent, and unemployment climbed to 10 percent. Nor were the effects limited to the United States. Stock markets worldwide tumbled, global foreign direct investment outflows declined by 42 percent, world trade contracted by 9 percent, and total global output as measured by GDP shrank by 2.3 percent.

Ranking as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, the financial crisis had far-reaching implications for U.S. foreign policy under President Barack Obama, who had recently been elected. Not only did it erode faith in the American gospel of privatization, deregulation, and open markets, but it led several prominent figures to suggest that a post-American era was emerging.¹⁸ No longer could Washington bankroll world order. It needed to rebalance commitments with capabilities. Worried that the United States was overextended, President Obama sought to convince allies to help shoulder financial burdens at the same time that he tried to engage America's adversaries diplomatically. On the one hand, he encouraged members of the Atlantic Alliance to increase military spending and become more assertive in defending their common values. On the other hand, he strove to reset relations with Russia, reconcile with Cuba and the Muslim world, and pivot toward the ascending nations of Asia. In a speech delivered at West Point on December 1, 2009, Obama said that he would not pursue policy goals that were beyond what could be achieved at a reasonable cost. "We can't . . . relieve all the world's misery," he conceded. International politics is "tough, complicated, messy" and "full of hardship and tragedy." To make headway "we have to choose where we can make a real impact." We must recognize "that there are going to be times where the best we can do is to shine a spotlight on something that's terrible, but not believe that we can automatically solve it."¹⁹ Washington would still play a primary role in setting the global agenda, he reassured the nation, but henceforth it would recognize the limits of military power.

For Obama, overreaching posed more dangers for America than underreaching.²⁰ Retrenchment, from his perspective, was a pragmatic response to a decade of overreaching. It entailed scaling back, cutting losses, and sharing

responsibilities. America would lead by articulating goals, empowering collaborators, and taking measured actions to keep its partners on course. One member of his administration characterized it as “leading from behind”—guiding others like a shepherd herding his or her flock.

An example of this occurred in 2011, when a NATO-led coalition of nineteen states imposed a no-fly zone, naval blockade, and bombing campaign aimed at the regime of Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi. Following a rebellion in late 2010 against Tunisian dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, popular uprisings had spread across North Africa, eventually toppling Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak a few months later. Mubarak’s ouster encouraged Qaddafi’s political foes, who seized control over several cities in eastern Libya. Fearing the volatile leader’s threats to massacre opposition forces, French president Nicolas Sarkozy, backed by British prime minister David Cameron, called for military intervention. While President Obama insisted that the Libyan government refrain from inflicting violence on its opponents, he hesitated to take direct action. Unless there was an existential threat to the United States, Obama believed that it would be best to avoid becoming mired in another war with a Muslim country.

On March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for “all necessary measures” to protect Libyan civilians. The mission soon widened into ousting Qaddafi, with the United States playing a central, albeit somewhat veiled, role. Although American allies flew the majority of the sorties and largely enforced the naval blockade, the United States provided the bulk of intelligence-gathering and refueling aircraft as well as precision-guided munitions and targeting assistance. Qaddafi was overthrown at a relatively low cost to the coalition. Only one aircraft was lost, and no major casualties were incurred. Yet the political results were dreadful. Civil order in Libya disintegrated, convincing Obama that further military involvement in the Middle East should be avoided. Thus, when Syria disintegrated into civil war shortly thereafter, Obama refused to become deeply involved, even when Syrian president Bashar al-Assad crossed his “red line” by using chemical weapons against the rebels.

Financial constraints and apprehension over becoming ensnared in an interminable **asymmetric war** also influenced how the Obama administration tackled the unrelenting conflict in Afghanistan. One approach considered by the White House was a search-and-destroy strategy that attempted to grind down insurgent forces with massive firepower. It was rejected because collateral damage might alienate civilians and strengthen their support for the insurgency. A second approach was a clear-and-hold strategy that assumed protecting the noncombatants within territories liberated from rebel control would be critical for gaining their assistance. Rather than operating out of remote, fortress-like compounds, U.S. forces would live in the neighborhoods they wished to secure, building relationships with locals that allowed them to discriminate between those rebels who could be won over and those who were irreconcilable. Despite seeming to work under the command of General David Petraeus in Iraq, senior officials lamented that this approach was slow and expensive, requiring roughly one soldier or

policeman for every fifty civilians. Equally troubling, no successful counterinsurgency in the twentieth century took less than a decade.²¹ With the war in Afghanistan costing over \$100 billion a year and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives complaining about the national debt, Obama soured on counterinsurgency as a solution to the turmoil in Afghanistan and began looking for a way to draw down U.S. troop strength.

Given the drawbacks of search-and-destroy and clear-and-hold, Vice President Joe Biden advocated a strategy of counterterrorism—eliminating incorrigible militants with special operations forces and precision-guided missiles fired from drones. Though less expensive than the alternatives under consideration, this approach had shortcomings, too. As one presidential adviser observed, it was like exterminating one bee at a time rather than destroying the hive.²² However, when a team of U.S. Navy SEALs killed Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011, Obama embraced counterterrorism. According to the 2012 strategic guidance for the Department of Defense, U.S. forces would “no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.” Whenever possible, the United States would adopt “low-cost and small-footprint approaches” to achieving its security objectives.²³

Sustaining the Liberal World Order at a Bearable Cost

Throughout America’s unipolar moment, each occupant of the White House tried to enhance the voluntary, rules-based international order that their predecessors had constructed after the Second World War. These efforts were numerous, and most produced positive results. Several arms control agreements were negotiated with the Kremlin to lower the odds that an arms race between the United States and the Russian Federation would escalate to a mutually destructive nuclear exchange. The most important accords were the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties of 1991 (START I), 1993 (START II), and 2010 (New START), and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty of 2002 (SORT), which cut the number of weapons in each country’s nuclear inventory. On the economic front, Canada, Mexico, and the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, and two years later the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was superseded by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which had the authority to enforce trading rules and adjudicate trade disputes. All of these agreements rested on the conviction that world order would be enhanced by framing world politics as a **positive-sum game** and embedding American power within a set of rules that allayed cutthroat competition.

In addition to strengthening the liberal rules-based order, Washington also tried to extend its reach, expanding the zone of free-market democracies and intervening abroad to shore up human rights and the rule of law. Former Soviet republics and members of the Warsaw Pact were brought into NATO, and, although the United States did not stop the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, it

inserted itself into the turbulent domestic politics of Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Serbia, and Libya. Unchecked by peer competitors following the collapse of the Soviet Union, America redefined its strategic interests broadly. “We’re an empire now,” proclaimed a senior adviser to President George W. Bush in 2004, “and when we act, we create our own reality.”²⁴

However, by the end of Bush’s second term, American optimism had eroded. Despite Obama’s ability to engineer a recovery from the 2008–2009 economic crisis, with thirty-two consecutive quarters of job creation and financial growth, faith in the capacity of the world’s preeminent state to accomplish ambitious foreign policy goals unilaterally had faded. The United States remained at the summit of world power, but its comparative advantage over other great powers was clearly receding. Intractable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, alongside the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and the unprecedented growth of America’s national debt, sapped American strength. At the very time that Washington’s ability to project American power was declining, great-power challengers were rising. Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula and supported separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine. China declared that the South and East China Seas were areas of “core interest” and began moving military assets into both regions under its security strategy of “active defense” which, ironically, mirrored the “anticipatory self-defense” justification that the United States had voiced when it invaded Iraq in 2003.²⁵ To many onlookers, the American-led liberal order was unraveling, and in its place the growing rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China threatened to plunge the world into a new Cold War.

As his presidency drew to a close, Barack Obama penned a letter to his successor. “American leadership in this world is indispensable,” he counseled. “It’s up to us, through action and example, to sustain the international order that’s expanded steadily since the end of the Cold War, and upon which our own wealth and safety depend.”²⁶ In the light of Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric, it seemed unlikely that he would heed Obama’s advice.

KEY TERMS

asymmetric war 119	human rights 106
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coercive diplomacy 97	irredentism 111
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