

The Rise and Fall of the Unipolar Concert

Foreign policy experts have struggled to describe the unusual character of contemporary world politics. Much of the debate revolves around the concept of polarity, which deals with how power is distributed among nations, as experts ask if the United States is still a unipolar power or in decline as new powers emerge.¹ The polarity debate, however, obscures more than it clarifies because the distribution of power does not determine the fate of nations by itself. It leaves out strategic choice and does not predict how the United States would exercise its power or how others would respond to U.S. primacy. World politics can take many paths, not just one, under any particular distribution of power. The most remarkable feature of post-Cold War world politics has not been the much-discussed power accumulation of the United States—although that is indeed noteworthy—but rather the absence of counterbalancing and revisionist behavior by other major powers.

Recently, we have seen the return of both balancing behavior (i.e. efforts to deter or defeat the United States) and revisionism (i.e. efforts to change the status quo) by Russia and China. Moscow has sought to prevent the further expansion of the European Union and NATO through military interventions and coercive diplomacy in Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia. It revised the map of Europe by annexing Crimea, which was the first act of irredentism there since World War II. And it has launched countless provocations—such as incursions into air and maritime space—against NATO and EU member states including Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. Russia has also actively built up its military capacity to more effectively carry out balancing and

Thomas Wright is a fellow and director of the project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. He can be reached at twright@brookings.edu and on Twitter at [@thomaswright08](https://twitter.com/thomaswright08). He would like to thank Fiona Hill, Bruce Jones, John McLaughlin, and Jeremy Shapiro for discussion of the ideas in this article.

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revisionist strategies by means of special operations and unconventional warfare. For its part, China has sought to revise the maritime status quo in the South China Sea through aggressive operations in the Scarborough Shoal, the second Thomas Reef, and in Vietnamese waters, as well as by flexing its muscles in the East China Sea and elsewhere. It is also actively balancing against the United States by means of a major military build-up, especially with asymmetric weapons to blunt U.S. power projection capabilities.

In this article, I seek to explain the prior absence and current return of counterbalancing, great power revisionism, and the implications for U.S. grand strategy. I argue that what we have seen is the rise and fall of a Unipolar Concert, similar to the Concert of Europe in the 19th century. Whereas the Concert of Europe was essentially a bipolar arrangement, with the co-hegemonies of Russia and Britain standing atop all others, the Unipolar Concert saw the United States set the agenda with others following suit.

The demise of the Unipolar Concert presents a significant challenge for U.S. strategy.

For a generation, U.S. strategic thinking has been heavily conditioned by the rise and existence of the Unipolar Concert—successive presidents saw geopolitical competition as a thing of the past and focused on international cooperation to tackle shared challenges such as terrorism and

nonproliferation. The demise of the Unipolar Concert marks the return of geopolitical competition and presents a significant challenge for U.S. strategy.

A Concert of Powers: Europe

A concert of powers has very special meaning in foreign policy. According to analysts Charles Kupchan and Clifford Kupchan, a concert of powers is when “[a] small group of major powers agrees to work together to resist aggression,” monitor events, and orchestrate initiatives. “Though a concert is predicated upon the assumption that its members share compatible views of a stable international order, it allows for subtle jockeying and competition to take place among them. Power politics is not completely eliminated...But the cooperative framework of a concert, and its members’ concern about preserving peace, prevent such balancing from escalating to overt hostility and conflict.”²

Inevitably, such a description conjures up images of the Concert of Europe, which formed after the Napoleonic Wars and the Settlement of Vienna in 1815 and lasted in various forms until the Crimean War of 1854.³ It initially consisted of four powers—Russia, Britain, Austria, and Prussia—with France brought in two years later. The Concert of Europe transformed European politics. Two key elements here are relevant to assess contemporary events. The first is that

although the Concert of Europe involved restraint and the limitation of security competition by the member states, this does not mean that the major powers did not compete against each other. They did. But any competition and conflicts between them were limited so they could pursue their collective interests, the most important of which was preventing a revival of revolution and upheaval in Europe.

The second relevant element concerns the distribution of power upon which the Concert of Europe rested. For many years, scholars believed that it rested on a balance of power among five countries and that wise statesmen manipulated this balance to prevent aggression and solve crises. However, perhaps the most distinguished historian of 19th-century Europe, Paul Schroeder, has painstakingly and persuasively argued that the Concert of Europe did not rest on a balance of power at all. According to Schroeder, the “essential power relations were hegemonic, not balanced, and a hegemonic distribution of power, along with other factors, made the system work.”⁴ The three central powers (France, Austria, and Prussia) were much weaker than the two flanking powers, Russia and Britain. In fact, Russia and Britain were each hegemonic powers in their own right.⁵ Thus, the Concert of Europe rested on this bipolarity. All nations were united in their support for monarchy and their opposition to revolutionary movements, but Russia and Britain were the two dominant powers—not just in continental Europe but also beyond, in the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Levant, the Balkans, and the Baltic.⁶

The Concert became the means by which these two “superpowers” imposed order on Europe. It was fairer, more restrained, and more cooperative than the orders that preceded and succeeded it, but it was nevertheless an order imposed by superpowers. When the two superpowers wanted, they acted in defiance of the views of the other members of the Concert. Schroeder explains: “nothing prevented Britain and Russia, whenever they chose, from combining to impose their will on the rest of Europe, regardless of the feelings, the interests, and even, in certain instances, the independence and integrity of other members. This happened twice after 1815, in 1826–1829 over the Greek question, and in 1839–1841 over the second Muhammad Ali crisis in the Near East.”⁷

The Unipolar Concert

Using this understanding, world politics from 1990 to 2008 is an even better fit for a concert than the Concert of Europe. After the Cold War, only one state could provide for its own security and stood head and shoulders above all others in its capacity to affect change in the international system. That power was, of course, the United States. It set out its strategic objectives which the other major powers either facilitated or endorsed and supported. Thus, the post-Cold

War Concert of Power rested on U.S. unipolarity and hegemony as well as the collective willingness to work within it, to varying degrees.

Some may argue that the security system from 1990 to 2008 was not a concert because the United States was simply too powerful to be bound by it or to be concerned by collective sanction.⁸ However, this overlooks the fact that a Concert does not mean the great powers share power. It simply means that they agree on a certain framework and set of rules. Those rules can be handed down from two hegemonic powers—as was the case in the Concert of Europe—or by one, as was the case in the post-Cold War world. In each case, the hegemonic powers did not use their power without limits; they agreed to operate within boundaries, and when they exceeded them they would usually return to those limits relatively quickly.

As Georgetown University professor Daniel Nexon wrote:

we are already living in a Concert system, albeit it one deeply inflected by American primacy. The argument that we aren't...is based on a flawed conception of just what the Concert of Europe did. The Concert did not preclude deep disagreements among its members. The great powers of Europe often acted without consensus. They even fought wars with one another during the lifetime of the system. But they did coalesce to manage a number of crises within Europe and on its periphery and otherwise to function as a kind of geo-strategic cartel, and lack of agreement did sometimes constrain one or more of the members of the Concert system. This sounds a good deal like the current order—with the notable difference that we haven't seen any great-power wars.⁹

The U.S.-led international order had several components. First, it consisted of a series of defensive alliances that formed the bedrock of regional security orders in East Asia and Europe. In the Atlantic area this was NATO, a multilateral and institutionalized alliance. In East Asia, it consisted of a series of bilateral alliances with the United States—the so called hub-and-spoke model.¹⁰

Second, it provided for an open global economy including liberal trade, the free movement of capital, and formal institutions.¹¹ This provided for the free movement of goods and capital, foreign direct investment, dispute resolution mechanisms, a lender of last resort, and development assistance. Institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the G20 were crucial actors here.

Third, it included international law and the United Nations. The United States did not always abide by international law or by UN decisions, but both played a significant role in shaping U.S. behavior—Washington has worked within the UN Security Council much more than it has ignored it, including on the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Syria. The United States also used both international law and the UN to advance its strategic interests and worldview.

Fourth, the U.S.-led order sought to promote and strengthen liberal values internationally, such as democracy and human rights, primarily through

international institutions but occasionally unilaterally or in coalitions of the willing.¹² This was manifest through the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), institutions like the UN Human Rights Council, support for fledgling democracies, and incorporating human rights into overall diplomatic efforts.

Fifth and finally, it included an intensification of bilateral engagement with Russia and China as well as strict limitations on security competition with both. This point is perhaps less understood than the first four so it is worth underscoring. Over the past two decades, the United States has dramatically reduced its forces in Europe and its capacity to balance against Russia. NATO did expand but NATO's military capacity in Europe steadily declined, not just as a result of declining European defense budgets but also because the alliance adopted new global priorities to cope with the war in Afghanistan and the fight against terrorism.¹³ Although the United States played a more active hedging role in Asia, it never sought to contain China; as we shall see, active balancing against China only really began to occur in 2010, after Chinese assertiveness unsettled Asia's security order.

This is not the order that Russia and China would have created if they were the world's largest power, but they have benefited considerably from it. Russia benefited from the pacification of Europe and the transformation of Germany. For all of Russia's complaints about NATO expansion, prior to its invasion of eastern Ukraine there were no NATO troops in Eastern Europe. Similarly, China benefited from a subdued Japan and relatively benign East Asia. Even more significantly, China emerged as a huge winner from globalization, which facilitated a rapid ascent that would have otherwise been denied to it if the United States organized the order along mercantilist principles. China was also a beneficiary of U.S.-provided public goods, especially the U.S. guarantee to keep sea lanes open for trade. Russia benefited less from the global economy, largely because of its domestic failures to reform its own economy, but it still gained much more than it would have from a more closed order. Both Russia and China were able to play an important role in the UN Security Council. They shaped world events, and on the rare occasions where the United States acted in the face of their opposition they were still able to influence the process and the court of world public opinion. Above all, Russia and China benefited from an order whereby the United States agreed to significant restraints in exchange for legitimacy. We tend to focus on the isolated incidents where those restraints broke down—particularly Iraq—but it is worth noting that the United

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States was bound to its alliances and international commitments. Even George W. Bush returned to the fold in his second term.

Meanwhile during the course of the Unipolar Concert, new powers began to emerge—Brazil, India, Indonesia, and others. Sometimes, these powers were lumped in with China and Russia. A Goldman Sachs economist, Jim O’Neill, came up with the moniker BRICs and it stuck. The BRICs even began to meet formally as a group. But foreign policy experts were always more skeptical than economists or investors. They noted that Russia was actually in a long-term decline, which stood in contrast to a country like Brazil that was very much rising. They also argued that China stood apart from other emerging powers in that its rise was faster and of an appreciably larger scale than anyone else. China was clearly on its way to becoming the second-strongest power in the international system, next only to the United States, while Brazil displayed little interest in military power at all.

Nevertheless, the emerging powers along with Russia and China all played an important role in the international order. They were significant actors in world politics but were not fully a part of the institutional architecture. They were underrepresented in the IMF and World Bank, and China only joined the WTO in 2006 while Russia is still not a member. None are allies of the United States so, as NATO and the alliances in Asia took on more political tasks, they found themselves excluded. Integrating “the BRICs” into the international order became a major objective of Western powers, especially those who are more liberal internationalist in outlook.

A unipolar concert is the best description for the post-Cold War period because it captures the informal understanding with potential rivals and why they decided not to balance against the United States, even though they were often unhappy with U.S. actions. Other scholars have different explanations. Foreign policy analyst Charles Krauthammer wrote about a “unipolar moment” where the United States was free to act as it wished given the power differential, but he overlooked the fact that the order the United States created and operated within reduced the incentive for Russia and China to balance against the United States.¹⁴

On the other end of the spectrum, Princeton University professor John Ikenberry argues that the post-Cold War order was a constitutional order that goes well beyond the more informal Concert.¹⁵ For Ikenberry, the constitutional order functions in much the same way that domestic politics do—there are legal restraints upon the powerful that they abide by in exchange for less powerful actors recognizing their rule as legitimate. Ikenberry, the preeminent theorist of liberal order, sheds much light on great power dynamics. However, the order the United States created may have constitutional characteristics when applied to the Western bloc—i.e. the countries that were a part of it during the Cold War—but not when

it includes China, Russia, Brazil, and others. These countries were not afforded the rights accorded to Western countries and they did not see the success of the U.S. order as a desirable strategic necessity. They tolerated it and worked within it, but they were and they remain apart from it, both because it has not accommodated them and because they have not wanted to truly integrate into it.

The Underlying Causes of the Unipolar Concert

Foreign policy scholars have come up with two reasons for this absence of observed balancing and period of great power peace. The first is that the United States was too far ahead of other countries for potential competitors to have much of a chance to overturn the status quo. Russia could object to the U.S.-led attack on Serbia in 1999 and China could privately covet disputed territories in its neighborhood, but they had no viable strategy to directly confront Washington. Dartmouth professor William Wohlforth called this the stability of a unipolar world:

The raw power advantage of the United States means that an important source of conflict in previous systems is absent: hegemonic rivalry over leadership of the international system. No other major power is in a position to follow any policy that depends for its success on prevailing against the United States in a war or an extended rivalry. None is likely to take any step that might invite the focused enmity of the United States. At the same time, unipolarity minimizes security competition among the other great powers.¹⁶

In other words, for balancing to occur, the balancer must believe that it will be effective. If the gap between the challenger and the existing hegemon is so wide as to be unbridgeable, balancing will not be effective and may only alienate and hurt the balancer.¹⁷ Wohlforth's insight is perhaps the most important cause of the Unipolar Concert. The Concert came into existence because the United States was winning the geopolitical game. Its immense power advantage meant that it had the prerogative to set the terms of the international order. As long as it was winning the game, it would be extremely difficult for weaker powers to challenge it.

This was only part of the story, however. If the entire world, including Europe and Japan, ganged up against the United States, the U.S. advantage would have eroded very quickly. That such a prospect appears absurd illustrates another reason behind the great power peace—most major states, including China, wanted to become a part of the existing order as it offered their best chance of advancement. The first person to recognize the potential for this dynamic was Francis Fukuyama in an essay that became instantly famous and highly controversial.¹⁸ “The End of History and the Last Man” captured the removal of ideological competition from world politics and the triumph of the market economy and liberal democracy model. All states would gravitate toward market

economics for pure self-interest. Some would continue to stave off the forces of democracy but they would lack a universal or generalizable alternative model, like communism, that could be exported to other countries.

Although critics seized on the terrorist attacks of September 11 to critique Fukuyama, for much of the post-Cold War his prediction bore fruit. The open global economy and international institutions allowed emerging powers to grow wealthy and have a say in the rules of the game. Rather than trying to overturn the order, they wanted to be a part of it.¹⁹

Other countries devised various strategies for coping with U.S. power. Sometimes they embraced it and sought closer relations with the United States (bandwagoning), either through deeper alliances or partnerships or by trying to bind the United States to international institutions. On other occasions, they tried to throw up some roadblocks by trying to delegitimize U.S. power in the court of public opinion or by using international law to increase the costs of unilateral action. However, they never countenanced formal counter-balancing, which many political scientists believe has been the normal response of great powers when confronted with a more powerful state.²⁰ And even when they sought to cope with U.S. power, they sought to embrace and support the U.S.-led order as a whole.

How the Concert Influenced U.S. Strategic Thinking

The notion of a great power peace or concert and the idea that it was caused by U.S. power and the appeal of the U.S.-led international order influenced successive U.S. administrations. After the fall of the Soviet Union, U.S. strategic thinking changed course. U.S. leaders downplayed differences between the great powers and emphasized the world's common challenges—including

The concert was created by both U.S. power and the appeal of the U.S.-led international order.

terrorism, nuclear proliferation, mass atrocities, managing the global economy, and climate change—and the need to tackle them together. President George W. Bush is remembered for the war on terrorism and for attempting to democratize the Middle East, but in retrospect his belief in a great power concert is at least as striking. Bush bought into both explanations for the concert—unipolarity and common interests. In a June 2002 speech at West Point he told the cadets: “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.”²¹ This was a radical statement. He was arguing that great power rivalry occurred as nations became

more equal in power. The United States would do the world a favor by ensuring that never happened so the great powers could focus on common challenges.

But Bush also believed that the great power peace was rooted in common interests. In the introduction to his first National Security Strategy he wrote:

Today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war. Today, the world's great powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. The United States will build on these common interests to promote global security. We are also increasingly united by common values. Russia is in the midst of a hopeful transition, reaching for its democratic future and a partner in the war on terror. Chinese leaders are discovering that economic freedom is the only source of national wealth. In time, they will find that social and political freedom is the only source of national greatness.²²

It is a piece of analysis that draws heavily on the end of history thesis. Later, in echoes of Ikenberry, Bush administration deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick would articulate the concept of China as “a responsible stakeholder, China would be more than just a member—it would work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success. Cooperation as stakeholders will not mean the absence of differences—we will have disputes that we need to manage. But that management can take place within a larger framework where the parties recognize a shared interest in sustaining political, economic, and security systems that provide common benefits.”²³

The Zoellick speech was hugely influential and reflected the hope that as China's power continued to rise, China's leaders would exercise it in a manner consistent with the U.S.-led international order. The Bush administration also sought to, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice put it, “change the relationship with ... (another) emerging power”—India—which had been a goal since the very beginning of the administration in 2001.²⁴ It negotiated and signed an agreement for civil nuclear energy cooperation with India, which also served to end U.S. isolation of India after its nuclear test in 1998.

On great power peace, the Obama administration tried to build on the Bush administration's great power concert approach. By the 2008 election, Democratic foreign policy experts generally expressed the belief that the United States and the rest of the international community shared the same major threats and challenges including terrorism, climate change, pandemic disease, instability in the global economy, and nuclear proliferation.²⁵ States would continue to have their differences—such as China and the United States over Taiwan, Russia and the United States over Georgia—but these differences were secondary to what they held in common. Senior administration officials began to use the term multipolarity, which they associated with greater cooperation and burden sharing instead of competition and less cooperation.

For instance, speaking in 2009 in Ukraine, which was to become a global flashpoint in the return of power politics, Vice President Joseph Biden said “We are trying to build a multi-polar world, in which like-minded nations make common cause of our common challenges—the stronger our partners, the more effective our partnerships.”²⁶

President Obama’s “reset” was a major strategic initiative to bring Russia back into the fold as a partner in the international order. Meeting in London in 2009 during the G20, Obama and President Dmitri Medvedev issued a joint statement declaring that they are “ready to move beyond Cold War mentalities and chart a fresh start in relations between our two countries.”²⁷ Obama also reached out to China in an effort to deepen the bilateral relationship. He supported institutionalizing the G20 at the leaders level and giving it responsibility for management of the global economy. At the London G20 summit, Obama explained his view on why the United States needed to bring non-Western powers into the fold: “Well, if there’s just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy, that’s a—that’s an easier negotiation. But that’s not the world we live in, and it shouldn’t be the world that we live in.”²⁸

In July 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said that while states have shared interests, they also “face very real obstacles—for reasons of history, geography, ideology, and inertia” which “stand in the way of turning commonality of interest into common action.” Consequently, the “heart of America’s mission in the world today” is to create new partnerships and to “promote universal values through the power of our example and the empowerment of people” in order to “forge the global consensus required to defeat the threats, manage the dangers, and seize the opportunities of the 21st century.”²⁹ The Obama administration began with a worldview that saw the United States as playing a leadership role in solving problems that all major states had in common. The notion that Russia or China or any other major power (with the exception of so-called rogue states like North Korea) would

The concert began to fall apart even before Obama took office.

have interests that could lead to conflict with the United States was anathema. Or if they did have conflicting interests, it was assumed that they paled in comparison to shared interests.

The notion that great power security competition was a thing of the past was a major influence in all three post-Cold War U.S. administrations. It was a strategic conclusion drawn from the existence and apparent success of the unipolar concert. With his

promise of multilateralism and strategic restraint, President Obama seemed poised to take global cooperation to new heights. However, in reality, the concert began to fall apart even before President Obama took office.

The Demise of the Unipolar Concert

This unipolar concert could not and did not last. As Russia recovered and China grew, they would have the option, previously denied to them, of being more assertive regionally. That may not have mattered if they were enthusiastic backers of the status quo, but they were not. There was an irreconcilable tension at the heart of the concert: the West hoped that the order would evolve in a way that transformed China and Russia into more responsible stakeholders in the international system. This would not necessarily entail democratization in the foreseeable future, but it would mean that these states would embark upon a positive trajectory of political reform and they would play an increasingly constructive role in upholding and strengthening the international order. For their part, Russia and China hoped that the order would evolve in such a way that would give them greater influence in world politics, including the ability to block military interventions where they disagreed with them, and to increase their own role in their regions. Thus, Russia would have something approximating a sphere of influence in the Caucasus and China would have a greater role in South East Asia.

These two objectives could coexist for a while, but they were fundamentally incompatible over the long run. The United States had no intention of facilitating a Russian or Chinese sphere of influence because it saw no need to concede any ground to them. Moreover, the countries that would be in such a sphere of influence have their own agency and would strongly resist. And, such an arrangement could have destabilized U.S. alliances and strategic partnerships. After the Cold War, U.S. policymakers believed that playing a role in the U.S.-led order was in the interests of Russia and China and that those in either country seeking a return of power politics were anachronistic and counterproductive. Thus, from the perspective of the United States, potential challengers like Russia and China as well as emerging powers like Brazil and India could play an increasing role in the international order only to the degree that they accepted the basic legitimacy of the existing arrangement.

The United States also hoped to enlarge the security order to include new countries and that this expanded order would have purposes other than the fight against terrorism. Thus, the seven-country enlargement of NATO in 2004 and the eastward movement of the European Union would create a Europe whole and free. The deepening of U.S. alliances in Asia and the engagement of non-allied countries like India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Burma would strengthen the U.S.-led regional order. Existing alliances would also be deepened where possible to consolidate the U.S. presence in key regions. Both Russia and China saw these efforts as having the purpose, at least in part, of constraining future opportunities for expansion of their own regional influence. This was the

correct course of action for the United States, and it was good for the world as a whole, but Moscow and Beijing saw things differently.

The United States and Europe did not actively seek to overthrow the governments of Russia and China, but their expressed desire to accomplish this goal through engagement made Moscow and Beijing wary of international institutions. Moreover, Western support for popular revolutions such as the Orange Revolution and the Arab Awakening exacerbated Russian and Chinese concerns that the United States' ultimate goal was regime change. Successive presidents from Clinton to Bush to Obama had gone on the record arguing that it was in U.S. interests for Russia and China to democratize over time. To Americans, this seemed like a reasonable goal that would benefit the Russian and Chinese people first and foremost, but to the Russian and Chinese regimes it represented a direct threat, albeit one that was vaguely expressed with little urgency behind it. Moscow and Beijing were especially suspicious of initiatives to promote human rights, none more so than the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which held that the international community had an obligation to act when governments were unwilling or unable to protect their own civilian population. Both Russia and China signed on to R2P at the UN Security Council in 2005, but after Libya in 2011 they saw it as just another excuse to enact regime change.

These strains on the concert were evident at the turn of the millennium. The concert might have otherwise come apart in the early 2000s, but the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the threat of weapons of mass destruction

Russia and China maintained concerns that the ultimate U.S. goal was regime change.

being used against civilian targets gave it a new lease of life. The United States prioritized the war on terrorism above all else, and so Russia mistakenly believed that providing basing rights in Central Asia and generally cooperating in the war would result in significant U.S. concessions elsewhere. For instance, the United States might, Putin hoped, withhold support for political change inside Ukraine. Or, the United States might give Russia more leeway in its neighborhood. This

expectation was based on a flawed assessment of the U.S. position. The United States never envisaged sacrificing its core strategic goals in Europe in exchange for cooperation in the war on terrorism. Indeed, not only did the United States not do this; it seems likely that it never occurred to anyone that this would seriously be on the table. As the decade wore on, the contradiction between Russia's expectations of what its support would buy it and its true value was laid bare. China had fewer illusions about a quid pro quo, but it was happy for the United States to be distracted given that it could have faced a tougher U.S. policy in Asia had the terrorist attacks of September 11 never occurred.

The concert did not unravel immediately, but its demise can be traced back to two events that occurred within the space of six weeks in the late summer and early fall of 2008. The first began on August 7 and 8, 2008, when hostilities broke out between Russia and Georgia. Although the facts of how the war began remain in dispute, it is clear that Russian forces prepared for and executed a major offensive against Georgia and occupied Georgia's separatist provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Casualties in the Georgia War were fairly low. The official numbers provided by the three protagonists—Russia, Georgia, and the separatists—suggest somewhere around 800, although these could be inflated. Nevertheless, as the late Ron Asmus titled his book on the subject, it was “the little war that shook the world.”³⁰ The war demonstrated Russia's

The demise of the concert can be traced back to two events in 2008.

determination to prevent the further expansion of NATO and Western influence. It showed that Moscow was willing to use force against another state (the first time it had done so since the Cold War). This was not Kosovo or Iraq where Russia would be satisfied with statements at the UN Security Council. This time, the objections were backed up with force.

This was a watershed event, but it did not appear that way at the time. The Russia invasion lasted only five days, after which Moscow agreed to mediation and a ceasefire. The newly elected U.S. president, Barack Obama, would promise a reset with Russia, and held out hope that increased cooperation could ultimately transform the U.S.–Russia relationship for the better. Only over time would it become clear that this was an illusion. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see August 2008 for what it was—a clear break between Russia and the West. It was the moment when Moscow made clear its opposition to the continued expansion of the U.S.-led order and its willingness to back up that opposition with military power.

When Vladimir Putin returned to the Russian presidency in 2012, the relationship cooled significantly. Russia would play an increasingly belligerent role in world politics. It armed the Assad regime in Syria and prevented the UN Security Council from taking tough action against it. He would take a harder line against EU partnership agreements with Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, and others. And he would, of course, invade and annex Crimea in 2014. This invasion resulted in the expulsion of Russia from the G8, the breakdown of relations between Russia and the United States, a significant cooling of relations between Russia and Western Europe, and the use of economic sanctions by the West against Russia. In 2014, Putin dramatically increased his rhetorical assault on the United States and the U.S.-led order.

Six weeks after the Russian invasion of Georgia, the United States was rocked by the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which triggered a full-scale global financial

crisis. In its first year, the global crash of 2008 was actually worse than the 1929 crash with respect to all the major economic metrics—industrial production, world trade, and equity markets.³¹ The United States stood on the brink of a new great depression. Even when that fear passed, the recession would prove to be the worst since the 1930s, while Europe plunged into a severe economic crisis of its own that threatened the future of the Euro and the European economy as a whole. For much of the world, the financial crisis discredited the U.S. model of international economic order. The promise of greater globalization and deregulation did not appear as attractive as they once did. For Americans, the crisis was a painful reminder of the limitations of U.S. power. Yes, the war in Iraq had been difficult, but the financial cost was manageable. The financial crisis called everything into question and focused attention on domestic issues.

In Beijing, the U.S. financial crisis was confirmation of U.S. decline. For over a decade, China had bided its time and pursued a relatively multilateral and cooperative foreign policy. There was a debate between doves and hawks, but the doves argued that China should wait until it was in a stronger position relative to the United States—following Deng Xiaoping’s advice to hide your capabilities and bide your time. Now, as the United States stood on the brink of economic Armageddon, that moment appeared to have arrived. China had no interest in pushing the United States over that brink. After all, the fate of the two economies was intertwined—Niall Ferguson of Harvard University even coined a term, “Chimerica,” to describe the relationship.³² But things would change dramatically in foreign policy. China would increasingly seek to assert itself in the region, particularly in the South China Sea, to take account of its perception that it was in a much stronger position after the crisis.

The financial crisis was not the only reason China pursued a more assertive foreign policy. As Harvard Professor Alastair Iain Johnston observed, China always had an assertive streak, which it demonstrated after the U.S. bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in 1999, over the downed EP-3 spy plane in Hainan Island in 2001, and toward Taiwan during President Chen Shui-bian’s administration from 2000–08.³³ Nevertheless, as Jeffrey Bader, who served as NSC Senior Director for Asia from 2009 to 2010 put it, “Beginning about 2008 and continuing into 2010 one could detect a changed quality in the writing of Chinese security analysts and Chinese official statements and in some respects in Chinese behavior. Citing the financial meltdown and subsequent deep recession in the United States in September 2008, some Chinese analysts argued that the United States was in decline or distracted or both.”³⁴ Chinese assertiveness has ebbed and flowed. After the initial period, there was some moderation, probably induced by regional counter-balancing. However, the assertiveness returned when President Xi Jinping took office in 2012.

A third event was to rock the order just over two years later. The self-immolation of a fruit vendor in Tunis set in motion a series of incredible events that toppled authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and left others reeling. For many years, it had been widely believed that the regional order in the Middle East—composed of generally pro-U.S. authoritarian governments—was unsustainable, yet somehow it continued. The Arab Awakening was the breaking point and was to create huge uncertainty about several basic questions: who would rule the Middle East, what would the make-up of their governments be, and would the United States continue to serve as the linchpin for the region's security through its bilateral alliances. Revolutions are usually bloody, long, and full of twists and turns; this was to be no exception. Unlike East Asia and Eastern Europe, this was not the result of a dissatisfied state; but the general unraveling still created a vacuum, opening up geopolitical questions that had been closed for decades.

Thus, in 2014, the United States found that three major regions were in serious trouble, albeit to differing degrees. These regional problems have occurred alongside another trend that affects the future of the international order: the much fabled rise of the rest, which includes countries like Brazil, India, and Indonesia.³⁵ These countries (excluding China and Russia) still accept the international order in a way consistent with the global concert of powers. They want reform of international institutions and would prefer a greater say in crisis management, but they broadly accept international rules as currently configured. They do not consider the use of force to change the status quo or to acquire more territory at sea or on land. Without Russia and China, the United States would face emerging powers dissatisfied with the international order and want to reform it, so Washington would be pressured to take more account of their interests. But this would be a very different, and much more benign, challenge that what it now faces.

The Unipolar Concert, R.I.P.

The Unipolar Concert was a unique period in world politics. It entailed unprecedented levels of cooperation and restraint among the major powers. However, it was the result of fleeting conditions and a fundamental misunderstanding between the Western and non-Western powers. Russia and China wanted to increase their own sphere of influence when they had the capacity to do so, and the United States had no intention of allowing this to occur. Thus, when the unipolar moment waned, so too did the Unipolar Concert. U.S. strategists have generally failed to recognize the unusual or temporary nature of the Concert, and have instead perceived it as the natural

The Unipolar Concert was the result of fleeting conditions and a fundamental misunderstanding.

order of things. Thus, many expect the United States to be able to coax Russia and China back into the fold of acting as responsible stakeholders within the U.S.-led order. This will not occur in the security sphere. The demise of the Concert is irreversible, and we are destined for a period of more intense geopolitical competition between the West and Russia as well as China. Unlike Russia, China is not yet fully committed to a revisionist path, largely because of its stake in the global economy, so there is a better prospect of good relations with Beijing than Moscow, although true strategic partnership will remain out of reach. In many respects, this is a return of normalcy in world affairs. However, it is concerning and regrettable.

This new geopolitical period will be unique, just as the Unipolar Concert was. It will take place following a quarter of a century of unprecedented integration and interdependence. The major powers are closely linked in ways that they would never have allowed if they saw each other as rivals. Now, they must retrospectively figure out how to continue to work together on mutual interests, even as they differ on matters as basic as the sanctity of borders.

The United States will need to change its grand strategy to take account of this shift in world politics. It must recreate the international order so it works even if revisionist powers seek to stymie or overturn it. It has to better understand the nature of the revisionist challenge to the status quo, especially since it is of a very different variety than the Manichean ideological challenges of the 21st century. And, it must develop viable tactics to deter and roll back unconventional revisionism when it occurs.

Notes

1. The literature on American decline is vast. For the view that the United States is in relative decline see Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York, NY: Norton, 2008); Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, The Rising Rest, and The Coming Global Turn* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2008). For the argument that the United States is not in decline see Joseph Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (Liveright Publishing, 2013); and Robert Lieber, *Power, Willpower, and the American Future* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
2. Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," *International Security* 16, no. 1 (Summer, 1991), pp. 114–161, cite on p. 120.
3. On the history of the Concert of Europe see Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996); Paul Schroeder "The 19th-Century International System: Changes in the Structure," *World Politics* 39, no. 1 (October 1986); Paul Schroeder, *Metternich's Diplomacy at Its Zenith* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968); Charles Webster, *The Foreign Policy of*

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4. Paul Schroeder, "Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?" *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (June, 1992), pp. 683–706, citation p. 684.
 5. Schroeder wrote, "Britain and Russia were so powerful and invulnerable that even a (highly unlikely) alliance of the three other powers against them would not seriously threaten the basic security of either, while such a (hypothetical) alliance would likewise not give France, Austria, and Prussia security comparable to that which Britain or Russia enjoyed on their own." *Ibid*, p. 687.
 6. *Ibid*, p. 689.
 7. *Ibid*, p. 692.
 8. Several scholars and experts wrote articles in the period between 1990 and 2008 calling for the United States to create a Concert of Powers, all of which rested on the assumption that there was not one already. See for instance, Stephen Van Evera, "A Farewell to Geopolitics," in Melvyn Leffler and Jeff Legro (eds), *To Lead the World: U.S. Strategy After the Bush Doctrine* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), pp. 11–35.
 9. Daniel Nexon, "Quarter-Baked Idea: The Post-Cold War Concert System," *Duck of Minerva*, February 12, 2012, <http://www.whiteoliphant.com/duckofminerva/2012/02/quarter-baked-idea-post-cold-war.html>. Nexon wrote about the existence of a concert in early 2012. As I shall argue below, I believe it ended in August and September 2008.
 10. For an account of the constituent parts of U.S.-led international order and how the alliances fit in, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major War*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2001, chapter six.
 11. President Harry S. Truman, "Address on Foreign Economic Policy," speech at Baylor University, March 6, 1947, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12842>.
 12. G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith, *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
 13. James Goldgeiger, "Stop Blaming NATO for Russia's Provocations," *The New Republic*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117423/nato-not-blame-putins-actions>.
 14. See Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70:1 (America and the World 1990/91): 23–33; and Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest* 70 (Winter 2002): 5–17.
 15. Ikenberry, *After Victory*. *Op. cit.*
 16. William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): p. 7.
 17. G. John Ikenberry (ed), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: NY, Cornell University Press, 2002).
 18. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: NY, Simon Schuster, 1993).
 19. G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

20. Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power* (New York: NY, W.W. Norton, 2006); G. John Ikenberry, *Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity*, Discussion paper for the National Intelligence Council, July 2003, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/cia/nic2020/strategic_reactions.pdf.
21. In this, Bush was echoing strategic thinking in an obscure 1991 Pentagon document titled Defense Policy Guidance which called on the United States to preserve its primacy. The document became incendiary when leaked to the press and was disowned by President George H W Bush.
22. Office of the President, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (September 2002), p. 2, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>.
23. Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility," remarks to National Committee on U.S.–China Relations, New York City, September 21, 2005, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.
24. Condoleezza Rice, *No Greater Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 2011), p. 436, 440
25. For instance, see G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century*, Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security, The Princeton Project Papers, (Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs: Princeton: NJ, 2007), <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>; Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bruce W. Jentleson, Ivo Daalder, Antony Blinken, Lael Brainard, Kurt M. Campbell, Michael McFaul, James O'Brien, Gayle Smith and James Steinberg, *Strategic Leadership: Framework for a 21st Century National Security Strategy*, A Phoenix Initiative Report, (Center for a New American Security: Washington DC, 2008), http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/SlaughterDaalderJentleson_StrategicLeadership_July08.pdf.
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27. "Obama, Medvedev to Reset Ties with Arms Pact," *Reuters*, April 1, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL194925620090401>.
28. Helene Cooper, "On World Stage, Obama Issues an Overture," *The New York Times*, April 2 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/03/world/europe/03assess.html>.
29. Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Remarks at The Council on Foreign Relations*, Washington, D.C., July 9, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm>.
30. For a good overview see Ron Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World* (New York: NY, Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2010).
31. Barry Eichengreen and Kevin O'Rourke, *A Tale of Two Depressions: What Does the New Data Tell Us*, VoxEu, March 8, 2010, <http://www.voxeu.org/article/tale-two-depressions-what-do-new-data-tell-us-february-2010-update#jun09>.
32. Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, "Chimerica and the Global Asset Market Boom," *International Finance* 10, no. 3 (2007), pp. 215–239.
33. Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7–48.
34. Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise, An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington DC: Brookings Press, 2010), p. 80.
35. For a good overview see National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence: Washington DC, 2012), <http://www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/global-trends-2030>.