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Unipolarity and its Benefits

Globalization and democratization have added an increasing amount of complexity to the international system that theorists seek to define and forecast. It is no wonder then, that competing fields of thought all generally have some success in explaining certain aspects of it. However, for each success of a theoretical field, a failure, or counterexample, of the theory usually follows quickly behind. Realism since the Cold War has lost certain aspects of its predictive power, and both liberalism and constructivism are grappling with the large amount of factors that they recognize as potential variables in the international system. The problem with each of these is that they are too narrow. Instead of focusing on a complex synthesis of relatively equal factors, they try to pick one or two as causal forces and argue that the rest are effects. By redefining conflict in terms of a synthesis of relatively equal factors, we can get a better idea of which system is ideal for a "better off" world. The argument here is that U.S. unipolarity is constructed to mitigate almost all potential factors that disrupt security and stability, and also sets the stage for improvement of "smaller" human security issues, both of which contribute to a "better off" world.

"Better off" and Security

The term "better off" refers in part to security, as traditionally defined by realists, but also in terms of human security issues, which refer mostly to issues that are currently affecting the developed world, such as food security or economic development for disenfranchised populations. Arguments rage over the importance of both of these approaches, but both need to be included. For obvious reasons, security and stability between great powers in the international system are both important in order to avoid high casualties in war or the economic and financial instability caused by conflicts

between them. But this is a generally status quo view of "better off," characterized by the absence of great power war, the absence of economic crises; in general, the absence of the massive amounts of deaths that can be caused only by great power conflict. It is reasonable to argue that a secure world in this sense contributes (and may be necessary) to a "better off" world. On the other hand, though, we can certainly add a second tier to our definition that has a more progressive tone to it.

The second tier is where human security issues can be addressed. In a stable world free of large scale conflict, issues such as economic security in impoverished nations, political freedom and stability in the developing world, and food security can be improved dramatically. More importantly, I would argue that they should be improved for a number of reasons. First is that, at some level, human security issues have the potential to flow up into what we have traditionally defined as "high politics" and can cause conflicts in between states. Terrorism, for example, finds roots in politically insecure, impoverished states that are often ignored by traditional security theorists. Its potential, then, to affect national security concerns is all too evident in the post-9/11 world.

At another level, though, human security can be considered in a moral light, as a more progressive outlook on the international system. Instead of maintaining the status quo, the system can be improved, and the world can be "better off" than before. We don't even have to necessarily inject a sense of morality into this definition of security. Instead, we can argue that regardless of right or wrong, there does exist a preference among democratic populations and in certain governments that human security issues be made important in the international arena[1]. Therefore, if our traditional first tier security and stability can be ensured, then there should not be any barriers to these populations and governments in pushing human security concerns.

We then have a two part definition of a "better off" world defined in a global security context. At its core it assumes a baseline of international stability and great power security that is characterized

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[1]Fen Osler Hampson, "Human Security" in *Security Studies: an Introduction,* ed. Paul Williams, Routledge (2009) 229 and Lloyd Axworthy, "Human Security and Global Governance: Putting People First." *Global Governance,* 7 (2001) 19-23

by an absence of conflict and high death tolls. After that, however, we emphasize a focus on human security issues that are often ignored in realist theories. It is important, however, to emphasize the hierarchy here. Human security can only come after traditional security. Throughout history, issues such as political freedom, world food security, and egalitarian economic development have almost always been sidelined in the face of great power conflicts. It is nearly impossible for great power governments and populations to concentrate on human security when their personal physical security is threatened by another great power. In the coming arguments, then, we will show how unipolarity provides sufficient traditional security to justify the pursuit of human security in a way that bipolarity and multipolarity do not.

The Security Dilemma, Democracy, Unipolarity

Unipolarity is the system that has the maximum capability to achieve the two-tiered type of security defined above, because current U.S. unipolarity has effectively eliminated the security dilemma. The security dilemma plays a central role in an anarchic world, and forms the basis of conflicts between states. Each set of theories has ideas about how the security dilemma manifests, or how it is mitigated, but each one has this dilemma, stemming from uncertainty, at the heart of its theory.[2] In an anarchic system, states are unable to know with certainty the intentions of other actors, regardless of how one characterizes interactions between states or which factors are emphasized.

The sources of conflict for each set of theory depends on how relevant the security dilemma appears to a theorist. Realism's response to the security dilemma is that cooperation is unlikely, nor is it necessarily sound policy, because it is not possible to know with certainty how another actor will use their relative power, and the costs of mistakes are often tragic. There are certain mitigating factors of

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[2]Robert Jervis. "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma." *Conflict after the Cold War: Arguments on the Causes of War and Peace* ed. Richard Betts, Longman Press (2008) 412-427

course, such as offense/defense power balances[3], or the addition of intentions that are influenced by domestic or non-power calculations[4]. They are generally pessimistic, though, about the potential for cooperation. In this non-cooperative world, then, conflict stems from an inability to communicate intentions to other actors, as well as imbalances or miscalculations regarding the balance of power in the system.

Liberal and constructivist theories are generated around the same focus. Liberals believe that iteration, communication, common values, international institutions, and globalization are all effective ways of alleviating the uncertainty caused by the security dilemma, and conflict therefore arises from pariah states, lack of communication, and protectionist economic. Constructivists focus on mutually constituted identities that can be either positive or negative. If it is positive, then actors can reasonably assume that they are not a threat to each other. If they are negative, however, then the uncertainty over intentions increases, and conflict is more likely.

The importance of these last few paragraphs was to show the centrality of the security dilemma and the uncertainty that accompanies it. It also highlights the range of conclusions or theories that can be derived from a person's perception of this one game in international politics. Over the general course of history, theorists have contended that realists have provided the most accurate and predictive view of international history. This certainly may have been the case, because in the past theorists have only had to deal with states as a unified body. Systemic interpretations were the norm, because they affected the cost-benefit analysis of a small group of autocratic leaders, and the security dilemma was prominent. Even from a liberal or constructivist viewpoint, evidence for cooperation was scant. Populations were not democratic, and therefore shared no common values, and economic integration had not taken hold yet. A small class of leaders had constructed non-cooperative identities in relation to each other, and passed those identities on to their heirs and successors.

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[3]Ibid.
[4]William Wolhforth. "Realism and the End of the Cold War." *International Security.* 19.3 (1994/5) 91-129

With the rise of democratic governments and legitimate non-state actors, however, the security dilemma has become more complex. Democratic populations and transnational corporations perceive interactions between states differently than leaders generally do, while both have a hand in the foreign policy decisions that construct the international system. The addition of nuclear weapons also added an entirely new variable into the calculation of conflict as well. However, at its root, conflict is an unwanted transaction cost. Apart from pariah states or leaders, the majority of actors would not choose conflict unless they believed it was the only available means to pursue or defend an interest. As a result, I would argue that the initiation and degree of conflict now is determined by the degree of agreement between all the factors involved in the decision making process. It is not one set of factors, such as geopolitical considerations or democratic peace, that determines a conflict, but a balance of each of them that can create a synthesized view of the security dilemma and conflict. This is a slippery concept in theory, but if we look at actual conflicts (or non-conflicts) in recent history we can get a better sense of how it is played out in the real world.

An early example of the effects of democratic populations on foreign policy calculations lies in the relationship between the United States, France, and Britain during the nineteenth century[5]. In the early nineteenth century, France and the U.S. became entangled in some small naval battles over merchant routes and trading with Britain during an Anglo-French war. Despite a number of realist factors that predicted war, such as an alliance with Britain, a possible bid for French hegemony in Europe, and French proximity to U.S. trading interests in the Caribbean, the U.S. was able to avoid war with France on the account of factors within the government and population that viewed France as a sister republic, even though it barely qualified as a liberal democracy. There were limited skirmishes in the Caribbean, but the conflict of interests within the U.S. decision making arena led to a more moderated view of French threat, and therefore an absence of full-scale war.

Just a decade later, in the War of 1812, the U.S. then went to war with Britain in response to

[5]John Owen. "How Liberalism Produces the Democratic Peace." *International Security,* 19.2 (1994) 87-125

similar trading infringements and naval conflicts that stemmed from another Anglo-French war. Realists argue that it was nonsensical for the United States to throw its lot in with the French, especially considering the more developed plans of European hegemony that Napoleon espoused,[6] but a realist can also point to the serious increase in British naval power prior to 1812 as well as the removal of French influence from the Louisiana territories as arguments that Britain was more of a potential threat to U.S. interests than France. Also, economic policies at that point were highly mercantilist, and resentment arose between the U.S. and Britain over the U.S. trading policy with France. More importantly, most Americans saw Britain as an illiberal monarchy, even though it was potentially more consistent with American values than France[7]. All things considered, there were a large amount of factors-realist, liberal, and constructivist- that portended war. Without that majority of predictors, like in Anglo-French relations, war would not occur.

A more modern set of examples can be considered in the wars and conflicts of the 20th century. World War I and World War II are good examples of overdetermined wars. In World War I, German unification and industrialization threatened the stability of the European continent. However, populations in France and Britain were relatively war averse, and the brilliant diplomacy of Bismarck's alliance system kept most great powers focused on economic interests in the colonies rather than Germany's rising power. However, with the rise of popular French resentment of Germany and a belligerent foreign policy change after Bismarck, alliances stiffened, and a powder keg was created in a Europe ripe for war[8].

World War II was the same story. A rise in German industrialization again threatened the stability of Europe, and the economic isolation and nationalist fervor in the German population brought Hitler to power. On the other side, French and British populations were war weary and felt guilty over

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[6]Owen (1994) 110
[7]Ibid.
[8]See diagram on pg 93 of Joseph Nye Jr. and David Welch. *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation.* Eighth Edition, Longman Press (2011)

some of the sanctions applied to the Germans after WWI, so despite realist imperatives, these countries did little to balance Germany in the early stages. Without the violent nationalism in Germany embodied in Hitler, war might have been avoided, and Germany could have been appeased, but as soon as Germany violated neutral Belgium, the French and British populations were angry and supportive of war, and full scale conflict ensued[9]. Both of these wars highlight the tragedy that can occur when wars are over-determined. Power imbalances, economic crises, and belligerent nationalism combined in a perfect storm of causal factors.

With the addition of nuclear weapons into the Cold War, the factors involved in conflict became even more nuanced. Nuclear weapons, as argued by realists, provides a strong deterrent for states, due to their capacity to punish any aggressor. The concept of mutually assured destruction provided by these new weapons is what kept the Cold War from escalating into and all out conflict. However, other factors agitated for war. There were almost no economic connections between the two poles, and both populations were ideologically mobilized in support of their cause. This tension assured that any efforts made to change the balance of power would be met with hostile responses from the other actor. Even if this did not lead to full scale war, devastating proxy wars occurred in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan when threats were perceived. Even though nuclear weapons provided a strong deterrent, almost all other factors agitated for war, and therefore at least limited conflict occurred. Also, at the end of the war, when the U.S. would have been able to take advantage of a weakened Soviet Union, conflict was avoided as reformists and pacifist in both governments came to the forefront of public policy.[10]

All of these examples have been used to show the complexity of modern day conflict, and the sheer number of factors that can go into the decision making process. It is not that theory has become indeterminate, but to an extent conflict itself has become indeterminate. It is difficult to parse out

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[9]See diagram of Nye and Welch (2011) 121
[10]Wolhforth (1994/5)

exactly what factors lead to war. From the examples above, though, we can see that a significant

majority of these factors have to line up for war to be a desirable option. Even during the Cold War,

when all factors agitated for war, nuclear weapons kept it at bay, and public opinion shifts toward the

end of the Cold War assured a peaceful decline for the Soviet Union. The triumph of U.S. unipolarity

that we can now address, then, is that it most effectively eliminates all the incentives for war that we

have examined in the past few paragraphs. Through a combination of its military supremacy,

geopolitical position, and democratic checks and balances, U.S. unipolarity offers the most secure and

stable world system, which in turn makes improvement in human security issues possible as well.

At a basic level, unipolarity eliminates the physical aspects of the security dilemma that realists

focus on, especially in relation to states other than the U.S. The conventional military superiority, as

well as the economic strength of the United States far outweighs the strength on any balancing coalition

that can be allied against it. Also, the United States is powerful enough to project power in almost all

parts of the world, at least in a limited manner. If the United States is willing to use that power to

maintain stability and diminish conflict between states (which it has) then basic geopolitical power

calculations are heavily mitigated between states. They do not have to feel as threatened by the rising

power of neighbor states. States in a bipolar or multipolar system can seek alliances with great powers

in order to provide for their security, but there can never be any reasonable guarantee that the one

power can protect a state from the other. In a unipolar system, we can know with fairly certain

knowledge that the unipole can protect states from others. This certainly leaves the question of the

willingness of the unipole to do so, as well as the threat that it represents to the states themselves, but

certain characteristics of U.S. unipolarity help to answer that as well.

The democratic structure of the United States government, with its numerous checks and

balances, make it so that no single actor has the ability to take the reins of U.S. military power and use

it for unwise or more sinister actions. Also, the liberalism found in the U.S. population emphasizes

individual human rights and international cooperation, rather than war or conquest. Certainly, there are

situations where the population of the United States has been extremely war prone, such as the beginning of the Vietnam War, but the amount of deaths in the U.S. ranks quickly turned the tide of public opinion, and without the threat of communism and the Soviet Union looming overhead, one can make the argument that war in Vietnam would not have been as popular. Now, without any realistic enemies at the state level, the U.S. population is generally averse to the invasion of other countries for realist, power-motivated goals.

The population of the United States is also very demanding on a domestic level, and generally does not enjoy the economic hardship or moral debauchery that are often effects of great power war. In that sense, the United States has a vested interest in maintaining and reinforcing the stability of the international system by shouldering security concerns and balancing great power interests. For example, its efforts to keep sea lanes open have resulted in a prosperous economic world, with the U.S. and its population being one of the prime benefactors of that system. Also, its support of NATO keeps a previously tumultuous Europe free of power concerns, and has resulted in the most successful collective security arrangement in history. This does not mean that the U.S. is going to intervene in every conflict, such as genocide in Rwanda, but it does ensure that the great European powers, as well as Russia, Japan, and a rising China, have little incentive to engage in conflict with each other, thus avoiding great power war, which is one of the key aspects of security we discussed above. It has to in order to appease a morally righteous and economically demanding population.

In this way, the United States is able to act as a benevolent, wise unipole, where leaders work to maintain stability in the international system, and purely realist calculations of power are mitigated by a democratic population. Even if the United States did decide to go crusading, its geopolitical isolation and the presence of nuclear weapons in other states would make it a tough go. Almost all the previous sources of conflict are then eliminated in this system. The military superiority of the U.S. and its commitment to international stability eliminates power concerns between other great power states. Its pursuit of economic development and interdependence and pursuit of international cooperation

reinforce the ties between states. Finally this is all underwritten by the liberal democratic control exercised over the government (as well as its transparency) which removes the United States itself as a threat to other states in the international system. Bipolar and multipolar systems (even cooperative systems) can hit certain aspects of these conflict calculations, but U.S. unipolarity is the most effective in eliminating almost all incentives for conflict.

At another level, U.S. unipolarity uses the concept of might is right[11] to create a legitimate international society based on liberal principles and rationality. Not only does this serve to reinforce the international order, but it provides a framework for cooperative action on human security issues that many democratic populations agitate for. The key to this society created by the United States, however, is that it does not exercise the same two-way control that a cooperatively created society is said to[12]. It has to maintain its own principles to a certain degree, but some have emphasized the relative latitude that the United States has in acting unilaterally[13]. Also, while the U.S. has used its international society to push human security issues, it has avoided making military or moral commitments to these issues if it threatens basic great power security (Human Rights issues in China). If the international system were run by two poles, or many, there would be less flexibility in the system as great power states would most likely seek to hold others to account. Otherwise a global society may be dysfunctional (Cold War).

U.S. unipolarity has created a global society that is capable of mitigating physical security threats and promoting human security issues simultaneously. This is a result of the power and democratic structure of the United States, as well as the flexibility it has retained in foreign policy. What, then, could go wrong? Despite being relatively secure, the international system is certainly threatened, both by state and non-state actors. The flexibility and security of the current system has a

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[11] Hedley Bull. "Society and Anarchy in International Relations." in Betts (2008) 155
[12] Ibid.
[13] Kier Lieber and Gerard Alexander. "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is not Pushing Back." *International Security.* 30.1 (2005) 109-139

quota, and if these threats are not treated, it could lead to instability and conflict, not to mention the impact it may have on fragile human security concerns.

Threats: Terrorism and its Effects

9/11 has highlighted the consequences of ignoring non-state actors (as well as human security issues) in the modern international system. The ability of terrorists to execute large scale attacks on human soil has dealt a severe psychological blow to the U.S. government and its population that has sent shock waves throughout the international system. Previous to 9/11, the United States military action had been relatively limited in the international system. Desert Storm was perhaps the largest conflict, but it was a limited, U.N. supported conflict that lasted less than a year. Since 9/11, the United States has become embroiled in two controversial, expensive, long, and largely unilateral wars that has significantly reorganized U.S. military and economic assets. What happened?

From a realist standpoint, 9/11 had almost no effect on the actual security of the United States. In terms of casualties, it was significantly lower than that caused by war, nor did it disrupt any economic interests that the U.S. had. However, the attacks on the World Trade Center left a deep psychological scar on the U.S. population[14], who were then willing to support a series of ill-devised international forays in response to what they perceived as a serious threat to international security. By all accounts, realist, liberal, constructivist, or otherwise, the Iraq war was neither justifiable nor intelligent in regards to the stability of the international system. The reaction to such a unexpected attack on American soil was so strong that it overwhelmed all of the other factors that agitated for a calm, collected response from the United States, and thus U.S. leaders were free to pursue their own narrow interests in the Middle East under the guise of the War of Terror.

The results of this shift in U.S. policy was an empowerment of liberal crusaders within the

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[14]Robert Jervis. "The Remaking of a Unipolar World." *Washington Quarterly* 29.3 (2006) 11

government and population that felt threatened (unrealistically) in an anti-democratic world,[15] and the barrier has been lifted for the United States to pursue unwise unilateral action. Debates rage over the actual effects that this shift in policy have created,[16] but it can be reasonably argued that a precedent has been set for the U.S. to make poor decisions in the international system, which has provided other actors excuses to doubt the U.S. or push their own agendas elsewhere in the system[17]. This is compounded by the economic drain that the Afghanistan and the Iraq war have been, which further inhibits the United States ability to deal with instability and problems in the international system. Essentially, the United States has created more problems then it had originally, and limited its ability to solve them, which has sped up the decline that most scholars recognize in U.S. unipolarity.

Of course, there is still time to right the ship with a shift in U.S. foreign policy and a period of recovery, but a significant amount of damage has already been done, and certain other states, like China, Russia, and Iran have begun to fill the gaps that the U.S. is leaving. More importantly, the threat of another terrorist attack has not significantly decreased; some scholars give a nuclear terrorist attack in the next decade a 50% or higher chance.[18] If an even more devastating attack were to happen on U.S. soil there is no telling the international consequences, although it would be reasonable to assume that the response would be much the same as post 9/11, possibly to an even greater degree.

This root change in U.S. policy (precipitated by terrorism) redefines almost all other international "problems" as threats to the system. Nuclear proliferation to smaller, less secure states can be opposed for fear of a terrorist hand off. More simply, many Americans do not trust states like Iran and North Korea to be rational actors, and therefore oppose nuclear proliferation for fear of state initiated attack, and the U.S. has even threatened intervention to deny these states nuclear weapons. Most of the causal factors point away from conflict, and so the U.S. has not made any serious mistakes

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[15]Ibid 12/13
[16]Comparison between Lieber and Alexander (2005) and Robert Pape. "Soft Balancing against the United States." *International Security,* 30.1 (2005) 7-45
[17] Wess Mitchell & Jakub Grygiel. "Vulnerability of the Peripheries." *American Interest Online*. March-April 2011
[18]Graham Allison. "Nuclear Deterrence in the Age of Nuclear Terrorism." *Technology Review* 111.6 (2008) 68

in this category, but it is a thorny issue, and there is no telling what the U.S. would do in regards to this issue if another terrorist attack were to occur on American soil.

The issue of a rising revisionist state like China is also magnified by a quickening decline in U.S. unipolarity. The power of the United States cannot last forever, but in an ideal world the decline of the U.S. unipolarity would occur when other democratic, responsible powers are rising to share the burden of leadership, or perhaps even take over the reins. China, however, is not at that point. China has exhibited increasing (sometimes dangerous) assertiveness in its surrounding region. Combined with an authoritarian regime, often supported by a nationalist population, it is difficult to predict the scope of expansion it may strive for if U.S. limits on it foreign policy were lifted. This issue has reignited a potent security dilemma between China, Japan, South Korea, India, and other East Asian countries, and a rapid decline in the ability of the United States to project power into the region (which seems likely under current policies) could open the door for a number of causal factors that agitate for conflict in the future.

However, U.S. unipolarity still has the tools to deal with these threats before they destabilize the international system, but it requires a shift in U.S. thinking from the fear of personal security (which is anyways over-exaggerated) to the importance of maintaining the international system. These goals are not even mutually exclusive. By reinvesting in the global society that it created (rather than embarking upon unilateral action) the United States would be able to address the pressing human security issues that lead to terrorism in the first place (political freedom, economic security, and cultural preservation in the Middle East). It would not be an easy job, but if the U.S. redirected the money that it spends on mass military operations in the region to collective human security issues in the Middle East, it may be able to mitigate the causes of terrorism at the root (and probably save money). By acting through the international system it created, the United States could reorient itself as a leader and re-legitimize the system simultaneously.

Having accomplished this policy reconciliation of sorts, the U.S. could move on to tackle other

issues such as a rising China with more intelligence and ease, as it would not have to invest all of its resources and energy into unilateral action in the Middle East. If the U.S. is declining, then so be it, but by working to slow its decline, as well as engaging China's interests (which may not even be revisionist[19]) it can perhaps prolong any significant power shifts until China's democratic experiments are more developed and relations between it and its surrounding countries are more cordial and stabilized. Essentially, it is in the interest of the security, stability, and cooperation of the future international system that the United State remain the unipole as long as possible. However, in order to do that, it needs to use the current international society to solve certain human security issues, reinforce existing relationships, and preserve its own resources as well.

Disadvantages and Conclusions

The threats listed above highlight certain advantages to unipolarity that need to be addressed. First is that the health of the system is determined in a large part by the actions of the unipole. When the U.S. was invested in the international system and acting as a benign unipole, there was high cooperation and economic prosperity. Its ignorance, however, of certain human security issues left it vulnerable to terrorism, and the resulting unilateral action contributed to U.S. decline and has to an extent destabilized the international system. Nuclear proliferation and a rising China are now also looming issues that the United States has trouble dealing with.

The argument can be made that all these problems have all just hit at the wrong time, but the abrupt shift in U.S. military action has certainly not contributed to the solution. By spending billions on an "unnecessary war"[20] in the Middle East, the actions of the United States worsened its own security issues and rendered it less capable to handle the maintenance of the system in other areas. Despite all of the security needs and checks and balances that U.S. unipolarity is constructed around,

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[19] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko. "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy." *International Security* 34.4 (2010) 63-95

[20] John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. "An Unnecessary War." *Foreign Policy* (Jan/Feb 2003) 51-59

certain catalytic events have the capability to throw the unipole off balance and disrupt a well ordered system.

More importantly, if the United States falls prematurely, it may give rise to powers that are not so interested in the maintenance of the international system. Despite the flexibility of the current system, there are always those who are not fully satisfied (Russia), or are new to the great power scene (China) and have not yet been able to fully integrate into global society. With more time the United States can engage these states and perhaps instill in them norms of cooperation that can last beyond U.S. military supremacy. But in actively contributing to its decline the U.S. has limited the amount of time it has to ensure a peaceful transition with the maintenance of the international order.

However, despite these disadvantages, unipolarity at its height is the most effective system in mitigating sources of conflicts between states and providing a "better off" world. There are certain problems that arise when the unipole is threatened by non-state actors, but the hope is that the unipole has created a strong enough international society to rein itself in. Even so, a bipolar or multipolar world that is characterized by shifting relative power concerns and potential ideological splits hardly has the tools necessary to deal with the human security issues that cause violence from non-state actors. Although a shift away from unipolarity is guaranteed at some point in the future, U.S. unipolarity has laid a groundwork for a more cooperative international society that can hopefully stabilize future bipolar or multipolar relations.