

H-Diplo | ISSF Roundtable XI-11

issforum.org

Michael Beckley. *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower*. Cornell University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781501724787 (hardcover, \$29.95).

21 February | <https://issforum.org/to/ir11-11>

Editors: Matthew Fuhrmann and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Christopher Layne, Texas A&M University.....	2
Review by Emma Ashford, Cato Institute.....	13
Review by Mauro Gilli, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Switzerland	17
Review by Joshua Shiffrin, Boston University.....	25
Response by Michael Beckley, Tufts University.....	29

INTRODUCTION BY CHRISTOPHER LAYNE, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

The debate about contemporary geopolitics, and American grand strategy, is shaped by two competing narratives: unipolar stability vs. rising China. The unipolar stability narrative holds that the distribution of power in the international system remains unipolar, and will remain so for a very long time.¹ The rising China narrative holds that American power is in relative decline, and that the primary reason for this is China's ascent.² By some metrics, China has vaulted over the U.S. to become the world's largest economy. In 2014, for example, the International Monetary Fund announced that, measured by purchasing power parity (PPP), China's GDP had surpassed that of the United States.³ Many analysts expect that, even in terms of the market exchange rate (MER), China's GDP will overtake America's in a few years' time.⁴ Viewing this trend line, some scholars have warned that the U.S. and China are locked in a power transition dynamic, which could lead to a war between them in the coming decades.⁵

The unipolar stability vs. rising China debate raises important questions for international relations (IR) scholars. It also has crucial policy implications. A perception has taken hold in American foreign policy circles that Sino-American relations are spiraling downward, and that China and the United States are on the precipice of—or already in—a new Cold War.⁶ The belief is widespread in such circles that great power politics is 'back,' and that China is challenging America's geopolitical,

¹ Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' World Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Brooks & Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008);

² Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Michael Pillsbury, *The One Hundred Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy Replace the America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015); Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline From Obama to Trump and Beyond* (New York: Other Press, 2017); Arvind Subramanian, *Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China's Economic Dominance* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011).

³ Keith Fray, "China's Great Leap Forward: Overtaking the US as the Largest Economy," *Financial Times*, 8 October 2014; <https://www.ft.com/content/166230a2-a18c-38f1-bcac-cbbdd495503a>.

⁴ "China to Become World's Largest Economy in 2024 Reports IHS Economics," *IHS Markit*, 7 September 2014; <http://news.ihsmarket.com/press-release/economics-country-risk/china-become-worlds-largest-economy-2024-reports-ihs-economics>.

⁵ For example, see Christopher Layne, "The Sound of Distant Thunder: The Pre-World War I Anglo-German Rivalry as a Model for Sino-American Relations in the Early 21st Century," in Asle Toje, ed., *Will China's Rise be Peaceful? The Rise of Great Powers in Theory, History & Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 123-142; Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). On power transition theory, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1996); William R. Thompson, ed., *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jack Levy, "Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China," in Robert Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008): 11-33.

⁶ Edward Luce, "Getting Acclimatized to the U.S.-China Cold War," *Financial Times*, 19 July 2019; <https://www.ft.com/content/a3062586-a9ac-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04>.

economic, and technological supremacy.⁷ How serious is the China challenge, and what should America's grand strategy be with respect to China? Michael Beckley's *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* is an important contribution to the discussions about Sino-American relations, the nature of the early twenty first century international system, and American grand strategy.

As the title makes clear, Beckley rejects the notion that America's relative power is declining, and asserts that the rise of Chinese power, like reports of Mark Twain's death, has been greatly exaggerated. Here he joins ranks with other noted "anti-declinists."⁸ According to Beckley, the "conventional wisdom" among scholars, policy analysts, and pundits is that unipolarity is "a fleeting 'moment' that will soon be swept away by the rise of new great powers" (1). Beckley rejects this view, and asserts that "the United States will remain the world's sole superpower for many decades, and probably throughout this century. We are not living in a transitional post-Cold War era. Instead, we are in the midst of what could be called the unipolar era—a period as profound as any epoch in modern history" (1). Beckley's argument rests on two foundations. First, the American decline/China rise literature does not accurately measure the power of the U.S. and China (2). Second, the historical and theoretical literature on the emergence, ascent, and decline of great powers does not apply to the United States (2).

How to define and measure power has long been a vexing topic for scholars.⁹ Traditionally, students of great power politics have used GDP as the best proxy for comparing the power of states and their capacity to extract wealth from their societies to support their geopolitical aspirations. In Beckley's view, since GDP as a gross indicator of economic power does not deduct "the costs countries pay to police, protect and provide services for their people" (2), it is a flawed metric.¹⁰ Consequently, he argues, traditional measuring sticks overestimate the economic power of poor, populous states (China and India), which, although generating large outputs, are saddled with "massive welfare and security burdens that drain their resources" (2). As Beckley elaborates with respect to China: "Gross domestic product and other popular indicators create the false impression that China is overtaking the United States economically" (5). "In reality," he claims, "China's economy is barely keeping pace as the burden of propping up loss-making companies and feeding, policing, protecting, and cleaning up after one-fifth of humanity erodes China's stocks of wealth" (5). Like Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, Beckley believes that aggregate GDP significantly underestimates America's economic (and technological) power and overestimates China's.¹¹

To address what he sees as the weakness of GDP as a comparative measure of states' power, Beckley proposes a new yardstick that measures a state's *net* power. As he explains, "I create a balance sheet for each country: assets go on one side of the ledger,

⁷ The Trump administration has stated bluntly that the United States is locked in a great power competition with China (and Russia). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, December 2017) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁸ See, Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half-Century of False Prophecies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013); Robert Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); James Fallows, "How America Can Rise Again," *The Atlantic* (January/February 2010): 38-55.

⁹ See, David A. Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Baldwin, "Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends Versus Old Tendencies," *World Politics* 31:2 (January 1979): 163-194.

¹⁰ In this respect, Beckley joins a group of "GDP skeptics" that includes: Diane Coyle, *GDP: A Brief but Affectionate History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Zachary Karabell, *The Leading Indicators: A Short History of the Numbers That Rule Our World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Joseph Stiglitz, *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New York: The New Press, 2010)

¹¹ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 16-17, 38-45.

liabilities go on the other, and the net resources are calculated by subtracting the latter from the former” (2). Beckley also uses *per capita* GDP as a proxy to measure a state’s military efficiency (18). Employing this methodology, by multiplying GDP by GDP *per capita*, Beckley constructs an index of national power that is based on net stocks of wealth (Chapter 2).¹² This calculation, he asserts, reveals that America’s economic dominance “is much larger than typically assumed—and the trends are mostly in its favor” (2).

Beckley’s prediction of continuing American primacy in a unipolar world rests on his rejection of two theories that point in the other direction: balance of power theory, and ‘convergence’ theory. The former holds that hegemons fail because they provoke countervailing alliances, and/or stimulate the emergence of new poles of power.¹³ The latter holds that because poorer states grow faster than rich ones, “rising challengers inevitably overtake reigning hegemons” (6). Beckley’s rejection of balance of power theory builds on Wohlforth’s theory of unipolar stability.¹⁴ Beckley argues that the U.S. is too powerful, and too distant geographically, to be challenged by any other major power (6). Moreover, he observes, all of America’s potential geopolitical rivals live cheek by jowl with rival regional powers and “therefore are more likely to fight each other than band together against the distant United States” (6). Therefore, Beckley concludes, rather than balancing against the U.S., other states will bandwagon with it (7).

With respect to convergence theory, Beckley argues that it is under specified. Sometimes poorer states grow faster than rich ones, but sometimes they do not. In other words, “convergence is conditional.” To fill in the gap, Beckley develops a “new framework for projecting the rise and fall of nations.” Specifically, he argues that “economic growth depends on three broad factors: geography, institutions, and demography.” Based on these factors, Beckley concludes that of all the major powers in the international system, the U.S. “by far” has “the best growth fundamentals” (7). Adding it all up, he finds that the U.S. has the greatest future growth potential, and a huge lead in economic and military power. Hence, unipolarity “will last for many decades” (8).

While acknowledging that there is evidence that China’s GDP (at PPP) is bigger than America’s, and that its economy is growing faster than that of the United States, Beckley dismisses the importance of these indicators. (Chapter 3). China’s aggregate economy may (or may not) be larger than America’s, but, he argues, there is “a large and persistent wealth gap between the United States and China” (33). This wealth gap exists because, although China’s economy is large, it is highly inefficient (both in absolute terms, and, especially, compared to the American economy). Beckley adduces data to support his claim by showing, *inter alia*, that China’s productivity suffers in comparison to that of the United States. Moreover, compared to the United States, China’s welfare and (internal) security costs are high.¹⁵ Hence aggregate GDP “ignores the cost side of the equation and creates the false impression that China is overtaking the United States economically. In reality, China is lagging behind because its inefficient growth model and the costs of caring for 20 per cent of humanity exhaust most of its economic output” (33).

As he lays out in Chapter 4, Beckley also sees U.S. military supremacy as a solid basis for continuing unipolarity. As he points out, because of the Cold War, the United States has spent some five decades accumulating a stock of military power and the

¹² Beckley describes his methodology at 16-18.

¹³ On these points, see Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security* 17:4 (Spring 1993): 5-51.

¹⁴ Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999): 5-41.

¹⁵ As Beckley notes, unlike the U.S., China must deal with serious internal unrest - particularly in Tibet and Xinjiang, (55-56). On the situation in Xinjiang, see Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims,” *New York Times*, 17 November 2019, A1.

industrial and technological infrastructure needed to support it. Additionally, China is handicapped in its ability to catch-up militarily with the U.S. by its geographical setting (and internal security costs). China has long borders to secure, and some of its neighbors (India and Vietnam for example) are potential adversaries. And, although not a contiguous land mass, Japan, which is another potential adversary, lies in close proximity to China. On the other hand, Beckley reminds us, the U.S. enjoys an extremely fortunate strategic geography: its neighbors are weak, and two vast oceans separate it from the world's conflict zones (64-65). Beckley's net assessment of the Sino-American military balance in East and Southeast Asia is sanguine. China's impressive military modernization notwithstanding, he argues "that [it] cannot impose regional hegemony nor achieve more limited aims, like conquering Taiwan or enforcing territorial claims in the East and South China Seas" (75). China's ambitions for regional hegemony, Beckley says, are blocked not only by U.S. military capabilities but also by the well-equipped forces that some of its neighbors have acquired. Even without U.S. assistance these forces "can deny China sea and air control throughout most of its near seas" (75).

With respect to geopolitics, Beckley is upbeat about the trajectory of U.S. power. Continuing unipolarity makes balancing against the United States unlikely, he says. In a unipolar setting, no state can singlehandedly balance the unipole, and collective action problems are likely to frustrate attempts to organize a counter-hegemonic coalition against the United States. In a unipolar system, therefore, other states will either bandwagon with the U.S., or simply stand aside and not get in its way (99). In Chapter 5, Beckley sets out the reasons why neither China nor Russia can challenge America's global primacy, and why both also are unable to challenge the United States' extra-regional hegemony in Europe and East Asia.¹⁶ He also outlines the advantages the U.S. enjoys over the international system's other big powers (Russia, China, Japan, India, France, Germany, and the UK). The United States, he notes, enjoys a huge advantage in energy resources and transportation infrastructure (120-124). With respect to state capacity, America's big (welfare) state is offset by a pro-entrepreneurship, pro-investment economic climate (125). China, Russia, and India, however, have serious state capacity problems without enjoying America's off-setting advantages. With respect to demography, the picture also favors the U.S. In China, Russia, and Europe, labor forces are contracting due to population declines. In the United States, the work force is forecast to expand throughout the twenty-first century. Conceding that the United States is "far from perfect," Beckley nonetheless concludes that its growth prospects going forward, and its continuing economic and military supremacy, place the United States in an advantageous position vis-a-vis the other major powers in the international system (134). His bottom line is that America's unipolar era "will persist for decades" (134).

In *Unrivaled's* concluding chapter, Beckley assesses the meaning of the unipolar era in which (in his telling) the international system finds itself. Here, he says, there is both good news and bad news. The good news is that in a unipolar system there is little chance of great power war, or its most dangerous subset, hegemonic war (135-136). Moreover, he adds, the U.S.-led post-1945 liberal international order—which rests on American economic and military dominance—has not only persisted, but it emerged from the Cold War stronger than ever. Even American rivals like Russia and China understand this, and have chosen to participate in this American-dominated system. The bad news is that there still are flashpoints—the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, the Baltics—where crises could break out and embroil the United States in conflicts—potentially nuclear ones—with China, Russia or North Korea. Moreover, Beckley argues that in a unipolar world, the United States must guard against what elsewhere I have called the "hegemon's temptation:" using its military dominance promiscuously to engage in asymmetric conflicts.¹⁷ He acknowledges that paranoia, threat inflation, and hubris can all lead to unwise military interventions that result in imperial overstretch. To avoid this in the future, Beckley proposes that the U.S. adopt a robust set of criteria for military interventions (a resurrected 'Powell Doctrine'); a reassertion by Congress

¹⁶ On the concept of extra-regional hegemony, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ See Layne, "The War on Terrorism and the Balance of Power: The Paradoxes of American Hegemony" in T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 120.

of its legitimate war-making powers under the Constitution, and imposition of a “war tax” that would compel Washington to finance wars on a “pay as you go” basis, rather than through deficit spending (141-2).

Beckley proposes U.S. grand strategy for specific regions. With respect to the Middle East/Persian Gulf, he aligns with those in the restraint and offshore balancing camps, who advocate extricating the U.S. from that region.¹⁸ Noting that there no longer is a need for the United States to defend Persian Gulf oil (or Saudi Arabia), and that terrorism does not require massive American military intervention in the region, Beckley argues for a diminished U.S. role in the Middle East (145-146). And he counsels against waging wars in that region with the aim of spreading democracy.

With respect to Russia and China, Beckley rejects a policy of U.S. retrenchment in either Europe or East Asia (even as he acknowledges that this strategy has “appeal”) because America would then lose influence in those regions (139). Instead, he calls for the U.S. to uphold the territorial status quo in Europe and East Asia by pursuing an Achesonian strategy of creating “situations of strength.”¹⁹ Beckley wants U.S. grand strategy to raise the costs to Russia and China of potential aggression, but without backing either Moscow or Beijing into a corner. He recommends that the U.S. strengthen the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities of Russia’s and China’s neighbors, and thus transform them into strategic “porcupines” (140). Beckley favors a variant of an offshore balancing/over the horizon strategy that would place American forces around Russia’s and China’s peripheries but, in order to reduce Moscow and Beijing’s apprehension of a threat from the U.S., would situate them at some geographic distance from their territory. These forces, Beckley suggests, would backstop the local balances of power, and the U.S. would become militarily engaged only if its regional allies failed to check Russian or Chinese aggression.

Beckley is keenly aware of the relationship between domestic politics and grand strategy. He discusses domestic decay in America. Partisan gridlock and political polarization have made it nearly impossible for Washington to tackle the big issues facing the United States: for example, rising entitlement costs, decaying infrastructure, income inequality, and the maldistribution of wealth. He makes the case that the United States is already slipping into “a vicious cycle in which partisan gridlock undermines public trust in government, which incentivizes politicians to starve the government of resources and authority, which leads to even poorer government performance, which leads to more defunding of the bureaucracy” (148). Beckley also argues that without an external enemy menacing enough to create a sense of national mission, Americans will fracture into political tribalism (147-148). Beckley cautions that having defeated its foreign rivals (Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union), America could easily turn in on itself, split into politically warring clans, and, as a result, its institutions will be gravely, perhaps fatally, weakened (146-148).

Unrivaled is a tour de force. Michael Beckley has made an important contribution to the debate about Sino-American relations, and about American grand strategy. The book is an important addition to the IR theory literature on hegemonic wars, power transitions, and great power rise and decline. Furthermore, *Unrivaled* explores the important, but often overlooked, issue of the inter-relationship between grand strategy and domestic politics. Of course, any book focusing on the timely and policy relevant topics that Beckley examines will invariably provoke debate and disagreement. So it is with *Unrivaled*. That, however, is an indication of the book’s strengths and of its importance. In this Roundtable, Emma Ashford, Mauro Gilli, and Joshua Shiffrin offer observations on, and critiques of, Beckley’s arguments.

“Power,” Ashford observes, “is a tricky concept.” As she points out, political scientists have consumed a rain forest’s worth of paper trying to define it, and have failed to reach a consensus. Notwithstanding the ascendancy of quantitative approaches in

¹⁸ For example, see Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 95:4 (July/August 2016): 70-83; Layne, “America’s Grand Strategy After Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing Has Arrived,” *Review of International Studies* 35:1 (January 2009): 5-25; Layne, “The (Almost) Triumph of Offshore Balancing,” *National Interest* (online), 27 January 2012, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/almost-triumph-offshore-balancing-6405>.

¹⁹ See Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969)

the study of international politics, widely accepted numerical measures of national power like GDP and CINC (composite index of national capability) are flawed. As she points out, the great strength of *Unrivaled* is Beckley's "fascinating attempt" to construct a more accurate way of measuring the comparative strength of great powers. By doing so, Ashford observes, Beckley is forcing analysts of international politics and security studies to ask whether the widely used quantitative metrics are "actually good measures of power or strength." In this respect, she notes that *Unrivaled's* big contribution is his focus on the issue of costs, and why that necessitates a focus on net, rather than gross, power metrics.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging the importance of Beckley's argument, Ashford suggests that although he "does a great job of highlighting the flaws in our existing metrics," his analytical framework has its own flaws and limitations. *Unrivaled's* ironic impact, Ashford argues, is to underscore the important point that "all qualitative measures of complex political and social phenomena are imperfect." For example, the percentage of its GDP that a great power spends on defense really says little about its actual military capabilities. Beckley, she acknowledges, is aware of the limits of quantitative approaches, and employs detailed case studies to illustrate the importance of the factors that he sees as key to measuring state power. These case studies "effectively" demonstrate "how costs can overwhelm gross national resources even in rich great power states."

For Ashford, the "big takeaway" of *Unrivaled* is that the United States has more power assets, and fewer liabilities (costs) than any other state in the international political system. While noting Beckley's evidence that the East Asian military balance is weighted against China, Ashford notes that the real importance of this finding does not concern America's military power in relation to China's. Rather, "it is that America's regional allies are more than capable of thwarting Chinese intentions in the region on their own..." Here, she finds "the most infuriating part of the book" to be the "logical disconnect" between Beckley's evidence of China's relative weakness and the robust military capabilities of regional powers, and his strongly stated policy conclusion that the United States must continue to pursue its grand strategy of primacy by actively containing China.

Gilli notes that *Unrivaled* is well-timed. From the early 1990's until quite recently, most economic headlines about China have focused on its astonishing economic growth. Today, however, such breathlessness about China's economic prospects has given way to concerns about its slowing growth rate, and other impediments, like economic inefficiency, environmental degradation, and worrisome demographic trends, to its achieving global economic dominance, or even parity with the United States. As Gilli comments, Beckley has done the hard work of digging "deep into the data to understand whether the conventional wisdom about America's decline and China's rise has solid foundations." He is in broad agreement with the thesis of *Unrivaled*: in the twenty-first century economic and military competition with China, the U.S. enjoys important advantages, which means that "there is little reason to believe the current distribution of power is going to change in the foreseeable future."

Although his review is laudatory, Gilli suggests that in several ways, *Unrivaled* is too humble in its conclusions. First, the book avoids the pitfall of much current work in IR theory (and political science more generally) by avoiding a self-conscious obsession with methodology and data for its own sake.²⁰ Rather, Beckley has produced "a truly interdisciplinary work that organizes an impressively broad range of data..." Second, Beckley has omitted intangible evidence, which, if included, would have widened the already considerable gap he finds between the U.S. and China. Here, Gilli mentions several factors that tilt the balance in America's favor: rule of law, which upholds property rights and contracts, thereby creating an environment that is conducive to entrepreneurship, and a social and cultural environment that supports innovation. On the other hand, China is a society "that is much less open to people who break social norms and violate rules." This observation provides a segue to the third way in which Beckley undersells his contribution: the advantages of America's political, economic, and social system. As Gilli argues, "China has without doubt achieved impressive results, but not only has this come at the exorbitant costs discussed by Beckley, but it has also entailed major socio-economic distortions that will haunt Chinese society and the economy for the foreseeable future, in ways that might be even difficult to imagine." Fourth, Gilli writes,

²⁰ On this point, see Michael Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Beckley underestimates *Unrivaled's* contribution to IR theory, which challenges the prevailing theories—notably Robert Gilpin's—about the rise and decline of great powers.²¹

Even if, to some degree, *Unrivaled* is too humble, its prediction that America's unipolar era will continue is, Gilli argues, perhaps too bold. As we all know from New York Yankee great Yogi Berra, making predictions is hard—especially about the future. Beckley's optimism about U.S. power is based on the assumption “that the current distribution of power does not hide some inherent malaise in the U.S. socio-economic system.” Thoughtful observers now speculate that the future of American democracy is at risk, and other respected scholars suggest that the United States has already been transformed from a democracy into an oligarchy.²² At a time when observers of the United States are worried about the effects of political polarization, gridlock, and bitter partisanship in Washington, D.C., income inequality, wealth mal-distribution, and issues of national identity are tearing at the fabric of American society; it is hardly a foregone conclusion (as Beckley acknowledges) that American primacy is immune from being undermined by domestic decay rather than by the geopolitical challenge posed by another great power.²³

Gilli also points to another unknown about the future: the possibility of a “technological revolution that changes the global source of wealth and power.” Technological change—what Gilli calls the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”—that is “unfolding in front of our eyes *might* make current sources of wealth and power obsolete. So if this new industrial-technological revolution does indeed materialize, much will depend on whether it reinforces America's current economic and military advantages, or, rather, creates opportunities for a rival with a different set of capabilities and institutions more suited to benefit from this revolution.” Gilli thus cautions that although Beckley's forecast of continuing American unipolar power may be correct, there is always the chance that discontinuous change could lead to a different outcome. In the final analysis, Gilli concludes, “to predict whether the U.S. will maintain its edge in world politics, we thus need to understand whether a technological revolution is indeed taking place, and who will gain and who will lose from it.”

Shiffrinson joins Ashford and Gilli in saluting Beckley's contribution to the debates on how best to measure power in international politics, and on the grand strategic implications of China's rise. *Unrivaled*, he notes, “joins a series of studies pushing back on the perception that the United States is soon to fall into the dustbin of history.” Moreover, Shiffrinson comments, if Beckley is right, his attempt to construct a new framework for measuring power may force security studies scholars and diplomatic historians to re-evaluate great power politics because “much of what we think we know of the link between power and international outcomes could now be suspect.” Indeed, Shiffrinson suggests, if Beckley is correct, a “reformation” of the discipline of IR/security studies would be in order.

Shiffrinson also identifies some flaws in Beckley's argument, one of which is that Beckley does not provide much guidance for identifying which states qualify for great power status, and which do not. Honing in on this observation, Shiffrinson raises several questions about Beckley's claim of continuing U.S. unipolarity. First, how should measures of power be used to discern the distribution of power in, and structure of, the international system? Second, what is “the relationship between power, structure, and international competition?” Third, what criteria should be used to ascertain whether a new great power has entered the international political system?

²¹ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*.

²² On these points, see Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Patrick Dineen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); Jeffrey Winters and Benjamin Page, “Oligarchy in the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7:4 (December 2009): 731-751.

²³ For example, see Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

As Shiffrinson states, these are more than just questions of measurement. Unless we have some way to determine what makes a great power, Beckley's argument about continuing American unipolarity is weakened. Shiffrinson uses the Cold War case of the Soviet Union to illustrate his point. At its peak, the Soviet Union's GDP was never more than 40% of America's, and its economy was notoriously inefficient. Yet, the Soviet Union constituted a threat—or American leaders said it did—that the United States had to take seriously. And policy makers and IR scholars alike agree that from 1945 to 1989 the international system was bipolar; that is, that like the United States, the Soviet Union was also a superpower. This casts doubt on Beckley's claim about present day U.S. unipolarity. "After all," Shiffrinson says, "if there are grounds to believe that a comparatively weak state can effectively compete even with the strongest state in the international system with a questionable resource and military base, then even a U.S. that is far stronger than the PRC (or other rivals) is no guarantee of unipolarity..." To drive the point home, Shiffrinson argues there is no reason to believe that the United States' welfare and security costs have the effect of preventing a "trailing" state(s) from challenging the leading state. There is, he suggests, a threshold level of resource stocks that qualifies a state as a great power, and Beckley does not tell us what that threshold is.

The debate about China's rise, and about the future of unipolarity, will continue. As Ashford, Mauro, and Shiffrinson agree, *Unrivaled* is an important contribution to the conversation. Whether Beckley's analysis of China's rise is correct is, however, an open question. Notwithstanding the American foreign policy establishment's rhetorical commitment to a unipolar strategy, and U.S. primacy, there is an obvious cognitive dissonance in elite thinking. The Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia was an (at least) implicit recognition of China's rise, and the shifting balance of power in East Asia.²⁴ Even more telling, today's panicky foreign policy establishment rhetoric about a new Cold War with China is difficult to reconcile with the widespread assertions of continuing U.S. dominance emanating from Washington's foreign policy 'Blob.' Similarly, the now fashionable contention that great power politics has 'returned'—with Sino-American relations as its fulcrum—is inconsistent with the still-prevalent belief in U.S. policy and academic circles that the international system remains unipolar. After all, great power politics can only 'return' if there is more than one great power.²⁵

It may indeed be the case, as Beckley (and Brooks and Wohlforth) argue, that China at present is unable to contest America's *global* primacy. But this misses the point: to paraphrase the late House of Representative Speaker Tip O'Neill, all geopolitics is regional, not global. There is a clear historical pattern associated with the emergence of great powers. Really strong rising great powers aim first at establishing their dominance in their own geographic region (as the United States did in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).²⁶ They "go global" only if they are successful in the first stage.²⁷ China's grand strategy (at least for now) is focused on attaining *regional* hegemony in East (and Southeast) Asia. This means that China and the U.S. are on a collision course in East Asia, the region where the United States has been the incumbent, extra-regional hegemon since 1945, and which an increasingly powerful and assertive China sees as its own backyard.²⁸ This is why

²⁴ See, for example, Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: American Statecraft and the Future of Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016); Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

²⁵ Even in unipolar systems great power politics is always immanent. There invariably are states - 'great powers in waiting' - that have the potential to rise and bring an end to the unipole's dominance.

²⁶ On this pattern of rising great power behavior, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Usual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Layne, *Peace of Illusions*.

²⁷ In this respect, the United States truly is exceptional: it is the only great power successfully to establish hegemony in its own region. America's regional hegemony was the springboard for its post-1945 extra-regional hegemony in Europe and East Asia. In contrast, during the past five centuries, many European great powers tried to establish their hegemony over the Continent, but all of them failed.

²⁸ Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105:690 (April 2006): 160-62; Layne, "China's Challenge to U.S. Hegemony," *Current History* 107:705 (January 2008): 13-18.

Sino-American relations are so fraught: there cannot be two hegemon in the same region simultaneously. Something has to give.

Unrivaled raises, but leaves unanswered, important questions that policy makers and scholars need to answer. How long will the ‘unipolar era’ last? Beckley’s answer is vague: it will last decades, or perhaps to the end of the twenty-first century. Twenty years or eighty years, or something in between? The time-scale makes a difference for policy. And what will bring this ‘unipolar era’ to an end? After all, if the path of China (to say nothing of India or Russia) to accumulating the stock of wealth necessary for great power status is impeded by high welfare and security costs, and the inefficient use of resources, what changes would have to occur to enable China (or Russia or India) to attain great power status? Although he says he is not arguing that America’s unipolar moment will last forever, Beckley does not provide a roadmap that answers the ‘Petraeus Question,’ as formulated by General David Petraeus: how will it end? Changes in the international system’s polarity tend to be evolutionary rather than abrupt. The change from unipolarity to bipolarity (or multipolarity) will not occur overnight. Or to put it another way, there is no ‘polarity light switch’ that can be flipped to transform the international system’s structure. Because changes in polarity have consequential real-world effects on international politics, it is important that we have indicators, or signposts, that help us understand if and when a polarity shift is underway, and, if so, how advanced the process is.

We may be much closer to the end of the unipolar era than Beckley (and other scholars) seem to believe. For example, the Norwegian Defense Institute’s Øystein Tunsjø makes a strong case that because of China’s great power emergence, the international system is *already* bipolar.²⁹ Policy makers and security studies scholars can debate Tunsjø’s conclusion. However, it does seem that *Unrivaled* misses, or discounts, important changes in the East Asian power balance between the United States and China. Moreover, the attempt to find a perfect (or merely better) objective measure of states’ relative power overlooks an important point: as Wohlforth has noted, in terms of real world statecraft it is not the “objective” distribution of power that matters.³⁰ What matters is how policy makers *perceive* the balance of power. When two rival great power each assess the balance of power between them incorrectly, the chances of war increase.³¹ As the United States and China careen into a new Cold War, policy makers in Washington and Beijing must guard against over estimating their own state’s power and underestimating the other’s.

Going forward, the danger in Sino-American relations is that the new Cold War between them is sowing the seeds of a potential new hot war. President Donald Trump’s trade war against China has stirred up anti-China sentiment within much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, which has spilled over from the realm of economics into that of geopolitics. In a recent column, the *Financial Times*’s Edward Luce confessed that “The speed with which US political leaders of all stripes have united behind the idea of a ‘new cold war’ is something that takes my breath away.” As Luce observes, less than two years ago the notion that the United States and China were locked in a new Cold War was dismissed as “fringe scaremongering.” But now, he says, “it is consensus.”³²

America’s grand strategy seems now to be directed explicitly to containing China. But if the United States builds a ring of bases and alliances around China’s periphery, this is bound to fuel Beijing’s fears about its security, and about Washington’s

²⁹ Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

³⁰ William Wohlforth, “The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance,” *World Politics* 39:3 (April 1987): 353-381.

³¹ In this sense, as the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey has observed, every great power war is caused by miscalculation: both sides believe they will prevail. One of them is wrong. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1988)

³² Luce, “Getting Acclimatized to the U.S.-China Cold War.”

intentions.³³ As Melvyn Leffler has noted, the United States pursued a similar strategy with respect to the Soviet Union following World War II, and that strategy contributed greatly to the intensification of the Cold War by heightening Moscow's concerns about its own security.³⁴ At the same time, events in Xinjiang and Hong Kong are causing the American foreign policy establishment to recast the nature of the Sino-American relationship from a traditional great power rivalry to an ideological contest between "democracy" versus authoritarianism.³⁵ This, too, is an unsettling echo of the Cold War. The Cold War might have been managed as a traditional great power relationship, including respect for spheres of influence, but American liberalism's missionary zeal and universal aspirations transformed the Soviet-American relationship into a Manichean ideological struggle.³⁶

The last thing the United States should want is to repeat the mistakes it made following World War II. The consequences would likely be worse this time around, because China already is a more formidable economic and technological rival than the Soviet Union ever was. The non-decliners, and the American foreign policy establishment as a whole, have failed to grasp what is really driving the evolving Sino-American relationship: status and prestige. As the ancient Greek historian Thucydides wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the policies of great powers for sure reflect their fears for their security, and the preservation, and enhancement, of their interests. However, he wrote, they are equally concerned about their honor (that is, status and prestige). Rising new great powers want to be accorded status and prestige equal to that of the leading great power.³⁷

Status and prestige are especially sensitive concerns for China because of the 'century of humiliation' it endured at the hands of the Western powers from the First Opium War (1839-1842) until the Chinese Communist Party's 1949 victory in the Civil War. Although it is now fashionable in U.S. establishment circles to speak of the China "threat," and Chinese "expansionism," Beijing's drive for regional hegemony in East Asia does not pose a threat to America's security, or to the

³³ This is textbook IR Theory 101 about the effects of the security dilemma. Beckley suggests that by putting American bases and military power out of China's sight, somehow Beijing will not feel threatened by the U.S. This is doubtful for two reasons. First, it is difficult to imagine that the U.S. would pull back from its military bases in Japan, South Korea, or Guam, or that it would cease naval and air patrols close to China. Second, it is unlikely that China would buy into such an American 'out of sight, out of mind' strategy. Chinese policy makers would understand fully the mission of American forces around its periphery, even if they were "over the horizon," and that the goal of U.S. strategy is to contain China, and prevent it from attaining regional hegemony.

³⁴ Melvyn Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48," *American Historical Review* 89:2 (April 1984): 346-381.

³⁵ As Republican Sen. Josh Hawley (Mo) has written: "China has shown its desire for domination in Hong Kong, where it ruthlessly suppresses its own people and seeks to strip them of their liberties, including the protections of the rule of law. It has betrayed its eagerness to impose authoritarian principles on America in its coercion of the National Basketball Association and other U.S. companies doing business in China. Those are previews of coming attractions if America doesn't change course." Hawley, "End 'Forever Wars' and Face China's Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 November 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/end-forever-wars-and-face-chinas-threat-11574634656>.

³⁶ On this point, see Daniel Yergin, *The Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

³⁷ Gilpin emphasized the importance of status and prestige in *War and Change in World Politics*. However, this topic was generally overlooked until recently. Doubtless inspired by the rise of China, this topic is now the subject of renewed attention. Important recent works on status and prestige include: Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Status in World Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Recognition, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

balance of power.³⁸ China's rise does, however, threaten America's identity: the perception of American exceptionalism by its elites, and the universality of American values. It remains an open question, and perhaps *the* foreign policy question of our time, whether the United States can adjust to China's emergence as a great power peer, and accord to it the status and respect of an equal in international politics. But it is a sure thing that the United States owns the off-ramp from a future Sino-American showdown. Once again, as in the years leading up to 1914, policy makers will need to face the question that was posed many years ago by the historian E. H. Carr: can a dominant power with a vested stake in maintaining the international status quo accommodate the necessarily revisionist goals of a rising great power?

Participants:

Michael Beckley is an associate professor of political science at Tufts University and a Jeane Kirkpatrick Visiting Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University. His research on U.S.-China relations has received awards from the American Political Science Association and the International Studies Association and been featured by numerous media including the *Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, the *New York Times*, NPR, and the *Washington Post*. Previously, he worked for Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, the U.S. Department of Defense, the RAND Corporation, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and he continues to advise offices within the U.S. Intelligence Community and U.S. Department of Defense. His first book, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower*, was published in 2018 by Cornell University Press.

Christopher Layne is University Distinguished Professor of International Affairs and Robert M Gates Chair in National Security at Texas A & M University.

Emma Ashford is a Research Fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., where she focuses on U.S. foreign policy, Middle East policy and U.S.-Russian relations. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and an MA from American University's School of International Service.

Mauro Gilli is a Senior Researcher in Military Technology and International Security at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Switzerland (ETH-Zurich). With Andrea Gilli, he has co-authored "Why China Has Not Caught up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering and Cyber Espionage," *International Security* 43:3 (Winter 2018/19): 141-189; and "The Diffusion of Drone Warfare? Industrial, Infrastructural, and Organizational Constraints," *Security Studies* 25:1 (Winter 2016): 50-84.

Joshua Shiffrin, Boston University Joshua Shiffrin is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Boston University's Pardee School of Global Studies. His research focuses on international security, U.S. foreign policy, and great power politics. A graduate of MIT and Brandeis University, his first book—*Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*—was published by Cornell University Press in 2018. He is currently working on a new project exploring great power efforts to suppress prospective challengers before they emerge.

³⁸ Senator Hawley has captured the emerging foreign policy establishment view of the China "threat." "China's expansionist moves are a direct threat to American security. Beijing's aim is nothing short of domination—first of the region, then of the world. The Asia-Pacific is critical to the prosperity of American farmers, manufacturers and consumers. We can't afford to be shut out in the years to come, nor can we afford to be reduced to begging Beijing for terms." Hawley, "End 'Forever Wars' and Face China's Threat,"

Power is a tricky concept. Despite thousands of words and decades of effort, political scientists are little closer to being able to define it than when modern discussion began in the 1960s.¹ Whether they point to the strength of a country, the elements of national power, or the fungibility of those assets, scholars agree on very little in the study of power. One is often tempted to just throw up one's hands and simply declare that power is defined—as Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once described the definition of obscenity—as “I know it when I see it.”²

In *Unrivaled*, Michael Beckley instead chooses to tackle this challenging problem head-on, in an ambitious and fascinating attempt to more accurately measure the strength of great power states, and to better assess the future fates of the United States, China, and other major players in the decades to come.

Despite improvements in recent years, his central contention—that the quantitative metrics most scholars currently use to measure power are woefully inadequate—still reflects a broader problem in the field of international relations. Often, scholars throw a composite index of national capability (CINC) score or a measure of military expenditure into regression analyses of international security as a control variable; it is so common that it's almost a no-brainer. Yet we rarely really think through whether that variable is an accurate measure of the phenomenon we want to account for.³

Does CINC really measure comparative military capability? Only if you think that a big population and steel production are the determinants of modern military victory. Is military expenditure really a measure of military capacity? As Beckley points out, only if you think that the state can translate resources into power without friction, and that all states do so at equal rates. Even an undergraduate political science student could point out why these assumptions are at best shaky.

Beckley's book therefore drives us to think more carefully about whether some of these no-brainer metrics are actually good measures of power or strength. His big contribution focuses on the overlooked question of costs, asking why we measure power in gross, rather than net, terms. He makes this point initially in terms of population, arguing that a big population consumes more resources, even if it could produce a bigger army. But as he points out, it is equally true in many areas; we should include government liabilities—whether social spending, security needs or corruption—in our assessments of relative power shifts.

Unfortunately, while *Unrivaled* does a great job of highlighting the flaws in our existing metrics, it does not do a good job of presenting a viable alternative. The metric that Beckley proposes—GDP multiplied by GDP per capita—certainly seems to

¹ For only a few examples of the massive volume of work in political science and international relations in particular on this topic, see Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, “Two Faces of Power,” *American Political Science Review* 56:4 (1962): 947-952; Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2005); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Klaus Knorr, *Power of Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds., *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Beyond the Three Faces of Power: A Realist Critique,” *Polity* 20, no. 1 (1987): 4-31. For a good overview of the debates involved, see David Baldwin, “Power and International Relations,” in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012: 273-298)

² *Jacobellis vs. Ohio* (June 22, 1964) (Legal Information Institute, Cornell University Law School), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/378/184>.

³ For just a few critiques of CINC scores, see Kelly Kadera and Gerald Sorokin. “Measuring National Power.” *International Interactions* 30:3 (2004): 211-230; or Carsten Rauch, “Challenging the Power Consensus: GDP, CINC, and Power Transition Theory,” *Security Studies* 26:4 (2017): 642-664.

perform better than GDP or CINC score in providing a rough measure of state power, but it doesn't actually account for many of the factors that Beckley himself argues are key. This new metric equally fails to account for investment flows, human capital or security costs. Stranger still, the book does not include what one would assume should be the heart of the analysis: a quantitative cross-national application of the metric. Instead, a brief two-paragraph summary simply points readers instead to the author's *International Security* article (31-32).⁴

Perhaps unintentionally, then, the book in many ways makes the point that all quantitative measures of complex political and social phenomena are imperfect. The same criticisms could easily apply to many of the alternative metrics Beckley uses to assess great powers in relative terms. World Bank governance indicators, for example, are opaque in their coding. He points to at least one case where UN and World Bank indicators come to opposing conclusions when measuring Chinese natural capital (56-58).

Of course, the suggestion that raw numerical metrics are not the best way to understand the world is hardly a new observation. But *Unrivaled* reminds us that it is one with real-world policy implications. Take current debates over NATO spending. The Trump administration's insistence that NATO members should meet their obligations to spend 2% of GDP on defense obscures the fact that this figure is not a good metric of defense capability or of capacity to contribute to the alliance.⁵ For some states, pensions even count towards that total. And as many analysts have pointed out, the focus on that two percent metric obscures very real shortfalls in actual military capacity.⁶

Unrivaled suggests similar concerns about military budgets. The comparison of military budgets is not just a common way to rank states in power terms; it is also a shibboleth in debates over U.S. military spending. After all, if America's military budget is shrinking relative to that of China, it would be an argument for spending more. Pointing out the reality that America spends more on its military than the next ten countries is, in contrast, an excellent argument for cutting the budget.⁷ Beckley's overview of American and Chinese power—which accounts for America's lower security and social liabilities—in many ways makes the case that U.S. military budget is even more outsized than defense spending critics often assume.

The book thus reminds us that quantitative metrics are a useful first-cut approximation. But they are also—at best—a rough guide to the world, and not something on which we should base conclusions unless further backed by other types of evidence. Given all the problems with the raw numbers, Beckley himself resorts to detailed case studies of great powers to get at the many factors he points to as important in measuring state power. These are far more effective in supporting his argument, as he effectively shows how costs can overwhelm gross national resources even in rich great power states.

Yet even this detailed analysis is a reminder that, far from being objective, such comparisons are shaped by the impressions and opinions of those who code them. Indeed, a number of the Beckley's assumptions about U.S. liabilities and resources are questionable. He excludes the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Fund—a measure of U.S. war spending—from his

⁴ See Michael Beckley, "The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters." *International Security* 43:2 (2018): 7-44.

⁵ Peter Baker, "Trump Says NATO Allies Don't Pay Their Share. Is That True?" *The New York Times* (26 May 2017), www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/europe/nato-trump-spending.html.

⁶ Simon Lunn, Simon and Nicholas Williams, "NATO Defense Spending: The Irrationality of 2%," European Leadership Network Issue Brief, June 2017, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/170608-ELN-Issues-Brief-Defence-Spending.pdf>.

⁷ That argument has been made recently by politicians like Bernie Sanders. See Paul Sprecht, "Bernie Sanders Says U.S. Military Spending is Bigger Than the Next Twelve Nations Combined," *Politifact*, 24 April 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/north-carolina/statements/2018/apr/24/bernie-sanders/sanders-says-us-military-spending-bigger-next-12-n/>.

listing of U.S. security spending. Likewise, he excludes domestic national guard costs since those are “funded by state budgets, not the U.S. military budget” (65). But domestic security costs *are* included in his assessment of Chinese military spending. It seems highly unlikely that federalism or budget gimmicks like OCO somehow absolve the United States generally of these security costs.

Likewise, Beckley is inconsistent in his assessment of the future potential of many great powers. He considers the possession of exploitable resources, for example, to be an asset for states (57; 115-116). Even putting aside the question of whether resources are truly an asset—or whether the negative institutional and economic impacts of resource production outweigh the monetary and industrial benefits—this metric is applied variably across cases.⁸ America’s resources are an asset. Russia, in contrast, gets dinged for resource possession because its economy is too oil- and gas-dependent (120-123). These are not unreasonable positions to take, of course. But they are inconsistent, rendering his comparison across cases problematic. The book thus serves as a reminder that all such analysis is in the eye of the beholder.

Ultimately, none of this really undermines Beckley’s big takeaway, which is that the United States has more assets than is commonly assumed and fewer liabilities than many other states, China included. The most interesting part of *Unrivaled* is its comparative military assessment of Chinese prospects in various theatres, in which Beckley shows convincingly that China’s ability to project power is surprisingly limited even within Asia. But while Beckley explains that his analysis shows that China cannot overcome U.S. military superiority, what his analysis actually shows is that America’s regional allies are more than capable of thwarting Chinese intentions in the region on their own, whether it’s Taiwan’s ability to resist a Chinese invasion, or China’s ability to wrest control of the South China Sea from Vietnam, Indonesia, or Malaysia.

Indeed, with the exception of the East portion of the South China Sea—a small and relatively insignificant geographic area—America only really figures in these cases as an afterthought. In many ways, Chapter Four is not really a comparison of Chinese and American military prospects, it offers an assessment of China’s ability to overcome its neighbors. The assessment is not favorable to China. As a result, the most infuriating part of the book is the logical disconnect between Beckley’s analysis and his policy proposals. He suggests repeatedly that the United States must remain engaged and active militarily around the world to counter China, yet his analysis suggests that U.S. allies and partners are far more capable of carrying that burden than commonly assumed.

Unrivaled is valuable because it helps us think more logically and more comprehensively about U.S. and Chinese power dynamics. With the Trump administration’s new National Security Strategy highlighting the importance of ‘great power competition’ with China, these questions increasingly move beyond the realm of academic debate, and can have substantive real-world impacts.⁹ Unfortunately, the biggest question raised by the book is the extent to which this kind of detailed analysis truly matters.

In the first place, though Beckley notes that “The United States could easily squander its geopolitical potential,” he argues that “...the purpose of this book is not to argue that unipolarity is set in stone, but rather to make an educated guess about how long it will last based on present trends” (3). The problem, of course, is that present trends in U.S. foreign policy—most notably the rise of Donald Trump—are decidedly ahistorical. Even if the general thrust of U.S. foreign policy has remained broadly similar under President Trump, he has opened a broad and wide-ranging debate about how America views its foreign policy future. With a growing domestic focus in both political parties, assuming that present trends in U.S. foreign

⁸ For an excellent overview of the literature on the ‘resource curse,’ see Michael L. Ross, “What Have we Learned about the Resource Curse?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 239-259.

⁹ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

policy (or trade or immigration) will continue, and that America will act as it did during the unipolar 1990s and 2000s, seems a precarious assumption.

Beckley likewise appears to assume that America's worst foreign policy impulses can easily be reined in; that it could end the war on terror and move to an offshore balancing posture in the Middle East. It would be wonderful if this were true. But the experiences of the Obama administration in trying to execute a 'pivot' to Asia suggest that foreign policy patterns may not be so easy to reform. The big assumption in *Unrivaled*, that America will not squander its bounty of resources and power in pointless imperial overextension, is questionable.

Finally, even if Beckley is correct in his overall assessment that the United States is far stronger than China, and far better positioned for future conflict, that assessment may not be shared by policymakers. Indeed, with *Unrivaled* focusing heavily on objective analyses of power and threat, it largely ignores the broader question of policymaker perceptions. International Relations is replete with examples of threat misperception, from wars fought due to overconfidence to the impact of ideology on threat perception.¹⁰ Put simply, if policymakers perceive a threat from China, there is likely little that books like Beckley's can do to change their minds. This is particularly true when even the author's own policy prescriptions are more hawkish than his data would suggest is strictly necessary.

Despite this, *Unrivaled* offers a useful counterpoint to those who argue that the United States is inevitably in decline, and that China is rising to superpower status. Perhaps most interestingly, it suggests that what comes next in international affairs is unlikely to be a repeat of a bipolar Cold War. Instead, what follows looks likely to be far messier: some variant of multipolarity or narrowly-scoped unipolarity in which America remains the largest player, but many countries play a role. Ultimately, for all of the criticisms of the metrics used here to assess power, it is rare to see any objective attempt to quantify power. Beckley should be commended for tackling this difficult question, and for laying out the issues involved so clearly.

¹⁰ Dominic DP Johnson, *Overconfidence and War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jack S. Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics* 36:1 (1983): 76-99; Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789-1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

REVIEW BY MAURO GILLI, SWISS FEDERAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ZURICH,
SWITZERLAND

The Big Short on China

Since Michael Beckley's *Unrivaled* came out in the fall 2018, news on China's economy has gone from bad to worse.¹ In light of these considerations, the Chinese leadership warned of possible social turmoil; and a state-owned think-tank recognized that the U.S. would remain the "only global economic superpower" until at least 2035.² At the same time, some prominent analysts confirmed what many (including Beckley) have long suspected: China's GDP is overestimated by 10-to-20%.³

Time will tell whether this set of news is just a transient storm that will leave China's rise to global hegemony unabated, or whether it is the beginning of the end for China's rapid and successful rise. In either case, Michael Beckley's book could not be better timely. While reading it, I kept thinking about another Michael, Michael Burry, the medical doctor turned hedge fund manager described in the book, and then the movie of the same title, *The Big Short*.⁴ In the mid-2000s, Burry realized that the U.S. housing market was vitiated by a set of malpractices and wrong assumptions, which would have led to a fall in house prices. For this reason, in the years preceding the Great Recession of 2008, Burry took a 'short position' on the housing market—a commitment to buy a good at a later time, and selling it at today's prices. At that time, large investment banks thought Burry was a lunatic who would provide them with easy and significant returns. Yet, Michael Burry was right: his strategy delivered a 489% return over the same period that saw the collapse of Bear Stern and Lehman Brothers, and the unsetting of global financial crisis. Why did Burry see what (almost) everyone else missed? Because he did what very few others were willing to do: he checked the data, the hard data. By looking at the contracts of subprime mortgages, Burry figured out that the housing bubble was inevitably doomed to bust once interest rates increased, as happened in the end.

Michael Beckley has done exactly that: he has dug into the data to understand whether the conventional wisdom about America's decline and China's rise has solid foundations. The result is an agile book that through intuitive logic provides a counter-intuitive explanation, and that questions the new wave of "declinism" that started in 2007/08.⁵ America has a lot of problems, Beckley acknowledges, but overall it has fewer and less severe problems than other would-be superpowers. Given

¹ Keith Bradsher and Ailin Tang, "China's Economy Slows Sharply, in Challenge for Xi Jinping," *The New York Times* (14 December 2018); Alexandra Stevenson, "China Pours \$218 Billion Into the Economy as Growth Slows," *The New York Times* (4 January 2019); Keith Bradsher, "China's Economy, by the Numbers, Is Worse Than It Looks," *The New York Times* (20 January 2019); Christopher Balding, "China's Banks Are Desperate for Capital—Lenders Can't Continue This Pace of Loan Growth Without a Bigger Cushion," *Bloomberg News* (27 January 2019); Mark Gongloff, "China Is Turning Into Its Own Worst Economic Enemy: Beijing Has Hamstrung Future Growth with Misguided Policies," *Bloomberg News* (16 January 2019).

² "China's Xi Warns Party of 'Serious Dangers' as Risks Mount," *Bloomberg News* (21 January 2019); Frank Tang, "United States to Remain Sole Global Economic Superpower Until 2035, Chinese Government Think Tank Says," *South China Morning Post* (12 February 2019).

³ *The Economist*, "China's Economy Might Be Nearly a Seventh Smaller Than Reported," (7 March 2019); Gabriel Wildau, "China's Economy Is 12% Smaller Than Official Data Say, Study Finds," *Financial Times* (7 March 2019).

⁴ Michael Lewis, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

⁵ One of the most prominent works that opened in the new wave of declinism was Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). For a more extensive list, see the works cited in Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36:3 (Winter 2011/12): 41, fn. 2.

that the U.S. benefits from key favorable conditions to long-term growth, Beckley argues, there is little reason to believe the current distribution of power is going to change markedly in the foreseeable future.

Unrivaled starts from two questions: why the U.S. is so dominant, and how long the current imbalance of power will last. Beckley answers the first question by noting that widely accepted measures of power, such as gross domestic product (GDP) and the composite index of national capabilities (CINC), significantly underestimate American power relative to other countries. Moreover, Beckley points out that when it comes to three important drivers of economic growth (demographic trends, domestic institutions and natural resources), the U.S. outperforms, in the aggregate, any major contender to the role of superpower. He concludes that there is no reason to believe any major power will surpass the U.S. in the foreseeable future.⁶

I have a couple of minor thoughts on some of the measures Beckley uses, but these are, in fact, minor points.⁷ My main criticism of the *Unrivaled* is that it is at once too humble and too bold in its claims.

Too Humble about the Present

Humble is clearly not the first adjective that comes to mind when describing a book titled *Unrivaled*. Yet, this is in fact the case. *Unrivaled* is too humble in that it undersells its contributions to international relations theory and unipolarity, in several ways.

First, Beckley has written a very unusual book. *Unrivaled* departs from typical works in International Relations in that it does not present a unified theory and it does not rely on sophisticated methodological tools to test its hypotheses. I am sure some scholars will criticize it for this very reason. In fact, this is its key strength: *Unrivaled* is a refreshing read for a field that is obsessed with “methods and theory for their own sake.”⁸ It reminds international relations scholars that sometimes we might observe phenomena that defy generalization: in those instances, description of data has the potential of being a very promising and rewarding approach, as the case of Michael Burry shows.⁹ Beckley, however, does not use his approach to

⁶ *Unrivaled* explores also other topics, including the qualitative gap in military capabilities between China and the U.S. as well as the constraints to Chinese naval expansion. With regard to the former, I have written myself on this topic, reaching similar conclusions to those of Beckley. See Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage”, *International Security* 43:3 (Winter 2018/19): 141-189. With regard to the latter, it is beyond my area of expertise and therefore I am not in the position to contribute to it. For a less optimistic view, see for example Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, *A Question of Time: Enhancing Taiwan’s Conventional Deterrence Posture* (Arlington: George Mason University Center for Security Policy Studies, 2018).

⁷ One of the key contributions of *Unrivaled* is the emphasis on ‘net’ rather than ‘gross’ measures of power. Beckley uses a proxy to measure net domestic product. Borrowing from economic historian Paul Bairoch, Beckley multiplies GDP and per capita GDP (pcapGDP) to measure net domestic product. Beckley admits that this measure is inevitably crude and that provides only a first cut to a much more complicated assessment. Yet, I am not sure this measure really captures net domestic product. If we were to use it in a standard regression model, this would be an interaction effect, which would estimate the marginal effect of an increase in GDP conditional pcapGDP, and the conditional effect of an increase in pcapGDP conditional on GDP.

⁸ Francis J. Gavin, “Who We Are, What We Do, and Why You Should Care,” *Texas National Security Review* 1:1 (December 2017), 11.

⁹ As a recent example of the importance of description, see Sam Walker, “Behind the Black-Hole Image: One Giant Leap for Teamwork,” *The Wall Street Journal* (20 April 2019).

hammer the discipline for its obsession with methods and theory.¹⁰ In this way, he significantly undersells his contribution to the field: *Unrivaled* shows that sometimes, in order to address very important questions in international politics, accepted conventions in the field might have to be ignored. Beckley has done so and opted for a truly interdisciplinary work that organizes an impressively broad range of data—going from tobacco consumption in China and in the US to muzzle- and breech-loading guns during the Opium wars.

Beckley undersells his contribution in a second important way: the data he analyses does not capture immaterial aspects that, when compounded, would probably further tilt the balance in favor of the United States. Consider for example the comparison in institutional settings between the U.S. and China: Beckley looks, among others, at state capacity, the capacity of the central government to enforce the rule of law and protect property right and contracts—which is fundamentally important for entrepreneurship.¹¹ Beckley points out that the U.S. is much better positioned than China. This measure, however, does not capture fundamental aspects about the U.S. economy and society, such as the opportunities that it gives to ‘nonconformists’ to emerge.¹² These are individuals such the founders of companies such as Apple and Google that revolutionized the global way of doing and seeing things; the hedge fund manager who beat Wall Street described above; or John Boyd, the Air Force fighter pilot who changed air tactics. These highly creative individuals, however, generally break conventions, despise rules, and work in highly unusual ways: the popularity of LSD among the early pioneers of the Silicon Valley being just one of the many examples.¹³ Of course, this is not to say that the U.S. society and economy make it easy for these individual to thrive: elementary school teachers, among others, tend in fact to penalize highly creative children.¹⁴ But the U.S. society and economy are still sufficiently flexible and open to give these individuals a chance. The very opposite is true for China, a society that is obviously much less open to people who break social norms and violate rules; consider that

¹⁰ Beckley does acknowledge that “the laws of history do not apply today” (2), but he does not develop this point further, thus leaving it to the reader (or the reviewer) to appreciate it fully.

¹¹ State capacity is in fact an important predictor of entrepreneurship and wealth creation. See Magnus Henrekson and Tino Sanandaji, “Small Business Activity Does Not Measure Entrepreneurship,” *Proceedings of National Academy of Science* 111:5 (February 2014): 1760-1765. See also Tino Sanandaji and Peter T. Leeson, “Billionaires,” *Industrial and Corporate Change* 22:1 (2013): 313-337.

¹² Beckley recognizes also the role of limited regulation behind American entrepreneurship, but does not explicitly discuss how the opportunities that the American society gives to nonconformists. It is telling that the seven top tech companies in the world are American. See Sue Chang, “U.S. Companies Really Do Rule the Tech World—Here’s The Chart to Prove it,” *MarketWatch* (8 October 2018). For a discussion on the role of nonconformists, see Adam Grant, *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017). For how Google looks for individuals with these very traits and tries to nurture them, see Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Google Works* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014).

¹³ See for example, Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014): 266-278. About other unusual ways of working, consider that in the office, Michael Burry would wear shorts, walk around barefoot and listen to heavy metal music. See Lewis, *The Big Short*: 193-194. Similarly, despite his career in the military, Boyd he used to show up at the Pentagon at noon, unshaved and with wrinkled shirts—unavoidably spitting profanities while addressing people. See Robert Coram, *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002): 205, 246 and 413. Coran’s biography has been accused of being a hagiography of Boyd. For a more balanced assessment, see James Hasik, “Beyond the Briefing: Theoretical and Practical Problems in the Works and Legacy of John Boyd,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 34:3 (December 2013): 583-599. For a more general discussion about highly creative individuals and their working environments, see for example the section “Your Parents Were Wrong—Messiness is a Virtue” in Schmidt and Rosenberg, *How Google Works*, 38-40.

¹⁴ Erik L. Westby and V.L. Dawson, “Creativity: Asset or Burden in the Classroom?,” *Creativity Research Journal* 8:1 (1995): 1-10.

some schools in China have started employing cameras and artificial intelligence to monitor (and punish) students who do not pay attention in class.¹⁵

This discussion leads to the third way in which Beckley undersells his contribution, namely he pays little attention to the very different philosophies underpinning the Chinese and U.S. socio-economic-political systems. The Chinese system is based on the assumption that the government can engineer growth by setting standards, metrics and benchmark to attain, as well as rules and regulations to follow—including the recently documented credit-score system (integrated with cameras around the country and facial recognition software) that punish those who violate even minor rules.¹⁶ China might one day prove that this model works. Yet, there are strong reasons to be skeptical: as Friedrich von Hayek noted, men tend to underestimate “how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.”¹⁷ China has without doubt achieved impressive results, but not only has this come at the exorbitant costs discussed by Beckley, but it has also entailed major socio-economic distortions that will haunt Chinese society and the economy for the foreseeable future, in ways that might be even difficult to imagine. The housing bubble with the so-called “ghost towns” provides the most intuitive example.¹⁸ But the most telling case is the skewed sex ratio in the Chinese population that Beckley himself discusses: that 70 million Chinese men will never find a life partner will inevitably have massive repercussions, from decreasing productivity to rising crime and possibly even to social turmoil.¹⁹ This is of course not to say that the U.S. system is perfect—far from it, as I discuss below. But to paraphrase Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, no Chinese wall can resist the unintended consequences of misguided policies.²⁰

Fourth, Beckley undersells his argument by subsuming his contribution to International Relations theory in his discussion of American unrivaled power. Beckley explicitly discusses the limits of existing theories, but he still does it *sotto voce*. This is an important aspect because *even if* his prediction about American unrivaled power were to be wrong, his book would still be relevant for International Relations scholars. Implicitly, *Unrivaled* in fact speaks to the most important work on the rise and fall of Great Powers, Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics*.²¹ The vast array of economic, demographic and military data that Beckley has gathered directly challenges the mechanisms that, according to Gilpin, set the fate of

¹⁵ Neil Connor, “Chinese school uses facial recognition to monitor student attention in class,” *The Telegraph* (17 May 2018). This is not just a questionable pedagogical approach, but also possibly detrimental to promoting and fostering an environment conducive to creativity. We know from academic research that distractibility actually helps creativity. This is why highly creative individuals display symptoms consistent with attention deficit disorder. For a summary, see for example Jonah Lehrer, “The Eureka Hunt Why do Good Ideas Come to Us When They Do?” *The New Yorker* (21 July 2008); and Maria Konnikova, “Where Do Eureka Moments Come From?” *The New Yorker* (27 May 2014).

¹⁶ For a discussion of some of the limits of the Chinese innovation system, see for example Adam Segal, *Advantage: How American Innovation Can Overcome the Asian Challenge* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

¹⁷ Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 76.

¹⁸ Wade Shepard, “What China Is Doing About Its 450 Million Square Meters Of Unsold Housing,” *Forbes* (9 February 2019).

¹⁹ See the very informative article cited by Beckley, Andrea den Boer and Valerie M. Hudson, “The Security Risks of China’s Abnormal Demographics,” *The Monkey Cage*, *The Washington Post* (30 April 2014). Other sources provide an even gloomier picture. See for example “Why Polygamy Breeds Civil War—When Large Numbers of Men Are Doomed to Bachelorhood, They Get Desperate,” *The Economist* (19 March 2018).

²⁰ Marx and Engels were referring to the cheap prices of commodities. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (New York: Verso, 1998): 39-40.

²¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

hegemons across history: a tendency towards increasing consumption and defense spending, to the detriment of investments and hence future growth.²² Maybe this trend will be reversed in the future. By linking his book to the fate of American hegemony, Beckley has both undersold *Unrivaled* and hidden his contribution to International Relations theory; until now, the mechanisms in Gilpin's theory have not been at work, something that in 10 or 20 years will still be relevant.²³

Too Bold about the Future

Unrivaled is also too bold about the future of the second American century. Beckley's prediction that American unrivaled position might last for many decades and possibly throughout the twenty-first century depends on two implicit assumptions—namely, that the data he has gathered about the current distribution of power does not hide some inherent malaise in the U.S. socio-economic system; and that the techno-economic paradigm we are currently living in is going to remain constant for the foreseeable future.

Beckley acknowledges that the U.S. suffers from many internal problems and worries in particular about its increasing political polarization—drawing from a long tradition that dates back to Plato and Aristotle. Other social scientists, however, have pointed to what I consider a much more subtle and serious menace for the U.S.: over time, successful societies become captured by inward looking groups, which prioritize the distribution of wealth and privileges to family members and cronies, thus undermining the future of their very society.

For example, Mancur Olson claims that over time interest groups will get more and more powerful, they will hence raise their rents and benefits, thus reducing the overall efficiency and the source of prosperity of their country.²⁴ Do we observe such a trend in the United States?²⁵ If so, is this trend powerful enough to slow down the U.S. economy in the years ahead?

²² I have written myself on how one of these three causal mechanisms discussed by Gilpin, the diffusion of military technology, no longer works the way it used to. See Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, "The Diffusion of Drone Warfare? Industrial, Infrastructural, and Organizational Constraints," *Security Studies* 25:1 (Winter 2016): 50-84; and Gilli and Gilli, "Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet."

²³ In this, I admit, I wished Beckley had gone one step further and had included also a short discussion on other sources of power for the U.S.—such as the benefits the U.S. derives from the international financial system (i.e., Lucas' paradox with regard to capital flows and the "exorbitant privilege" with regard to the U.S. dollar) as well as those deriving from the internationalization of culture, which despite the various pushbacks still promotes American interests (consider the increasing enrollment of foreign students in U.S. colleges and universities, the growing popularity of American sport leagues, such as the NBA and the NFL, other than, obviously, American movies, music, etc.). The role of the dollar and the international financial system seems to be particularly appropriate in light of the broadly shared view, in the early 2000s, that the Euro would challenge American financial dominance. In fact, the very opposite happened. On monetary and financial sources of power, see for example, Barry Eichengreen, *Exorbitant Privilege. The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). On U.S. cultural power, see for example Bruce Russett, "The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony; or, Is Mark Twain Really Dead?" *International Organization*, 39:2 (1985): 207-231; and Joseph S. Nye, *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

²⁴ Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. This is consistent with several different strands of literature. See for example George J. Stigler, "The Theory of Economic Regulation," *The Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science* 2:1 (Spring 1971): 3-21; and Douglas North and Robert Paul Thomas *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

²⁵ There is some reason to believe this might in fact be the case, as Jonathan Rothwell has summarized, "Almost all of the growth in top American earners has come from just three economic sectors: professional services, finance and insurance, and health care, groups that tend to benefit from regulatory barriers that shelter them from competition." See Jonathan Rothwell, "Myths of the 1 Percent: What Puts People at the Top. Dispelling Misconceptions about What's Driving Income Inequality in the U.S.," *The New York Times* (17 November 2017). This is consistent with Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* 12:3 (September 2014): 564-581.

Similarly, as Francis Fukuyama stresses, every society needs “a system of impersonal merit-based bureaucratic recruitment” for its success.²⁶ However, he explains, this systems runs counter to the tendency of human beings to prioritize family members and friends over an impersonal, merit-based system. When left unchecked, these tendencies will lead to decay in the long run. To avert such outcome, Fukuyama explains, ancient China relied on eunuchs, and the Catholic Church introduced celibacy for priests.²⁷ Beckley points out that the U.S. fares quite well in terms of accountability, but do we observe any trend towards decreasing meritocracy and increasing nepotism in U.S. society, the private sector included?²⁸ Does this trend pose a long-term threat to U.S. prosperity? I could list many other problems identified by social scientists that undermine successful countries. The key questions are whether these domestic challenges are already evident in the American case, and—in that case—whether the U.S. will manage to address them.

There is a second reason why *Unrivaled* is too optimistic about the future of unipolarity: the future is necessarily uncertain, and without an understanding of what the source of wealth will be, it is difficult to make predictions about what the distribution of power in the international system will look like. In this sense, Beckley’s prediction that American unrivaled power is going to last for the foreseeable future is based on an implicit assumption—namely, that the techno-economic paradigm we are currently living in will remain constant. Under this condition, Beckley’s conclusions are very likely correct. But what if we experience a technological revolution that changes the global source of wealth and power?²⁹

Many observers and scholars have argued that we are in fact transitioning towards the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (also called the “Second Machine Age”).³⁰ Such a transition, the argument goes, is going to revolutionize the world economy, and hence also the sources of wealth creation. Of course, nobody knows what will happen in the future. The Fourth Industrial Revolution might never really materialize, and may be more of linear transition than a drastic break with the past. In that case, U.S. power could remain unchallenged for the time being.³¹ But even in this case, in order to make predictions about

²⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011): 21.

²⁷ Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*: 130 and 256.

²⁸ Some research has pointed to decreasing meritocracy in the U.S. For a summary, see Christopher Ingraham, “Still Think America Is the ‘Land of Opportunity’? Look at This Chart,” *The Washington Post* (22 February 2016). Recent trends are particularly interesting when compared with the past. Consider the following description of those who went to work at Bell Laboratory, one of the key pillars of American technological innovations in the twentieth century, which is telling. “It was curious, in a way, who they were, these men coming to Bell Labs in New York. Most had been trained at first-rate graduate schools like MIT and Chicago and Caltech; they had been flagged by physics or chemistry or engineering professors at these places and their names had been quietly passed along to Kelly or someone else at the Labs. But most had been raised in fly-speck towns, intersections of nowhere and nowhere, places with names like Chickasa [...] or Quacker Neck or Petoskey [...], rural and premodern like Gallatin, towns where their fathers had been fruit growers or merchants or small-time lawyers. Almost all of them had found a way out—a high school teacher, oftentimes, who noticed something about them, a startling knack for mathematics, for example, or an insatiable curiosity about electricity, and had tried to nurture this talent with extra assignments or after-school tutoring, all in the hope [...] that the students could be pushed towards a local university and away from the desolation of a life behind a plow or a cash register.” Jon Gertner, *The Idea Factory: Bell Labs and the Great Age of American Innovation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012): 38.

²⁹ The following discussion draws from Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Technological Revolutions and the Distribution of Power in the International System,” Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Conference (30 August 2018). For a further discussion, see Andrea Gilli, “Preparing for ‘NATO-mation’: the Atlantic Alliance Toward the Age of Artificial Intelligence,” *NATO Defense College Policy Brief 4-19* (February 2019).

³⁰ Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014); Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (New York: Crown Business, 2016).

³¹ For a similar view, see for example Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). It is important to note, however, that Gordon reaches the very opposite

the future, we would need to understand why those warning of the impending revolution are wrong. Alternatively, the Fourth Industrial Revolution might take place and reward the very factors in which the U.S. outperforms all other countries, thus prolonging and possibly even extending the gap between the U.S. and other would-be superpowers. Finally, this revolution might reward other factors, in which the U.S. is relatively weak, and thus undermine its relative power.

This means that without an understanding of the techno-economic paradigm of the future, it is not possible to make predictions about what the distribution of power in the international system will be. I am not saying that *Unrivaled* is wrong—I am saying that the technological revolution that is unfolding in front of our eyes *might* make current source of wealth and power obsolete. Technological revolutions call for different types of natural resources, institutions, political systems, and much more.³² It follows that today's winners might be tomorrow's losers. To appreciate the difficulty of making predictions about the future in light of technological revolutions, consider the case of the esteemed economist and Nobel Prize Laureate Paul Samuelson. Samuelson first praised the Soviet command economy in his textbook edition of 1961, and he kept reiterating his praise in the following editions until 1989—going as far as to argue that a command economy could “function and even thrive.”³³ We now know that Samuelson was wrong throughout the whole period. But while for the era of mass production the flaws of the command economy were comparatively limited, with the transition towards the information age they became massive, so much so to convince even socialist leaders of the need for profound economic reforms.³⁴ This was admitted, already in 1983, by the Chief of the Soviet General Staff:

Numbers of troops and weapons mean little... We cannot equal the quality of U.S. arms for a generation or two. Modern military power is based upon technology, and technology is based upon computers. In the U.S... small children—even before they begin school—play with computers. Computers are everywhere in America. Here, we don't even have computers in every office of the Defense Ministry. And for reasons you know well, we cannot make computers widely available in our society... We will never be able to catch up with [the U.S.] in modern arms until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we can have an economic revolution without a political revolution.”³⁵

conclusion. Namely, he believes that U.S. economic growth will inevitably slow down in the years ahead, which will allow other countries to catch up. This view is consistent with the argument in Stephen L. Parente and Edward C. Prescott, “A Unified Theory of the Evolution of International Income Levels,” in Philippe Aghion and Steven N. Durlauf, *Handbook of Economic Growth Volume 1* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier, 2005): 1371-1416.

³² See, for example, Thomas K. McCraw, ed., *Creating Modern Capitalism: How Entrepreneurs, Companies, and Countries Triumphed in Three Industrial Revolutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³³ Samuelson long argued the superiority of the Soviet Economy over the US one. He first presented it in the fifth edition of his popular textbook *Economics*, published in 1961 (830). In that period, data seemed to support his claim. However, Samuelson reiterated his opinion also later, in the twelfth edition of his book, published in 1985 (776) and then in the thirteenth edition, published just before of the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), 837. See Mark Skousen, *The Making of Modern Economics: The Lives and Ideas of Great Thinkers* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001): 416.

³⁴ As long as the competition was on increasing steel production through scale and scope, the Soviet Union could keep pace with the West (albeit at astonishing human costs). Yet, with the transition to electronics, precision manufacturing, advanced materials, and modular production, it no longer could—thus making Samuelson's understanding completely obsolete. See Robert C. Allen, *Farm to Factory: A Reinterpretation of the Soviet Industrial Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas,” *International Security* 25:3 (Winter 2000/01): 5-53; and Stephen G. Brooks, *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 129-160. Some of these points are discussed also in Gilli and Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught up Yet.”

³⁵ Leslie H. Gelb, “Who Won the Cold War?” *The New York Times* (20 August 1992).

What would the Fourth Industrial Revolution mean for the U.S.-China rivalry? Consider, for example, China's aging population, one of the problems Beckley discusses. According to some observers, automation will increasingly substitute not only manual jobs but also intellectual ones, thus leading to massive unemployment in advanced societies.³⁶ If this prediction turned out to be correct, the shrinking of the working-age population that China is going to experience would not be a liability, but an asset. Conversely, a country with a growing population, such as the U.S., would have to devise a strategy to employ or ensure a source of income for significant chunk of its population. This is not to say that this prediction is correct (it might very well not be). Rather, this examples serves to exemplify how today's liabilities might be tomorrow's assets. This logic applies to broad range of realms, including the type of educational system, labor market, available natural resources, type and size of firms, international trade, type of government and more. To predict whether the U.S. will maintain its edge in world politics, we thus need to understand whether a technological revolution is indeed taking place, and who will gain and who will lose from it.

³⁶ Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015).

REVIEW BY JOSHUA SHIFRINSON, BOSTON UNIVERSITY

In *Unrivaled*, Michael Beckley tackles the age-old question of how one should measure the power of nations and, with it, the relative distribution of power in the international system (which is often treated as synonymous with system polarity). This is a question of no small importance. Analysts as eclectic as Niccolò Machiavelli, Quincy Wright, Nicholas Spykman, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Keohane, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Nye, J. David Singer, Paul Kennedy, and John Mearsheimer have all struggled with these issues. Now, in *Unrivaled*, Beckley throws down the gauntlet in the context of assessing American power today. Power, in Beckley's argument, is not about having a large and highly capitalized military or a vibrant economy. Rather, only "net stocks of resources"—significant national wealth and military assets accumulated over decades—allow countries to play the game of great power politics. And, at a time when many analysts fear that the United States' "unipolar era" is over, or soon to be over, the implications of the argument are stark: the United States is not only not declining relative to states such as China, but "the United States will remain the world's sole superpower for many decades" (1).

This is an important book. Not only has Beckley offered a powerful critique of existing attempts to measure power, but his call to focus on resource stocks should serve as a clarion call for scholars who are inclined to turn to simpler metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or the Correlates of War Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) when measuring power, to pause and reflect on the utility of the measure. Moreover, in walking the reader through the advantages enjoyed by the United States in economic, military, and geopolitical matters in the current age, his book joins a series of studies pushing back on the perception that the United States is soon to fall into the dustbin of history.¹ Along the way, the project offers a useful framework for judging power that can also be applied retrospectively, potentially assisting scholars in re-evaluating the distribution of power in past eras. These are no mean feats. Baldly stated, *Unrivaled* needs to be read and discussed.

Indeed, if anything, the book understates its potential contribution. Although framed in the context of American decline, *Unrivaled's* attempt to come up with a new approach to measure power could carry many implications for assessing international politics. Power, after all, is a core explanatory variable in international relations, one that scholars have used to explain phenomena as diverse as diplomatic bargaining power, international war, and grand strategy. If Beckley is right, not only might existing research using power as an independent variable need to be re-run, but much of what we think we know of the link between power and international outcomes could now be suspect. One would not be surprised if current graduate students grabbed their theses and nailed them to the door of their IR advisors—a reformation of the discipline would be in order.

My principal objection to the book is that it is never clear what Beckley wants this project to accomplish. For all the effort at recasting how scholars are to measure power, the project elides the fact that some metrics, at some times, work better for explaining different phenomena than others. Relatedly, for a project focused on measuring power in international affairs and emphasizing the durability of American unipolarity, the book has little to say on how one knows a great power—central to judging both the distribution of power and unipolarity—when one sees it; moreover, what it does occasionally imply seems empirically wrong. These problems do not detract from a timely book that merits deep engagement by scholars, but they do present tensions for some of the project's principal claims. I return to these points below.

Beckley's core thesis is simple: as he writes, "to rank among the most powerful nations in the world, a state needs to amass a large stock of [economic and military] resources" (12). Accumulating this cache, however, may—in *Unrivaled's* telling—be harder than expected. Where many scholars in international affairs tend to proxy international power by looking at gross

¹ Stephen G. Brooks and William C Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40:3 (Winter 2015/16): 7-53; Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); National Intelligence Council, "Global Trends 2030: Alternate Worlds" (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, 2012).

resource indicators such as GDP, such indicators can create a false impression of capabilities because they do not factor in costs (e.g., feeding one's populace, paying for domestic security) that can eat up these assets. Instead, only states which have a sustained net surplus of resources over and above costs can, over time, generate a sufficient "stock" of assets. In short, "a nation's power stems, not from its gross resources, but from its net resources—the stock of resources left over after subtracting costs" (12). This is actually a long-standing thesis in international relations engaged by scholars in the run-up to the world wars and afterwards—a point only acknowledged by implication in the footnotes—but Beckley is among the first to systematize the intuition.²

Unrivaled then aptly applies the net resources framework to understand contemporary power trends. Reviewing first the existing distribution of economic and military power between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC)—"the only country that could catch the United States in net resources anytime soon" (32)—Beckley bluntly finds that (1) the U.S. remains much wealthier than the PRC and "the absolute gap is growing by trillions of dollars each year," while (2) the United States retains "five to ten times the net military assets" of China. When these factors are combined, "the United States retains a preponderance of power over China" (97). Nor is this likely to change in the future: more than just China, "geography, institutions, and demography" all impose strong limits on the potential for other countries to ascend to the great-power ranks, while the comparative weakness of other states limits their ability to counter-balance the United States. The ultimate implication looms large: "We are living in the unipolar era," Beckley concludes, "and it will probably outlive us" (195).

Even if one does not agree with some of Beckley's conceptual moves or substantive claims, *Unrivaled* offers an invaluable resource for debating the durability of the American era. It is a significant accomplishment. But the very success of *Unrivaled's* central thesis about net resources poses a puzzle: for what analytic purpose is Beckley's refined assessment of power intended?

One possibility is that the book might help us better characterize the international distribution of power. As Beckley notes in the theoretical discussion, scholars focus on measuring power in terms of resources because it should (if done right) tell us something about the nature of international politics (4-5, 10-32). Accordingly, for a book focused on the measurement of power and the durability of unipolarity—America's time as (per the subtitle) "the sole superpower"—one might expect that there would be a robust discussion of (1) how one uses measures of power to infer the structure of the international system, and (2) in turn, the intensity of strategic competition between given great powers. However, the work is strangely silent on the relationship between power, structure, and international competition. Except for a brief early mention that unipolarity might end if a state managed to hold half of the United States' capabilities, (3), no criteria are offered to adjudicate when a new great (or super) power can be judged to have emerged.

This is not just a quibble with measurement. In fact, the absence of clear standards to determine what qualifies as a great power undermines the central premise that *unipolarity* will endure. Other great powers may be around, or they may not—we have no clear way of knowing. One might respond that more refined criteria are superfluous as no state even approaches American capabilities today; indeed, this seems to be Beckley's underlying point. Even this logic, however, is questionable in light of historical experience and, in part, Beckley's own data.

For instance, most scholars (including Beckley) acknowledge that the Cold War witnessed something approximating a bipolar contest between the United States and Soviet Union, in which the USSR gave the United States a good run for its money. It did so despite the fact that the USSR was an economic pygmy compared to the United States (indeed, Beckley's

² Beckley briefly cites Klaus Knorr's foundational 1956 volume when discussing the role of costs, but is otherwise quiet on the issue. Nevertheless, analysts such as Nicholas Spykman and Hans Morgenthau paid significant attention to costs vis-a-vis e.g., German and Soviet capabilities; likewise, U.S. analysts after 1945 spent significant effort trying to assess Soviet liabilities when calculating the Cold War distribution of power. For a more recent and related discussion, see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), chap. 3 and footnotes.

own data has the USSR a small fraction of American wealth), enjoyed limited ideological appeal by the 1960s, had few worthwhile allies, deployed a military of questionable quality, and lagged ever further behind the United States technologically over time.³ The fact that *Unrivaled* claims that the stocks of resources which help explain why the United States eventually overcame the Soviet challenge is of little relevance: a bipolar contest that lasted over forty years emerged despite the United States' stark advantage in net stocks (28-31). Likewise, the years before World War One witnessed a constellation of five to seven great powers—depending on the study—that varied substantially in resource endowments vying for influence and position; by the turn of the twentieth century, trends were such that a rising Germany was noticeably catching up to Great Britain despite lagging in net resources (again per Beckley's data; see his Table 2.1).⁴ Competition among great powers in prior periods, in short, occurred despite the fact that some states enjoyed substantially greater net capabilities across a host of indicators.

This is problematic for Beckley's thesis. At bottom, if *Unrivaled* is correct, not only should many such actors not have been considered great powers in the first place, but international competition should have been relatively straightforward and limited given the imbalance of power: stronger states with substantial resource stocks would have had little to fear from weaker actors, weaker actors would have few avenues to pursue their objectives, and what competition there was should have been comparatively muted. That this did not happen, and that even comparative midjets could challenge strong states, suggests that Beckley's refined measurements are not as confirming of American unipolarity as the project claims. After all, if there are grounds to believe that a comparatively weak state can effectively compete even with the strongest state in the international system with a questionable resource and military base, then even a U.S. that is far stronger than the PRC (or other rivals) is no guarantee of unipolarity; to belabor the point, even though the United States had nearly *nine times* the net stocks of the USSR in Beckley's assessment (see Figure 2.4), the Cold War was effectively bipolar and the USSR a superpower. Put differently, history and parts of *Unrivaled's* analysis suggests there is a threshold above which states qualify as great powers—with the resulting implications for system structure and international competition—and below which they do not; the absolute advantages enjoyed by the U.S. in contemporary periods is no guarantee that this threshold remains out of reach. In sum, for a project that is focused on assessing power and the durability of American unipolarity, the implications for assessing the distribution of power remain unclear and, in light of historical experience, may potentially be faulty.

Closely related to the preceding point, it is far from obvious that costs, which are central to the refined measures of power advanced in the project, are enough to prevent trailing states from accumulating the resources necessary to challenge leading states as fellow great powers (even if they do heavily bias the outcome of the resulting competition). Beckley is, of course, quite correct that externalities such as environmental damage, feeding a population, local counterbalancing, and so on sometimes detract from a state's international performance. Still, it is unclear whether such problems are genuine impediments to waging a great power competition.

Late industrializers such as Germany and the Soviet Union, for example, rose to great power status while often suppressing the welfare needs of the population and bearing real security burdens.⁵ Similarly, the U.S. created substantial environmental

³ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). Many apologies for the self-reference.

⁴ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, 1st ed., (New York: Random House, 1987).

⁵ Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

problems and often ignored the welfare needs of its population while emerging and sustaining itself as a great power. This variation implies that states can incur substantial and different costs but still become great powers. And this, in turn, means that the fact that states such as China are far less efficient and bear greater average economic and military costs than the United States should not be taken as a sign that American unipolarity endures.

Indeed, to take the China case that anchors much of the analysis, the very fact that policymakers in the United States and across Asia feel compelled to adapt to changing geopolitical realities implies that costs are far from prohibitive in shaping power relations and great power politics. Run the thought experiment: two decades ago, the U.S. felt comfortable sailing an aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait. Today—although smaller warships continue to transit the Strait—the U.S. is working to devise new military options to defend the East Asian status quo while operating away from Chinese territory. Such a shift in attitudes and policies seems difficult to explain unless there has been some kind of foundational shift in the distribution of power—which is inexplicable in light of *Unrivaled's* thesis.

Finally, one wonders about Beckley's recommendations as to what to do with American power. Power is often considered a core determinant of international behavior: the quest for it often motivates states, while the lack of it often constrains foreign ambitions. In discussing what the United States should do with its power in the final chapter, however, Beckley's recommendations come unmoored from the analysis. In charting a course for the use of American power and strength, Beckley specifically calls for the United States to remain engaged in structuring economic and security conditions in Europe and Asia so as to forestall the possibility that states such as China and Russia will threaten their neighbors or that the global economic order will fray. In sum, he advocates a policy of Deep Engagement while critiquing calls for a more restrained policy agenda.

Now, Deep Engagement is an eminently fair position to hold. However, given that this is a project about American power, the recommendations come from left field. If the United States is as strong as *Unrivaled* proposes, why should it care if a state runs amok across Europe or Asia—wouldn't it be inefficient for a wannabe-hegemon to improve its position by trying to assimilate the resources of various other states who also have high costs? If American wealth is robust and others midgets, who cares if the global economic order frays—other countries will have an even harder time catching up. Why not, then, take advantage of the freedom of action afforded by American power and reduce the substantial resource costs of a global defense budget? There are, of course, good arguments for sustaining the U.S. global role, some of which (for instance, crisis stability) *Unrivaled* notes. The analysis, however, does not directly bear on these issues—arguing for the durability of American power is far removed from either identifying the merits of greater or lesser forms of American *activism* in world affairs, or tracing how American power might be affected by different grand strategies that may be adopted. Indeed, if Beckley's argument is correct, it actually seems the case for a reduced American role is stronger rather than weaker: with unipolarity intact because of structural factors, the strategic rationale for American engagement loses its luster.

Despite these problems, however, *Unrivaled* is a valuable book. Although it is unpersuasive in its argument that American unipolarity endures, the project makes a notable contribution to a burgeoning series of studies proposing that even a relatively declining United States remains a massively powerful and extraordinarily capable nation, one that will still remain the overwhelmingly dominant state, even as systemic competition reemerges. In this, it provides a useful corrective to hyperbolic studies suggesting that a new hegemonic transition—with a new 'leader' in charge of the whole of the international system—is in the offing. The United States is doing just fine in the great power game.

RESPONSE BY MICHAEL BECKLEY, TUFTS UNIVERSITY

I am grateful to Emma Ashford, Mauro Gilli, and Josh Shiffrin for their thoughtful reviews and to Christopher Layne for graciously introducing the discussion. I will respond to what I view as the three core questions raised by the reviewers. First, what defines a pole in the international system? Second, will future trends, such as changes in the nature of technology or the decay of U.S. political institutions, undermine American power? Third, given U.S. power advantages, why do I recommend that the United States remain engaged abroad?

Shiffrin critiques my book for not including a robust theoretical discussion about what defines a pole in the international system. This is an important question, but my failure to address it does not, as Shiffrin asserts, “undermine the central premise [of the book] that unipolarity will endure.” Scholars have written extensively about what defines unipolarity and, by any reasonable definition, my book shows that the world is and will likely remain unipolar for many decades.¹

For example, Nuno Monteiro defines unipolarity as a situation in which only one country can fight major conventional wars beyond its home region; my book shows that no other country is close to developing this capability (62-71, 100-102).² Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth identify three benchmarks—economic, technological, and military—that a country would need to pass before it could be considered a rival pole; my book shows that China has not even achieved the first of these benchmarks and likely will fall further behind in the coming decades (33-61, 120-133).³ John Mearsheimer defines a pole as a state that can “put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state.”⁴ Although I find that China could temporarily deny the United States sea and air control within a few hundred miles of the Chinese coastline (71-75), I also find that China would have trouble sustaining major combat operations anywhere beyond its shores in a limited war in East Asia, let alone in an all-out war on the high seas (76-97).

Shiffrin argues that net stocks of economic and military resources are not as decisive as I suggest for determining the polarity of the system. To support his claim, Shiffrin points out that the Soviet Union “gave the United States a good run for its money” during the Cold War despite having a fraction of U.S. wealth. China, he implies, could do the same today.

I agree that China does not need to match U.S. power resources to be considered a rival pole, but it at least needs to be in the same ballpark. By Soviet standards, China has a ways to go. During the Cold War, the Soviet economy was roughly 60 percent the size of the U.S. economy in dollar terms, just as China’s is today, but Soviet per capita incomes were 50 percent of America’s whereas China’s today are only 20 percent;⁵ Soviet technology was on par with U.S. technology in many

¹ For a review of some prominent definitions, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127-145.

² Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.

³ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 127-130.

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 4-5.

⁵ Maddison Project Database, version 2018. Jutta Bolt, Robert Inklaar, Herman de Jong and Jan Luiten van Zanden (2018), “Rebasing ‘Maddison’: New Income Comparisons and the Shape of Long-run Economic Development.” Maddison Project Working Paper, no. 10, www.gdc.net/maddison. Shiffrin rightly points out that Figure 2.4 in my book, which suggests the United States had 6 times (not 9 times) the net resources of the Soviet Union using a crude proxy that multiplies GDP x GDP Per Capita, is nonsensical. It appears that the 2008 version of the Maddison database used in the figure severely underreports Soviet output. I recalculated the figure using the 2018 version of the data (cited above), which comprehensively revamps the Maddison database employing the latest scholarly best estimates of each country’s wealth. The new GDP x GDP Per Capita figure suggests that the United States had 2.4 times the Soviet Union’s net resources in 1975 and has 4 times China’s net resources today. The former result probably still overstates the true U.S.-Soviet

militarily-relevant sectors whereas Chinese military technology, some pockets of excellence aside (e.g. missiles, quantum computing), generally lags far behind U.S. standards (48-52, 69-71);⁶ and the Soviet Union outspent the United States on defense and fielded a massive army that could potentially overrun central Europe whereas China today spends several times less on defense than the United States and probably cannot conquer Taiwan, let alone overrun East Asia (62-66, 76-97). In sum, China today is much weaker relative to the United States than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. Focusing on net resources makes this distinction clear and provides a solid basis for distinguishing today's unipolar system from previous, and potential future, bipolar and multipolar eras.

Second, Gilli suggests that two trends—technological change and U.S. domestic political decay—may drag down U.S. economic growth and allow China to catch up. However, the Fourth Industrial Revolution seems unlikely to disadvantage the United States, given that the United States already dominates the industries that comprise it, accounting for 3 to 6 times China's shares of value-added in artificial intelligence, computing, data analytics, robotics, biotechnology, nanotechnology, alternative energy, medical technology, and aerospace among other “industries of the future” (48-52). Gilli suggests that the United States might have a harder time adjusting to a “Second Machine Age,” in which robots perform the lion's share of routine tasks and humans must be capable of high-level critical thinking or creativity to find gainful employment. But China relies more heavily than does the United States on mass low-skill employment for economic growth and social stability; and the Chinese population is far less educated than is the U.S. population—the average Chinese citizen receives half the years of schooling of the average American; and one-third of Chinese children currently entering the workforce have an IQ below 90, largely a result of malnutrition, poor care, and rampant pollution (34-43). China, therefore, seems especially unprepared for the new economy.

I also am skeptical that political decay will undermine U.S. relative power, not because the U.S. political system is in great shape—it is clearly a mess (146-150)—but because China's political system is so much worse (124-130). The United States may be a flawed democracy, but China is an oligarchy ruled by a dictator for life. Special interests may drag down U.S. economic efficiency, but the Chinese Communist Party systematically sacrifices economic efficiency to maintain political control. To cite one of many examples, private firms generate most of China's wealth, but state-owned enterprises receive 80 percent of the loans and subsidies. As a result, state zombie firms are propped up, at enormous expense, while private firms are starved of capital (44-48).

Third, Ashford and Shiffrinson argue that my policy recommendations are at odds with my empirical results. If the United States is so dominant, they ask, why should it remain engaged abroad? I am surprised by the pushback on this point, because the last chapter of my book outlines a grand strategy that is far more modest and less militarized than current U.S. policy. I advocate offshore balancing in the Middle East (145-146);⁷ an active denial strategy in Europe and Asia that would shift more of the burden of containing Russia and China to local actors (139-141); the resurrection of a war tax and Congressional constraints on the use of force (143-145); and a redistribution of resources from the U.S. military to foreign

power gap, because GDP x GDP Per Capita proxy does not explicitly measure military capabilities, which the Soviet Union had in spades, but it does not strike me as wildly off the mark.

⁶ Stephen G. Brooks, “Power Transitions, Then and Now: Five New Structural Barriers that Will Constrain China's Rise,” *Chinese International Strategy Review* 1 (2019): 65-83; Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage,” *International Security* 43:3 (Winter 2018/19): 141-189; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position,” *International Security* 40:3 (Winter 2016 2015): 7–53.

⁷ On offshore balancing, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), chap. 8. For an application to the Middle East, see Emma Ashford, “Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, (Spring 2018): 127-148; Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Less Is More: The Future of the American Military in the Persian Gulf,” *Washington Quarterly* 37:3 (Fall 2014): 47-60.

aid and domestic infrastructure projects, scientific research, and family and worker assistance programs. In other words, I advocate restraint (152-154).

I do not advocate retrenchment, however, because I believe ditching allies and gutting the U.S. military and foreign service would be an enormous gamble. We are living in the most peaceful, prosperous, and democratic era in history, and a large body of research, including some of my own work, suggests that U.S. engagement has played an important, albeit mixed, role in making these outcomes possible.⁸ Ashford may be right that the world would sort itself out in the absence of U.S. engagement, but I am not willing to find out, given how great things are now, how terrible they were the last time the United States pulled back from the world during the interwar period, and how many options remain for the United States to stabilize local balances of power abroad at moderate cost (139-141, 150-154).

Shiffrinson is probably right that the United States could improve its *relative* position by adopting an America First policy and letting the world burn, but one of the benefits of unrivaled power is that the United States can afford to pursue *absolute* gains, sacrificing a bit of relative advantage to make America and the world better off overall. As the most secure and powerful country in history, the United States can and should do more than ceaselessly struggle for power. Would other countries suffer more than the United States from the collapse of the liberal order? Probably, but that strikes me as cold comfort if it means living in a nasty and brutish world of rigid trade blocs; closed borders; a splintered internet; militarized sea lanes; fewer democracies; more nuclear proliferation; a higher likelihood of major war; and a lower likelihood of collective action on transnational issues, such as climate change.

⁸ For a few of many works on this point, see Michael Beckley, “Pax Americana: The Rise of the United States and the Decline of War,” unpublished manuscript, Tufts University, December 2018; Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Kevin Narizny, “Anglo-American Primacy and the Global Spread of Democracy: An International Genealogy,” *Security Studies* 64:2 (April 2012): 341-73; Jesse C. Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds, “Defense Pacts: A Prescription for Peace?” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7 (2011): 45-65; Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39:4 (Spring 2015): 7-48; Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Seva Gunitsky, *Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Or Rabinowitz and Nicholas L. Miller, “Keeping the Bombs in the Basement: U.S. Nonproliferation Policy toward Israel, South Africa, and Pakistan,” *International Security* 40:1 (Summer 2015): 47-86; Gene Gerzhoy, “Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany’s Nuclear Ambitions,” *International Security* 39:4 (Spring 2015): 91-129; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Defending Frenemies: Alliances, Politics, and Nuclear Nonproliferation in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press 2019); Michael Beckley, Yusaku Horiuchi, and Jennifer M. Miller, “America’s Role in the Making of Japan’s Economic Miracle,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18:1 (2018): 1-12.