

Unrivaled

*Why America Will Remain
the World's Sole Superpower*

MICHAEL BECKLEY

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Ithaca and London

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
1. Why America?	1
2. The Pillars of Power	10
3. Economic Trends	33
4. Military Trends	62
5. Future Prospects	98
6. The Unipolar Era	135
<i>Notes</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Works Cited</i>	<i>179</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>223</i>

Why America?

By most measures, the United States is a mediocre country. It ranks seventh in literacy, eleventh in infrastructure, twenty-eighth in government efficiency, and fifty-seventh in primary education.¹ It spends more on health-care than any other country, but ranks forty-third in life expectancy, fifty-sixth in infant mortality, and first in opioid abuse.² More than a hundred countries have lower levels of income inequality than the United States, and twelve countries enjoy higher levels of gross national happiness.³

Yet in terms of wealth and military capabilities—the pillars of global power—the United States is in a league of its own. With only 5 percent of the world's population, the United States accounts for 25 percent of global wealth, 35 percent of world innovation, and 40 percent of global military spending.⁴ It is home to nearly 600 of the world's 2,000 most profitable companies and 50 of the top 100 universities.⁵ And it is the only country that can fight major wars beyond its home region and strike targets anywhere on earth within an hour, with 587 bases scattered across 42 countries and a navy and air force stronger than that of the next ten nations combined.⁶ According to Yale historian Paul Kennedy, “Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing.” The United States is, quite simply, “the greatest superpower ever.”⁷

Why is the United States so dominant? And how long will this imbalance of power last? In the following pages, I argue 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.

This conclusion challenges the conventional wisdom among pundits, policymakers, and the public.⁸ Since the end of the Cold War, scholars have dismissed unipolarity as a fleeting “moment” that would soon be swept away by the rise of new powers.⁹ Bookstores feature bestsellers such as *The Post-American World* and *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline*;¹⁰ the U.S. National Intelligence Council has issued multiple reports advising

the president to prepare the country for multipolarity by 2030;¹¹ and the “rise of China” has been the most read-about news story of the twenty-first century.¹² These writings, in turn, have shaped public opinion: polls show that most people in most countries think that China is overtaking the United States as the world’s leading power.¹³

How can all of these people be wrong? I argue that the current literature suffers from two shortcomings that distort peoples’ perceptions of the balance of power.

First, the literature mismeasures power. Most studies size up countries using gross indicators of economic and military resources, such as gross domestic product (GDP) and military spending.¹⁴ These indicators tally countries’ resources without deducting the costs countries pay to police, protect, and provide services for their people. As a result, standard indicators exaggerate the wealth and military power of poor, populous countries like China and India—these countries produce vast output and field large armies, but they also bear massive welfare and security burdens that drain their resources.

To account for these costs, I measure power in *net* rather than gross terms. In essence, I create a balance sheet for each country: assets go on one side of the ledger, liabilities go on the other, and net resources are calculated by subtracting the latter from the former. When this is done, it becomes clear that America’s economic and military lead over other countries is much larger than typically assumed—and the trends are mostly in its favor.

Second, many projections of U.S. power are based on flawed notions about why great powers rise and fall. Much of the literature assumes that great powers have predictable life spans and that the more powerful a country becomes the more it suffers from crippling ailments that doom it to decline.¹⁵ The Habsburg, French, and British empires all collapsed. It is therefore natural to assume that the American empire is also destined for the dustbin of history.

I argue, however, that the laws of history do not apply today. The United States is not like other great powers. Rather, it enjoys a unique set of geographic, demographic, and institutional advantages that translate into a commanding geopolitical position. The United States does not rank first in all sources of national strength, but it scores highly across the board, whereas all of its potential rivals suffer from critical weaknesses. The United States thus has the best prospects of any nation to amass wealth and military power in the decades ahead.

For the foreseeable future, therefore, no country is likely to acquire the means to challenge the United States for global primacy. This is an extraordinary development, because the world has been plagued by great power rivalry for millennia. In the past five hundred years alone, there have been sixteen hegemonic rivalries between a ruling power and a rising power, and twelve of them ended in catastrophic wars.¹⁶ In the first half of the

twentieth century, for example, when the world was multipolar, Germany twice challenged Britain for European primacy. The result was two world wars. In the second half of the twentieth century, under bipolarity, the Soviet Union challenged the United States for global primacy. The result was the Cold War, a conflict in which the superpowers spent between 6 and 25 percent of their GDPs on defense every year, waged proxy wars that killed millions of people, and brought the world to the brink of nuclear Armageddon.

Today, by contrast, unipolarity makes a comparable level of great power competition impossible and thus makes a comparable level of conflict highly unlikely.¹⁷

Not the Argument

Before elaborating on the points above, let me be clear about what I am *not* arguing. First, I am not arguing that U.S. dominance is guaranteed or will last forever. The United States could easily squander its geopolitical potential. It could, for example, gut its demographic advantage by restricting high-skill immigration. It could allow demagogues and special interests to capture its political institutions and run the country into the ground. Or it could fritter away its resources on reckless adventures abroad. In addition, there are any number of events (e.g., a nuclear accident, natural disaster, or disease outbreak) that could disproportionately devastate the United States. 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 and current knowledge about why great powers rise and fall.

Second, I am not arguing that the United States is invincible or all-powerful. There are more than 190 countries, 7 billion people, and 197 million square miles of territory on earth. The United States cannot be present, let alone dominant, in every corner of the globe. Weaker nations can “route around” American power, doing business and calling the shots in their home regions while ignoring the United States.¹⁸ They also can “tame” American power by, among other things, denying the United States access to their domestic markets, suing the United States in international courts, bribing American politicians, bankrolling anti-American terrorist groups, hacking U.S. computer networks, meddling in U.S. elections, or brandishing weapons of mass destruction.¹⁹ Unipolarity is not omnipotence; it simply means that the United States has more than twice the wealth and military capabilities of any other nation. To translate those resources into influence, the United States will often have to collaborate with regional players.

Third, I am not arguing that unipolarity constitutes a *Pax Americana*, in which U.S. primacy guarantees global peace and prosperity. Unipolarity implies the absence of one major source of conflict—hegemonic rivalry—but

it allows for, and may even encourage, various forms of asymmetric conflict and domestic decay.²⁰ The United States still faces serious threats at home and abroad. The purpose of this book is to clarify the scope of these threats, not to deny their existence.

Finally, I am not arguing that Americans are inherently superior to other nations or that the United States is the most wonderful place on earth. I assume that people are basically the same all around the world, and I know for a fact that citizens of some rich nations enjoy a higher quality of life than the average American. My argument, therefore, is not that Americans are exceptional or that the United States is the greatest country in the world. Instead, I argue that the United States has been blessed by exceptional circumstances that all but guarantee that it will be the most *powerful* nation. One implication of this conclusion, as I explain later, is that the United States can afford to devote a bit more of its immense resources to improving the lives of its citizens.

Plan of the Book

The plan of the book is straightforward. First, I develop a framework for measuring power and use it to assess current trends in the balance of power. Then, I build a framework for predicting power trends and use it to assess the future prospects of today's great powers. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for world politics and U.S. policy.

THE PILLARS OF POWER

Chapter 2 defines power and explains how to measure it. I start by showing that standard indicators exaggerate the power of populous countries because they ignore three types of costs that drain countries' economic and military resources: production, welfare, and security costs.

Production costs are the price of doing business; they include the raw materials consumed, and the negative externalities (e.g., pollution) created, during the production of wealth and military capabilities. Welfare costs are subsistence costs; they are the expenses a nation pays to keep its people from dying in the streets and include outlays on basic items like food, healthcare, education, and social security. Finally, security costs are the price a government pays to police and protect its citizens.

Needless to say, these costs add up. In fact, for most of human history, they consumed virtually all of the resources in every nation. Even today, they tie down large chunks of the world's economic and military assets.²¹ Thus analysts must deduct these costs to accurately assess the balance of power.

To illustrate these points, I show that the rise and fall of the great powers and the outcomes of hundreds of international wars and disputes during

the past two hundred years correlate closely with variations in countries' net stocks of economic and military resources—not with gross flows of resources. China and Russia, for example, had the largest GDPs and military budgets in the world during much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but both countries suffered from severe production, welfare, and security costs that condemned them to defeat at the hands of smaller but more efficient nations.

After reviewing this history, I develop a framework for assessing the current balance of power. I also explain why China is the most potent challenger to U.S. primacy and thus why I focus on the U.S.-China power balance in the following two chapters.

ECONOMIC TRENDS

Chapter 3 analyzes economic trends for the United States and China. The main conclusion is that the United States is several times wealthier than China, and the absolute gap is growing by trillions of dollars each year. China's economy is big but inefficient. It produces high output at high costs. Chinese businesses suffer from chronically high production costs, and China's 1.4 billion people generate massive welfare and security burdens. The United States, by contrast, is big and efficient, producing high output at relatively low costs. American workers and businesses are seven times more productive than China's on average, and with four times fewer people than China, the United States has much lower welfare and security costs. Gross domestic product and other popular indicators create the false impression that China is overtaking the United States economically. In reality, 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.

MILITARY TRENDS

Chapter 4 analyzes the U.S.-China military balance, both overall and within East Asia. The results are stark: the United States has five to ten times the military capabilities of China, depending on the type of military forces in question, and maintains a formidable containment barrier against Chinese expansion in East Asia. In a war, China could potentially deny the U.S. military sea and air control within a few hundred miles of China's territory, but China cannot sustain major combat operations beyond that zone, and the United States retains low-cost means of denying China sea and air control throughout the East and South China seas as well as preventing China from accomplishing more specific objectives, such as conquering Taiwan.

The widespread perception that China is poised to dominate East Asia and close the military gap with the United States stems from a neglect of

production, welfare, and security costs. My analysis takes these factors into account. I show, for example, that Chinese weapons systems are roughly half as capable as the United States' on average; Chinese troops, pilots, and sailors receive less than half the training of their American counterparts and have limited operational experience and no combat experience; China's personnel costs are at least 25 percent higher than the United States'; and homeland security operations consume at least 35 percent of China's military budget and bog down half of China's active-duty force, whereas the U.S. military outsources such operations and their costs to civilian agencies.

Of course, U.S. military assets are dispersed around the world whereas China's are concentrated in East Asia. The United States, however, is involved in most regions by choice and can redeploy forces from one area to another without seriously jeopardizing its security. China, by contrast, has to keep most of its military on guard at home, because it suffers from twice the level of domestic unrest as the United States and shares sea or land borders with nineteen countries, five of which fought wars against China within the last century and ten of which still claim parts of Chinese territory as their own. Crucially, many of these countries have developed the means to deny China sea and air control throughout most of its near seas—even without U.S. assistance.

In sum, despite much talk of the rise of China, the United States maintains a huge economic and military lead, and the trends are generally in its favor. For China or any other nation to catch up to the United States, they will need to grow their power base much faster than they currently are. How likely is that?

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Chapter 5 analyzes the future prospects of the great powers and shows that the United States has the best foundation for growth.

I begin by critiquing two theories that currently dominate discussions about why great powers rise and fall—balance-of-power theory and convergence theory. Both of these theories suggest that unipolarity will be short lived.²² Balance-of-power theory holds that weak states usually gang up on strong states and force a redistribution of international power.²³ Convergence theory holds that poor countries grow faster than rich countries, thus rising challengers inevitably overtake reigning hegemon.²⁴

I argue that these theories do not apply today. Balance-of-power dynamics are muted, because the United States is too powerful and far away for other major powers to balance against.²⁵ Currently, no country can afford a sustained military challenge to U.S. primacy, and all of America's potential rivals are packed together in Eurasia and therefore are more likely to fight each other than band together against the distant United States.²⁶ To

back up this argument, I show that balancing against the United States has been sporadic since 1991 while bandwagoning with the United States has been widespread.

Convergence theory, on the other hand, is underspecified.²⁷ Sometimes poor countries grow faster than rich countries and sometimes they fall further behind. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Germany, Japan, and the United States rose relative to Britain whereas Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, China, India, and the Ottoman Empire declined. These and other historical examples show that convergence is conditional; it depends on additional factors that, so far, have not been incorporated into theories of international change.

To address this shortcoming, I develop a new framework for projecting the rise and fall of nations. Drawing on studies from the field of economics, I show that sustained economic growth depends on three broad factors: geography, institutions, and demography.

The ideal geography for growth is one with abundant natural resources, transport infrastructure, and buffers from enemies.²⁸ The ideal government is one that is capable yet accountable, meaning that it is strong enough to provide services and maintain order, but sufficiently divided to prevent corruption and the violation of private property rights.²⁹ Finally, the ideal population is large, young, and educated.³⁰

After presenting the evidence linking these factors to economic growth, I use indicators of each to assess the future prospects of the eight most powerful countries: the United States, China, Russia, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and India.

I find that the United States has, by far, the best growth fundamentals. Geographically, the United States is a natural economic hub and military fortress. It has enormous stocks of natural resources, more natural transport infrastructure than the rest of the world combined, and is surrounded by “friends and fish” (Canada, Mexico, and two huge oceans) whereas all the other major powers border powerful rivals. Institutionally, the United States is so-so. The small and divided U.S. government does a poor job redistributing wealth, but it fosters entrepreneurship and innovation; spurs reform after policy blunders; and helps the United States suck up investment, technology, and human capital from other nations. Demographically, the United States has the most productive population, and its working-age population is set to grow during this century, unlike the populations of its competitors.

Potential challengers each have several weaknesses. China, the only country that is anywhere close to challenging U.S. primacy, has especially dismal growth prospects. In the coming decades, China will lose a third of its workforce and age faster than any society in history, with the ratio of workers to retirees shrinking from 8-to-1 today to 2-to-1 by 2050; its institutions fuel corruption, stifle entrepreneurship, and stymie reform after policy mistakes; its natural resources have dwindled due to overuse

and pollution; and it is encircled by more than a dozen hostile countries. Russia has vast stocks of natural resources, but its institutions are more corrupt and less effective than China's, and it has a declining and extremely unhealthy population and a vulnerable geographic location. Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom have slightly more effective and less corrupt institutions than the United States (France lags slightly behind), but they have small and shrinking populations and few natural resources. India will soon have the largest and youngest population among the great powers, but it trails the other great powers in virtually every other category.

In sum, the United States has the most potential for future growth, in addition to an enormous economic and military lead. Unipolarity is not guaranteed to endure, but present trends strongly suggest that it will last for many decades.

IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 6 concludes by discussing the implications of unipolarity for world politics and U.S. policy. The most important implication is the absence of hegemonic rivalry. During the past five hundred years, there has been a hegemonic competition between a rising power and a ruling power every thirty years on average.³¹ Seventy-five percent of these feuds ended in war, and even many of the "peaceful" cases were vicious cold wars. Today, by contrast, the United States does not face a peer competitor. As a result, there is less warfare in the world than in any period in modern history.³²

Unipolarity, however, is not totally conducive to peace and prosperity. In the remainder of chapter 6, I highlight several dangers.

First, unipolarity may undermine crisis stability between the United States and weaker nations.³³ American military superiority could embolden the United States to stand firm in a crisis while simultaneously encouraging weaker nations to shoot first, before the U.S. military can wipe out their offensive forces. This "use it or lose it" dynamic can turn minor incidents into major wars. I discuss how the United States can avoid such scenarios with China, Russia, and North Korea.

Second, unipolarity will tempt the United States to fight stupid wars of choice in areas of little strategic value.³⁴ I explain where and when such imperial temptations will be most severe and propose ways to contain them.

Third, without a superpower rival, American national unity may dissolve, and special interests may capture the country's institutions and stifle reform and innovation.³⁵ The analyses of U.S. institutions in chapter 5 suggest that polarization, gridlock, and corruption are already infecting the American system of government. I highlight these trends and assess various proposals to reverse them.

Finally, unipolarity could undermine the liberal world order.³⁶ As the world's sole superpower, the United States is more capable than other

nations of providing global governance, but it may have less incentive to do so given its secure location and vast stocks of wealth. In the coming decades the United States could become a “global power without global interests,” turning inward while leaving others to maintain international security, prop up the global economy, and defend human rights.³⁷ Arms buildups, insecure sea-lanes, and closed markets are only the most obvious risks of a return to U.S. isolationism.³⁸ Less obvious are problems, such as climate change, water scarcity, refugee crises, and disease, which may fester without a leader to rally collective action. I discuss these threats to global security and explain why the United States can and should help address them.