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The Ties that Bind the United States: A Recount (Book Review)

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Review by Jeffrey W. Legro, University of Virginia

"The Ties that Bind the United States: A Recount"

The United States is sweltering under the greatest economic meltdown since the great depression. Historian Paul Kennedy is back in the press preaching once again, as he did in 1988, that America is plagued by fiscal mismanagement, military overstretch, and faces inevitable relative decline.¹ Things look bleak indeed for the Obama team.

Many scholars and pundits have argued the United States is a superpower increasingly bound by the webs of world politics - i.e., the reactions of other states that are fearful of U.S. power or intentions, globalization, and international institutions or norms. Hegemony hardly seems fetching.

"Bunk," say Dartmouth Professors Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth. Well, they do not actually use that word, but that is the message of their wonderful book, *World out of Balance*. They assert that the U.S. today has unprecedented power, that there are relatively few systemic constraints on global primacy, and that rather than clipping its talons, the American eagle should take wing and remake the international system, lo these many years after 9/11. They advocate a strategy of "primacy" and reject engagement and off-shore balancing. The encouraging message for Obama's more ambitious global plans is clear - "Yes, you can!"

This is a big, important, and provocative argument, a delight to read, and largely persuasive. My lingering doubts relate to two key questions. If there are few systemic constraints and international activism would serve U.S. interests, why has the U.S. hegemon done so little to revise international institutions since 1991, and when has it tried to do so, why has it achieved so little success?

One possible explanation is that Brooks and Wohlforth undervalue or overlook systemic brakes that have checked U.S. international activism. Might a recount be in order? A brief audit of six systemic constraints suggests the challenges for U.S. activism and possible answers for its absence.

Three constraints are offered or hinted at by Brooks and Wohlforth themselves. Theirs is more of a "no" book than a "yes" book: they mostly expose the weaknesses of other arguments rather than explain the logic and test the implications of their own argument. The heart of their book is a negative claim: a hegemon in a unipolar world will not be subject to significant systemic constraints. Their positive argument -- which only takes shape slowly as the chapters unfold -- is complex, multi-causal, and reveals more ties that bind the eagle than the simple thesis suggests.

First, while the authors do an excellent job of debunking the notion that balancing is constraining the United States today, they acknowledge that balancing is possible if states view their security as sufficiently challenged. At the extreme, if the United States tried to "run the table" with a strategy of global aggression and domination, they expect balancing. So balancing does operate under some circumstances.

What is less explicit is how the absence of balancing may depend not just on unipolarity but on how the dominant power is perceived and accepted in the world. A hegemon that is not respected or trusted or seen as benevolent is likely to encounter balancing behavior short of "running the table" because others will fear that it may indeed attempt aggression in the future. A hegemon that is trusted or seen as benevolent, is less likely to encounter balancing unless it takes actions that change opinion about its intentions. The United States, with a reputation for geopolitical restraint (even if diminished in recent years), provokes less reaction than would a Napoleonic France or Fascist Germany with the same power advantages. And it suggests that a United States that (via primacy) seeks revision of the international system could provoke more significant offsetting reactions because of the impact of such actions on how others perceive the United States.

Second, states will also constrain the United States if they have other important opposing interests not related to security. Brooks and Wohlforth count this as part of their argument as long as it does not involve the security concerns central to balancing theory. Thus if other countries resist the United States due to economic interests, regional security concerns, disagreements over non-security issues, or domestic policy issues, the authors treat this as evidence in favor of their argument.

In this view, the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not about offsetting the United States, but is instead about arms sales and fighting terrorism in their region. Likewise, Russia's ties to Tehran have commercial and regional security roots. And opposition to the Iraq war in places like Germany and Turkey is seen as a product of "long term domestic political dynamics" rather than a reaction to the concentration of U.S. power.

Brooks and Wohlforth's argument is not that other countries won't constrain the unipole, it is that they will not do so simply because of the unipole's extraordinary power. This implies that international order is dependent not just on unipolarity but also on the distribution of interests. Hence any theory of hegemonic behavior or international order must heed the distribution of interests as well as power. The structure of interests among major countries is a constraint on U.S. actions. Strategies, security or otherwise, that do not attend to those interests will suffer.

Third, Brooks and Wohlforth's analysis of legitimacy adds further caveats to their argument. As with the other systemic constraints, they find that the need for legitimacy does not provide a strong check on U.S. policy. They do however conclude that legitimacy is a "weakly conditional" constraint. They insightfully explore how dominant powers have many tools to shape what constitutes legitimacy and paper over the instances where they prefer to ignore the rules. But ultimately hegemons "want and need rules and the legitimation that they bring." Hence those rules for that very reason must have some integrity. Hegemons, it might be said, can shape the rules of order, but not always exactly as they please, and sometimes at significant cost.

This concession has further consequences for a positive argument about unipolarity and international relations. It means that the strategy of hegemons and the orders that take shape are affected not only by the unequal distribution of power and standing of the hegemon, not only by the distribution of interests among states, but also by the rules that define order.

These different elements, however, are typically associated with theoretical schools (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) that are seen as mutually exclusive. Brooks and Wohlforth are to

be congratulated for ignoring such paradigmatic blinders in sorting out what matters from what does not. But it does leave us in a bit of a fog on what exactly the nature of this synthetic argument looks like, how power, interests, and norms relate to one another, what common assumptions bind them, and what are the boundaries of the argument. The positive argument they point us to deserves more attention. Most important for the critique here, it suggests that the cumulative or interactive effect of these three constraints may add up to something greater than merely an asterisk to the thesis 'constraints are not binding.'

The fourth systemic constraint that deserves more weight involves factors associated with neoliberal institutionalism. As Brooks and Wohlforth present it, one would think that theory was all about reputation. However, an important strand in institutionalist thinking concerns transactions costs, focal points, and increasing returns. For example, many institutionalists believe that reduced transactions costs are what drive cooperative agreements and institutions are maintained by those lower costs and the greater burden involved in change. One of the reasons the United States has not attempted a redesign of international architecture may indeed be the heavy costs involved. For example, NATO endures not because it is optimal to deal with the new threats beyond Europe, but instead because it already exists and is too expensive to reinvent. Other institutions that fit this vein include the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the United Nations. Relative transactions (or sunk) costs contain Goliath.

The fifth systemic constraint is timing. It is easier for the top dog of international politics to work its will in the international arena at some times versus others. For example, it is often argued that major crises or wars present opportunities for systemic transformation with little pushback. Thus the Concert of Europe came out of the Napoleonic Wars, the League of Nations from WWI, the United Nations from WWII, and so on. Such times involve conditions that facilitate change including not only an altered balance of power, but also war or economic weariness, the desire to avoid prior problems, and the emergence of new domestic coalitions and policy ideas. Timing has arguably not been favorable to unipolar revisionism with the possible exception of post 9/11 - an opportunity neutralized by subsequent failed efforts. It is not clear if the economic crisis today will become so severe that it has similar effects. The general point is that the hegemon will be more or less likely to get pushback on its efforts to redo the international system depending on whether extraordinary events are an icebreaker on political inertia.

The sixth constraint involves domestic politics. Brooks and Wohlforth do note that domestic resistance, not systemic constraints, might limit resources to pursue activism. Their thesis, however, is about the lack of systemic constraints. What they pay less attention to is whether factors in world politics inspire U.S. domestic opposition to primacy. It seems that systemic effects - perhaps other states opposing the United States, a loss of trading privileges, or anti-American sentiment, arguably do mold U.S. domestic resistance to global projects. Perhaps part of the turn of domestic opinion against the Bush policy activism correlated to the decline in U.S. international standing. Americans thought less of President Bush and his agenda because the reaction abroad was so negative. The external-internal connection is one that deserves more attention in understanding the limits of a unipolar policy.

So let us return to the puzzle of why there has been so little successful primacy style global activism as advocated by Brooks and Wohlforth's argument. In terms of the general lack of activism since 1991 there is no clear answer within their framework-though domestic politics or

poor strategy are two fallbacks. In terms of the failure of the Bush efforts after 9/11, their answer is the Bush administration did it badly. Instead of pursuing systemic activism based on military force, it should have pursued a policy that aimed at the global economy or international standards that define legitimacy. Moreover, Bush did it with an inept diplomacy that paid too little attention to the ways power can be used to leverage legitimacy and the rules of the global economy. Instead, the Bush team disavowed itself of the need to reshape institutions and focused too narrowly on justifying policies to the American public.

They may indeed be right but "bad policy" is a residual category for their argument - it is not part of either the main negative argument or even the opaque positive argument. It also would have been more effective if they had used counterfactual reasoning to show how different tactics of a primacy strategy would have led to a different outcome for the Bush administration.

Perhaps, however, systemic constraints did play a role in checking a more assertive U.S. primacy strategy. While Bush's policy did exacerbate the situation it is unclear if any policy that stirred doubts about U.S. intentions, did not take into account the interest of other key players, did not respect most core international rules and norms, could not justify why new versus existing institutions are needed, was not wisely timed, and did not heed the domestic consequences of international developments could have succeeded.

All said, however, Brooks and Wohlforth's sophisticated argument is the best to date as to why the United States, even after the recent economic crisis, is well-positioned to take the lead in reinvigorating international rules and institutions. In practice the Brooks and Wohlforth program would likely embrace significant multilateralism (not unilateralism) and heed the interests of others (not roll over them) even at the short term expense of some U.S. interests in order to get deals done. It would probably look more like engagement than primacy - the result not of U.S. relative power or overt efforts to balance it, but of the residual constraints even that significant power faces in the contemporary international system.

Notes

1. Paul Kennedy, "American Power is on the Wane," Wall Street Journal, January 14, 2009.