**WEEK 3: Great Power Politics: Continuity or Change?**

**Lesson**

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| **Great Power Politics: Continuity or Change?**When the Cold War came to an end, a debate emerged among scholars of international relations about the future of international political system. The question was whether international politics after the Cold War would remain fundamentally an area of competition between the most powerful states in the international system, or whether a new era had finally dawned in international history. In September of 1990, George Herbert Walker Bush addressed a joint session of Congress, preparing the United States for conflict with Iraq. In this address, he argued that US intervention in Kuwait was not just about Kuwait, it was about something more important than that. President Bush stated that the crisis in the Persian Gulf offered “a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation. Out of these troubled times… a new world order can emerge: a new era – freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wards raged across the span o human endeavor. Today that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we’ve known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.” In this new order that president Bush identified, he argued that the United States would be a dominant power, and lead the way. It would do so, however, in *cooperation with the other great powers in the international system*. Great power competition for primacy, he suggested, would be a thing of the past. This, of course, was a vision that saw a radical departure from international politics as it had unfolded for hundreds of years.         Realists, unsurprisingly, scoffed at this notion. As Waltz explains, Realists argue that nothing had fundamentally changed in the international system. The bipolar system that defined the Cold War may have come to an end, they argued, but this did not mean a fundamental change in the nature of international politics. It was a change in the structure, rather than a change of the structure of the international political system. The implications of this position are that American dominance in the international system after the end of the Cold War (or what realists call the “unipolar moment”), was going to be only temporary. Eventually, Realist theory suggests, other great powers would rise to challenge American dominance. This Realist logic is neatly outlined in Christopher Layne’s article, titled “The Unipolar Illusion,” in which he explains why the rise of challengers to America’s dominance was inevitable. Like prominent Realists, Mearsheimer (1990) and Waltz (2000), Layne projected (and continues to do so) that unipolarity would not last forever.         This pessimistic view was challenged, however, by the fact that no serious challenger to the United States had emerged by the turn of the century. As IR scholars were increasingly pointing out, by the year 2000 no single great power challenger, nor a coalition of challengers, had emerged to challenge the dominant position of the United States.  While Neo-Realists like Layne have continued to argue that this is simply a matter of time (the US will decline eventually, and great power challengers will rise, in this view), other scholars have tried to explain the absence of real balancing. Three basic explanations have been offered for the stability of the current unipolar system.(1) The first comprehensive explanation for the stability of the unipolar world, came from William Wohlforth, in his aptly titled, article “The Stability of a Unipolar World.”(2) A second more recent attempt to account for the absence of balancing against the United States can be found in Lieber and Alexander’s article, “Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is not Pushing Back.” Lieber and Alexander argue that the absence of balancing is not simply due to America’s overwhelming capabilities, but that other factors are more important. While they diverge from Mearsheimer, Waltz, and Layne, however, Wohlforth, Lieber, and Alexander do position their arguments firmly within the Realist school of thought. That is, they don’t think that the absence of balancing has to do with the domestic political structures of the United States and its potential Great Power rivals.(3)     John Owen, by contrast, argues that domestic political structures have everything to do with the absence, or presence, of balancing behavior. Not only does Owen provide a theoretical alternative to the Realist argument about the likely continuation of Great Power competition, he also offers specific predictions as to the identity of the Great Powers he believes will be engaged in a struggle for international primacy in the early 21st century.      With the recent friction between the United States and Russia, over Ukraine and other issues, and the United States and China, the debate about the rise of renewed Great Power competition, and whether is inevitable has once again gained traction. One take on the rise of the US-Russian friction in recent years can be seen in Fareed Zakaria's clip that you can view here: <http://www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/bestoftv/2014/04/19/exp-gps-0420-take.cnn.html>. What do you think?**References**Layne, Chistopher. 1993. “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise.” *International Security* 17.4: 5-51.Wohlforth, William C.1999. “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24.1:5-41. Lieber, Keir A., and Gerard Alexander. 2005. “Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back.” *International Security* 30.1: 109-139 Owen, John. M. 2001. “Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy.” *International Security* 26.3: 117-152.  |