

WESTERN EUROPE AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE "UNIPOLAR MOMENT": IS MULTIPOLARITY THE ANSWER?

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Introduction: Bush-emissaire?

In a recent article on the Iraq war, Pascal Cuche cites a French colleague, Laurent Cohen-Tanugi, to the effect that most of French public opinion has become fixated upon its Bush émissaire.¹ This is a punning reference to the felt need of many in France, and by extension the rest of Western Europe, for a scape-goat (in French, a bouc émissaire) for the current strains in transatlantic security relations. Memory being what it is, many appear to think that prior to the arrival of George W. Bush in power three years ago, transatlantic relations were on a healthy footing.²

But memory is usually fickle, and in the realm of transatlantic security relations, as elsewhere, it is wont to play its tricks. Consider, in this regard, what was being said about the US by many Western Europeans in the closing months of the Clinton administration. This was an administration judged by no less an observer than France's foreign minister at the time, Hubert Védrine, to have been presiding over the affairs of a country for whom the label "superpower" no longer made any sense, a country that had

¹ Pascal Cuche, "Irak: Et si la France s'était trompée?" *Politique étrangère* 68 (Summer 2003): 409-22, quote at p. 420.

² Useful correctives are supplied in two articles written by Martin Walker during the second Clinton administration: "Present at the Solution: Madeleine Albright's Ambitious Foreign Policy," *World Policy Journal* 14 (Spring 1997): 1-10; "What Europeans Think of America," *World Policy Journal* 17 (Summer 2000): 26-38; and Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), pp. 42-43.

to be branded, even if with no malice intended, as a hyperpuissance.³ Allegations of American "arrogance" and domineering routinely made the rounds of European (and other) policy intellectuals.⁴

Or take the same Clinton administration's closing days, in that brief period between the December 2000 decision as to whom the American public had finally elected the previous month and the swearing-in of the new president in January 2001: during these weeks the US was being chastised by European allies for a host of deeds done or not, a list that even included (though the French took a pass on this particular indictment) the charge that Washington had been jeopardizing the health of allied soldiery through its use of munitions made from depleted uranium (DU) during NATO's 1999 war against Serbia.⁵

Other entities who joined the DU fracas may have had their own particular axes to grind -- to name just one such, the Serbs (at home as well as in the diaspora) were seizing upon DU as a means of casting negative light upon NATO, by implication making the Serb role in the Yugoslav tragedies of the late 1990s appear, in respect, less iniquitous. But what really stood out was the criticism of certain allies, who were primarily responsible for inflaming the controversy in the first place, and who were motivated by the desire to express a set of broader anxieties they entertained about the future of "multilateralism" within the alliance. To some observers, the DU tempest in the

³ John Vinocur, "France Has a Hard Sell to Rein in U.S. Power," International Herald Tribune, 6-7 February 1999, p. 2. Ironically, once Clinton had left office, Védérine could extol the departed president as having been practically a European, the one American leader who had shown himself to be the "most open to European ideas in 20 years." Quoted in "Europe Is Sad to See Clinton Go," Guardian Weekly, 19 January 2001, p. 3.

⁴ James Schlesinger, "Fragmentation and Hubris: A Shaky Basis for American Leadership," National Interest, no. 49 (Fall 1997), pp. 3-9; Charles William Maynes, "The Perils of (and for) an Imperial America," Foreign Policy, no. 111 (Summer 1998), pp. 36-48.

⁵ See David G. Haglund and Orrick White, "The Parable of the Metal: Depleted Uranium, NATO, and the Issue of 'Environmental

alliance teapot "illustrated a growing estrangement between the United States and its European allies on several fronts at a time when NATO faces an array of difficult decisions that will profoundly affect its destiny as the world's dominant military alliance."⁶

Unipolarity, Hegemony, Empire: What's in a Word?

The intra-alliance querulousness of the holiday season of 2000-1 was, as the above quotation suggests, fundamentally emblematic of a wider and perhaps deeper malaise that itself had been some time in building during the second half of the 1990s. While the malaise probably had no single identifiable source, it could be traced to a growing bad "mood" within the Atlantic alliance associated with declarations, notions, and even theories about the contemporary global balance of power, or lack thereof. In a word, America was being regarded by many, friend and foe alike, as "hegemonic." And hegemony, said many (though by no means all) analysts and policymakers, was inconsistent with, and fundamentally corrosive of, the norms and institutions associated with post-Second World War multilateralism. As William Pfaff put it, the "emotional charge of the [DU] controversy reflects a certain European anti-Americanism.... The United States is unwilling to yield the economic and commercial advantages that can be drawn from its political-military preponderance. The Europeans resent that advantage and have an interest in overcoming or reversing it."⁷

Security," *European Security* (forthcoming, 2004).

⁶ William Drozdiak, "NATO Allies Split on Uranium Shells," *International Herald Tribune*, 10 January 2001, pp. 1, 5.

⁷ William Pfaff, "But Longer-Term, U.S. Leadership Worries the Alliance More," *International Herald Tribune*, 13-14 January

Those Europeans who thought this way had a point. That dispensation known as American multilateralism had certainly been taking on a more "instrumentalist" coloration during the latter half of the 1990s, so it was obviously not a process that began with George W. Bush.⁸ However, and notwithstanding what candidate Bush said during the presidential campaign about the need for America to show itself more "humble" in its dealing with allies, and to be more willing to consult with them,⁹ the instrumentalist tone became more prominent during the first nine months of the new administration -- i.e., before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Not surprisingly, those Europeans who had gotten used to expecting an America that regarded its allies as partners and not irritants (or partners first, and only after that irritants) expressed consternation over the prospect that they were about to lose the America they had come to accept, if only grudgingly in some cases, as a constituent element of their own strategic identity.¹⁰ Nor would their consternation dissipate after 11 September, once it became apparent that Washington intended to fight the war against the Taliban without the support of the alliance writ large (though certain NATO allies, along with non-NATO partners, were welcomed participants in a "coalition of the willing" from the opening stages of the American counterattack).

Neither should it be imagined that it was just the French who were objecting to a variant of multilateralism bordering on the ersatz; we have already said the French were keeping mum on the DU issue, and besides, for the French, instrumentalism is not such

2001, p. 6.

⁸ Some observers date the onset of the process from the Republican triumph in the 1994 congressional elections; for this interpretation, see Justin Vaïsse, "Le nouvel âge postatlantique," *Commentaire*, no. 103 (Autumn 2003), pp. 541-48.

⁹ As he stated in the second presidential debate with his Democratic challenger, Vice-President Al Gore.

¹⁰ For the claim that the Western allies share a "collective identity," see Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among*

a bad thing in itself. Increasingly, it had been in the late 1990s the ur-multilateralist Germans, heretofore among the best students in the atlanticist classroom, who were grumbling the most about the quality of American leadership, some to the extent that they began to doubt whether America's erstwhile commitment to multilateralism ever did reflect anything other than "instrumental multilateralism [in which] international institutions are useful as long as they help to reduce costs, lend legitimacy to foreign policy actions, and do not constrain the United States."¹¹ The German mood was hardly improved in the early months of 2001 when American policymakers and policy analysts sympathetic to the administration began to extol the virtues of Washington's "à la carte" multilateralism, and even of its "consultative unilateralism."¹²

What was going on within the Atlantic community? From the European point of view, those who fretted about life, first under Clinton and much more so under Bush, analyzed their dilemma broadly in one of two, ostensibly similar but in reality divergent, fashions. There were those, such as the Germans, who concentrated upon an America that was comporting itself poorly, in the sense that it was abandoning the practice of "strategic restraint" that had served as the pillar of the "constitutional order" within which Germany and Europe had become restored to economic and moral legitimacy after the

Democracies: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹¹ See Peter Rudolf, "Vision Impossible? The United States as Benign Hegemon," in The France-US Leadership Race: Closely Watched Allies, ed. David G. Haglund (Kingston: Queen's Quarterly, 2000), p. 152; and Idem, "Amerikanische Außenpolitik unter George W. Bush: Eine erste Einschätzung," SWP-Aktuell 5 (April 2001): 3. Also see Bernd W. Kubbig, Matthias Dembinski, and Alexander Kelle, Unilateralism as Sole Foreign-Policy Strategy? American Policy toward the UN, NATO, and the OPCW in the Clinton Era, PRIF Reports 57 (Frankfurt am Main: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, November 2000). OPCW is the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

¹² The first expression is attributed to Richard Haass, director of policy planning at the State Department; the second springs from the keyboard of William Safire. See Stewart Patrick, "Don't Fence Me In: The Perils of Going It Alone," World Policy Journal 18 (Fall 2001): 2-14, quote at p. 2; and William Safire, "Bush's Missile Shield Can Work," International Herald Tribune, 4 May 2001, p. 11.

Second World War.¹³ For those who regarded matters in this fashion, what was needed was not so much a weaker America as an America that was better-behaved, one that understood that forging collective decisions on what was important or not worked to advance both its own interests and those of its allies.

But there was another, contrasting, position, articulated most clearly and most often by the French: as indicated by the above-mentioned reference to Hubert Védérine, what constituted the crux of the problem for Paris was not so much American behaviour (held to be epiphenomenal), but rather American power -- power, that is, that was relative to others in the international system at a time when the historic adversary of the Cold War era of bipolarity had ceased to exist. For the French, it was simply inconceivable how America could be enjoined or expected to behave in a more satisfactory manner if the principal determinant of that behaviour -- its relative capability -- was not somehow "balanced." To his credit, Védérine acknowledged that were Paris to possess as much power as Washington did, it would probably behave in a manner judged by allies to be even more insufferable than American behaviour!¹⁴

Those in France and elsewhere who look first and foremost at one feature of the international system, relative capability, might otherwise be labelled "structural realists," save for the fact that this variant of realist theory (often annoying mislabelled "neorealism") conjures up a perspective on global politics that is considered to be decidedly American -- or at least does so to those who have not thought through the

¹³ G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order," *International Security* 23 (Winter 1998/99): 43-78.

¹⁴ Hubert Védérine, *Les Cartes de la France: À l'heure de le mondialisation* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p. 50.

logical implications of Kenneth Waltz's 1979 opus, Theory of International Politics.¹⁵ But relative capability, however essential it may be as a conditioning variable of international politics, possesses only an indeterminate ability, at best, to "cause" particular foreign policies ("outputs") to be the way they are. Consider, for instance, the confusion attending the overlapping usage of three terms of contemporary art: unipolarity, hegemony, and empire.

The first of these terms, unipolarity, is simply a description of a particular international order in which states continue to be regarded as the central actors (even if few analysts are so silly as to dispute the influence of nonstate actors). In other words, it is a quantitative means of taking the measure of a qualitative system, namely the Westphalian order that dates from around 1648 and continues in existence today, premature reports of its death to the contrary notwithstanding. Logically, there can be three and only three quantitative renderings of such an order. The first, by far the most frequent dispensation since 1648, has been multipolarity, taken to mean that there exist three or more great powers each of whom can be said to possess roughly comparable amounts of "power" as construed in some measurable fashion, and usually branded "aggregate capability."¹⁶ The second structural arrangement is bipolarity, a period of time (as was the Cold War) when two ("super") powers so stood out from the rest that their bilateral competition came to be define the system's structure. And the third is unipolarity. This is the most contentious of the quantitative descriptors, though why it

¹⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

¹⁶ This is not the only manner in which power can be assessed; a major competing usage has power as a synonym for influence, the expression of which is rendered in the familiar formula of "A's ability to get B to do that which B would not ordinarily wish to do." For this alternative, see David A. Baldwin, Paradoxes of Power (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), chap. 7. For a recent restatement of the merits of defining power in terms of aggregate capability, see John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great

should be so requires a bit of elaboration. But that the system subsequent to bipolarity must have become a unipolar one seems obvious, for if we subtract one from what used to be two (and two only) dominant powers, the inference has to be that only one such dominant power remains.

What policy outputs (and maybe even "outcomes") must flow from this finding are the subject of endless debate, as I discuss below. But what should not be controversial is our use of unipolarity here, merely to describe the structure of the current state system. As William Wohlforth puts it: "Unipolarity is a structure in which one state's capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced."¹⁷ By this he means counterbalanced by a "peer competitor," for clearly the US in and of itself does not possess more than 50 percent of the planet's aggregate capabilities. As such, it is conceivable that it could be balanced through a) the robust growth of an existing state; b) the establishment of a new and powerful entity possessed of statist features and with outsized geopolitical aspirations; or c) an unambiguously counterbalancing alliance of states that, on their own, hold no prospect of becoming America's "peer competitor."

At the same time, Wohlforth does appear to believe (and here he has plenty of company) that America is a "hegemonic" power, construed in the sense that it is capable of imposing -- by coercion or persuasion but ideally by the latter -- its will upon others, getting them to follow where it wishes to lead, all the while by providing essential public goods to the international system that only it can supply.¹⁸ For not a few

Power Politics (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001). In this article, I follow Mearsheimer's usage, for not doing so would render footless any discussion of a "return" to multipolarity.

¹⁷ William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24 (Summer 1999): 5-41, quote at p. 9.

¹⁸ Readers will recognize in this formulation the basic rudiments of what has come to be known as "hegemonic stability theory," the locus classicus of which is Charles P. Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation,

scholars, hegemony exists and it is durable, so that the term, "unipolar moment" suffers from prolepsis in its stated anticipation of unipolarity's impending disappearance. Others, however, believe hegemony must lead to its own undoing, and this sooner rather than later, on the basis of an iron law of international politics, namely power "balancing."¹⁹

It is possible, though not common, to make the claim that while the system really is unipolar (at least for the time being), the US is not a "hegemon," benign or otherwise. Indeed, to David Wilkinson, this is exactly what the system has represented since the Soviets dropped out of the game: unipolarity of a nonhegemonic nature. To Wilkinson, hegemony might connote, on a bilateral basis, an unequal relationship (though not necessarily a coercive one) between two differently proportioned states; but on the more important global basis, it must connote a dispensation in which unipolar influence matches unipolar capability. If the first (bilateral) kind of "hegemony" does find applicability in today's world, the latter does not: there are simply too many instances of great powers (e.g., France) either defying the US, or simply abstaining from following it, for anyone to conclude that hegemony possesses global meaning.²⁰

Wilkinson is correct, and though John Mearsheimer also agrees that system-wide hegemony simply does not exist -- only regional hegemony exists, and even in this category there is only one such hegemon, the US -- the latter parts company from the former when it comes to assessing the prospects of unipolarity's persisting. For Wilkinson, nonhegemonic unipolarity can endure for a considerable length of time, while

Public Goods, and Free Rides," *International Studies Quarterly* 25 (1981): 242-54.

¹⁹ See Christopher Layne, "Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Hegemony or Balance of Power in the Twenty-First Century?" *World Policy Journal* 15 (Summer 1998): 8-28.

for Mearsheimer, its days are clearly numbered. I believe Wilkinson calls things more accurately, and in the following sections I am going to say why this is so, at least insofar as concerns the mooted notion of "Europe" somehow emerging as America's next peer competitor.

But before we get to that question, one final term of contemporary strategic discourse needs to be addressed: "empire." This is especially so given the tendency of many writers today, in France as elsewhere, to descry and decry a new American "empire."²¹ In some ways, empire cannot easily be separated conceptually from hegemony, particularly if one inclines toward the helpful definition of imperialism proffered by Benjamin Cohen, namely "any relationship of effective domination or control, political or economic, of one nation over another."²² As with hegemony, so with empire can there be a supposition of benign intent and even outcome, as when some describe America's as an empire "by invitation" over Western Europe, one that has benefitted the latter.²³ Usually, however, empire is regarded as being even less benign than hegemony, to the point that for many writers it takes on an indisputably pejorative quality.

Interestingly, for our purposes here, what does serve structurally to distinguish

²⁰ David Wilkinson, "Unipolarity Without Hegemony." *International Studies Review* 1 (Summer 1999): 141-72.

²¹ See, for instance, Pascal Boniface, *La France contre l'Empire* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003); and Emmanuel Todd, *Après l'Empire: Essai sur la décomposition du système américain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). To be sure, this is not simply a French claim, as is witnessed by John Newhouse, *Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Nor is it even a very contemporary claim, as evidenced by the debate attending US policy during the Vietnam era. See, for that debate, Raymond Aron, *The Imperial Republic: The United States and the World, 1945-1973*, trans. Frank Jellinek (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Ronald Steel, *Pax Americana* (New York: Viking, 1967); and Robert E. Osgood et al., *Retreat from Empire? The First Nixon Administration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

²² Benjamin Cohen, *The Question of Imperialism: The Political Economy of Dominance and Dependence* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 16.

²³ Geir Lundestad, *The American "Empire" and Other Studies of U.S. Foreign Policy in a Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

hegemony from empire tends to be masked precisely by the latter's pejorative signification: empire as an empirical reality has certainly not been inconsistent with, indeed you might even say it has usually been an accompaniment of, "multipolarity." By this I mean to suggest that if history is any guide, and if "empire" is the problem with today's international system, multipolarity might not be much of a solution at all, given that the great age of imperialism of the late nineteenth century was preeminently an age of multipolarity. By contrast, we think of hegemony in structural terms that appear to require the negation of multipolarity, either the kind of "hegemonic stability" provided for its side by America's leadership during the era of bipolarity, or the promise of further such stability in the post-bipolar -- i.e., unipolar -- system.

Let us sum up the argument to this point. First, unipolarity is an accurate way to depict the structure of the contemporary international system. Secondly, the United States can be considered a global hegemon only in a Pickwickian sense, as there are simply too many instances of its inability to get others (great as well as not so great) to follow its lead (this is not to be taken as suggesting that America is powerless to achieve its goals). Thirdly, if there is an American "empire," it does not follow that converting, if it could be done, today's unipolarity to multipolarity would provide a solution. In this latter regard, we do well to remember that multipolarity is not a synonym for multilateralism. The former term applies to the relative distribution of capability of the units making up the international system; the latter is an institution (broadly conceived) governing principled behaviour on the part of three or more actors.²⁴

²⁴ John Gerard Ruggie, Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era (New York: Columbia University Press,

Can Multipolarity Be Willed, and if so, Should Western Europe (i.e., France) Try?

Kenneth Waltz has remarked, apropos the stated desire of French leaders for a multipolar world, that "one cannot usefully will the end without willing the means."²⁵ And while Waltz himself is the first to admit that balancing behaviour is virtually inevitable, he is dubious about America's next peer competitor emerging any time soon as a result of French initiatives; indeed, if any European country can be said to be a candidate for spearheading the balancing of America, it is more likely to be an "impatient" Germany. Mostly, he feels, balancing will take place in Asia, with China standing out as the obvious candidate for peer-competitor status.²⁶ In the next section we shall take a look at the prospect of Western Europe balancing the US, something that Samuel Huntington, at least, holds out as a realistic prospect, not despite but because of French determination.²⁷

In this section, we ask a different question, because we are interested less in whether France, in association with Germany, can orchestrate a European balancing initiative than in why French élites should so often insist that a return to multipolarity would be a good thing to achieve, were it possible to will such a return. Among the Western European states, it has been France after all that has stood out in the frequency and conviction with which its political élites make appeal to the merits (such as they are conceived) of multipolarity.²⁸ Some will tell you that the dogged emphasis

1996), p. 20.

²⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Globalization and American Power," *National Interest*, no. 59 (Spring 2000), p. 54.

²⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25 (Summer 2000): 31-32.

²⁷ See Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* 78 (March/April 1999): 35-49.

²⁸ See in particular Hubert Védrine, with Dominique Moïsi, *France in an Age of Globalization*, trans. Philip H. Gordon

upon multipolarity is simply the latest conceptual cloak donned by France's anti-Americans, with the syllogism going roughly like this: France is well known to be Western Europe's most consistently anti-American land; multipolarity is a structural arrangement intended to check American power; France's multipolar quest is simply a reflection of anti-Americanism.²⁹

Whatever its source(s) may be, there can be no mistaking that France's leaders proclaim, loudly and frequently, the merits of multipolarity as the systemic structure most congenial to French interests. At first glance, the proclamation seems unobjectionable: who would not want a multipolarity that is held to be tantamount to "multilateralism," and who apart perhaps from the US would want a unipolarity said to be synonymous with "unilateralism"?

But probe a bit deeper, and ask whether it follows logically that multipolarity must correlate positively with multilateralism, or that multipolarity must therefore be a good in itself, for France and its European partners. Here the historical record provides reason for caution, even skepticism. Take just the issue of multipolarity's postulated "goodness": it is apparent from that record that France did not derive net benefit from its centuries-long experience with multipolarity. To be sure, things started promisingly enough for it; within a decade of the ending of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, which effectively ushered in the international state system we know today, France had supplanted Spain as the world's ranking power. But as time went on during that long multipolar era stretching from the Peace of Westphalia to the Second World War, things

(Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

²⁹ On the issue of French anti-Americanism, see Jean-François Revel, L'Obsession anti-américaine: Son fonctionnement, ses causes, ses conséquences (Paris: Plon, 2002); and Philippe Roger, L'Ennemi américain: Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme

went downhill for France, with decline being glimpsed as early as its naval defeat by the British and Dutch at La Hogue, in 1692.³⁰

A series of global contests in the eighteenth century would leave Britain as the dominant world power by 1763, though France continued to be the preeminent land power in Europe.³¹ As bad as the eighteenth century was for France, the nineteenth would be worse, for following a short-lived spike in its status in 1805, the rot once more set in, symbolized early in the century by Waterloo and later in the century by Sedan. But this was nothing as compared with the curse multipolarity would lay on France in the twentieth century, culminating in June 1940.³² So depressing had that secular experience been that by the midpoint of the twentieth century a "rational" analyst could have been forgiven for drawing the conclusion that this country in particular should never again wish to be so unfortunate as to live in a multipolar world.

In contrast, the four decades of bipolarity were beneficial ones for France, even though this does not receive the attention it should from that country's analysts and policymakers, who seem taken with the myth of "Yalta," which holds that France was betrayed and diminished by the division of Europe into a Soviet sphere of influence and an American one.³³ As for the current structure of international power, whatever else might be claimed about the impact of the Soviet Union's demise upon French status and

français (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

³⁰ William R. Thompson, "Dehio, Long Cycles, and the Geohistorical Context of Structural Transition," *World Politics* 45 (October 1992): 127-52.

³¹ On those contests, see Walter L. Dorn, *Competition for Empire, 1740-1763* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940).

³² See Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Arnold, 1995).

³³ For a rare exception, see Noël Mamère and Olivier Warin, *Non merci, Oncle Sam!* (Paris: Éd. Ramsay, 1999), a book that can hardly be labelled pro-American but one that at least dispenses with the conventional wisdom that the so-called "Yalta order" was detrimental to French interests after 1945. "We forget," say the authors, "just how cozy the Cold War era was for France.... The superpower blocs butted up against each other, forming a roof under which France was able to shelter and prosper" (p. 12). On Yalta, see Reiner Marcowitz, "Yalta, the Myth of the Division of the World," in *Haunted by History: Myths in International*

interests, it is hard to sustain any meaningful comparison between the negative (if that it what it has been) impact of unipolarity's first dozen years with that of multipolarity's final century.³⁴

With regard to Germany, which admittedly has been less vocal than France on the need for multipolarity -- its leaders contenting themselves in the aftermath of the Schröder government's first electoral with mutterings about "emancipation" -- the historical ledger reads even more cruelly. Thus we do well to recall André Tardieu's observation that "[n]othing is more human than to believe what one desires." To this, Tardieu added the postscript, quoting Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet: "It is the worst of mental aberrations; but it is also the most common."³⁵

What is striking about the contemporary calls for multipolarity is not just, or even primarily, the dispensation's dubious track record, at least insofar as French interests are concerned (for the US seems to have done very well for itself since 1776, even though -- perhaps because -- for some 170 of the years that have passed since American independence, the international system was characterized by multipolarity).³⁶ Rather, what most stands out are the logical steps required to be taken if the means are to be generated to service the will. Whatever else they may do, allies do not balance against each other in any meaningful sense of the word (though they can and do

Relations, ed. Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1998), pp. 80-102.

³⁴ For that matter, it is not easy even to say what the impact of unipolarity's first dozen years has been on France, although there is no shortage of pessimism on this score, as for instance to be found in Dominique Moïsi, "The Trouble with France," Foreign Affairs 77 (May/June 1998): 94-104. But a different perspective exists, one arguing that France actually benefitted from the ending of bipolarity, because Germany had lost standing relative to it in the Bonn/Berlin-Paris-Washington "strategic triangle." Cf. Helga Haftendorn, "Le triangle stratégique Bonn-Paris-Washington," Politique étrangère 61 (Autumn 1996): 554.

³⁵ André Tardieu, France and America: Some Experiences in Coöperation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), pp. 244-47. This book was first published in France under the title, Devant l'obstacle: L'Amérique et nous (Paris: Éd. Émile-Paul Frères, 1927).

³⁶ For the claim that American foreign policy has been a virtually unparalleled success story, see Walter Russell Mead, Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

partake in what Josef Joffe calls "neo-ganging up").³⁷ There are three ways, and three ways only, by which a non-unipolar world can be brought into being, and none of these depend upon ganging up in that occasional theatre of the absurd, the United Nations Security Council.

The first way is the easiest, though perhaps not the most effective, and certainly not the speediest: do nothing and hope that America declines significantly enough on its own to close the gap between itself and the next most powerful member(s) of the system, so that the era of unipolarity can be pronounced dead. The second and third ways require some considerable effort on the part of France and whomever else it seeks to implicate in the balancing act. France could try to forge a more perfect and competent European Union, one in which that entity's political and military grasp is brought into harmony with its economic and monetary reach. The problem here, as we shall see in the next section, is that "Europe" cannot be built solely on the basis of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany -- all the more so as it cannot be taken for granted that Germany would abandon its longstanding preference for transatlantic security bonds and succumb instead to the charms of an "autonomous" Europe.

This leaves the third way, good old-fashioned balancing via alliance formation among discrete states -- in short, the fomenting of a so-called "anti-hegemonic" coalition, with the probable (indeed the only) candidates for this being France, Germany, and Russia.³⁸ Apart from the likelihood that Germany (perhaps even Russia) would draw back from such an arrangement, there is the matter of economic cost. If

³⁷ Josef Joffe, "Who's Afraid of Mr. Big?" *National Interest*, no. 64 (Spring 2001), pp. 43-52.

³⁸ For one advocacy of exactly this means of balancing, see Henri de Grossouvre, *Paris-Berlin-Moscou: La voie de l'indépendance et de la paix* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2002).

they are to be serious about the job, which is another way of saying if they are to be serious about multipolarity, France and its two partners in balancing would have to make sacrifices that far transcend anything they have had to do to date (including for the two wealthy Western European states, pumping up the Russians while substantially dismantling their own social-welfare systems), and while the thought of such transfer payments might appeal to some Russians who have forgotten what excess defence spending did to the Soviet Union, the executing of the transfers would sound the political death knell for any government in Paris or Berlin.

There is yet another reason for caution in assuming that multipolarity might be the solution to whatever is conceived as being the "American problem" of the moment. If that problem is held to be synonymous with a postulated increasing tendency for America to opt for "unilateralist" measures in its diplomacy, then it has to be recognized that unilateralism on the part of the US can be entirely consistent with multipolarity. Unilateralism, as Walter McDougall reminds us,³⁹ is a time-honoured American diplomatic doctrine, and it has only been fairly recently (i.e., since the onset of the post-Second World War era), that American leaders have been known to tout the merits of "multilateral" economic and security arrangements.⁴⁰

Indeed, to those who want to believe that multipolarity will rein in America's unilateralist instincts, the diplomatic record of the interwar period is sobering. For American policies during those two decades demonstrated not only that unilateralism in its extreme form of "isolationism" not only could flourish during a period of multipolarity,

³⁹ Walter McDougall, Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁴⁰ See Rosemary Foot, S. Neil MacFarlane, and Michael Mastanduno, US Hegemony and International Organizations: The

but might itself have been a required response to multipolarity, in an era in which great political significance was attached to America's geographical setting.⁴¹

Is Anyone Out There (in Europe) Balancing?

Now, it is always possible to argue that merely because something turned out one way in the past is no argument that it must turn out the same way again, and equally possible to sustain the belief that there is nothing inherent in multipolarity that must render it noxious to French interests. Perhaps William Bennett Munro had it right when he remarked that "[w]e can teach History, but History cannot teach us."⁴² There may be much wisdom in abjuring a certain "historicist" approach to contemporary international relations, and it is apparent that history's "lessons," such as they are, must always require a good deal of deciphering, not so say massaging.⁴³ So let us leave open the possibility that French élites are aware, when they invoke the goal of multipolarity, that this dispensation did not treat their country particularly well last time around, but that they are convinced that enough has changed, both in the world and in France, to enable them to feel more confident about multipolarity's coming innings. After all, none of us possesses any good information about the future, and perhaps it is the structural realists who have it wrong, in ascribing to systemic factors causal power

United States and Multilateral Institutions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴¹ On that geographical significance, see Arthur P. Whitaker, The Western Hemisphere Idea: Its Rise and Decline (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954); Eugene Staley, "The Myth of the Continents," Foreign Affairs 19 (April 1941): 491-92; Isaiah Bowman, "Geography vs. Geopolitics," in Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography, ed. Hans W. Weigert and Vilhjalmur Stefansson (New York: Macmillan, 1944); and Alan K. Henrikson, "The Geographical Mental Maps of American Foreign Policy Makers," International Political Science Review 1, 4 (1980): 495-530.

⁴² Quoted in Albert Guérard, The France of Tomorrow (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), pp. ix-x.

⁴³ See Ernest R. May, "Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy (New York: Oxford

over the "agents" of the state system: who says international politics has to be the "same damned thing" over and over again?

Still, the track record of multipolarity insofar as French fortunes are concerned does, at least, give reason to hesitate before throwing caution to the winds, and embarking upon a campaign to bring behaviour into line with the ostensible declaratory policy. Thus, in this section, we are not so much interested in why anyone in France (or Europe) would want to balance against the US as we are in detecting whether anyone is, in fact, doing so.

There are three elements worth mining for evidence of possible balancing behaviour: 1) the current state and future prospects of the Atlantic alliance, 2) the debate within Germany of the merits of transatlantic security linkages, and 3) the ongoing French assessment of the merits of Europe for French interests.

Let us start with NATO. Surely, if balancing against America were occurring in Europe the first place it would show up would be within the venerable alliance. This means that we should expect to be witnessing a transformation in the structure of European security, in which less and less reliance is placed upon the US and the alliance that many see as being little more than a cat's-paw of American interests, and more and more weight is being attached to the promise of an autonomous (i.e., of the US) European security and defence identity. Significantly, this transformation should be effected by a European quest for strategic distance from America, and not by any mooted American disaffection with the merits of NATO as a core of its own grand strategy.

I think we can take it for granted that Washington regards NATO today as being less central to its security than during the Cold War era, and the reasons for this need not delay us. It suffices simply to note that the ending of rivalry with the Soviet Union, the pacification of Western Europe itself as a result of Franco-German reconciliation, and the appearance of radical Islam as a threat to US interests have all resulted in an American reassessment of NATO's value to it.⁴⁴ This need not, and does not, mean that America is prepared to walk away from the alliance, for it clearly does not intend this. Nor can anyone argue the relative diminution in value America accords to the alliance suggests it is thinking of balancing against its allies.

So what we really need to ask here is whether anything about NATO's recent evolution holds out the prospect of the allies' balancing against America. If certain structural realists were quick to prophesy, as the Cold War was winding down a dozen or so years ago, that NATO's "days are not numbered, but its years are," and this because an alliance without an enemy had no reason for remaining in existence,⁴⁵ then the record of the "post-Cold War" era did not treat their predictions kindly. NATO managed to stay in the game, and in a central way as far as most of the European states were concerned, by "reinventing" itself as a different kind of security entity, one whose mission became increasingly identified with the dual "cooperative security" tasks of 1) reaching out to, and cooperating with, recent Cold War adversaries, and 2) engaging in conflict management in regions that had, heretofore, been regarded as "out of area." Its first task would eventuate in the expansion of the alliance, from a Cold War

⁴⁴ A skeptical American perspective on NATO's value is E. Wayne Merry, "We Can't Be Partners with an Obsolete Alliance," International Herald Tribune, 4 February 2004, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," International Security 18 (Fall 1993): 75.

grouping of 16 to one that will soon embrace 26 states; its second task would see it involved militarily in the Balkans and beyond.⁴⁶

Something clearly was happening in respect of the alliance, but whatever it was, it did not lead to NATO and the American link being seen to be of declining value from the standpoint of most European countries; rather the reverse occurred, as "bandwagoning" not balancing became the dominant response of "Europe" to the ending of the Cold War.⁴⁷ It is true that the war with Serbia in 1999 appeared to result in a rededication of Western European states to the goal of enhanced defence "autonomy," but the more important Iraq war of 2003 revealed just how fractured Europe was, and how few in number really were those EU states who dared to invoke the autonomy quest. Although numerous commentators, who should have known better, persisted in regarding the Iraq war as having sundered the transatlantic alliance, the reality is that -- insofar as European states and not publics went -- the war revealed how split Europe, not the alliance was; for apart from the notable rump of France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg, the rest of the current and future allies sided with the US. If this is "balancing" behaviour, it was against the pretensions of France and Germany to claim to speak for Europe that the others were reacting; they were not balancing the US.

Another reason why the Iraq war cannot and should be interpreted as balancing of a transatlantic nature concerns, ironically, Germany. "Ironically," because it was the

⁴⁶ For this transformation, see David G. Haglund, ed., *New NATO, New Century: Canada, the United States, and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance* (Kingston, ONT: Queen's University Centre for International Relations/Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2000).

⁴⁷ Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 19.

electoral expediency that undergirded so much of the German opposition to the war that threatened, for a brief time in the autumn of 2002, to result in a new, and for NATO more menacing, transatlantic security reality, and did so because Germany now seemed not only to be on France's "side," but even ahead of France when it came to opposing America. To some observers, a new era was being ushered in, resulting from an unstoppable rise in German anti-Americanism, and in this atmosphere, who could say that Huntington's fears of an anti-hegemonic alliance grouping together France and Germany were not materializing?⁴⁸

But it was precisely because such visions could be entertained that prudent Germans, including and especially some in the government of Gerhard Schröder, could see much merit in drawing back from the abyss and trying to patch things up with the Americans, and in such a way that NATO would be protected as the principal, even if not sole, vehicle for promoting European security interests. Instead of saying to the world that they now considered NATO and the US link to be redundant, at best, or even detrimental to European interests, German leaders began to stress that it would be inconceivable to plan the future of Europe without a strong American role. Not only were the Germans not balancing behaviourally by any objective economic measures -- just the reverse! -- they were also not genuflecting before the altar of autonomy and speculating on the charms of a Europe more distanced from America.⁴⁹ They have known those charms only too well within living memory.

⁴⁸ For two such dire assessments, see Henry Kissinger, "Pourquoi le torchon brûle entre Washington et Berlin," Le Figaro, 23 October 2002, p. 13; and Jim Hoagland, "German Vote Exposes Global Fault Lines," International Herald Tribune, 27 September 2002, p. 9.

⁴⁹ See Fred Kempe, "Fischer, Rumsfeld Find Common Ground in Munich," Wall Street Journal Europe, online edition, 11 February 2004.

Finally, although here the evidence is more mixed, there is reason to believe that not only is France not doing anything to balance in the objective sense, but that some French élites may be losing faith in the EU as a "force-multiplier" for France itself.⁵⁰ Take the issue of actually spending on a more autonomous European defence capability, without which the rhetoric must remain empty. It is widely thought that France is committed to a robust increase in its defence spending, and indeed the government elected in 2002 promised to repair years of neglect inflicted on the military by the socialist government of Lionel Jospin between 1997 and 2002. But when French military expenditures are adjusted so as to deduct the share of the defence budget allocated to the gendarmerie and to veterans pensions -- that is, when French statistics are brought into line with the practice of the Western allies -- the picture looks different. Instead of being among the top two EU states when it comes to the share of GDP allocated to defence, France actually scores further down the list, and is fifth among today's 15 -- but will drop to tenth among 25 when the EU expands in May 2004 -- in terms of the percentage of GDP (1.7) it allocates to defence.⁵¹ "Some balancing," the cynic might be tempted to remark!

As for France's conviction that a larger Europe must be in its interest, in no small measure because a bigger EU will be a less "atlanticist" creation than the current one, the opposite seems closer to the truth: the painful lesson of the Iraq war is that if France is counting upon "Europe" as a means of ensuring greater autonomy from America, the game may already be lost. Some French policy intellectuals, including and especially

⁵⁰ For the "force-multiplier" argument, see Pascal Boniface, La France est-elle encore une grande puissance? (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1998).

⁵¹ Jacques Isnard, "La France est au cinquième rang en Europe pour son effort de défense," Le Monde, 6 December 2003, p. 6.

former prime minister Michel Rocard, have so concluded, and are prepared to concede that for now and some good portion of time into the future, "l'Europe politique est morte"⁵² -- and with the death of political Europe must also come the passing of the vision of a Europe of defence conceived as balancer of America, which is to say conceived as one mechanism for ushering in the bright new age of multipolarity.

Conclusion: Europe Is Dead, Long Live ESDP!

To say that Europe is not balancing against America, which has to mean that Huntingtonian nightmares of an "antihegemonic coalition" taking shape on the old continent will remain the stuff of dreams, is not to argue that the much-commented European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) must similarly reside outside the realm of conscious, objective, reality. Indeed, and paradoxical as it might seem, the Iraq war has made it more rather than less likely that something tangible will come out of the ESDP quest.

But, significantly, it will do so only if the process recaptures the spirit of Saint-Malo of late 1998, when Britain and France agreed to take some concrete measures to bolster the defence capabilities of the EU. For if in so many ways Germany is France's necessary partner when it comes to the EU's existential future, Britain is France's natural partner when it comes to endowing the EU with deployable military capability. The issue of defence spending aside (here France stands midway between Britain and Germany), the truth is that Paris and London see military realities in a more similar way

⁵² Michel Rocard, "Du bon usage d'une Europe sans âme," Le Monde, 28 November 2003, pp. 1, 17.

than either Paris and Berlin or London and Berlin see them, save for one issue: the question of multipolarity. And even on this issue, Berlin and London are closer together than Berlin and Paris, for the Germans not only show little inclination to spend for the purposes of balancing, they generally shy away from lauding the abstract notion of multipolarity, in favour of a stress upon the virtues of a different concept, "multilateralism."

Jolyon Howorth has recently argued that ESDP implies "a project to confer upon the EU the ability to take collective decisions relating to regional security and to deploy a range of instruments, including military instruments, in operations of crisis management, peacekeeping and, if necessary, peace-enforcement (preferably with a legal mandate), as a distinctive European contribution to the overall objectives of the Atlantic Alliance and in consultation with both European members of NATO and non-allied EU accession candidates."⁵³ In other words, if ESDP is to take shape, it must do so more as a complement to, rather than a balancer of, the Atlantic alliance and its American partner.

On the most recent evidence, this is what is happening. "Atlanticist" tendencies are not only carrying the debate within the EU of today, and will do so even more within the expanded EU of tomorrow, but even the French are coming round once more to the merits of ESDP à la Saint-Malo: that is, as a project embedded within NATO, albeit an increasingly Europeanized NATO, thus a project that can both deliver "autonomy" and preserve the alliance, so long as one does not probe too closely the supposed implications of autonomy. Britain's flirt with excessive closeness to America will be one

⁵³ Jolyon Howorth and John T. S. Keeler, eds., Defending Europe: The EU, NATO and the Quest for European Autonomy (New

casualty of the Iraq war, but so too will France's rhetorical sallies against the alliance and its supposed (to the French) objective correlative, "atlanticism."