CHAPTER ONE

THE GATHERING GLOOM

The events of the past decade have unfolded at a dizzying pace. It’s enough to make any analyst of international politics, shout “Stop the World, I Want to Get Off.” We know the events that have shaped American policy during the past ten years: defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, chaos in the Middle East (notably the collapse of the “Arab Spring”) and emergence of the Islamic State, the rise of China and deepening tensions in East Asia, the resurgence of Russia, Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and the Russo-Ukrainian war, and - of course - the great American financial meltdown in 2008, and the ensuing global economic crisis. The sheer volume and velocity of crisis and change in international politics during the past decade, - and the impact on the U.S. - has made it hard for analysts to put these events in perspective. As Buffalo Springfield famously sang, “there’s something happening here, what it is ain’t exactly clear.” Bringing clarity to these fast-paced events is one of my aims in this book.

The common thread linking these events is the decline of American power. In East Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, the U.S.-created post-World War II international order - the Pax Americana - which was bulwarked by the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1989-91, is withering. Resistance to U.S. dominance is growing at the same time America’s ability to maintain its leading role in international politics is beginning to weaken because the the U.S. gradually is losing its nearly century long grip as the global economy’s unchallenged leader. The gradual erosion of American preeminence is part of a bigger picture: the re-ordering of the international system caused by the shifting balance of world forces. The locus of global geopolitical and economic power is moving from the Euro-Atlantic world - where it has been located for 500
years - to East Asia. The relocation of the world’s geopolitical and economic centers of gravity heralds the end of the United States’ seventy-five year run of international political and economic supremacy. It also signifies the approaching end of five hundred years of Western dominance.

The central question of our time is how will this ongoing West-to-East power shift affect international politics, and the U.S., in the 21st century’s early decades? This is the question that After the Fall addresses. This book should be of obvious interest to two of my target audiences: scholars of international politics and strategic studies, and those who are students, analysts, and practitioners of American foreign policy. There is, however, a third - equally, if not more, important - audience that I want to engage: a readership of non-specialist, informed citizens who follow the big debates on public policy - domestic and foreign - and who care about our nation’s future. Why should they read a book that discusses seemingly abstract concepts - which I will define in this book - like hegemony, the balance of power, unipolarity, grand strategy, and power transitions?

The answer actually is simple: because these concepts are analytical tools to help answer real world questions of fundamental importance: What are the causes of war and peace in the international system? Will China’s rise be peaceful? Should the United States contain, or accommodate, a rising China? How do we determine and define America’s national interests? Who - which social forces and classes - shapes American foreign policy, and for what purposes? How do the policies - the grand strategy - intended to secure the U.S. from external threat affect the economic well being of American citizens? These are - or should be - issues of vital importance to all Americans, not just to members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment...

Even if they don’t study international politics for a living, many Americans intuitively
understand that big changes are happening in the world that will impact their lives, and those of
their children and grandchildren. With respect to the outside world, Americans don’t even need
to read the books on China’s rise that overflow from bookstore shelves. The only needed to
watch the Beijing Olympics in 2008 to get the message that China is ascending. Rapid economic
growth, futuristic infrastructure, and the bold architecture of Shanghai and Beijing testify to
China’s swelling national pride and vaulting ambitions. Every day seemingly brings new stories
about China’s use of its economic muscle to advance its geopolitical goals, its growing military
power, and its increasingly assertive policies - especially in the East and South China Seas.

At home, most Americans probably don’t pay a lot of attention to debates among
scholars, pundits, TV talking heads, and policymakers about whether the U.S. is in decline. Why
should they? They have just lived through the nation’s worst economic crisis since the 1930s.
Although, by some measures, things are improving - the unemployment rate is down and jobs are
being created - Americans know their nation. is still suffering a severe hangover from the Great
Recession. One does not need a magnifying glass to see what really is happening in the
economy. The “One Percent” are cleaning-up financially, but the picture for many Americans is
far less rosy. Even with the recovery, many Americans still are struggling to get back on their
feet, and rebuild the value of their net worth that was lost during the Great Recession. Others are
underemployed, have been compelled to take jobs that pay much less than the ones they lost at
the height of the Great Recession, or have simply opted out of the job market altogether. There
also are plenty of reasons for Americans to be gloomy about the United States’ long term
economic prospects: the hollowing out of the U.S. manufacturing sector; fears that jobs will be
outsourced to China, or India, or other “emerging market” countries; stagnant middle class
wages; great inequalities in the distribution of the nation’s wealth; and the intractable fiscal crisis. When they look to their political leaders for solutions, Americans have come to understand all too clearly that the grid-locked U.S. political system is incapable of addressing the nation’s problems.

Americans not only have a stake in the nation’s economic fortunes. They also are profoundly affected by events in the outside world, and the U.S. grand strategic response to them. Here, too storm clouds are building on the horizon. Even if they are not diplomatic historians or experts on international politics, Americans need to understand that in the 21st century, the possibility of great power war is very real. The centenary commemoration of the Great War of 1914-1918 is a stark reminder of this. In many ways, the era leading up to the outbreak of World War I bears uncanny similarities to the present. Then, as now, there was a widespread belief that - because of globalization, technology, and increased international cooperation - great power war was a thing of the past. As Charles Emerson observes:

In 1913, our world was alive and kicking. Globalization, which is often casually assumed to be a phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century, was well underway in 1913 - indeed, in some respects one might argue that global integration was more advanced then than it is today. The ideas of global society or a world ordered by international law were commonplace in the year before the Great War even if its institutions were less well-
Europeans alive at the time, of course, had little inking of the catastrophe that lurked just around the corner. For them, Emerson notes, “1913 was a year of possibility not predestination.” In our own time, the memory of 1914 has served as a wake-up call - at least in some quarters.

Increasingly, an ascending China is being compared to Wilhelmine Germany, and the deepening Sino-American rivalry is being analogized to the pre-World War I Anglo-German antagonism. Although some of these comparisons are overblown, others are not. As I will demonstrate, there are both obvious, and less obvious parallels between our world and the world that plunged into the abyss in 1914. And, as we shall see, it is perhaps the less obvious ones that should worry us the most.

A good path into the issues this book engages is to rewind to the Cold War’s end, which in many ways is where our “1913" began. The Soviet collapse was seen as an epic - transformative - geopolitical and ideational victory for the United States (or, at least, so it has been interpreted by the American foreign policy establishment). With the Soviet Union tossed into the rubbish bin of history, the (supposedly) two superpower -“bipolar” - international system that had emerged after 1945 gave way to the “unipolar moment.” Unipolarity is the term that came into vogue in the early 1990s among international relations (IR) scholars, and foreign


2 Emerson, *1913*, p. xiii.

3 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*

4 Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*
policy pundits, to highlight the dramatic change in international politics wrought by the Soviet Union’s implosion. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States - “the sole remaining superpower” as U.S. officials never tired of saying - was left, in Frank Sinatra’s words, as “king of the hill, top of heap” in the international political system. In other words, the United States was what (IR) scholars call a hegemon - the dominant state in the international political system. Indeed, in some quarters the United States’ vanquishing of the Soviet Union (if that is what it really was) heralded the “end of history” - an epoch in which no further geopolitical or ideological challenges to the supremacy of America’s power or its liberal ideas could emerge from any quarter of the globe. Simply put, many U.S. foreign policy commentators believed that the Cold War’s end heralded the start of a long era of peace based on the spread of democracy, globalization, and international institutions - backstopped, of course, by the United States’s hard (military) power.

The conventional wisdom among IR scholars - and even more so among the U.S. foreign policy elite - was that America’s unipolar “moment” would be infinite rather than transitory - a never ending “moment” of U.S. geopolitical supremacy. And, for sure, beginning with President George H. W. Bush, the overriding grand strategic aim of every post-Cold War U.S. administration has been to preserve American primacy (also called hegemony, primacy, dominance, or preponderance). From the Cold War’s end well into the first decade of the 21st century

5 Francis Fukuyama, The End of History

6 For example, the George H. W. Bush administration’s draft Defense Planning Guidance for fiscal years 1994-99 stated that the United States “must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” “Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: ‘Prevent the Re-emergence of a New Rival’,” New York Times, March 8, 1992; Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” New
century, important books and articles routinely described the United States as most powerful international actor since the Roman Empire. Seized with their own dreams of imperial glory, neoconservative pundits actively plumped for the creation of a “new” American empire. It is easy to explain why the foreign policy establishment subscribed to this intoxicating vision of post-Cold War American omnipotence. After all, at the start of the millennium, the United States was, by any measure, the most powerful state in the international system. So powerful, indeed, that it was taken for granted that it would be a long time - if ever - before any new power could emerge to challenge American primacy. The U.S. wielded overwhelming military power. Economically, the U.S. was the acknowledged manager of the international economic and financial systems. As such, it was charged with the responsibility of preventing crises like that of the late 1920s and 1930s from unhinging the global economy.

That was then. This is now. In just a short time, the world has been turned upside down. During the past decade, it is the limits - not the extent - of American power that increasingly have become obvious. Geopolitically, everywhere one looks events reinforce the perception of diminished American power and influence. The neoconservatives’ imperial aspirations died in the Hindu Kish and the desert of Mesopotamia, where the United States has fought losing - and ill-conceived - wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. America’s failed military adventure in Iraq created

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7 For an overview of the arguments for and against an American empire, see Christopher Layne and Bradley Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
the conditions that allowed the Islamic State to emerge. The ripple effects of the so-called Arab Spring - including the Syrian civil war and Libya’s descent into chaos - have exposed how little influence Washington actually has in shaping events in the Middle East, a region long considered to be of cardinal interest to the United States. U.S. relations with Europe - which never really fully recovered from transatlantic disagreements about the George W. Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq - were damaged by revelations that the National Security Agency was conducting a massive intelligence gathering campaign against the leading European states - the highlight (or low light) of which was the disclosure that the United States had tapped German Chancellor Angel Merkel’s cell phone. And it certainly didn’t help when the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European affairs dropped an “F-bomb” on the European Union during the upheaval in Ukraine. The U.S. was powerless either to stop Moscow from occupying Crimea, or to make Russia pay a meaningful price for doing so - much less to compel Moscow to disgorge Crimea. The Ukraine crisis also has reemphasized the drifting apart of the U.S. and the Europe. The U.S. relationship with Germany - Europe’s leading power - is of special concern. Anti-Americanism, long confined to Germany’s political left, now is establishing a foothold in among the respectable political right. As Norbert Rottgen, chair of the Bundestag’s foreign affairs committee recently said, various U.S. actions “have created a toxic mistrust and fueled anti-Americanism in Germany.” Quoted in “Ami Go Home,” Economist, February 7, 2015, p 51.

In perhaps the most portentous example of eroding U.S. ability to affect international outcomes, in October 2013 wrangling with Congress over the federal government shut-down forced President Barack Obama to cancel his trip to East and Southeast Asia. This undermined

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Washington’s efforts to bolster the credibility of its Asian “pivot” strategy, and left the
diplomatic running to Chinese President Xi Jinping. That was a self-inflicted wound to U.S.
grand strategy. But deeper historical forces are also at work. In contrast to the sunnily optimistic
turn-of-the 21st century belief that no state could challenge America’s geopolitical and economic
dominance, the U.S. foreign policy establishment began belatedly waking up to the realization
that since 9/11 - while America’s strategic focus shifted to Afghanistan and Iraq - a rapidly
ascending China has been doing exactly that.

On the economic side, the Great Recession turned the U.S. global economic role its head.
Rather than rescuing the international economy from the tailspin that menaced global prosperity,
the United States caused it. The U.S. then watched from the sidelines as China (and to a lesser
extent the emerging market nations) provided the stimulus that staved-off a global economic
free-fall. The financial crash and the Great Recession were an economic wake-up call for the
U.S. For a variety of reasons the indicators of U.S. decline over the past forty years went
unheaded by the foreign policy establishment, which pollyannaishly insists that the United States
is not in relative decline.

The United States has entered a new age of fiscal constraint. No longer can America
have it all. One result of the fiscal crisis and economic meltdown has been to spur a contentious
debate about national priorities, specifically about striking the right the federal spending balance
between “guns” versus “butter” - that is between military spending versus domestic spending.
The budget sequester that went into effect in March 2013 sent a strong message that even many
pro-military Republicans are willing to sacrifice the defense budget in pursuit of fiscal austerity.
And this is just the bow-wave. Over the next decade, as the Baby Boomer generation retires, the
cost of Medicare and Social Security will skyrocket, and the guns versus butter trade-offs will become even more acute. U.S. grand strategic options will be correspondingly narrowed. Indeed, they already are being constricted. Economic malaise and fiscal stringency have been or drivers of the Obama administration’s decisions to: disengage from Iraq and Afghanistan, “lead from behind” in Libya, avoid military intervention in Syria, limit the U.S. role in the battle against the Islamic State, and shrink the U.S. army to its smallest size since 1940.

There is, of course, a lively conversation about the meaning of the past decade’s geopolitical and economic events. It is fashionable in Republican and neo-conservative circles to deny that U.S. power has atrophied. Instead, it is claimed that President Barack Obama’s foreign policy stewardship has been inept. Under President Obama, it is said, geopolitical turmoil and setbacks abroad are the result of the president’s allegedly weak, vacillating, and dithering foreign policy. Specifically, this narrative holds Mr. Obama guilty for: not intervening in the Syrian civil war, for withdrawing U.S. forces prematurely from Iraq and Afghanistan, being too soft on Iran; and supinely rolling over in the face of alleged Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine. There is another narrative, however. And it is one that is much closer to the truth, and which illustrates the dilemmas confronting the U.S. as it attempts to confront the changing geopolitical chessboard of the early 21st century.

President Obama has been an enigmatic grand strategist - trapped between his own intuitive sights about America’s shifting strategic and economic fortunes - and a foreign policy establishment discourse holding either that there are no deterministic, macro-historical forces operating to diminish U.S. power - or, if there are, these can be overcome by the exercise of American willpower and resolve. President Obama has been stuck in a posture of terminal
ambivalence on the question of whether U.S. leverage and influence on world politics is declining. On the one hand, he has pointed out - rightly - that America is unable to control most of the headline geopolitical turmoil in the world. Recognizing the fiscal and economic constraints on U.S. power - and loathe to throw good money after bad - he sought to disengage the United States from the quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Obama administration’s 2015 *National Security Strategy* warns against “over-reach” and states that the United States cannot - and should not - “attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world. As powerful as we are and will remain, our resources and influence are not infinite. And in a complex world, many of the security problems we face do not lend themselves to quick and easy fixes... we have to make hard choices among many competing priorities...”

At the same time, in a jarring disconnect, President Obama has strongly denied that the U.S. is in relative decline. And, even as it highlights limits on U.S. power, his administration’s 2015 *National Security Strategy*, contains over 100 references to “American leadership” (the code word for U.S. hegemony) in a twenty nine page document - a document that specifies a laundry list of what the administration - and the foreign policy establishment generally - believe to be U.S. strategic, diplomatic, and economic global responsibilities. While on one hand he talks about the the limits of U.S. power, on the other hand President Obama (again invoking a tried and true foreign policy establishment trope), suggests that any scaling back of America’s overseas commitments would be a return to “isolationism.” When it comes to pinpointing what President Obama really thinks about America’s power trajectory - and about its

9 National Security Strategy (2015)

10 TBA - Quote from Obama January 2014 State of the Union.
proper world role - he seems like a contestant in an early 21st grand strategic remake of the 1950s/1960s quiz show, “What’s My Line?”: Will the real Barack Obama please stand up? By not doing so, he forfeited the opportunity to fundamentally recast U.S. grand strategy. His successor more likely than not will adhere to foreign policy establishment’s the old think assumptions - increasingly discrepant with the actual power balance in international politics - that have guided American grand strategy since 1945.

Although After the Fall is not a book about the Obama administration’s foreign policy, the administration was in office during a time of geopolitical and economic flux. As such, it had to confront - even if only in an inchoate fashion - the issue American grand strategic readjustment. The administration had to grapple with the three questions that are at the heart of this book.

First, what is the trajectory of U.S. power? Can American primacy and unipolarity be perpetuated? Or, is the era of U.S. dominance that began during World War II - what the historian Michael Hunt calls the “American Ascendancy” - coming to an end? Does it matter whether the international system is unipolar. Just about everyone in the U.S. foreign policy establishment believes so, and that unipolarity is a good thing for the United States. Are they correct? And even if they are, how long will it last - and at what costs (and risks) to the U.S. of attempting to perpetuate it? This is another way of asking whether the United States in relative decline That is, is the United States losing ground economically and/or geopolitically to new

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12 Brooks & Wohlforth, World Out of Balance; Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan; BIW article in International Security
rising great powers (like China and India), and resurgent old ones (like Russia)? How can we tell? What are the key metrics of decline? If the U.S. is declining, what are the causes of its waning power? Is continuing decline inevitable, or can it be arrested or even reversed? If the U.S. is in relative decline, what becomes of the Pax Americana? If U.S. decline weakens the foundations of military and economic power upon which the Pax Americana rested - and still does - can it survive? What becomes of its security architecture, its institutions, and the “globalized” international economic and financial systems to which it gave birth?

Second, how will the Sino-American relationship play-out over the next several decades? Because of its stunningly rapid emergence as a great power, China is the poster child of the West to East power shift. Will China’s rise, as Beijing contends, be peaceful? Diplomatic historians and scholars of international politics have devoted a great deal of time and effort to studying the geopolitical dynamics - which they call power transitions - that occur when an ascending power like China challenges the position of an established hegemon like the United States. Does China’s great power emergence herald an impending power transition in international politics during the next couple of decades - either globally, or regionally in East Asia - and, if so, what are likely to be its consequences?

Finally, what should be American grand strategy as we move forward in the 21st century’s coming decades? Should the U.S. respond to China’s great power ascent with a strategy of containment, or a policy of accommodation? If the relative decline of U.S. power foreshadows the end of both of America’s unipolar moment and the Pax Americana, what grand strategic options does the United States have for adjusting to a world no longer shaped by dominant American power? Will changing geopolitical realities, and domestic fiscal and economic
constraints, require the U.S. to adopt a strategy of retrenchment by scaling-back the role of security guarantor that it heretofore has played in the post-1945 international political system? Going forward, will domestic considerations - political culture, national identity, elite interests - impede or facilitate American strategic adjustment?

Grand strategy is not just about military power and geopolitics. It encompasses all aspects of a state’s power - most especially the economy. And here crucial questions arise about the economic dimensions of American grand strategy. At least since the end of World War II, the need to provide a permissive security environment for America’s preferred policies of international economic openness and globalization has been the primary driver of U.S. military commitments in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf/Middle East. Does the U.S. still benefit from the open international order based on free trade and financial globalization that it has fostered since 1945? Or has “globalization” served to fuel the emergence of geopolitical - and economic - challengers to the U.S.? Questions of grand strategy also have crucial domestic implications, because rather than being tightly compartmentalized, foreign and domestic policy overlap. Do these policies of openness and globalization still work to the advantage of most Americans, or do they affect them adversely - especially in their pocket books where it hurts the most? Stated bluntly, although the grand strategic preferences of the U.S. foreign policy establishment advance the economic interests of the “One Percent,” it is far from clear that benefit America as a whole.

In answering these questions, my starting point is that the United States is no more immune from decline than were Imperial Rome and the British Empire. This isn’t a popular argument with the U.S. foreign policy establishment, which is divided into three camps on the
question of decline. One camp is composed of the “Wise Monkeys” who “see no decline, speak no decline, and hear no decline.” The second camp are the Ostriches who bury their collective heads in the sand and simply deny the U.S. is declining. These denialists believe that the United States is destined to remain Number One for a very long time - if not, indeed, forever. The third camp mimics Alfred E. Neuman - the cover boy of *Mad* magazine - whose motto is: “What, me worry?” This group advances what amounts to a theory of “painless decline” - or, as I call it, a theory of Zombie Hegemony. They - very reluctantly - concede the possibility that U.S. military and economic power will atrophy over the next several decades. Nevertheless, they say, the United States can ensure the survival of the post-1945 international order, the *Pax Americana*, by acting now to “lock-in” its rules, institutions, and norms.\(^\text{13}\)

In *After the Fall*, I reject the Panglossian views of the denialists. My argument is simple: U.S. decline is real and irreversible, and is the result of the big, impersonal forces of history - exacerbated by some bad American policy decisions. American policy elites believe in the myth of American exceptionalism. As they see the world, history is something that happens

\(^{13}\) Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012; *World Politics* - Special Issue on UP; BIW article in *International Security*. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth occupy an important place in the denialist literature. At first blush, *World Out of Balance* would seem to place them in the Ostrich camp. At the beginning of the book - without specifying what this means in terms of the number of years, they contend that American primacy in a unipolar world will last for a very long time. In their conclusion, however, they hedge considerably by suggesting that American hegemony is only likely to last for another two decades. Thus, the say, the United States has a “twenty years’ opportunity” to recast the international system in ways that will bolster the legitimacy of its power and advance its security interests. Here is the first hint of their switch to the Alfred E. Neuman camp. This change in their analysis was consummated in their 2012 *International Security* article co-authored with G. John Ikenberry. In that article, they embrace Ikenberry’s theory of painless decline.
to other states - not to the U.S.; that is, rather than being the object of history, America shapes history. Similarly, they think that decline happens to other great powers but not to the United States. These are dangerous illusions upon which to base U.S. grand strategy going forward.

In *After the Fall*, I demonstrate that the U.S. foreign policy establishment’s fundamental policy assumptions are wrong. Contrary to the post-Cold War euphoria, history is not over. Rather, along with great power politics, it is back with a vengeance. The geopolitics of the early 21st century will have a very familiar look. With the ascent of powerful new states - especially China - the curtain is fast coming down on America’s unipolar moment, and great power politics is staging a comeback as the hallmark of international relations. To explain the geopolitical transformation that is reshaping the 21st century international system, I develop a theory of hegemonic instability. This theory builds upon both upon the history of great power politics since the beginning of the modern international state system (circa 1500), and on realist theories of international relations. The history of international politics - especially that concerning the relations of great powers - has very definite patterns and regularities. Mark Twain said that while history does not repeat itself, it rhymes. Thus, history is important because understanding the past can help us to think clearly about the future. “The present does not replicate the past,” observe the diplomatic historians Michael Hunt and Steven I. Levine, “but historical parallels can provide fresh ways of understanding and dealing with current challenges.”14 In this respect, history reminds us that we are not sailing on uncharted geopolitical waters in the early 21st century.

Hegemonic instability theory shows why hegemonic systems - including the post-Cold War unipolar system - are volatile and transient. The history of great power politics is characterized by two cyclical tendencies. One is the established pattern of successive attempts by the leading great powers to gain hegemony - dominance - of the international system. Invariably, these aspiring hegemons have been thwarted in their ambition by the resistance of the other great powers. Second, the rise and fall of great powers is a regular occurrence in international politics. The great power league standings fluctuate over time; some great powers gain relative power while others lose it. By the same token, however, just as some great powers decline and fall, every so often new great powers burst onto the scene as the U.S., Germany, and Japan did more or less simultaneously in the late 19th Century. When new great powers enter the international system, geopolitical turbulence is the result. This is why the rise of China is so fraught.

In the early 21st century, the two drivers of geopolitical change are China’s astonishingly swift great power rise, and the relative decline of American power (which is the flip side of China’s rise). In addition to China, there are several other key causes of U.S. decline: American strategic overstretch; the progressive erosion of U.S. economic power over the past four decades; and the lengthening shadow of America’s long-term fiscal crisis. Taken together, China’s ascent and U.S. relative decline will have a huge impact on international politics. First, the Alfred E. Neuman camp notwithstanding, American decline will not be painless. The erosion of its hard power underpinnings means the era of the Pax Americana is drawing to a close. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously observed that there are no second acts in American lives. Similarly, there are no second lives for declining international orders. There is no “Night of the Living Dead” for declining hegemons and the international orders they created. American primacy will not have a
second life in a zombie-like incarnation. The *Pax Americana* will be replaced by a new international order, the outlines of which already are visible.

It is important to state my argument with precision. First, I do not contest the point that - taking a freeze-frame view of the balance of power - the United States today still enjoys clear-cut military dominance over China (and any other potential rivals). But grand strategists must think dynamically not statically: the important question is not what the balance of power is today, but it what it will be when we fast-forward ten, fifteen or twenty years down the road. In other words, it is not today’s snap-shot picture of the power equation between the U.S. and China that counts. What matters is the trend lines, and these do not look good for the U.S. Put another way, I do not claim that the curtain *already* has fallen on the “unipolar moment” and with it the *Pax Americana*. However, the curtain is in the process being lowered - and pretty quickly so. As they say, the opera isn’t over until the fat lady sings. While she hasn’t sung yet, she is warming up her voice and waiting in the wings.\(^\text{15}\) Second, although the U.S. indeed is in relative decline, this is not a Chicken Little moment. The United States is not experiencing an uncontrollable downward spiral either geopolitically or economically. The trajectory of U.S. decline is shallow not steep, and unless American policymakers mess-up big time, the U.S. is not going to plunge rapidly in the great power standings the way (once-) Great Britain did following World War II. Still even if U.S. decline is managed skillfully, America’s ability to shape and influence strategic and economic outcomes in the international system will be diminished greatly.

\(^{15}\) Of course as the Los Angeles Dodgers Hall of Fame broadcaster Vin Scully once observed, the fat lady never sings at Coors Field (home of the Colorado Rockies), which is a hitters haven where no lead is ever safe - because of its mile high altitude and the vast expanse of its outfield. There is no analogue to Coors Field in great power politics, however.
Finally, I reject the arguments - popular in the U.S. foreign policy establishment that China’s rise will be derailed by its various domestic problems, and/or that its economy is so riddled with fundamental weaknesses that it will be unable to overtake the U.S.\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, Beijing faces serious domestic challenges - just as the U.S. does.\textsuperscript{17} But these arguments miss the mark. The United States must not allow its exceptionalist mythology, or ingrained notions of the West’s allegedly inherent civilizational superiority, to blind it to the reality - and implications - of China’s rise. At the same time, I do not claim that China will rule the world - certainly not anytime soon.\textsuperscript{18} But for sure a rising China will change the world.

Since 1945, the U.S. has followed a grand strategy of preponderance - or primacy. Today, however, we are at a turning point. Primacy - which some foreign policy analysts recently have re-christened as “deep engagement” - is fast becoming unsustainable, unaffordable, and dangerous. Facing fiscal and economic constraints, and the possibility of an explosive rivalry with China, the U.S. needs to adopt a new grand strategy that is more suitable for the conditions of the early 21st century than is the current strategy of preponderance. Offshore balancing should be America’s next grand strategy. Unlike deep engagement, it is a strategy of restraint that


\textsuperscript{17} For a good discussion of some of the domestic challenges facing the U.S., see Paul Taylor, \textit{The Next America} (2014).

learns from the mistakes of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The United States has far less power to shape the world than U.S. policymakers believe. As an offshore balancer, the United States would seek to accommodate China’s rise rather than trying to contain it. Finally, rather than embarking of futile foreign policy crusades driven by perceived need to export U.S. values, offshore balancing would be based on a hard-headed calculation of U.S. strategic interests.

It is one thing, however, to say that the impending shift in the balance of power and U.S. fiscal and economic difficulties necessitate U.S. strategic adjustment. It is something else to be confident that the United States actually will be able to pull this off. The U.S. foreign policy establishment’s worldview is wedded to strategies of dominance, and to American “leadership” in international affairs. Before America’s grand strategy can change, the way in which the U.S. foreign policy elite establishment thinks about the nation’s relationship with the world will need to change. I hope this book will stimulate debate about strategic adjustment, and help bring about that change.