In his introduction Dr. Wohlforth noted that an air of crisis exists in some international relations circles as well as a belief that changes were occurring in the international system. All of this is happening in an era of dwindling resources and with an apparent limited number of solutions. Much of this unease is being tied to the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world. Dr. Wohlforth considers such concepts as \textit{bunk}, \textit{balderdash}, or \textit{piffle}.

This talk pushes back against the idea that there is a big shift going on in international relations requiring big changes to and the rethinking of the basics of government activities.

- Basis question: Does US Grand Strategy need to change?
- Basic answer: NO!

**Point #1**: the international system is still unipolar
- It is not likely to shift for decades
- The US will continue to have the ability to make things happen
- US can’t be compelled to make unwanted changes in policy planning

**Point #2**: the benefits of unipolarity are still good for the US

**Point #3**: the situations presented by unipolarity are not the major challenges

**Point #4**: maintaining a unipolar world is not particularly costly to the US when compared to situations in the past

**Point #5**: an activist leadership Grand Strategy (as discussed by Walter Russell Mead in last month’s Rethinking Seminar) is best for the US in the long run

**Point #6**: domestic issues are the biggest problems for the US

Must begin by defining terms:
- Unipolarity – 99% don’t understand the definition
  - Polarity – how usable capabilities are when compared to others with similar capabilities
  - Capabilities may be clustered among countries
Those with the most capabilities are those that can make change happen
Only a short list of Great Powers can make change happen at all
How these capabilities are distributed among the Great Powers determines the polarity of the world
Today, only 1 state is far above all the rest in so many capabilities

Graph above shows a very simplistic but indicative view of international relations
- The Great Power that has such across the board capabilities is still not omnipotent
  - It does not always get what it wants
  - It can’t always do what it wants
- But it is the only one that can bring together the others
- Not something that developed overnight – result of many years of investment
- Also shows that no other near-peer will be approaching anytime soon
- US should also not be compared to the Romans or any other peer-less leaders of the past

Bipolarity means that there were two Superpowers in the world
- In 1950 two Powers were so far above the others that together they influenced the world
- See chart below

Multipolarity means that there are no Superpowers in the world
- A world of peers with many Great Powers
- This was the general state of international relations until the end of World War II
  - Some might have great navies
  - Some might have great land forces
- In 1870 no one or two countries stood out above the rest
- See chart below
Bipolarity—Two Superpowers

Distribution (percentage) of GNP and Military Spending, 1950

Multipolarity: no superpowers, many great powers

Distribution (percentage) of GDP and Military Spending, 1870

Question: How long will it take us to get back to a world like viewgraph #3?
Answer: A very long time
However, history is not frozen
- China is rising
- Much more must happen before there are big changes in the world
A graph of the US economy as a percentage of the world GDP would show wide swings over the last 50 years

- But is going from about 25% in 1948 to about 20% in 2008 really that big a change?
  - Answer depends on exactly what the question being asked is
- US has been in some kind of crisis for most of the last 50 years
  - Kennedy ran for president on the missile gap
  - Cuban missile crisis threatened to bring on a major war
  - Kissinger said the US was in decline and soon would be hunkering down alone
  - Much of the US felt it was in decline after Vietnam
  - Nixon and Kissinger saw a multipolar world coming
  - Initially, few commentators believed in Reagan’s “morning in America” optimism
  - In the 1980s Japan was seen as the rising Asian power which could not be stopped

- But: real changes in the world take much longer to happen
  - Real problems did occur and current problems should be handled with concern
- Big problem was that people saw a problem then extrapolated it into the future
  - And then ran it back to the present day
  - Basically, an over-interpretation of the importance of these problem events
    - Same thing happening now
    - A trend is not the same thing as a real situation
- We’ve been here before – with Japan in the 1990s
  - Japan looked closer to becoming a peer then than China does today
  - This is not a prediction that China will be going through 20 years of stagnation like Japan did

**Point #1 Bottomline:** it will take a very long time to go from a uni- to a multi-polar world
- China’s growth is moving us toward a bipolar, not a multipolar world
- Could only become multipolar if India and Brazil suddenly started doing much better

**Point #2 Bottomline:** the discussion about a need for a new Grand Strategy is premature
- Some issues do need to be discussed and addressed
- Not a crisis

**Point #3:** the situation as it exists today continues to provide benefits to the US
- Problem: we only see today’s problems, not benefits
- Some pretty bad things are not happening today because of unipolarity
- What we don’t see today:
  - Direct military rivalries between Great Powers
  - Hegemonic rivalry activities – neither direct nor through proxies
  - Great Powers throwing their major capabilities at each other
  - An arms race involving quantities or quality of major weapons systems
- While some of the above does happen today, it is not at the levels seen in the past

International balancing in the classic sense occurred when Britain played at the top of its game
- Even then Britain continually faced potential peers who were just short of it taking on
  - In the 18th Century Britain ruled the waves but France had the major land force
France was always just a few years of good government and good revenues away from building a navy capable of attacking Britain. But then there would be another war. France kept intervening (Caribbean, North America, etc.) where insurgents could not have fought the British without French help.

- Great Powers simply do not go after each other now the way they used to.
  - 19th Century: the Russian Empire tried to move toward Britain’s India.
  - 20th Century: the Germans tried to take over Europe twice.

The Cold War shows the high costs of a bipolar world:
- The two sides were constantly developing symmetrical capabilities to confront those of the other side.
  - US had to continually invest in making improvements to its capabilities.
- Since the Soviets tried to use so many Third World proxies, the US had to get involved all over the world.
- The nuclear arms race was especially costly.
- Both sides ran the risks of various crises getting out of hand.
- Peer rivalry was a serious and costly situation.

Now the US faces asymmetrical threats because no country can face off against it with symmetrical forces:
- If you think today’s asymmetrical costs are bad, think back to the costs of the symmetrical Cold War.
- There is a counter-balancing effort going on – but the activity is not as frantic as when the sides were better balanced.
- Read what Russian commentators are now saying:
  - If they had a $12 Trillion economy, they would be competing with the US.
  - Might not be as bad as what went on during the Cold War but bad enough.
  - The only reason that they are not challenging the US is because they recognize they can’t really reach the US.
    - Result: they don’t take the costly steps that would move them toward confrontation.

Point #3: Bottomline: We get all of these benefits because the world is unipolar.

Point #4: Maintaining a unipolar world is not that costly to the US:
- If the US could only maintain unipolarity with huge expenditures, then it would not be worth it.
  - That is not the situation now.
- A one-Superpower world did not happen because the US tried to build it by expanding its commitments.
  - Resulted from the collapse of the USSR.
- Costs are lower:
  - US defense costs in the Cold War ran about 7-10% of GDP.
  - Now defense costs are about 4-5% of GDP.
- Must also consider the cost of such things as the number of Americans lost in Vietnam and the collateral damage to other peoples.
  - Not nearly as great in Iraq and Afghanistan now as in past wars.
• Costs required in assorted Cold War interventions also should be considered
  - Crises happened over Berlin, Cuba, Yom Kippur War, and even a 1982 exercise that frightened the Soviets nearly into a response
  - Crises kept raising possibility of developing situations that could lead to global thermal nuclear war
• Since the Cold War costs have not been as high
  - Not the size of deployed forces / not death toll / not percent of GDP

Point #4 Bottomline: in the unipolar world there is less need for dramatic new commitments
• Some policy decisions that got headlines were not done to support unipolarity
• Example: Iraq was not invaded to support unipolarity
• Even if the decision had been made to just constrain Saddam, the US did not have to do it

Some commentators say that unipolarity is self-defeating
• Without a peer there is nothing to induce constraint
• Result: the unipolar state over commits itself and eventually fails
• Such a view rejects history
  - Having a peer rival may not force but it can push
  - Example: a peer rivalry pushed the US into Vietnam
• US could choose a different Grand Strategy
  - Nothing is forcing the US into an activist Grand Strategy

Point #5: a unipolar strategy is probably best for the US
• Some argue that scaling back US commitments is a good idea
  - Because the US is the unipolar leader, it can pull back a little
• US is better off in this unipolar world

An activist Grand Strategy would involve:
• A wide-spread alliance system with numerous security guarantees
• Building leverage over allies to be able to persuade them away from dangerous paths
• Build security guarantees to help reduce regional rivalries
  - Classic example: US/Japan security arrangement that dissuades Japan from rearming causing an Asian arms race
• Trying to encourage global responses to issues such as nuclear proliferation or terrorism
• Being engaged in many international institutions

An activist Grand Strategy would have benefits for the US
• Could slow the drift toward a more dangerous bi-polar world
• Would reduce the need for others to ramp up their military capabilities, especially nuclear
• By increased engagement could slow down other more frightening rivalries

While an activist Grand Strategy can foster some problems for the US, some global issues require an activist strategy – proliferation, global warming, etc.
• US leverage comes in part from an activist Grand Strategy
• Restraint would not provide that leverage

US has been writing new international law during its unipolarity
• What is created today may well outlast the unipolar world
• Example: the British pound sterling remained the world’s reserve currency for at least 50 years after the US economy had surpassed the British economy

Point #5 Bottomline: an activist Grand Strategy will better serve the US

Point #6: To maintain this unipolar world the US must look to its domestic policies
• US got to where it is because of its domestic decisions
• China is rising today because of the domestic decisions made 20 years ago
  o Involves how they are putting together their society
  o Now lifting millions of people out of poverty
• US cannot balance its budget because of its domestic policies, not its international commitments
  o Basic problem: the current domestic system is incapable of making decisions that would lead to adequate funding for the government
  o Strains on the military may come 70-80% from domestic decisions
• US must get its domestic house in order
• The domestic problems may be the worst problem under unipolarity
• An absence of a peer rival eliminates the potential binding force that was evident during the Cold War, or other previous wars
  o There was some slightly better level of bipartisanship evident then

Point #6 Bottomline: Domestic problems may be the hole in the donut of unipolarity

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Metrics
Defense spending is only a measure of the scale of the capabilities of the military
• Only a quick way to show differences in scale
• Huge portion of the Defense budget is really human capital costs
  o US proportion of such costs is probably at a higher percentage than for other countries
• There could be trade-offs between what is spent on defense and what is spent on education or other domestic needs, but:
  o Some funds could be saved by severely cutting back on overseas commitments
  o What would be saved would be very small compared to the national debt
• Bottomline: decisions must be made related to domestic policies to find real savings

Perceptions of the degree of challenges to the US
• Perceptions do matter greatly in politics and policy-making
  o People act on what they think is going on
  o Look at the conversation of the elite in Russia now
  o China’s elite are saying the same sort of thing
• We often conflate unipolarity with unilateralism which is wrong to do
• No one can say that there are any near-peers for the US really
• Could say that there might be near-peers in the distant future
• Must not over-interpret global power shifts
• We should be optimistic generally about the future for the US
  o Tonight’s audience members are largely engaged with very difficult challenges
  o Hard for individuals to believe that there challenges aren’t as difficult when compared to the past
• The 9/11 attacks on the homeland were more jarring than anything in the Cold War, but:
  o Still not as big as you might think
  o Need to step back and look at the whole picture
• Overall, Great Power commitments are very low today and that is a good thing
Are we measuring the right things?
- Look at the Great Powers and the capabilities for doing things to each other
  - Must compare capabilities across Great Powers at a given time
  - Once it was wooden ships, then dreadnought, then armies, etc.
- But some would say we need to look at different things today – non-state actors, etc.
  - Measuring Great Powers may not be the right metric when thinking about Iraq or Afghanistan
  - Great Power thinking may have mislead the US into wrong decisions in Vietnam and mislead British decisions in the Boer War
  - High-end capability Great Power forces always have problems with insurgencies
- Policy does matter in Great Powers relations, but…
  - Often it is a matter of the dog that does not bark
  - Policies and decisions may not always be relevant to other situations

Uses of nuclear weapons
- Standard view is that nuclear weapons are good for deterrence
  - Good to have for a country’s existential security
  - Adversaries will see nuclear weapons as a self-negating protection from them
  - Must have a secure second strike capability
    - This will have an impact on polarity
    - Impact not as strong as would be direct attacks among Great Powers
- If you move beyond discussing security for defense of the homeland or from occupation, then the value of nuclear weapons would be uncertain
  - At the end of the Cold War, there was a drop off in study of proliferation
  - More study needed now
    - What if Iran gets a nuclear weapon that is vulnerable to a first strike?
    - Possibly no one might attack Iran but what if the nuclear capability could be eliminated?
  - Increased interest in proliferation studies could come back if a new bi- or multi-polar world emerged

Space and cyberspace
- There is a problem of comparing such attacks to traditional attacks
  - Risk of attacks that could be more devastating than nuclear attacks
- We cannot estimate how close we really were to nuclear war in the Cold War
  - We know that leaders did take risks, especially to maintain the credibility of their nuclear forces
  - Threats to civil liberties were also a problem in the early Cold War
- From an Ivory Tower / academic perspective, the Cold War was more dangerous
  - No scenario exists in which an al-Qaeda could come up with a way to end US political existence
  - But also Dr. Wohlforth admitted to lacking expertise required to determine what the threat is from space / cyber attacks, especially given our internet dependence
- Must look at all of a nation’s capabilities – if we do the US is still in good shape
  - But if you look as specific individual problems, you can see the vulnerabilities
An apolar world?
- It should be feared – something with no Grand Strategy anywhere
- Might be more frightening than a multipolar world
- Russia is actually doing better today than it was in the 1990s when it had no effective government
  - May not be a good government but it does govern
  - Despite all of its problems
- Even China is “well-governed” even if not democratically so
  - But it has many domestic challenges
  - China has no big desire to take on world responsibilities at this time

Grand Strategy
The more you know about how policy is made, the more likely you are to think that only Bismarck had a Grand Strategy
- Grand Strategy can be at various levels of activism
- There are inducements to activism
- The future is always a guess / a bet on a policy
  - Changes may come from a conscious policy-making effort
  - Changes may come from only reacting to crises
- Generally, policy-makers believe that it is better for the US to be involved rather than not to be involved
  - US may not always win (See: Chicago Olympics bid)
  - US should always fear of getting involved in wars with little real value – really only a bet on the future
- At the margins, having leverage is better than not having it
  - May only be an informed bet
  - Not just being pushed into a policy

Problem of pressure is true everywhere for every Great Power
- In London there is, and has usually been, a feeling of being pressed
  - There is always an issue of inadequate resources
  - All through history there has been an issue of power going up and down
  - When the Britain had 50-60% of the world’s industrial economy, it was in much the same position as the US was at the end of World War II
    - When substantial resources and power were available, then it was a matter of “What should we build next?”
    - Leadership position provided potential of taking advantage of opportunities, but possibly only for short periods
- We cannot expect the US to have such opportunities for long
  - It is good to have conversations about the challenges such as failing education systems
  - The US needs discussions on domestic policies that might lead to taking actions on domestic challenges