

**Entrapment Revisited:  
Strategic and Structural Dynamics**

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**Introduction**

States form alliances to pool resources in the face of a common threat.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, however, when and why are great powers vulnerable to entrapment into potentially-costly foreign adventures by their allies? Scholars increasingly disagree. For much of the Cold War and post-Cold War era, policymakers and analysts – particularly those working with various versions of balance of power realism – argued that great powers acting abroad risked entrapment into their allies’ conflicts. This was seen as particular concern for the United States which, with its expansive set of allies, seemed to be taking on a number of burdens that could potentially court unwanted competition with other great powers and, in extremis, drag it into outright conflict. Thus, Kenneth Waltz – the founder of modern realist theory – sought to warn policymakers that alliances were not worth fighting over in bipolar systems when their predilections seemed otherwise;<sup>2</sup> critics of an expansive post-Cold War U.S grand strategy caution that American activism exposes the U.S. to allied misbehavior;<sup>3</sup> policy analysts in think tanks and government

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); for other varieties of alliances, see Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979), chaps. 8–9.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary, see Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (December 13, 2012): 28–29; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 33, 44–50; Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2013): 122–23; Jennifer Lind, “Keep, Toss, or Fix? Assessing US Alliances in East Asia,” in *Sustainable Security*, ed. Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino (Oxford University Press, 2016), 26–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190611477.003.0012>.

circles are beginning to voice worries that “longstanding security arrangements could drag the United States” into foreign conflicts;<sup>4</sup> and scholars have even begun considering how alliance ties can dragoon great powers into civil wars.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, a growing number of studies argue that entrapment is both rare and manageable. Drawing heavily from U.S. foreign policy decisions during and immediately after the Cold War, empirical studies of entrapment have found few overt instances of states bearing significant costs for allies in unwanted conflicts. This – so the argument goes – makes sense, as it would highly unlikely indeed for rational states to harm their security for the sake of a partner.<sup>6</sup> As importantly, great powers are not simply subservient to their partners. Rather, and as Michael Beckley and Tongfi Kim propose, states can craft alliance treaties with escape clauses and conditions that allow a great power to abandon its partner(s) if the latter act in particularly reckless or risky manners; thus, great powers are able to avoid any loss of credibility or reputation that might otherwise push them to intervene and risk entrapment.<sup>7</sup> Combined, great powers such as the post-Cold War United States can take on an expansive set of alliance ties with little worry of being exposed to entrapment by their reckless partners.

Which view is correct? On balance, is entrapment something great powers need to regularly fear, or are the problems generally manageable and malleable? In this paper, we

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Also useful is Thomas Wright, “Should America Power Down?” *The American Interest*, August 14, 2015, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/08/14/should-america-power-down/>.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Bosco, “Entrapment and Abandonment in Asia,” *The National Interest*, July 8, 2013, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/entrapment-abandonment-asia-8697>.

<sup>5</sup> Emma M. Ashford, “Hegemonic Blackmail: Entrapment in Civil War Intervention,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 218–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2017.1341843>.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home,” 29; Alexander Lanoszka, “Tangled up in Rose? Theories of Alliance Entrapment and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 234–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2017.1392102>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (April 1, 2015): 7–48, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00197](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197); Tongfi Kim, “Why Alliances Entangle But Seldom Entrap States,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 350–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599201>.

simultaneously challenge recent research pushing back on the risks of entrapment while clarifying and elaborating on the manners and conditions under which entrapment is a going concern for great powers. We do so by undertaking three tasks. First, we clarify what entrapment entails and the manners in which it manifests in international relations. Here, we argue that much of the recent pushback on entrapment erroneously focuses on the dichotomous question of whether states are ensnared in others' wars. While this type of entrapment is certainly worrisome, it oversimplifies how entrapment may operate and manifest under real-world conditions. Accordingly, we identify three types of "entrapment dynamics" – over the timing of foreign policy decisions, the means states use to go confront opponents, and the goals states adopt in this confrontation – that may be both more subtle and common than the kind of overt war/no war choice critics of entrapment have engaged.

Building on this typology – second – we utilize core work on the origins and drivers of alliances to hypothesize the conditions under which different entrapment dynamics are more or less likely to manifest. Scholars such as Glenn Snyder and Waltz long ago made seminal contributions to theorizing the systemic conditions linked to entrapment, noting in particular how multipolar systems were prone to far more entrapment than bipolar systems.<sup>8</sup> We extend this logic to cover unipolar systems, paying particular attention to the circumstances in unipolarity that may lead to powerful states' entrapment in foreign conflicts. Here, we argue that there are good reasons to suspect alliances in unipolar systems are likely to carry greater entrapment risks than even analysts critical of American engagement abroad appreciate.<sup>9</sup> Put simply, by pushing the unipole

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<sup>8</sup> Waltz, *Theory*; Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–95.

<sup>9</sup> Most directly, no less an analyst than Stephen Walt has argued that for great powers, "the abandonment/entrapment dilemma will be most intense under multipolarity, somewhat diminished under bipolarity, and *least worrisome under unipolarity* [emphasis added];" Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 98–99. For reasons discussed below, we argue this logic is incomplete.

to find partners with which to preserve its geopolitically privileged position, unipolarity affords smaller states tools to shape the unipole's foreign policy in ways the unipole might otherwise prefer to avoid.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, system structure – not any formal contract or amendment to an alliance agreement – is the key to understanding when and why entrapment occurs. Finally, and drawing on the preceding framework, we provide suggestive evidence that the “unipolar moment” saw the United States slowly but surely entrapped by virtue of its East Asian alliances into worsened relations and an increasingly risky confrontation with China.

Without resolving the entrapment debate, the arguments advanced in this paper clarify and advance the ongoing discussion. As recent entrapment critiques argue, entrapment is not a constant risk for great powers and war via alliances is neither inevitable or insurmountable. At the same time, entrapments risks are never negligible and there is strong evidence that the risk of entrapment in a unipolar world is larger than the conventional wisdom often allows. Alliances, in short, are not a free lunch even for great powers at the height of their dominance: though of prospective use for deterring, containing, or defeating common opponents, the process of doing so creates new potential conflicts.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in five sections. Following this Introduction, we review the ongoing debate over what entrapment entails and how it manifests, paying special attention to problematic conceptual and definitional elements in recent studies challenging the risks posed by entrapment. Second, we identify three different ways in which entrapment can occur that may be both more frequent and difficult to study than existing studies allow. Third, we hypothesize the structural conditions under which our revised forms of entrapment are more or

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<sup>10</sup> On the incentive a unipole has to maintain its privileged position - as well as for the particularly destabilizing ways the United States has done so - see Robert Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 188–213.

less likely to manifest and, in particular, why unipolarity may be more prone to entrapment dynamics than existing studies allow. Fourth, we provide suggestive evidence for unipolar entrapment by examining U.S. intervention in the 2011 Libyan Civil War and the evolution of U.S. policy in East Asia in the 2000s and early 2010s. Finally, we conclude by briefly discussing the implications of the analysis for both international relations theory and ongoing U.S. grand strategy debates.

### **What Is Entrapment?**

Paradoxically, for a concept central to international relations theory, scholars increasingly disagree on what entrapment entails.<sup>11</sup> As originally defined by Glenn Snyder, entrapment meant “being dragged into a conflict over an ally's interests that one does not share, or shares only partially.”<sup>12</sup> It thus tends to occur when a state valued “the preservation of the alliance more than the cost of fighting for the ally's interest.” Significantly, because entrapment erupts when states are “dragged” into conflict, the problem for Snyder is therefore not necessarily a simple choice of going to or avoiding war on behalf of a partner. Rather, entrapment actually manifests as a type of “risk” that varies over time and space contingent on states’ dependence on others for their security. In other words, the risk of entrapment emerges and changes as part of an evolutionary process as a great power interacts with its partners, and its efforts to give form and content to its alliances – involving issues such as where to deploy troops, how to prepare for war, and what political guarantees to extend – waxed and waned.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The original use of the term “entrapment” was by Michael Mandelbaum; see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics Before and After Hiroshima* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 151.

<sup>12</sup> Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” 467.

<sup>13</sup> Snyder, “Security Dilemma,” 467, 471–77.

Recent efforts to examine entrapment, however, define the issue differently. In a widely-cited study, for example, Tongfi Kim argues that Snyder's definition, is "too broad" because it encompasses both military and non-military behaviors that may or may not be desirable from the perspective of the state in question. Instead, Kim argues that Snyder's original definition should more properly be understood as "entanglement" – "the process whereby a state is compelled to aid an ally in a costly and unprofitable enterprise because of the alliance" – while "entrapment" more narrowly refers to "undesirable entanglement in which the entangling states adopts a risky or offensive policy not *specified in the alliance agreement* [emphasis added]."<sup>14</sup> Beckley embraces Kim's approach, arguing that entrapment occurs "only when an ally instigates a conflict with a third party in order to drag its alliance partners into the dispute." Entanglement, by contrast, "occurs when a state is dragged into a military conflict by one, or more, of its alliances" – a definition very close to Snyder's original – with "alliances" themselves requiring states to be bound by a formal treaty.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Lanoszka's rigorous examination of mechanisms that might undergird entrapment relies on a similar distinction. As he writes, "Entrapment is a type of entanglement" that "occurs because of risky or offensive actions taken outside the parameters of the original alliance treaty."<sup>16</sup> And, just as Kim notes that entrapment is "undesirable entanglement," Lanoszka argues that "entrapment by definition cannot take place if the defender wishes to fight in order to protect an ally that it sees as vital for the goods that it provides."<sup>17</sup> In short, recent redefinitions relabel Snyder's original concept as "entanglement," narrow entrapment to only include going to war for an ally in overt contravention of one's interests, and narrow its applicability to formal alliances.

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<sup>14</sup> Kim, "Why Alliances Entangle But Seldom Entrap States," 355.

<sup>15</sup> Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances," 12–13, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Lanoszka, "Tangled up in Rose?," 235–36.

<sup>17</sup> Lanoszka, "Tangled up in Rose?," 239.

In this paper, we adopt a revised form of Snyder's original conception because of conceptual and empirical limits in the revised definitions advanced in recent studies. Before offering our definition, it is first worthwhile noting the problems posed by the revised definitions. On one level, defining entrapment solely as an issue of formal alliances sidesteps the reality that many real world debates concern worries of entrapment via informal alliances. Critics of American backing for Ukraine, for instance, worry that informal-but-real American security engagement with Ukraine may end up pulling the United States into a conflict with Moscow for the sake of Kiev.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, as U.S.-Indian ties strengthen as the U.S. seeks partners to confront China, it is reasonable to question whether the United States will end up courting an increased risk of conflict with China as Indian-Chinese relations themselves deteriorate for issues separate from those the United States has with the PRC.<sup>19</sup>

Not coincidentally, treating entrapment as only an issue of formal alliances also highlights questionable solutions to the problem, namely, crafting loop-holes and escape clauses into alliance treaties. In reality, even formal treaties with notionally clear obligations among its members are often the subject of significant intra-alliance haggling, and debates surrounding the credibility of states willingness to follow through on the terms of the agreements. After all, if alliance provisions (loopholes and all) were sacrosanct and a panacea for real political debates, there would be no questions of the scope and credibility of alliances at any point in international politics.<sup>20</sup> That this

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<sup>18</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Don't Arm Ukraine," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/opinion/dont-arm-ukraine.html>; Tom Hayden, "Ukraine: Anvil of the New Cold War," *The Nation*, July 21, 2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/ukraine-anvil-new-cold-war/>.

<sup>19</sup> On the gulf between U.S. and Indian conceptions of Indian national security, see Paul Staniland, "America Has High Expectations for India. Can New Delhi Deliver?" *War on the Rocks*, February 22, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/america-has-high-expectations-for-india-can-new-delhi-deliver/>.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, one of the striking features of post-1945 politics has been the regular efforts powerful states have adopted to (1) reassure and assuage their partners over their fidelity to alliance agreements, and (2) seek their preferred interpretations of alliance terms and provisions (sometimes unsuccessfully) in the face of partner opposition. Case in point, the U.S. and its European partners faced regular crises in transatlantic relations during and after the Cold War over the reliability and credibility of states' commitments to NATO, just as the U.S. and its Asian allies have engaged

is not the case – that states in practice bargain hard with their partners over even formalized alliance terms – suggests that linking entrapment to formal alliances creates erroneously adopts an essentially legal approach to thinking through a fundamentally political and strategic problem, in addition to narrowing the scope of analysis.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, narrowing the definition of entrapment solely to cover “undesirable” instances of military escalation for a partner virtually defines away the problem entrapment seeks to explain. To have Beckley, Kim, and others tell it, entrapment can only occur if states knowingly throw caution to the wind and roll the iron dice for a partner for uncertain or avowedly irrelevant ends. Setting entrapment at such a bar, however, ignores that Snyder’s original formulation heavily focused on the risks states run in the course of forming and adjusting alliances over time. Put differently, the new definition ignores the process by which policy and strategy evolve over time and, in doing so, may cause entrapment.

At a basic level, the decision to go to war is rarely a dichotomous or discrete event.<sup>22</sup> Most international conflict is preceded by extensive diplomatic deliberations with both opponents and allies as states try to obtain their objectives through means short of war while preparing for conflict on the most advantageous political and military terms possible.<sup>23</sup> Even fast-moving crises involve

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in regular bargaining to make credible, discuss, and adjust alliance commitments in East Asia. Clearly if the terms of an alliance agreement specifying what actors were to do and *not* to do were sufficient to resolve these problems, there would be nothing to negotiate and the crises of credibility and reliability would never occur.

<sup>21</sup> On the difficulties states face in sustaining even formalized alliances and holding allies to agreed-upon terms in a competitive international arena, see Timothy Crawford, “The Alliance Politics of Concerted Accommodation: Entente Bargaining and Italian and Ottoman Interventions in the First World War,” *Security Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014), 113-147.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); John A. Vasquez, “The Steps to War: Toward a Scientific Explanation of Correlates of War Findings,” *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987): 108–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010196>; for illustration, see Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (London ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., “The Origins of World War I,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 795–818.

<sup>23</sup> Thus, the run-up to World War One saw the major belligerents negotiate and signal friend and foe alike. Likewise, and as scholars such as Marc Trachtenberg and Mark Stoler show, the U.S. entry into World War Two was preceded by extensive bargaining between the U.S., its prospective opponents, and its likely allies.

such diplomatic engagement and coordination: the run-up and immediate outbreak of World War One, for example, saw extensive negotiations across the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance, diplomatic consultations within the alliances and domestic efforts within various states to prepare the policymaking apparatus and public for conflict. The net result is that dissenting voices on the necessity of a particular course of action (here, conflict) tend to be minimized;<sup>24</sup> by the same measure, policymaking elites may come to hold particular and debatable understandings of the national interest riven by psychological, domestic, or decision-making biases.<sup>25</sup> Hence, even an ally that – in Snyder’s terms – shares interests “only partially” with a partner may end up concluding that conflict on behalf of the ally is viable: the process of forming and managing the alliance in a competitive international system can alter how states perceive their interests. Not only does this make it problematic to treat entrapment as undesired conflict, but it makes it difficult – as scholars such as Kim and Beckley attempt – to assess the frequency of entrapment by evaluating states’ perceptions and decision-making deliberations in the run up to war.

Finally, missing from all treatments of entrapment is recognition that entrapment is not solely a problem of pre-war deliberations – entrapment can be a wartime issue as well. After all, even if Allies A and B agree on the necessity of confrontation and conflict against Adversary C, A and B may hold different preferences over how, where, and when to engage in this confrontation.<sup>26</sup> This again reflects the reality that allies may share interests “only partially”:

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<sup>24</sup> On the process by which dissenting voices can be suppressed or bypassed over time, see Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* 42, no. 04 (May 1, 2018): 9–46, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00311](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00311).

<sup>25</sup> For a seminal treatment along these lines, see Jack L. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Case in point, the Grand Alliance in World War Two was riven with intra-alliance disputes over what allied policy should encompass against Nazi Germany (and, to a lesser extent, Japan). At different times, members tried to pull partners into fighting at times, places, for particular goals, and in certain manners that cut against the interests of the alliance’s other members. Sometimes – as with the North Africa Operation of 1942 – these efforts succeeded. See Stoler, *Grand Alliance*.

partners can disagree on what the form and substance of a confrontation with a common adversary should entail. In turn, as states try to keep an alliance together for the sake of prosecuting a conflict while still pursuing the conflict in ways that best serve their interests, states may end up entrapping (or being entrapped by) their partners by pursuing policies and accepting risks that they would not otherwise.

Recognizing these shortcomings, we adopt a modified version of Snyder's original definition. For our purposes, entrapment constitutes a *process whereby states seeking security progressively take on greater risks of being dragooned into a partner's political or military endeavors by virtue of having an alliance, even if the state in question shares few interests besides the continuation of the alliance itself in the partner's moves and even if the alliance is never formalized*. There are several elements to this definition. First, and in keeping with Snyder's original formula, entrapment can occur in stages, as states take on sequentially greater risks on behalf of partners in the hopes of creating security for themselves. This may or may not be seen as "desirable" in the moment – the key for this concept is that states can be seen to accept real risks of confrontation or conflict that they would not otherwise if not for the existence of the alliance. Second, this conceptualization is agnostic as to the degree of formality in the alliance – entrapment can manifest in informal as well formal alliances. Third, entrapment is not limited to pre-war behaviors: entrapment during wartime is also a logical possibility. Finally, entrapment is fundamentally a byproduct of the politics of alliance management: states may take on progressively greater risks on entrapment owing to the existence of the alliance and its partners moves both therein and vis-à-vis an adversary.

### **Where Entrapment Manifests**

Building upon this revised definition, entrapment can occur in four distinct manners related to states' ongoing efforts to craft security for themselves in the shadow of an international system colored by violence. The first concerns a state's ultimate decision to threaten or go to war. Here, and as Snyder, Beckley, and others argue, Ally A adopts an offensive or risky behavior on behalf of Ally B against State C even if A has little interest at stake besides sustaining its alliance with B. This manifestation is widely discussed in existing research and is the subject of significant conceptualization and analysis.<sup>27</sup>

Less well-studied, however, are three other forms of entrapment that may manifest on finer-grained allied decisions surrounding the (prospective) use of force before and during a conflict. These "entrapment dynamics" reflect the fact that allies, even if they share similar preferences on which other states in the international system need to be opposed, can still hold divergent preferences over the nature of that opposition – they capture Snyder's idea that entrapment can occur on interests that states share "only partially." More precisely, allies in agreement on the value of threatening or waging war against a common adversary can still differ profoundly across three key areas related to the use of force, namely (1) the timing of confrontation, (2) the goals to be pursued in confrontation, and (3) the contributions each state will make during the confrontation.<sup>28</sup>

Separate from the outright decision to go to war, these three features capture points of potential friction between states in an alliance that need to be adjudicated in the course of making

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<sup>27</sup> Again, see Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances"; Kim, "Why Alliances Entangle But Seldom Entrap States"; Lanoszka, "Tangled up in Rose?"

<sup>28</sup> For discussion of these issues as they affected alliances in Europe during the Cold War, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Steven T. Ross, *American War Plans: 1945-1950* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1996); Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne, *A Cardboard Castle?: An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, 1955-1991* (Central European University Press, 2005). Also useful is Mary Ann Heiss and S. Victor Paracosma, *NATO and the Warsaw Pact: Intra-bloc Conflicts* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2008).

allies more than a scrap of paper.<sup>29</sup> Since allied preferences over these issues can diverge even though states value the alliance itself, they can create propitious conditions for entrapment. After all, if one state acts in a way that pressures an ally either to alter its behavior, prepare for or go to war before it is ready, fight longer and harder, pursue different political objectives, or contribute greater resources than it sought to a conflict, then it is reasonable to conclude that the state was entrapped by the actions of its ally. Ultimately, by breaking alliance deliberations surrounding the use of force down into these constituent elements, entrapment becomes evident at different levels aside from the macro-question of whether a state was drawn into a war it would otherwise have preferred to avoid. We treat each type in turn.

### Timing Entrapment

Timing entrapment occurs when members of an alliance disagree over the optimal moment at which to confront an opponent. Weaker members of an alliance, for example, may feel proportionally more threatened by an adversary at an earlier date than proportionally stronger members of an alliance, and so be more inclined to adopt hardline policies that increase the likelihood of war before the alliance's stronger members reach that point.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, unsettled domestic politics may give some members of an alliance incentive to go to war sooner than its

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, allies can escape this problem if they opt to treat the alliance as little more than a scrap of paper. Insofar as alliances are designed to confront an opponent using military force, however, states party to an alliance tend to end up deliberating and debating these issues. Thus, the consolidation of the Franco-Russian alliance before World War One saw the two states quickly give content to the political commitment through discussions of the military issues involved; similarly, the Dual Alliance between Austria and Germany was widely seen as moribund until changes in European politics prompted growing German-Austrian political-military coordination in the run up to 1914. See William L. Langer, "The Franco-Russian Alliance (1890-1894)," *The Slavonic Review* 3, no. 9 (March 1925): 554–75; William L. Langer, "The Franco-Russian Alliance. II. The Conclusion of the Military Convention," *The Slavonic Review* 4, no. 10 (1925): 83–100; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Cornell University Press, 2018), chap. conclusion.

<sup>30</sup> On the link between shifting power and the adoption of hardline policies, see Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), chap. chapter 1.

allies prefer if a ruling coalition seeks to resolve an external threat but fears being turned out of office before its allies are prepared for joint action.<sup>31</sup> Under these circumstances, even if Ally A might eventually be willing to assertively confront or fight alongside Ally B against a common opponent, B may initiate a confrontation at a time that State A finds unattractive, yet A feel compelled to back B for fear of later having to stand alone later (when it would prefer to fight). Put differently, Ally A left to its own devices might prefer to address an external threat without resorting to behaviors that increase the risk of conflict, feeling it has the capacity to wait or hoping that war can avoided through deterrence or a negotiated settlement; nevertheless, Ally B may behave in ways that makes war more likely in the short-term for fear that time is no longer on its side.

In theory, states seeking to entrap partners at times its partners would rather avoid can do so in a number of ways. Some states, for instance, may spoil negotiations with an opponent designed to settle outstanding disputes so that a diplomatic standoff festers or escalates.<sup>32</sup> Alternatively, states may engage in provocative behavior over disputed issues designed to trigger an aggressive stance by an opponent that merits an allied response. And, in extremis, states can simply begin hostilities despite allied opposition, thereby daring its partners not to back it up. In all these situations, Ally A is faced with the choice of either being drawn into an escalating crisis or war, or abandoning B. When A chooses to support, entrapment occurs. To not act, despite the

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<sup>31</sup> This inverts Schweller's well-known discussion of the constraining effect of unsettled domestic politics on state security policy; see Randall L Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> The canonical statement of spoiler problems is Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (October 1, 1997): 5–53. In a more modern example, Japanese reluctance to settle with China over the disputed East China Sea islets – regardless of the normative issues involved – keeps the conflict festering and makes it more likely the United States needs to back Japan against China sooner than pure balance of power logic dictates.

ill-advised timing of B's provocations, would potentially leave B weakened and vulnerable to a defeat in the face of a seemingly pressing threat that, in the end, may be far worse for State A.

Russia's involvement in World War I on behalf of Serbia presents an example of timing entrapment. Few would deny that Russia believed it had a strategic interest in defending Serbia and bolstering the pan-Slav identity. As Jack Levy and William Mulligan argue, however, the timing of this support poses a puzzle. If Russia was perceived by Germany as a rising power and a potential threat, then it would have been sensible for Russia to lay low and avoid provoking Germany into a wider war. Yet in the dangerous summer of 1914, St. Petersburg stood by its Serbian allies even as they issued an ultimatum to Austria-Hungary that made war considerably more likely. As Levy and Mulligan note, "1914 was not Russia's favored year for war." But the Russians were also fearful of the diplomatic consequences of an unfavorable outcome to the Austro-Serbian crisis." And, "Although Habsburg control of Serbia did not present an immediate threat to Russian territorial integrity, a more prominent consideration was Russian credibility. In the context of Balkan politics, Russian inaction in the face of Austro-Hungarian aggression could have had severe consequences."<sup>33</sup> To reiterate, our contention is not that Russia supported Serbia despite strategic interests wholly to the contrary. Rather, our claim is that entrapment occurred in a more subtle yet very consequential manner: rather than waiting for a more opportune moment for war, Russia was pulled in on behalf of its ally, Serbia, at a time more of Serbia, than Russia's, choosing.<sup>34</sup>

### Goal Entrapment

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<sup>33</sup> Jack S. Levy and William Mulligan, "Shifting Power, Preventive Logic, and the Response of the Target: Germany, Russia, and the First World War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (July 29, 2017): 742, 758, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1242421>.

<sup>34</sup> Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 59, 70.

A third type of entrapment is goal entrapment. Here, Ally A may be willing to initiate a confrontation or fight alongside Ally B, but the two states diverge in their preferences for the goals of the contest and/or terms for settling the dispute. In theory, this can occur through two different pathways. First, if Ally A has more modest goals than Ally B, A may become entrapped in the more ambitious goals of its ally once confrontation begins simply by B's refusal to end a standoff or conflict when A desires. Again, A's only alternative is to abandon its ally, a risky proposition with a confrontation looming or war at hand. Second, and closely related, one ally may entrap another by expanding the scope of a confrontation. Here, Ally B might seek broader gains or more ambitious terms than A, and so layer on new demands or carry a contest into new venues. This move risks entrapping Ally A, as failure to back B may result in B's defeat, the loss of crucial resources, and opening up inter-allied political fissures that may dissolve the alliance.

As an example of goal entrapment, consider the sequence of decisions that led to the allied Operation Torch landings in northern Africa in 1942. In May 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised Josef Stalin that the allies would shortly alleviate the pressure that the Germans were putting on the Soviet Union. Great Britain, however, resisted a cross-channel attack, seeing in an assault against the main body of German strength in Western Europe – which would have to be led largely by British forces as the U.S. forces were still mobilizing – an exercise that risked exhausting British strength. British leaders instead preferred an assault on North Africa, a move that would be less costly, divert (at least in theory) German resources away from the Soviet Union, and relieve continued Axis threats to British colonial holdings in the Mediterranean/Middle East. The resulting Anglo-American dispute over military strategy continued throughout the summer of 1942 and, as Mark Stoler showcases, significantly undermined Allied unity. Ultimately, American leaders faced with sustained and immutable British opposition to a 1942

attack on France acceded to British demands. Though many American leaders suspected that Britain's efforts were motivated less by military factors and more by a political effort to bring American resources to bear to protect British influence in the Mediterranean, no cross-channel assault was to come until 1944.<sup>35</sup>

What is striking about the decisions leading up to Operation Torch is how the driving considerations were simultaneously the pledge of assistance made to Stalin, and Britain's successful efforts to channel these pledges into a campaign that widened the European war to include North Africa. Once again, entrapment does not have to entail fighting a war against one's own interests - it can mean pursuing certain objectives for little reason other than to accommodate a partner. Vincent O'Hara offers a damning critique of Operation Torch, "'Torch was a rushed, half-baked experiment in the art of war, full of untested ideas and amateur touches. The politicians mandated it for political reasons over the objections of most of their military chiefs.'" O'Hara's political reasons were precisely Roosevelt's determination to meet the obligation he felt he had to intervene in a way that would distract Germany from its assault on the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> The entrapment in this case was in terms of the goal of the war, not the general decision to fight in the first place.<sup>37</sup>

### Means Entrapment

Finally, means entrapment describes a situation in which Ally A is maneuvered by Ally B into committing more resources to confrontation than it otherwise desired. This is distinct from

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<sup>35</sup> [Stoler. Cite Army Green Book volume on Torch, too.]

<sup>36</sup> Vincent P. O'Hara, *Torch: North Africa and the Allied Path to Victory* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2015). [page numbers]

<sup>37</sup> [discuss US-South Vietnam debate over a peace deal, South Vietnam efforts to scuttle in '72; Christmas Bombing results]

goal entrapment: even if A and B agree on their strategic objectives, B may still end up dragging A into a costlier commitment than intended by underproviding the capabilities required and pushing A to make up the difference. This situation can either be intentional – where B withholds available resources from a contest in order to deploy them elsewhere and/or shift the burden onto its partners – or unintentional – where B underestimates the capabilities required to achieve a specified end and, lacking the requisite resources, turns to A. In either case, A is compelled to intervene for fear of harming the alliance’s credibility, prestige, and future functions. Metaphorically, and occasionally literally, B calls for A’s cavalry to ride over the hill to its assistance.

Although poorly catalogued, means entrapment may be the most common form of entrapment. States, after all, regularly promise one another the military tools required for joint military action, only to change course and leave their partners high and dry. During the opening days of World War One, for example, Austria-Hungary reneged on agreements to deploy most of its forces against Russia while Germany attacked France, exposing Germany to Russian assault and requiring Germany to alter its own war plans.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Soviet and Chinese officials only agreed to back North Korea in the Korean War when assured by North Korea that the contest would be quickly won and limited in scope; when this assumption proved overly optimistic following the American-backed intervention in June 1950, the USSR and China were forced to commit their own forces rather than see their client collapse.<sup>39</sup> As we discuss below, the 2011 allied intervention in Libya also demonstrates means entrapment as the United States found itself

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<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire*, 1 edition (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> [Pull from notes; Weathersby & Stueck?]

committing substantial resources in support of the intervention despite an initial instinct to limit its involvement.

### **Distributions of Power and Entrapment Risks**

In sum, entrapment is not simply a dichotomous question of *whether* a great power goes to war on behalf of an ally with whom it shares few interests, but as much an issue of *when, how, and why* states engage in costly politico-military activities on behalf of their partners. As such, recognizing that entrapment can occur over the timing, goals, and means by which states compete emphasizes that entrapment may be more widespread and more subtle than recent studies allow.

This does not mean, however, that entrapment in any or all its forms is necessarily equally likely to occur across time and space. Strikingly, this is an issue largely ignored in existing empirical studies of entrapment that tend to focus on Cold War and early post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy deliberations, and from this conclude that entrapment is avoidable in other instances. Again, states seek to form and sustain alliances because allies reduce the costs a state pays to create security for itself. As a result, states should tend to back away from an alliance if the security costs – such as entrapment - of maintaining an alliance outweigh the benefits derived partnership. Conversely, states are apt to sustain an alliance and accept the costs of entrapment if they (1) need the alliance to otherwise obtain security for themselves in the face of other threats, or (2) expect to need the alliance for security in the near- to medium-term. Put differently, and as Glenn Snyder noted long ago, states that are dependent on other states for their security are at greater risk of entrapment than those that are comparatively secure irrespective of allied commitments.

Particularly important in shaping the degree of a state's dependence on others and its assessments of the security costs-benefits of alliance is the distribution of power. As Waltz,

Snyder, and others suggest, whether great powers exist in a multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar world has a critical effect upon the threats they face and, with it, their options for obtaining security. After all, holding aside factors such as military technology and geography that also affect a state's ability to provide security for itself, the distribution of power directly influences whether and when states need alliances to obtain security and, with it, the risk of entrapment.

Consistent with this research, we argue that great powers are most likely to face all forms of entrapment risks in multipolar environments – in which states often need great power allies to obtain security – and highly unlikely to be entrapped in bipolar systems. Unipolarity, however, remains broadly undertheorized so far as alliance politics are concerned. Scholars including Stephen Walt hypothesize that great power entrapment should be virtually absent in unipolar settings owing to the absence of real threats to the unipole's security and others states' inability to meaningfully contribute to its well-being. Still, the unipolar era has witnessed regular American concerns with entrapment by its partners and, given American efforts to increasingly confront China and Russia in order to buttress its credibility with its Asian and European partners starting in the 2000s, a degree of plausibility; by the same measure, it is not obviously irrational for the United States to value its relationships with regional powers that might be of use in confronting potential future challengers. Combined, these processes suggest that unipolar entrapment cannot be so easily written off – in fact, entrapment in unipolarity may be possible and potentially greater than the risk of entrapment under bipolarity. In this section, we elaborate on the the logic linking the distribution of power to the risks of entrapment, discuss the mechanisms by which states can be entrapped, and highlight suggestive evidence in support of these propositions.

### *Multipolarity*

Great powers are at greatest risk of entrapment in multipolarity, that is, situations composed of three or more great powers. By definition, multipolarity means that any given great power is potentially threatened by at least one other great powers, and is it itself a threat to other major states. Owing to the multiplicity of threats, any given state tends to balance hard and fast in order to simultaneously (1) prevent other actors from becoming sufficiently strong that they can attack, conquer, or otherwise impair the security of one's own security, and (2) seek advantages of one's own to better pursue one's interests. Nevertheless, because economic and military power is distributed with rough equality in these situations, states tend to be unable to balance through their efforts alone: not only can a coalition of other states swamp one's own capabilities, but states seeking to maximize their interests are unlikely to be sufficiently strong that they can successfully defeat other states with approximately the same economic and military resources. Instead, states seeking to survive and thrive in multipolarity are apt to form alliances to gain an additional margin of security against other threats and create conditions for better pursuing their foreign policy objectives.

Since states tend to need alliances in multipolarity, however, they also tend to be vulnerable to entrapment. Furthermore, they have only a limited ability to avoid the problem. Two different mechanisms undergird this situation. First, and most simply, a great power whose partner(s) is courting or going to war with another great power may be forced to go along – acceding to its partner's demands over the timing, goals, and relative contributions – for fear of strategic isolation in a threatening international environment. After all, a state bereft of allies in multipolarity may be vulnerable to challenges by a hostile opposing coalition. Reinforcing this dilemma, abandoning an ally in the face of a third, potentially-hostile great power may lead to the

ally's destruction or defeat, create an even-stronger third great power, and thus leave a state in an even more isolated and vulnerable position in the future. Fearing possible isolation, they are prone to value the maintenance of their alliance commitments, thereby creating conditions under which they can be entrapped.

Nor is it just isolation that is a problem: one's allies may also be emboldened to take greater risks vis-à-vis an adversary and, in turn, set off a foreign policy cascade that can lead to one's entrapment. All things being equal, states in multipolarity are often constrained in their foreign policy ambitions. Owing to the presence of several states, all of which can impose meaningful costs on an overly-ambitious peer, states may face strong incentives to limit the scope and aggressiveness of their foreign policies. Alliances, however, can upend this situation. By providing states with more security than they would be able to obtain through their own means alone, alliances can lead one or more members of an alliance to feel empowered to pursue a more expansive foreign policy that may, in turn, antagonize other states. This is particularly likely if two states ally against a third before the third can find its own partners: here, Ally A – counting on Ally B - may expect to be able to bring overwhelming capabilities to threaten, coerce, or compel the third state.

Unless the third state gives way, B can thus find itself on the horns of a dangerous dilemma. On one level, and as noted, failing to support A risks dissolving the alliance and courting one's own isolation. At the same time, even if B successfully restrains an emboldened A, it may still invite retaliation from the third state. Having narrowly avoided a clash with members of the alliance, the third state is prone to arm and ally on its own, thus priming world politics for insecurity spirals and tensions which proportionally increase the risk of war. Over time, the net

effect is to build a greater risk of conflict into international affairs, as even states uninterested in aggrandizement are penalized – directly or indirectly – for their partner’s emboldenment.

To be sure, states in multipolarity are not always equally vulnerable to entrapment due to fears of isolation or allied emboldenment. In practice, geography and the state of military technology may give states a particularly effective ability to defend themselves even without allies. As importantly, the presence of other great powers means that there may be other alliance opportunities states can pursue if an ally begins dragging it into war at undesired times and places. Still, periods of “defense dominance” appear to be relatively rare in world politics, just as the process of forming new alliances may be neither smooth nor effective in the near-term; France, for instance, was left isolated in late nineteenth century Europe as its efforts to ally with Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Britain all floundered due to competing foreign policy objectives. As a result, the potentially-lengthy adjustment costs required can push a state to remain tethered to even a reckless ally. Combined, states in multipolarity often enjoy large reasons to form and sustain even costly alliance commitments, thus increasing their exposure to entrapment.

### *Bipolarity*

Two features of bipolar systems make them the least likely to see great power entrapment. First, since the two great powers in bipolarity are both significantly stronger than all other states in the system, allies are generally not necessary to maintain a balance of power. Of course, allies still have uses such as aiding one’s geographic reach, defraying military costs, expanding one’s influence, and helping great powers establish reputations for resolve. Nevertheless, balancing in bipolarity is principally a matter of great powers’ internal arming efforts; alliances with comparatively small states can be useful, but are not central to shaping the economic and military

balance of power.<sup>40</sup> As importantly – second – the fact that the two great powers themselves constitute the clearest threats to one another’s security helps focus policymakers’ attention, discipline state behavior, and avoid miscalculations over this basic issue: because the costs of conflict with the other side are clear and there is no confusion over which states are one’s opponents, the limited importance of allies to great power’s well-being tends to be singularly transparent.

These factors combine to lower the risk of entrapment. Again, two mechanisms undergird this result. First, when an ally threatens to ensnare one of the great powers into a conflict with another state, a great power can simply abandon its ally or loosen its alliance commitment without impairing its security; consistent with recent studies of entrapment noted above, ambiguities in any alliance treaty may provide one way of carrying out such a policy, but the distribution of power is such that simple abandonment – as, for instance, the United States did with South Vietnam in 1975 – is equally feasible. Again, in an environment where balancing primarily occurs through a great power’s own means, allies are useful but not vital to a great power’s survival and can thus be cast aside when interests dictate.

Second, and relatedly, bipolarity makes the potential costs of entrapment starkly clear. At root, a state that courts conflict with the other pole in the system is essentially asking its great power ally to roll the iron dice and risk a potentially-devastating war at times and places of (at best) uncertain utility to the great power in question.<sup>41</sup> Unless the great power seeks war itself or

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<sup>40</sup> Waltz.

<sup>41</sup> This process need not be as simple as a great power’s ally picking a fight directly with the other great power (though that is certainly possible) – the risk also looms if a client of one great power picks a fight with the client of the other great power, thus suggesting that the other great power might be drawn into the contest. Many real or feared contingencies during the Cold War were of this type. For instance, the various Middle Eastern wars suggested the U.S. and USSR might be drawn into the contest (as nearly happened in 1973) and many envisioned crisis scenarios for World War Three in Europe beginning with the two Germanys tilting at one another in ways that ensnared the Americans and Soviets.

policymakers are idiosyncratically unable or unwilling to take a hardline with the client state, the great power is unlikely to accept such risk for the questionable benefits allies provide. Thus, the Eisenhower administration refused to support its British and French allies in the 1956 Sinai War after the Soviet Union threatened to retaliate against the attack on its Egyptian client. Moreover, even when a state threatens to entrap a great power ally into a conflict in which the other great power is absent, the great power ally is apt to either avoid intervention or severely limit its support – backing away from the alliance when needed – for fear of (1) diverting finite resources to secondary conflicts, and (2) creating conditions whereby the other great power can intervene to lengthen the duration and costs of the conflict.

Still, this does not mean the risk of bipolar entrapment is zero. Instead, bipolar entrapment is possible if a great power miscalculates the consequences of backing an ally. On one level, and as Stalin's own decision to support North Korea suggests, policymakers may be overly sanguine that the other great power will not intervene. Alternatively, and as the U.S. decision to aid South Korea as a signal of American resolve implies, policymakers may erroneously evaluate the benefits of supporting a client and so allow themselves to be entrapped. Still, the virtue of bipolarity is its tendency to limit the frequency of such miscalculation: with allies of limited use, and the costs and risks of conflict with the other great power clear, policymakers in bipolarity face strong reasons to carefully evaluate the merits of action on behalf of their partners. Only if policymakers miscalculate badly will entrapment occur.

The Korean War illustrates these dynamics in action. On the Soviet side, fears of entrapment into conflict with the United States propelled Soviet leaders to refuse political support for the 1950 North Korean attack on South Korea until it had received firm assurances – erroneously, as it turned out – that the United States would not intervene in support of South Korea.

Moreover, and even when American intervention prompted desperate North Korean calls for Soviet military assistance, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin denied the request, limiting Soviet backing to covert Soviet air force “volunteers” who were told to avoid even speaking Russian to limit the likelihood of American retaliation. On the American side, meanwhile, American policymakers entered the fray partly out of an erroneous concern that the North Korean invasion was directed by the USSR to test American willingness and resolve to defend its allies. Instead, had the United States known that the conflict was not part of a Soviet-led offensive against the West, it is debatable whether the United States would have become involved. After all, faced with the option in late 1950 of escalating the conflict by carrying the war into China and inviting Soviet retaliation, American policymakers demurred, with Army Chief of Staff General Omar Bradley remarking that it would be the “wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Unipolarity*

Prima facie, unipolar systems – that is, systems with a single great power and a host of comparatively smaller powers – might seem the least entrapment-prone of any distribution of power. By definition, unipolarity affords a great power far more security against external threats than in either bipolar or multipolar systems – indeed, unipoles are uniquely advantaged in that there are no real other threats to present for the time being in international affairs! Although a unipole may opt to ally with smaller states, these alliances are thus superfluous so far as the unipole’s well-being is concerned. Hence, if an ally attempts to entrap a unipole into conflict, the unipole should be free to walk away, reducing or severing ties with the ally without impairing its

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Barton J. Bernstein, “New Light on the Korean War,” *The International History Review* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 1981): 266.

own security. Viewed in this fashion, the risk of great power entrapment in unipolarity might appear to be a more extreme form of entrapment in bipolarity.

Though not wrong, we argue that this view of unipolar entrapment is incomplete for two reasons. First, entrapment can occur as a consequence of the surplus of security enjoyed by the unipolar power. On one level, aware that a unipole has security to spare, its allies are likely to be emboldened to act in risky or provocative ways, while gambling that the unipole will bail them out rather than see them fail if the provocative behavior goes south. Along, they may attempt to craft arguments explaining how intervention is in the unipole's interest, focusing on the potential for intervention to deliver other goods to the unipole and avoiding harms – such as a loss of prestige or credibility – that might otherwise result. Meanwhile, because the unipole itself has a surplus of security and no threats around, the cost to it of acceding to allied demands might be (or appear to be) low.<sup>43</sup> In some instances, deploying its military power on behalf of an emboldened partner may simply not be hard to do and the unipole accept calls for intervention for the sake of avoiding a disruption to its alliance. At other times, the absence of the disciplining effect of other great powers as in multi- and bipolarity can make the unipole prone to overestimate the benefits and ease of intervention, and under-estimate the risks.<sup>44</sup> After all, without other great powers to worry about, policymakers in the only great power around face comparatively limited incentives to question what may happen if intervening on behalf of an ally goes awry and overestimate their capacity to act in idealized fashion on behalf of a partner.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For elaboration on the link between unipolarity and the easy use of force, see Nuno Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (January 2012): 9–40.

<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that policymakers in unipoles do not assess costs and benefits. Rather, the point is that the incentive to rigorously evaluate the prospective costs and benefits of acting on behalf of an ally is more limited when the likelihood of another great power becoming involved and making a seemingly quick intervention a quagmire (or risking escalation) goes down in unipolarity.

<sup>45</sup> On the tendency of unipolarity to create a permissive environment for unipolar adventurism, see Jervis, “Unipolarity,” 198–99.

None of this may result in a unipole's entrapment in any single episode. However, aggregated among the full range of alliances that a unipole may have, the risk of entrapment is not negligible. Eventually, a unipole may be cajoled into acting on behalf of an ally or miscalculate that the unipole is impelled to act – it is a kind of regular risk that may come due. Furthermore, even if the unipole avoids direct conflict with the target of its ally's policies, it may need to restrain its ally from adventurism yet, by virtue of remaining allied with an emboldened partner, accept worsened relations of its own with the targeted state; over time, these foreign entanglements can fester and result in a conflict that would not have resulted absent the unipole's alliance choices.<sup>46</sup> Again, the fact that allies are largely used by a unipole for maintaining its unipolar status rather than creating near-term security means that the risks of such outcomes manifesting are less than they are in multipolarity. Still, the problem is non-negligible.

Second, and crucially, entrapment can occur when the distribution of power under unipolarity begins shifting. Again, unipolarity is a uniquely advantageous position for a great power to inhabit. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily durable – new great powers may arise and threaten to move the system back to multipolarity and bipolarity. Anticipating the problems that such a shift would bring, a unipole therefore faces great incentives to try to sustain its unipolar position by suppressing the rise of prospective peer competitors. In doing so, however, it may confront real risks of entrapment.

To appreciate this risk, it is instructive to consider the range of strategic options a unipole may adopt to address the rise of a potential peer competitor. At one extreme, a unipole may engage in highly coercive strategies such as preventive conflict or containment directed at an emerging

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<sup>46</sup> This extends Eugene Gholz's important observation that the U.S. has not so much suppressed regional security dilemmas in Europe and Asia as inserted itself in those areas and accepted its own security dilemmas with states such as China and Russia.

peer competitor. At the other end, it may try to conciliate, appease, and engage a rising state such that the latter foregoes developing the economic and military capabilities that could threaten the unipole's position. Between these ends, meanwhile, are a range of hedging strategies designed to prepare for possible confrontation with the rising peer at a later date without triggering immediate conflict. In each, the unipole is effectively shaping its strategy in the near-term based on the expectation that doing so will sustain its unipolar position in the future. Indeed, and as the United States' own 1992 Defense Planning Guidance offered, the U.S. was willing to maintain extensive allied commitments in Europe and Asia largely to help limit the risk that peer competitors would be able to emerge and challenge the United States' post-Cold War dominance.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of the strategy adopted, allies can take on unique importance to a unipole's policy. For highly coercive strategies, allies help distribute the costs of confrontation<sup>48</sup> and may be needed to ensure the unipole can effectively confront the rising challenger.<sup>49</sup> At the other extreme, non-coercive strategies put emphasis not on alliances *against* the rising state, but rather potentially alignment *with* the rising state. Indeed, trying to co-opt a rising state such that it forgoes challenging a unipole requires the unipole to align with the riser and taking on the role of a security guarantor: without such alignment, a rising state would enjoy good reasons to acquire military and

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<sup>47</sup> Eric S. Edelman, "The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance," in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey Legro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 63–77.

<sup>48</sup> This point requires elaboration. By definition, a unipole should be strong enough to suppress a rising challenger on its own – otherwise, the system is not unipolar. One might therefore assume allies have little to contribute to coercive suppressing a rising peer. Recall, however, the a rising challenger is just that – *rising*. The gap separating a rising state's capabilities from other states the unipole might try to ally with is therefore narrower than the gap separating the unipole from its allies, such that allies can bring meaningful resources to bear against the *challenger*. And because states have incentives to minimize the costs they pay for confronting an opponents, unipoles should be expected to embrace anti-challenger coalitions as a way of minimizing the resources they must extract from their own society to sustain their dominance.

<sup>49</sup> In particular, allies may provide the unipole with geographic access to regions where a challenger is emerging or in which it is active that make confrontation more efficient. [Offer Germany in Cold War and Japan vs. China]. For general discussion, see Michael C. Desch, "Why Realists Disagree about the Third World (and Why They Shouldn't)," *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (1996); Michael C. Desch, "Bases for the Future: U.S. Military Interests in the Post-Cold War Third World," *Security Studies* 2, no. 2 (1992).

economic capabilities of its own to provide for its security, but which over time would afford it the potential to challenge the unipole. As for hedging, alliances again help defray the costs a unipole pays for potentially confronting the challenger – as Robert Gilpin observed, unipoles facing a shift in the distribution of power often “enter into alliances with or seek rapprochement with less threatening powers.”<sup>50</sup> At the same time, alliances take on added importance by limiting the likelihood actors will bandwagon with the challenger and foreclose the unipole’s future options.

The result of such processes is a growing risk of entrapment. For the unipole employing a coercive or hedging strategy, the desirability of keeping allies on one’s side means that that the unipole is primed to entrapment into allied conflicts. Otherwise, allies might question the unipole’s credibility or opt to abandon the unipole – allies, in effect, are given leverage over the unipole’s strategy and the unipole’s hands tied by virtue of confronting a challenger. Conversely, for a unipole seeking cooperation and engagement with a rising challenger, the risk of entrapment grows as the unipole cannot afford to have the challenger view it as an unreliable partner. That is, keeping a rising state from developing the capabilities that can threaten the unipole requires that the unipole convince the rising state that there a concordance of interests exists between the two that obviates the need for the rising state to develop such capabilities. To do so, the unipole can be pushed towards risky policies and/or military actions on behalf of its rising ally less the ally see the unipole’s support as irrelevant to its own interests. Again, the risk of entrapment grows as an ally is afforded leverage over the unipole’s policies largely because because unipolar states face stark incentives to maintain their unipolar moment.

### *Summary*

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<sup>50</sup> Gilpin 192.

In sum, there are theoretical reasons to believe that the risk of entrapment in any of its forms is not monotonic. Instead, the structure of the system – and the accompanying incentives for and constraints on great power balancing – plays a crucial mediating effect. Put simply, and as Table 1 illustrates, structure affects the mechanisms by which entrapment may occur and the overall risk of entrapment. Taken as a whole, we thus expect the tendency of great power entrapment to vary wildly across time and space rather than – as several studies suggest – remaining constant and generalizable regardless of circumstances.

**Table 1: System Structure and Entrapment Risks**

<u>System Structure</u>	<u>Risk of Entrapment</u>	<u>Mechanisms</u>
Multipolar	- <b>High:</b> allies constantly needed obtain security with several threats present	- Fear of isolation - Allied emboldenment
Bipolar	- <b>Low:</b> allies not needed for security and can be abandoned without compromising great power security while the potentially large costs of entrapment are clear	- Miscalculation
Unipolar	- <b>Moderate:</b> allies useful for sustaining unipolarity; unipole incentives to discipline its behavior limited	- Allied emboldenment + unipolar ill-discipline - Suppressing prospective challengers

### **Unipolar Entrapment: The Evidence**

Notably, the above framework helps account for the seemingly-disparate findings of scholars who have attempted to identify evidence of great power entrapment. On the one hand,

noting that entrapment is both broader than the dichotomous choice of going to war or abandoning an ally, and that it is more common in multipolarity than bipolarity, explains why Snyder's study of alliance politics was able to point to evidence of great power entrapment during the heyday of European multipolarity. By the same token, noting that entrapment in all its forms should be less frequent in bipolarity and during stable unipolarity explains why scholars such as Beckley and Kim identified few instances of American entrapment during and after the Cold War: with the Soviet Union present to discipline American policymakers through 1991 and with U.S. dominance seemingly durable through the early 2000s, entrapment was unlikely to obtain.

Still, to further demonstrate the relevance of considering finer-grained strategic issues and system structure for entrapment, it is worth looking for evidence that the U.S. has been entrapped into costly or risky foreign exercises by its partners in the unipolar era. To do so, we examine the U.S. decision to intervene in the 2011 Libyan Civil War, as well as American efforts to counter China's rise starting in the mid-2000s. The Libyan intervention constitutes an important episode in which allied and American interests initially differed, yet the United States intervened regardless; it is therefore worth considering whether and how entrapment dynamics shaped American policy. China, meanwhile, represents a test of the contention that waning unipolarity should make some form of entrapment likely as the declining unipole seeks allies. We treat each episode in turn, highlighting suggestive evidence consistent with our argument.

### *Emboldenment, Unipolar Dominance, and Entrapment: The Case of Libya*

The 2011 allied intervention in Libya illustrates the how a surplus of security can lead a unipolar power to become entrapped by aggressive allies. The U.S. decision to participate in the intervention was, by all accounts, a close call, and President Barack Obama eventually adopted a

position that has been described - mostly derisively - as “leading from behind.” Even if one grants that the United States was not entrapped into its participation in the intervention, the evidence suggests that the United States was subject to the variety of entrapment dynamics identified above.

Though both the United States and its European allies largely agreed on the heinous nature of Moammar Qaddafi’s regime in Libya, the European powers from the outset were more enthusiastic about military intervention. Gerard Araud, then the French ambassador to the United Nations, quotes his American counterpart at the U.N. at the time, Susan Rice, as saying, “You are not going to drag us into your shitty little war. . . We’ll be obliged to follow and support you, and we don’t want to.”<sup>51</sup> Other American leaders, including Vice President Joseph Biden and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, were reluctant to take on an intervention in Libya even as the U.S. continued to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, but U.S. Secretary of States Hillary Clinton ultimately won the debate, in part, by arguing that the United States would inevitably be dragged in to the Libya conflict if British- and French- initiated actions went poorly. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned of “political fallout if America again attacks a Muslim nation, even to support a popular revolt.”<sup>52</sup> But the determination in London and Paris to go ahead with the intervention made it difficult for the Washington to sit it out.

In doing so, the United States was, in the first, place, subject to timing entrapment. As Jo Becker and Scott Shane report, Clinton was informed about France’s intentions to carry out air attacks after the planes were already in the air. “I’m not going to be the one to recall the planes,” lamented Clinton, “And create the massacre in Benghazi.” At least some within the U.S.

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Hillary Clinton, ‘Smart Power’ and a Dictator’s Fall,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Thom Shanker, “U.S. Military Intervention in Libya Carries Risks,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/world/middleeast/07military.html>.

administration would have preferred to hold off on the use of military force in Libya, but the impatience of America's allies forced Washington's hands.

The United States also became entrapped into the goals set by its European partners as well as the means to achieve those goals. President Obama initially indicated that the United States would act to end the acute massacre of civilians, but then turn over authority to Arab and European allies. The United States has no interest in objectives beyond limited humanitarian ones, but abiding by such limited aims proved to be impossible. Simultaneously, the pressure to remove Qaddafi from power grew as, once involved, it became difficult not to endorse regime change.

Above all, Libya highlights that allies can be entrapped into utilizing tools that they would not use if not for the alliance. The United States went into Libya seeking to keep its contributions limited – backstopping European efforts without taking on a central military role. This effort was quickly spoiled. As Becker and Shane report, “Practical military considerations also complicated Mr. Obama's in-and-out strategy. Though he had directed that the United States provide only unique capabilities that its allies did not possess, that turned out to be quite a bit: a continuing supply of precision munitions, combat search and rescue, and surveillance, [CIA Director David Petraeus] said.” Once the objectives had grown, the United States was entrapped by the need for American military capabilities to carry out the mission. As Dennis Ross, who was on the National Security Council at the time observed, Clinton believed that, “Once we have made a decision, we can't fail.” And avoiding failure meant committing American resources to the mission. The intervention in Libya was short critical military capabilities, “The most critical shortages were persistent aerial surveillance and precision-attack capabilities. These resulted from shortages of these capabilities in Europe, US withdrawal from the combat role in early

April and the refusal of many NATO states to conduct ground attacks.”<sup>53</sup> In the end, and as Ivo Daalder and James Stavridis detail, “Washington provided 75% of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data employed to protect Libyan civilians and enforce the arms embargo. It also contributed 75 percent of the refueling planes used throughout the mission. . . . And U.S. commanders in Europe had to quickly dispatch over 100 military personnel to the NATO targeting center at the outset of the intervention when it became clear that other member states lacked the knowledge and expertise to provide their aircraft with the correct targeting information.”

The case of Libya demonstrates the dangers of entrapment for a unipolar power. In particular, the argument illustrates how a surplus of security makes a unipolar power susceptible to entrapment. While the U.S. was not overly enthusiastic about intervening in Libya, it ultimately decided to go along with its allies rather than risk the mission failing. A state with less abundant security would likely have been more reluctant to take on a mission that was of questionable value to national security irrespective of allied calls for action. Beyond the overall decision to intervene, the U.S. was further subject to timing, goals, and means entrapment. France and Britain both accelerated the timeline of intervention. The U.S. went along with an expansion of the objectives of the intervention, and was pushed to dedicate its unique capabilities to ensuring that the mission succeeded. Unipolar powers are generally remarkably secure, but that is precisely what can make them susceptible to entrapment by allies. In the case of Libya, what was thought to be a relatively low cost intervention was worthwhile if it both eliminated the Qaddafi regime and supported the initiative of American allies.

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<sup>53</sup> Ben Barry, “Libya’s Lessons,” *Survival* 53, no. 5 (November 1, 2011): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2011.621622>.

*Waning Unipolarity and Entrapment: Explaining U.S. Policy in East Asia*

Recent events in East and Southeast Asia illustrate the second aspect of unipolar entrapment, highlighting how the United States' desire to sustain its unipolar moment is, ironically, prompting its entrapment. There are two aspects to this dynamic. First, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been worried with China's potential power and uncertain long-term tensions. This concern has only grown over time, to the point where many policymakers and some analysts worry China may be emerging as a regional hegemon.<sup>54</sup> Though American policymakers offered lip service throughout the 1990s to the notion of reassuring all states – including China – in the post-Cold War era, when forced to choose the United States has long prioritized backing other countries and hedging against China.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, increasingly, existing allies are seen as vital components of U.S. efforts to contain China's rise by ensuring the U.S. retains physical access to East Asia and is capable of assembling a potential counterbalancing coalition.<sup>56</sup> As importantly, countries like Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam are aware of American calculations. Towards the end of the 2000s and continuing afterwards, this knowledge afforded East Asian leaders a powerful tool with which to pressure the United States to become “more involved” in East Asia after seemingly ignoring the region amidst the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.<sup>57</sup> In this, East Asian policymakers were simply doing what was eminently reasonable from their perspective: seeking firmer U.S. security guarantees as the distribution of power moved against them.

The effect of this effort has been to entrap the United States into a simmering regional conflict once the United States announced its intent to “remain a Pacific power” and began “the

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<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Legro, “What China Will Want,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (September 2007), 515-534.

<sup>55</sup> for evidence, one need only look at the U.S. decision to retain the U.S.-Japanese alliance after 1991 while quickly forgetting that China itself served as a de facto ally against the USSR.

<sup>56</sup> [Brands and Cooper article; NSS 2017]

<sup>57</sup> Much of the following is drawn from Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise* (Washington: Brookings, 2012).

Pivot” to East Asia.<sup>58</sup> Yet although The United States may have an interest in East Asian stability, it does not have an interest in the particular ownership of contested rocks and shoals in the East and South China seas. What the ongoing shift to focus on East Asia has done, however, is inject the United States into these disputes not just as an active participant, but also to signal American resolve vis-à-vis its clients and the PRC.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, since the Pivot was announced in 2010, policymakers in both Asia and the United States have increasingly treated American backing for East Asian allies in the sea disputes as a litmus test of U.S. security commitments. This trend makes little sense unless entrapment is at work. That is, the United States could readily provide security to its friends in East Asia and maintain Asia’s status quo by, e.g., surging forces to the region as crises developed, providing its clients additional military aid, or simply reinforcing infrastructure to support American forces. That the United States is instead actively protesting Chinese moves (de facto placing the blame entirely on China) and devoting its own military forces to monitor and respond to Chinese actions suggests the entrapment dynamic at play. Even if protecting Japan, South Korea, and other American friends in the region is in the United States’ interest, only entrapment explains the timing and form of the American response.

The second aspect of entrapment comes from the response by East Asian countries. It will be some time before we have detailed evidence on what was said to whom that convinced the Obama Administration to Pivot to East Asia. Nevertheless, the East Asian response since 2010 suggests allied emboldenment is creating increased entrapment risks for the United States. As Iain Johnston suggests, one of the most striking trends in East Asia since the Pivot is the renewed

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<sup>58</sup> See White House, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” November 17, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>; Katherine Murphy, “US Defence Secretary: ‘We Are a Pacific Power, We Aren’t Going Anywhere,’” *The Guardian* (UK), August 11, 2014; Mark Manyin, et al., *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ Toward Asia*, Congressional Research Service, R42448, March 28, 2012, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

assertiveness of East Asian states imperiled by the rise of China.<sup>60</sup> This trend includes independent action by the Japanese, Vietnamese, and other military forces to take a forward leaning stance on maritime disputes that, at minimum, help justify a symmetrical Chinese response. However, it is worth recalling that Japan, Korea, and others lobbied for the Pivot for the purposes of having the United States help them manage the rise of China – the implication being that, without an active American role, they would either bandwagon with China or engage in increasingly aggressive policies with a large risk of war. As things stand, it is difficult to see what else Japan, the Philippines, and others could be doing that would risk conflict with China: East Asia is already witness to an arms race and militarized interstate disputes. Thus, unless the Pivot has had *no* effect on allied behavior, then its main influence has been to 1) avoid bandwagoning, but 2) allow the very assertiveness the United States presumably sought to avoid! To put the issue differently, the claims employed by East Asian allies to push what became the Pivot strongly suggest the result of the Pivot has been East Asian over-assertiveness. This is emboldenment of the purest sort: take away the United States' post-Pivot policy, and the East Asian allies would almost certainly not be tilting with China to the same extent.

In sum, entrapment is alive and well in terms of both the arguments employed and policies adopted by the United States and its allies since the late 2000s. No war has occurred, but crises are ongoing and the intensity of American backing for its East Asian clients is growing. This is a recipe for miscalculation. As American forces continue to move into the region, as American diplomacy continues to take an anti-China flavor, and as allies simultaneously spur and build upon these trends, entrapment dynamics are drawing the United States into the wrong conflicts, at the

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<sup>60</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (April 2013), 7-48; Associated Press, "Japan, Philippines Hail Second Day of Joint Drills in South China Sea," *Japan Times*, June 24, 2015, [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/06/24/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-philippines-hail-second-day-of-joint-drills-in-south-china-sea/#.Vd\\_G3LxViko](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/06/24/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-philippines-hail-second-day-of-joint-drills-in-south-china-sea/#.Vd_G3LxViko).

wrong time, and in the wrong place. The United States has an interest in maintaining Japan and other major states as independent actors friendly to the United States; it does not have an interest in their particular island disputes with China. Entrapment is alive and well as the United States mistakes the latter for the former.

## **Conclusion**

The implications of this study are stark. In contrast to a prominent argument that great powers like the United States need not fear entrapment by their foreign allies, the results of this project suggest that entrapment may be less obvious than recent critiques apply. As importantly, the risk of entrapment is not reducible to legal solutions – it varies in important ways due to the structure of the international system and the nature of great power competition itself. In effect, entrapment is the risk states run for seeking allies.

These findings carry real implications for American grand strategy and foreign policy. At a time when many analysts expect American unipolarity is waning (and may already be over), the analysis here highlights that risks of American entrapment are likely to grow over time, just as maintaining an expansive set of American security commitments leaves the U.S. exposed to allied machinations and U.S. miscalculation. In turn, managing these risks requires adjustments to how U.S. policymakers understand and approach alliance commitments. First, and at the most basic level, a more realistic approach would have U.S. policymakers recognize the dangers of entrapment – whether over the choice of confrontation, or the means, timing, and goals chosen along the way – inherent in the United States' current grand strategy. To say this is simply to call for acknowledging that alliances are ultimately tools of *realpolitik* – they are ways for states to seek security, such that self-interested actors may manipulate and ensnare even their allies when

their interests dictate.

Second, the results highlight that managing entrapment is less an issue of shaping the terms of an alliance as it is accepting that entrapment will remain a risk so long as the United States has allies. This places a premium on deciding which alliances – if any – are truly necessary for U.S. national security and retaining a clear vision with regard to the United States' own interests in the alliance. This is no small issue. Over the last several decades, a foreign policy consensus calling for the United States to play an outsized role in world affairs – pursuing not only its security interests, but providing an array of notionally public goods – has attained dominance in the American halls of power. Accompanying this trend has been an ever-growing set of alliance commitments. The rise of China and resurgence of Russia, meanwhile, have reinforced this dynamic, creating a sense of urgency in adding additional partners with which to confront these new threats. The work here, however, challenges both the stability and logic of this behavior: the more allies the United States has, and the more the U.S. believes these alliances are needed to contain threats to U.S. dominance, the greater the likelihood it will be entrapped in some way, shape, or form. Put differently, the costs of an expansive American grand strategy are not as minimal as some analysts claim and are primed to grow as the distribution of power changes.

Instead – third – policymakers might need to consider casting off those alliances which no longer suit American interests while taking steps to tie American hands in ways that minimize the risks of entrapment in those that are retained. In this, there is a logic to what proponents of a more restrained grand strategy recommend. In brief, calling for the U.S. to retrench from areas of the world in which American involvement is neither necessary nor effective, while altering U.S. military options so other countries have must be the defenders of first resort against regional security problems not only forecloses the avenues by which the United States might be entrapped,

but, in embracing strategic self-abnegation, creates a disciplining device for American behavior; along the way, it may also prompt U.S. policymakers to re-consider the scope of the challenge to American unipolarity, the accompanying threat to U.S. national security, and whether and how allies are useful in addressing these problems.

Ultimately, a realist foreign policy requires a more forthright appreciation for the risks that alliance commitments pose to U.S. national security. These risks, as this study indicates, are never minimal (though they can certainly vary). Present trends indicate that the United States has faced real entrapment problems during its unipolar era, and there are good reasons to expect these problems will increase in the years ahead. Adjusting to this situation thus requires not only an intellectual shift in how analysts contemplate the alliance entrapment game, but how American grand strategy itself accommodates these dynamics.