
— Keren Yarhi-Milo, Columbia University ky218@columbia.edu

Psychology of a Superpower is unlike any other book currently written on US hegemony. Christopher Fettweis diverges from how we typically study the concept of unipolarity and, particularly, US primacy. Whereas most books on this topic deal with questions such as the source of unipolarity, its likely stability over time, and its distinct features compared to other systems, Fettweis’s book explores the psychological dynamics of the unipolar order. Rather than probing the sources of US primacy, Fettweis is more concerned with how insights from the laboratory can shed light on how unipolarity affects both the psychology and behavior of states within such a system.

Fettweis’s book is distinct from most literature on this topic not only in what it studies but also in how it studies it. Indeed, by Fettweis’s own admission, Psychology of a Superpower is not a traditional scholarly work in international relations. The book does not offer a new theory; it does not engage in systematic hypothesis testing; and the evidence it brings is more anecdotal, rather than grounded in full-fledged case studies. As a result, readers are unlikely to find useful answers in this book for questions on how to measure power; whether other powers have, in fact, engaged in balancing against the United States; or how long unipolarity will last. But readers who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of why unipolarity has a unique effect on the psychology, perceptions, and strategy of states should certainly read this book.

The core argument of the book cannot be summarized succinctly. There is no one bumper sticker message to encapsulate its main takeaway, or at least I have not been able to find one. Rather, the book is filled with insights drawn from the field of psychology that are applied to explaining patterns of behavior. Some of those insights will be familiar to students of psychology, but other insights from psychology are less intuitive because of the way Fettweis applies them to the context of unipolarity. As such, the book offers a set of novel explanations for the behavior of states under unipolarity because it deals with the effect of power, or the perception of power, on both which biases are likely to become salient and why the process of unbiasing might be more difficult to pursue under conditions of unipolarity compared to other systemic structures. For example, in a chapter titled “Unipolarity and the System,” Fettweis explains why egocentrism and self-serving bias are particularly harder for the unipole United States to resist. In another chapter, he explores why power disparities guarantee that pathological US images of its rivals will be far more common and will have more meaningful consequences. Elsewhere he argues that relative power heightens attention deficit, obstacles to exercising empathy, and reliance on stereotypes in decision making.

The consequences of such biases that stem from structural conditions are explored in chapters 5 and 6, which deal with the evolution in US strategic thought, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the grand strategy of the United States and its allies in the present day. Here, Fettweis offers a set of observations about the behavior of the United States and its allies during and after the Cold War. He delves into the sources of divergence between the United States and its allies in threat perceptions and why US allies should be in a better position to view threats from a less skewed perspective and to adjust to them accordingly. The concluding chapter is likely to be of most interest to those who wish to explore the twin questions of the durability of unipolarity and the prospect of a US decline. Its main takeaways are refreshing and far from intuitive. For example, he claims that the unipolar structure of the system and US dominance are secure at least in the short run, that fears of decline in the United States have both psychological and cultural roots, and that the United States has nothing to fear from decline because the world is “remarkably peaceful and stable and is likely to remain so for quite some time” (p. 173).

This book should be required reading for students of unipolarity and US foreign policy. Psychology of a Superpower forces the reader to rethink the sources of US behavior and to wrestle with the consequences of psychological biases that stem from and are enhanced by relative power. Due to the structure, style, and goal of this book, however, readers might also find the analysis unsatisfactory in some places. For example, the book is rich in anecdotes
and examples, but it stops short of engaging in a systematic and fair assessment of empirical evidence. It makes many assertions about the state of unipolarity, US strategy in the present moment, and the trajectory of unipolarity in the short run. And yet, there is very little systematic evidence to support those assertions. The book, by its own admission, does not seek to engage in hypothesis testing. This makes it easier to access (especially for lay readers), but it could make academic readers question the foundation of its premises and predictions.

A second issue that emerges from this choice of style is that the author fails to delve deeply enough into the psychology literature. The results from the relevant laboratory experiments are not presented, and the overall insights from psychology we are asked to rely on are not given with a sufficient level of contextual detail. As a result, it remains unclear whether the insights and conclusions we are borrowing from the psychology literature can really travel to these political situations. To his credit, Fettweis aptly acknowledges the by now familiar hurdles that accompany the importation of insights from the laboratory into the field of international politics. These include not only concerns about the external validity of those studies, but also the need to move between levels of analysis and extrapolate from the psychological studies implications for the field of politics and for elite individuals who may differ in important ways from the public. These are no trivial issues: they are ones for all interdisciplinary researchers to seriously consider and are ones that make this book, and other cross-disciplinary research, interesting and innovative. But they also require scholars to expose, unpack, and educate readers about the findings from the psychology literature in ways that an unfamiliar political science audience can use and understand. This is why I wished the book presented the background, evidence, and context for its claims so as to be more informative to students who are interested in the psychological micro-foundations of this argument.

Finally, although each chapter features many subsections, the book is easy to follow overall. Yet, it remains confusing when it shifts between describing or explaining behaviors to prescribing policies. Especially in the second half of the book, the reader is left wondering whether the author is still in the realm of describing unipolar pathologies or whether he has shifted to describing strategies for changing those pathologies. For instance, Fettweis’s claim, cited earlier—“The world is remarkably peaceful and stable and is likely to remain so for quite some time”—raises the question of whether this prediction hinges on US behavior. If so, this statement belongs in the realm of prescription. Alternatively, if this statement is meant to be the case no matter what the United States does, this statement belongs in the description category. This is just one example. At the same time, it is worth noting that the vast majority of the book deals with describing behaviors and pathologies, rather than prescribing policies.

A related source of confusion is whether the insights of this book apply to the general psychological pathologies of great powers or are limited to superpowers or even to the particular culture, history, and domestic politics of the United States. Most of the book deals with pathologies of a superpower in general, but the book does mention several examples of particular tendencies that are more specific to the United States. And yet, it is not entirely clear how Fettweis’s theory weighs the structural material variables compared to the US-specific variables. Again, this type of hypothesis testing is not what this book sets out to do, and as such, it is unfair to expect the author to delve into this. But for students seeking to understand the scope conditions of the insights offered, and hence their generalizability beyond this case, the answer to this question is crucial.

Notwithstanding these quibbles, this book offers many interesting, novel, and important insights for scholars of US foreign policy to digest and contemplate. It should appeal to a large and diverse audience, and it offers students of international relations an opportunity to build on the useful insights of psychology and study them more formally and systematically.

Response to Keren Yarhi-Milo’s review of Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy

doi:10.1017/S1537592719003426
— Christopher J. Fettweis

I very much appreciate the review from Keren Yarhi-Milo and the opportunity to conduct this dialogue. Her insights are important and helpful, and I wish I had access to them before publication. If only this kind of sustained interaction occurred more often.

As to her critiques, I am afraid I am guilty as charged. I attempted no systematic analyses of the processes under consideration and tested no hypotheses. I am grateful that international relations (IR) remains a methodologically heterogenous field, because Psychology of a Superpower marshals no scientific support for its assertions. I never considered rigorous testing, because for these subjects I simply did not think any was possible, at least in convincing ways. How can one assemble data regarding unipolar psychology when we have only had one instance of it? It seems that one of the skills valued by today’s scholars is to find creative ways to quantify the unquantifiable in order to prove the unprovable. I suppose I could have tried to construct a dataset based on some sort of textual analysis of speeches or newspaper articles, or counted UN votes or militarized disputes, but I would
have found it all terribly artificial and unconvincing. This is not to say that other scholars do not do such analysis very well, only that my subject did not lend itself to such methods. This book is saddled with my particular prejudices, I’m afraid, which are generally skeptical of the self-consciously scientific approach to security studies.

I often find case-study analysis to be even more problematic. Too often scholars develop theories based on their extensive, lifelong study of particular cases and then test the theory on those same cases. Though sold as tests of theory, case studies in IR are often merely extended defenses of the author’s argument. For these and other reasons, when reading IR books, I generally follow what I suspect is the standard pattern: I concentrate on the theory chapters up front and skim through case studies, reading in earnest again at the conclusion. All those hours of labor, all those interviews, archival research, and fieldwork go unappreciated by skeptics like me.

I wanted this book to be different, but that does not make it better. Professor Yarhi-Milo may well be right that I should have described in greater depth the psychological experiments and their results that provide so much of the support for the book’s points. I do describe a few here and there, but for the most part I merely report their findings. Earlier drafts of the book described more, but as I revised the manuscript those sections tended to bore me, so I assumed they would put all but the most determined readers to sleep. I suppose that adding more detail about the experiments, however, may well have strengthened the argument. If only Perspectives on Politics had commissioned this dialogue a bit earlier in the writing process, I could have incorporated this and her other thoughts into the book. As it is, we have to stick with the writing process, I could have incorporated this and her extended defenses of the author’s argument. For these and other reasons, when reading IR books, I generally follow what I suspect is the standard pattern: I concentrate on the theory chapters up front and skim through case studies, reading in earnest again at the conclusion. All those hours of labor, all those interviews, archival research, and fieldwork go unappreciated by skeptics like me.


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States often fight to preserve their credibility. Whether they should or not is a much different question, one that has been debated for decades by scholars of international politics. Keren Yarhi-Milo takes a different approach to the issue in Who Fights for Reputation, which is an excellent contribution to this important literature and one that expands our understanding of how beliefs affect behavior. Yarhi-Milo is less interested in whether it is wise to fight to preserve one’s reputation for resolve than in the variation in leaders’ beliefs on the subject. The key, she reasonably surmises, may well be found in the psychological profiles they bring into office.

Yarhi-Milo’s key explanatory variable is a trait that has its origins in nature rather than nurture: self-monitoring, or the ability to regulate behavior to accommodate different social situations. High self-monitors are those “inclined to modify their behavior strategically in order to cultivate status-enhancing images” (p. 11). Low self-monitors, in contrast, are less likely to take the opinions of others into consideration when making decisions. They are more concerned with aligning their internal beliefs, rather than the views of others, with their external behavior. High self-monitors are those Zeligs willing to change to win the favor of their audience; low self-monitors have a very hard time projecting different versions of themselves. There is substantial variation in self-monitoring among individuals, including among those who inhabit the Oval Office and those who do not. Thus Yarhi-Milo does what often makes political scientists uncomfortable: she crosses a disciplinary boundary to borrow a concept from another field and applies it to her topic. Both fields are better off for her having done so.

Self-monitoring, according to Yarhi-Milo, is directly related to the concern for credibility. High self-monitoring leaders will pay more attention to their reputation for resolve (hereafter abbreviated as R4R, with apologies to R2P). Low self-monitoring presidents, in contrast, will be less willing to fight to maintain their R4R. High and low self-monitors come in both hawkish and dovish forms and are found across the political spectrum.

The theory makes good intuitive sense. Those most concerned with how others perceive them should also be most concerned with how their states are perceived during crises. Yarhi-Milo hardly relies on intuition, however; she employs an impressive array of methods to test her theory, beginning with a series of survey experiments, followed by a large-N statistical analysis of post–Cold War presidential decisions, and finally three in-depth historical case studies (of Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Clinton). Along the way she performs textual analysis of presidential speeches and conducts a survey of 68 presidential historians. Each method produces strong support for the notion that self-monitoring is linked to an actor’s concern for reputation and that high self-monitoring presidents will be more willing to use force to preserve their R4R. By the book’s end, the reader is left fully convinced that a real relationship exists and that no potential research avenue has been left unexplored.

Who Fights for Reputation is an excellent work of social science. It asks interesting and important questions; it lays out reasonable, testable hypotheses; it employs a series of quite diverse methods to evaluate its claims. It provides much to think about and certainly helps explain the variation in presidential concerns for credibility. Although any criticism will seem like nitpicking, there seems little
point in having a “critical dialogue” without some limited contention. So I will highlight a few concerns.

The first nit could be picked from the experiments regarding the theory’s “microfoundations.” In a chapter cowritten with Joshua Kertzer, Yarhi-Milo reports the results of an experiment performed in the United States and Israel regarding the connection between self-monitoring in individuals and their willingness to fight to preserve their reputations. The crucial variation comes in the way participants were primed or the manner in which their tasks were described to them. A control group received straightforward instructions; another was told that if the United States failed to remain firm its enemies may doubt its resolve; a third was told the same thing, replacing the word “enemies” with “allies”; and a fourth group was primed with the phrase “the eyes of the international community are on us.” This wording supposedly allows for the sensitivity of participants to the opinions of others, and therefore their concern for reputation, to shine through. Although priming is a common technique in psychology experiments, it is not without perils for political science. The extent to which such phrases actually bring R4R to the forefront of participant concerns in a simulation regarding international politics is not fully clear. There is also a limit to the amount that such experiments can teach us about presidential decision making, because it is not obvious that participants in an experiment, even primed participants, react in ways similarly to national leaders. Jonathan Mercer spoke for many skeptics of experimental political science when he observed, “Bismarck was not an American college sophomore” (Reputation and International Politics, 1996, p. 70). Fortunately it is not necessary for the theory’s microfoundations to be on firm ground for it to be convincing.

Validity again becomes an issue for the quantitative analysis. Yarhi-Milo constructs a dataset to test the correlation between self-monitoring and concern for R4R and runs into some problems operationalizing her concepts. To represent presidential self-monitoring, she uses a score compiled from her survey of historians (which unfortunately we cannot assess, because there appears to have been an oversight regarding the online appendix—its address is not given, and Google was no help finding it). Concern for R4R is much more difficult to measure quantitatively so she uses proxies, both of which are drawn from the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) database: the number of MIDs the United States was involved in and the number it initiated. Neither is particularly satisfying. Although there is clearly some connection between resolve and the willingness to fight, MIDs involve much more than presidential concerns for credibility. The rest of the world gets a vote, at the very least. She attempts to control for variation in the security environment by including the worldwide rate of MIDs, but this is not a reflection of US national security concerns. The rate of violent disputes involving the United States is not merely a function of decisions made by its leaders nor is it the equivalent of their concern for resolve. The use of MIDs may be the best available way to approximate R4R, but it is an imperfect one that injects error into the model.

The self-monitoring scores for presidents are based to the extent possible on the standard measurements used by psychologists, but they correlate weakly with popular perceptions of their R4R. Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Clinton all score substantially higher than Nixon, for instance, which does not comport with how they ran their foreign policies. I need more detail and explanation to be convinced that these presidents were more concerned with R4R than was Nixon, who prolonged a rather important MID (and engaged in other little ones, like the farcical Mayaguez “crisis”) largely to preserve US credibility and honor. Nixon’s America may well have engaged in fewer MIDs, but that was the result of relatively low levels of Soviet activity, not underattention to R4R.

Overall, the quantitative analysis produces the banalities standard to all MID-related research (“the United States was significantly more likely to be involved in and initiate military coercion against autocracies as well as less powerful countries,” p. 93), rather than persuasive evidence for the theory. The cases are much more interesting. Carter, Reagan, and Clinton were examined because they provide variation on both self-monitoring and hawkishness, and Yarhi-Milo was interested in seeing whether the measures were distinct. Again, one cannot help but think that Nixon would have made a more interesting subject.

Crisis gives the cases structure. For each presidency, Yarhi-Milo focuses on three to four instances where we might expect R4R to have factored into decision making. Like all good qualitative analyses, the cases follow the same pattern, asking similar questions in similar ways. The choice of crises is a bit puzzling, however. From the Carter era, she chooses three crises that involved the Soviet Union, whereas only one of the four Reagan-era crises did. These choices are certainly important, because the primary target for US reputational concerns during the Cold War was the Soviets, and we might expect different emphasis on R4R based on (1) the seriousness of the crisis and (2) the actors involved. The crises from the Clinton years include the intervention in Somalia and the Taiwan Straits of 1995–96, which were significantly different from both each other and the previous choices. Such wide variation can be a strength clearly, but it also has its weaknesses: Reputation for resolve has no meaning in the absence of an audience, and the composition of the target audience may well affect decision making. The cases here assume that concern for credibility is constant, as if policy makers cared equally about their reputations in the
I would like to thank Christopher Fettweis for his thoughtful comments and kind words on my book. In the rest of this response, I respond to some of the key points he raises in his review. First, Fettweis notes that “Nixon would have been a more interesting case to explore” because Nixon seems to have engaged in prolonged MIDs to defend reputation and credibility. I agree with Fettweis that Nixon would have been an interesting case. Indeed, when I started this project I wanted to write about Nixon. Nixon’s personality, it can be argued, played a significant role in shaping his foreign policy behavior, and as a result, he could have been a good test case to explore in the book. However, there are at least three important reasons why Nixon might be a problematic case. First, as the book clearly indicates, historians are split in their assessment of Nixon’s self-monitoring. As a result, Nixon cannot be classified as an ideal-type high or low self-monitor. From a research design perspective, the case studies should illuminate the causal mechanisms underlying cases in which the value of the independent variable falls clearly within one category. Second, Nixon’s behavior, even in the realm of foreign policy, revealed some inconsistencies in terms of concerns for reputation for resolve. Furthermore, given Kissinger’s influence over foreign policy during his administration, it is difficult to separate where Kissinger’s ideas ended and Nixon’s began.

Another important point that Fettweis raises is whether concerns for reputation are constant throughout the cases I explore. Indeed, it is the variation in concerns for reputation that I seek to explain in this book. But Fettweis asks whether we should expect all cases to generate a similar level of reputational concerns for decision makers. In the book I deal with this variation in two different ways. First, I argue that in all the Cold War crises, the Soviet Union was the primary outside audience, whereas in the crises in the post–Cold War era, the audiences vary depending on the crisis. I further offer evidence about public opinion and pressure from allies during each of those crises to identify the strength of support for the use of force.

Finally, Fettweis wonders whether I consider President Obama to be a low self-monitor. My answer is that I cannot offer a definitive answer to this question; the classification of leaders is a task that is best assigned to scholars, experts, or at least personal acquaintances who know or have studied the president on and off camera. But even if we were to classify President Obama as a low self-monitor, it does not mean that he would be unable or disinclined to ever modify his behavior in response to social cues. Rather, it is a matter of the degree and frequency with which he chose to do so. Overall, however, I do believe it is worthwhile to extend the analysis to Presidents Obama and Trump and probe whether these two out-of-sample presidents fit the overall pattern I identified in this book.

Response to Christopher J. Fettweis’s review of Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict
doi:10.1017/S1537592719003724

— Keren Yarhi-Milo