

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Polarity and International System Consequences

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Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union has produced the biggest change in the balance of power since World War II, thus transforming the bipolar system of the Cold War into a unipolar international system dominated by American power. Restructuring the system of international relations, led many scholars to declare the creation of a new world order. Since 1989, one of their central concerns has been the analyzing of the system and how it would function in the absence of the old style bipolar balance of power. That is the reason the studies on the polarity of the international system and comparative analyzes between unipolarity, bipolarity or multi-polarity, constitute the central debate in international relations theories.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how structures, dynamics or characteristics of different types of polar systems affect the sustainability of international relations. At the same time, this paper aims to highlight the essential components which define the status of a polar power in the structure of the international relations, by defining primarily the notion of “polarity” and analyzing the unipolar, bipolar and multi-polar systems. Secondly, this article scrutinizes the structure of the new international order established after the Cold War, which is clearly a unipolar system, unlike previous historical epochs, where the distribution of power among the major states attempted to create a bipolar or multi-polar system.

Through the study of literature and documents, as well as being based on two classical theories of international relations, the theory of hegemonic stability and the balance of power, we conclude that unipolarity brings about a more stable and peaceful system.

Key words: *polarity, international system, international relations, stability.*

Introduction

In efforts to understand the nature of the international system, many scholars have used a variety of terms, like: empire, hegemony, imperial power, colossus with hegemonic power, etc. For a long time have been looking for a language that can describe and introduce historical and comparative perspective on the structure of the international order in different periods, although the terminology used has created more confusion than clarity about global system. Therefore it is not surprising that studies on the polarity of the international system and comparative analyzes between unipolar, bipolar or multi-polar systems turned to central debate in the theories of international relations. Not only the debates on the polarity of the system, but also those on hegemony or anti - hegemonic balancing coalitions, reflect the fact that the role of the state is a defining paradigm in the international order. We cannot doubt that although the states have different capacities to act, they continue to be essential actors of the international order.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the change into a bipolar were very important moments, which influenced the studies in the field of international relations and the explanations given on polarity. Most of the researchers were found unprepared in the end of the Cold War. A very small number predicted that the system could be unipolar. Since

then, a lot of studies have been made on unipolarity, the peace that derives from it, its sustainability or failure. Also, the newly formed world order led to the emergence of many scientific debates to understand the trends of dominant states, threats to such a system, a state's ability to translate its dominant powers into effective influence (Jervis, 2006: 7-19) as well as other issues that will be discussed in this article.

Based on theoretical approaches, scholars do not agree on how the structures, dynamics and the features of polar systems affect the stability of international relations system. Therefore, by explaining the concept of polarity as an important causal variable and by analyzing the restructuring of the international system after the Cold War, we would conclude that the unipolar system, compared with different types of polar systems, enables a more stable and peaceful international system.

Polarity in the system of international relations

In fact polarity is a theoretical concept. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, William Wohlforth try to interpret it as a concept that brings a threshold value of the distribution of capabilities (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, Wohlforth, 2009: 5). According to them, the polarity implies a threshold value in relation to the capacity to be reached by the power of states

in order to be considered “polar actor” in the international system. But, how can one understand whether or to what extent a particular state has met the necessary requirements of distribution of capabilities, in order to turn the international system into a unipolar, bipolar or multi-polar one. For this we will need to refer to the conventional definition of the term “pole”, according to which the international system is unipolar if a state contains capacities which unequivocally place it in a separate category compared to all other states in the system (Wohlforth, 1999: 1-36). This concept has been extensively discussed among scholars of international relations, thus creating an abundant literature on polarity, where the scholar Kenneth Waltz is worth mentioning. According to this researcher, for states to qualify as poles, they should have the following power components, such as size of population, territory, natural resources, economic power, military and force (Waltz, 1979: 131). Waltz writes in *The Theory of International Politics* that “polar actor” is a state that: (a) enjoys considerable level of resources or opportunities to achieve its goals; (b) exceeds other states in every element of state capacity conventionally defined as, the size of population and territory, natural resources, economic capacity and military forces, as well as organizational-institutional “competence” (Waltz, 1979: 131). The unipolar system is the system, whose structure is determined by the fact that only one state meets these criteria.

Referring to the realistic school of international relations, which is created by the concept of “polarity”, one will understand that “poles” are considered the most important actors within the system of international relations, where the skills of the latter are so great that they can not be counterbalanced (Niou, Ordeshook, Rose, 1989: 77-106). Fatos Tarifa, following this school, states that “polar actor” is considered one state or coalition of states, which is so important, that his leaving or entering into the system will change the architectural structure of the international system itself (Tarifa, 2010: 48). He specifies four essential components which determine the status of a power polar in the international structure: political power, economic power, military power and technological power (Ibid).

Polarity refers to the distribution of power in the international community, thus describing the nature of the international system and the consequences that come from it. Continuing to refer to the theory of structural realism, the concept of “polarity” is made quite clear during three time periods of modern Western civilization.

In the table below we present a list of great powers into three periods, which correspond to different structures of the international system: multi-polar system from 1816 to 1945; bipolar system from 1946 until 1989; and, unipolar international system, from 1990.

In a historical perspective, since 1750s, (more concretely the seven-War period, in the years 1754-1763, which included most of the great powers of the time) until 1945, coincides with a multi-polar structure of the international system. States such as Prussia, England, Spain, France and Russia, which had a very powerful army and navy, are qualified as polar forces in the multi-polar system. A multi-polar international system is considered when the distribution of political, military, economic, technological and cultural power among at least three “polar states” or three “polar actors” is such that the latter have almost equal global impact. However, it is worth mentioning that there should be at least three actors to dominate the polar system, so that the structure of the international order can be termed as multi-polar.

After World War II, another historical period in the system of international relations began, which gave a form of bipolar structure. Bipolarity can be defined as a system of world order, in which the distribution of power is such that only two states have the greatest impact on economic, military and global culture. The classic case of a bipolar world, and at the same time the first in modern history, is the period of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. These two countries dominated international system in the second half of the twentieth century having different spheres of political and military influence. The system was structured and functioned as bipolar from the point of view of military potential, the type of political regime, the shape of the economic system and the contradictory dominant ideologies (Tarifa, 2010: 51) like capitalism and communism.

Table 1: Great Powers since 1816

	<i>Multi-polarity</i>		<i>Bipolarity</i>		<i>Unipolarity</i>	
	<i>Period</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>years</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Years</i>
Austro- Hungarian Empire	1816-1918	102				
France	1816-1940	124				
Prussia/Germany	1816-1918/ 1925-45	123				
Italy	1860-1943	83				
Japan	1895-1945	50				
Great Britain	1816-1945	129				
Russia /USSR	1816-1917/ 1922-45	125	1946-89	43		
USA	1898-1945	47	1946-89	43	1990-2013	23

Source: “Correlates of war”,¹ version 4.0 of the date in: Meredith R. Sarkees & Frank Wayman. 2010. *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-state, Extra-state, Intrastate, and Non-state Wars, 1816-2007*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

¹Correlates of War (COW), is an academic study of the history of wars. The project was initiated by political scientist J. David Singer in 1963, the University of Michigan and consists of data collection about the history of wars and conflicts between states. COW provides data from 1812 to 2007, for annual data concerning: total population; urban population; energy iron and steel consumption; military spending and military personnel.

No doubt, there will be periods in which the polarity of the system will be difficult to determine, but now there seems that we are not living in one of them. Researchers mostly agree with the idea that, that before 1945 there were more than three countries that qualified as poles: from 1950 onwards, only two states were at the right level to be determined as polar actors; while in the early 1990s, one of these two poles lost this status. As a result, the United States emerged as the largest military, political and economic power of the world.

Researchers use the term “unipolarity” to distinguish a structure in international relations, in which the distribution of power is such that only a “pole” or “polar actor” exercises greater cultural, economic and military influence by dominating the system. In this system, the superpower should effectively solve the important international issues, without being possible that other states combined together have the power to prevent it from doing so. While, according to the classical realist theory of balance of power, but also the logic of neorealist’s, unipolarity is a structure in which the skills of the polar actor are so great, that they cannot be counterbalanced (Niou, Ordeshook, Rose, 1989: 76). According to them, the unipolar system is that system in which power is counterbalance is impossible. When counterbalance becomes possible, then the system cannot be called unipolar.

In this view, the unipolar structure is completely distinct from multi-polar or bi-polar structure that we discussed above. In fact, numerous studies on polarity tend to be somewhat ambiguous. However, there aren’t many uncertainties concerning the structure of the international system after the Cold War, where the majority of researchers agree that the new system created was purely unipolar. The issue will be treated as follows

Restructuring of international system after the cold war

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, there is no doubt on the American supremacy in world affairs. While the Gulf War in 1990 increased the aspirations of some researchers for a new multi-polar era, the international system seemed less multi-polar than ever, truly demonstrating what President George H.W. Bush proclaimed a *new unipolar world order*².

Charles Krauthammer was among the first to use the concept of unipolarity in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, arguing that:

It is assumed that the old bipolar world will give way to a multi-polar world, where power will be distributed in several centers [...]. the immediate post-Cold War world is not multi-

polar, but unipolar. The Center of world power is the unquestioned superpower of the United States, followed by its Western allies (Krauthammer, 1990-91: 23).

The definition of Krauthammer continues to be among the most cited definitions of scholars of international relations, reflecting the inability of the Soviet Union to have a leading role in the world, while America is magnified as the only unchallenged power in the new unipolar world. But according to him during the last decade of the 20th century, the gap separating the United States from all other major powers grew even more, thus making the features of a unipolar system more distinctive.

Since 1815, the structure of the international system has never been more evident than after the collapse of the Soviet Union as superpower. Unlike most historical epochs, where the distribution of power among the major states attempted to create multi-polar or a bipolar system, in the early 90s, for the first time in modern history, the system was clearly unipolar.

But, how did the United States reach the status of polar power, to later lead solely the international system? Indeed the United States has been able to lead the world, before the First World War, but the USA foreign policy, from its foundation to 1940, was isolationist and rigid in its character, thus being withdrawn from global issues. Only in the early 1940s President Franklin D. Roosevelt estimated to co-operate and consider Europe an important partner. After World War II, when the United States were able to show the world the power and its importance for global security, U.S. foreign policy changed direction and America became the most important actor in the international system and its leader.

With a more powerful army than any other country (SIPRI Yearbook 2010: 196–198), with defense expenditure that is almost half of global military spending (Ibid: 202); with a marine and naval fleet superior to all other countries combined together (Work, 2005: 16); with a nuclear superiority over its former enemy, Russia (Lieber, Press, 2006: 16), with a budget for research and development in the field of defense which occupies 80 percent of the total budget for defense of its future rival, China (SIPRI Yearbook 2010: 202); and with an unmatched ability to design power (Lieber, 2005: 16), it is understandable that as the United States, after reaching the status of sole superpower continue to run the system, which, according to many scholars of international relations continued to be Unipolar not only in the post Cold World War period, but also over the century that we are actually living. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, the slow economic growth in Japan and Western Europe during the 1990s, the USA's overwhelming victory in the First war in Persian Gulf accompanied with its leadership in the peace process in the Middle East during 1991, and the increasing military, political and economical power, further widened the gap between the United States and other powers.

Unlike the leaders of previous systems of international relations, the concentration of power of the United States since the fall of the Berlin Wall, has been *symmetrical unipolar*. This means that the United States, as the sole polar actor, have been omnipotent in all material indicators of economic power, military, technological and geopolitical

²President George H.W. Bush in a speech to Congress on 6 March 2001, stated: "Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order. In the words of Winston Churchill, a world order in which "the principles of justice and fair play protect the weak against the strong [...] A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations"

Found in: http://www.cspan.org/executive/transcript.asp?cat=current_event&code=bush_admin&year=0391;

power. All maritime and commercial powers, that most scholars identify as hegemon of the past, were largely deficient in military terms, even though they had an impact on global issues. Here, Great Britain, which was known as naval and financial power, is no exception together with Russia or France. American supremacy after the Cold War was already seen not only in military and economic terms, where it dominates the trade and business, but also in cultural terms, where the language and the products of American mass culture products conquered the world, making the U.S. the superpower of the twenty first century. It should be said, that the asymmetry of the power of a leader state generates ambiguity, because if a state is an economic and naval power, but cannot be classified as military power on land, sea and air, it can seem powerful, but also unprotected. This creates confusion and ambiguity in the classification of states in the structure of the international system, by not making possible a fair classification on the most powerful, the safest, or the most threatened country, or on a possible candidate for polar actor. In this situation, where the change of the system of international order makes it clear that the fate of countries in world politics can change even without war, one fact remains unchanged, the unprecedented supremacy of America as the only polar actor in the new global architecture after the Cold War.

Unipolarity - peaceful and sustainable?

There are different views on the stability of polar systems. In most cases, the scholars not only disagree on the question which of the systems: unipolar, bipolar, or multi-polar offers more stability, but do not speak with the same language concerning the variables that will determine the stability. For some of them, stability implies the absence of war, peace, for others implies such a strong and consolidated structure of international system which faces the challenges for its alternation. According to other scholars as Kenneth N. Waltz and later William C. Wohlforth, stability should be associated with two components, stability and peaceful character of the system. Instead, the classic realist theorist Hans Morgenthau, argues that multi-polar systems are more stable compared with other forms of polarity, since the major powers can benefit power through alliances and small wars that do not directly challenge other powers; according to him, in the bipolar systems this is not possible to happen (Morgenthau, [1948] 1973: 167-169). Other authors support the view that, while the balance of power in a bipolar system is both strong and delicate, the unipolar system, embodied in American hegemony, is more stable than the bipolar system and will continue to be maintained for a long time.

We will refer below on the classical theories of international relations. They are the hegemonic stability theory and that the balance of power theory and have been for a long time on the focus of scholarly debate in international relations. *Hegemonic stability theory* is a theory of international relations under which the international system is more stable and when a nation-state is the only polar actor, the dominant world power, or hegemon (Goldstein, 2005: 107). According to this theory, the lack of leader state would reduce the stability of the international system. This state, which has the ability to dominate the rules and arrangements in political and economic international relations, leads on its own by setting a dominant power, either through diplomacy, through

coercion or persuasion (Goldstein, 2005: 83). According to them, the dominant position of a single power provides more security, peace and stability in the global level.

The essence of this theory emphasizes that the more the power and strength be concentrated on the leader state, the more peaceful is the international order, in which this state is included. Conflict occurs only if the leader state and its challenger disagree about their relative power. The situation is such, the leader seeks at all costs to maintain the status quo, considering the latter possible, given the power of his leadership, on the other hand, in parallel with efforts of the hegemon to maintain the system unchanged, the state number two, believes it has the power to challenge it. Expectations to deal with such a conflict are high under two circumstances: when the overall gap between the leader state and the challenger state is small, and / or when the challenger rivals leader state in several elements of national power, and both sides do not agree on the relative importance of these elements.

Another theory that has been the focus of explaining the sustainability as well as the peaceful or non-peaceful character of the unipolar system is *the balance of power theory*, which underlies in the realistic and neorealist school. According to this theory, in an anarchic order consisting of powerful and threatening states the balance of power is the only viable strategy. This theory predicts that the international system is uncertain as long as it is not accompanied by the tendency to equilibrate the power within it. As Waltz notes, "unbalanced power constitutes a potential danger to others, regardless of who owns it" (Waltz, 1997: 915).³ Meanwhile, according to William Wohlforth the most accepted among its representatives, is the belief that the unipolar system has the tendency to create a peaceful international system.

Finally, we can say that the theory of hegemonic stability and that of the balance of power, make us clear the limits of concentration of power in order to have a peaceful system. The balance of power theory conveys the idea: the less, the better for peace, but if the rivalry among the great powers is not kept to a minimum, the latter will respond to the polar state with the counterbalance of power to create balance in the system. While hegemonic theory entitles hegemonic state, with full force, to eliminate the rivalries for supremacy, thus maintaining the status quo. Although the relationship between these controversial theories is quite complex, it is important therefore that the two theories, the *hegemonic power* and *balancing of power*, predict that the unipolar system is more peaceful.

However, personally we think that, as long as we are dealing with a system where only one of the states is at the top, there are very few uncertainties, which may be faced by other countries when it comes to calculating the power, or creating alliances. The idea is that these "second level" states do not have many options, but only two: either to become a party of polar power explicitly or implicitly, or at least, not to take any action that might cause hostility thereof. As long as their

³Among the main criticisms against neorealist arguments of stability is that, only the concentration of power is a totally insufficient indicator to explain the tendency for war that can characterize the international system in a given time period. See: Robert Powell. 1996. "Stability and the Distribution of Power", *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 239-267.

security policies are oriented towards the power and preferences of single pole, second level countries are less likely to engage in conflicts for security or prestige, thus keeping away from and creating not only as peaceful, but also a sustainable system of international relations

Conclusions

Finally we can say that the concepts “pole” and “polarity”, are important causal variables that are widely used in analysis of international relations systems. The concept of polarity implies that within a certain relationship, one or several actors are so important, that their leaving or entering the system will change the architectural structure of the international system itself. Essential components which can determine the status of a polar power in the international structure are: political power, economic power, military power and technological power.

According to the theory of structural realism, the concept of “polarity” is made quite clear during the three time periods of modern Western civilization. Before 1945 there were more than three countries that qualified as poles, thus creating a multi-polar international system; after World War II, and later, only two states were at the right level to be determined as an polar actors by making the system of international relations recognize the classical case of a bipolar world; while in the early 1990s, one of these two poles lost this status. As a result, the United States emerged as the largest military, political and economic power in the world, thus reshaping the international order of the post-Cold War.

Views on sustainability and peaceful character of polar systems are different. Classical theories of international relations, as the theory of hegemonic stability and balance of power theory, predict that the unipolar system is more peaceful, while sharing different views on its sustainability. According to the theory of hegemonic stability, the international system is more stable when a nation-state is the only polar actor or hegemon, because the dominating position of a single power provides more security, peace and stability in the global level.

However, we must be clear that, although unipolarity creates less opportunity for rivalry, thus offering more security for great powers, this system does not mean the end of any conflict. Unipolarity should be understood as a kind of system structure, which prevents the existence of two major problems which in the last epochs have been evident: rivalry for hegemonic status and problems with balancing political power among great powers. Therefore, the efforts of international relations scholars to portray the American unipolar order as dangerous and threatening, should be rejected.

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