



Multipolar Myths and Unipolar Fantasies

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Is the world becoming multipolar or will it remain unipolar? Analysts disagree, but it might be that this does not matter too much and that we better skip polarity terminology altogether.

It is quite common in EU circles in Brussels to describe the current world order as multipolar. Even the European institutions themselves in their official statements from time to time refer to multipolarity or at least to an evolution towards a more multipolar world. They are not the only ones. Multipolarity has been a recurrent ingredient of Chinese foreign policy discourse since the late 1980s. In Russia, despite all the differences between the Yeltsin and Putin reigns, they have one thing in common: the promotion of multipolarity as a central goal of Russian foreign policy. BRIC-countries like to refer to a multipolar world in their summit statements and thus it is also present in EU partnership declarations with these countries.

So one might conclude that all major world players agree that the international system is becoming multipolar or is already, if it were not for some American academics who continue to claim that the world is unipolar and will remain so for some time.

Indeed, ever since the Neo-conservative Charles Krauthammer coined the term 'the unipolar moment' in 1990, there has been a whole school of thought in the United States that describes the world in terms of a lasting American unipolarity, if not hegemony.¹ Admittedly in the United States too there were authors who claimed that this unipolar moment would not last long, or has simply never been there. Yet the difference is striking: many Americans think the world is unipolar, and the rest of the world thinks it is or is becoming multipolar.

Now, one could argue that American unipolarists are just a bunch of ivory tower university professors, but that is too easy an argument, given the intellectual calibre of many of the participants in the debate and the sophistication of their arguments. Moreover, though both the Clinton and the G. W. Bush administrations avoided explicit references to unipolarity or hegemony, their foreign and defence policies (though very different in outlook) started from the same premise of American dominance. It was only under Obama that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mentioned an evolution towards 'a multipolar world and towards a multi-partner world.'² But here too, the differences with the world views of the former administrations might be less

than one might think at first glance, for even the current administration stresses the need for American leadership and the fact that the United States will continue to remain the strongest nation in the world.

So if the American unipolarists are right, the multipolarists in the rest of the world must be wrong. However, European and Asian politicians and commentators are not less intelligent than their American counterparts. If they talk about multipolarity they must have good reasons. In official statements, wording is subject to detailed negotiations and compromise between participants. It is not by mere nonchalance that multipolarity is used or omitted.

So who is right? Are we confronted with a ‘Unipolar Fantasy’ as one author claimed, or with a ‘Multipolar Myth’ as another stated?³ I argue that both sides are right because they speak about different things. At the same time, I claim they might both be wrong because polarity does not help much in describing and analysing the complex international situation we face today.

BACK TO THE COLD WAR

Polarity left a deep imprint on how academics think about international relations. Every undergraduate who takes just a short introductory course on international relations theory knows that for the Neo-realist school, polarity – that is the number of great powers – is the central structuring element of the international system. It is the factor that defines how interaction between great powers develops, how mechanisms like ‘the balance of power’ and the ‘security dilemma’ function.

But polarity has never been a purely academic concept. It was already around for several decades before Neo-realism emerged as the dominant school in American international relations theory. The term ‘bipolarity’ was used from 1945 onwards to describe the new

situation that emerged from the Second World War. It was widely used by politicians, political commentators and academics alike. In this broader non-academic sense, bipolarity was closely linked to the term Cold War. After World War Two the world had become bipolar, so it was said, and that was a completely different situation from the one before 1945. As Wagner put it: ‘One reason why the concept of bipolarity has seemed meaningful to many people in spite of its ambiguities and contradictions is that it conforms to their intuition that there was something special about the distribution of power among states after World War Two.’⁴

But what was so special about this post-World War Two period? What did people mean when they called it bipolar? In fact, as is so often the case, they meant several things at the same time.

Firstly, there were two superpowers, which were much more powerful than the other states, even than other, residual great powers, such as France and Great Britain.

Secondly, there were not only two superpowers but also two blocs usually referred to as East and West. This was about more than just two alliances. In history there have been many periods when two alliances confronted each other, for example, on the eve of the First World War. What made the situation after 1945 really unique was the combination of two opposing military alliances within two opposing blocs of states with different types of society, economic systems, etc.

Thirdly, the situation was profoundly polarized. It was difficult to remain neutral, to find a third way between the West and the East. Every conflict anywhere on the globe was seen as part of a worldwide contest. So was every domain of human activity: military, economic, social and cultural, even personal.

Bipolarity was not just about military confrontation or commercial competition. It was about a profound ideological clash over how society should be organized. It was about the Cold War, a deeply bipolarized situation.

Finally, bipolarity was about the bipolar nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Though the bipolar confrontation was an all-inclusive phenomenon, it was at the same time highly militarized and nuclearized.

All these different aspects emerged in the same short period of time, between 1944 (the end phase of World War Two) and 1950 (the Korean War). Except for the nuclear arms race (but not nuclear weapons and deterrence as such) all these elements also disappeared in a similarly short period between March 1985 (Gorbachev taking office) and December 1991 (the end of the Soviet Union).

At that point bipolarity was clearly over: that is the one thing unipolarists and multipolarists agree about. They differ, however, on what was the most important change that happened.

TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENT THINGS

When discussing the new, so-called ‘post-Cold War’ situation, unipolarists and multipolarists emphasize different things.

For unipolarists the most important change was the disappearance of the Soviet Union. As two minus one makes one, the United States became the only superpower and thus the world became unipolar. Multipolarists do not deny that the world became unipolar after 1990, but they consider it a temporary phenomenon. New powers are rising or will do so in the future. Unipolarists do not deny this but claim it will take a long time before any other power will be able to challenge the United States. In fact, much of the academic uni/multipolar debate has been dominated by

a rather fruitless discussion of how long unipolarity will last.

Secondly, unipolarists neglect the huge impact the disappearance of the East–West divide had on world politics. This is partly due to an almost exclusive focus on military affairs, and from that perspective they are of course right: the American alliance system remained intact and even expanded to encompass Eastern Europe. American military dominance is undisputed and it will remain so for some time. Multipolarists, on the contrary, take a broader and more sophisticated view. By multipolarity they mean that the East–West bloc system is no longer there, that economic, financial and commercial, cultural and ideological relations are structured in a much more complex way. Alignments and coalitions are no longer automatically formed according to the great contradiction between the two opposing systems, but can change according to the domain (economic, military) and the issue at stake. This pattern was as typical of the multipolar nineteenth century as it is in the post-Cold War. American power is much bigger than the rest but this does not imply that everybody follows the American lead without posing questions. To put it another way: multipolarists speak about influence and interaction between states; unipolarists speak about mere material, and above all military, power.

This brings us to the third point. Some American unipolarists do use a broader approach than just a focus on military capabilities. But in that case they see the United States as the inventor of democracy, free trade and market economy. Such a view of world history and the development of Western values (surely distorted to French and British eyes) leads to the idea that it was the United States, not the West as a whole, let alone the people of the former Soviet bloc, that ‘won’ the Cold War. Unipolarists do not realize that the end of

the ideological bipolarization gives much more freedom to individual states – even if they share US world views – to pursue their own interests and insights in world politics. When Western European multipolarists, especially the French, speak about multipolarity, they also mean this larger freedom of action, and not feeling obliged to follow an American lead unconditionally.

Nobody seems to pay much attention to the fourth element: nuclear weapons. Unipolarists and multipolarists apparently agree that they are no longer an important element in great power relations. This is remarkable, given the centrality of nuclear weapons in the Cold War East–West confrontation. Yet there is no reason why nuclear deterrence should no longer play its role in the current situation. More than any reference to unipolarity or multipolarity, it might, for example, explain a great deal about how the Georgian and Ukrainian crises have been dealt with, in comparison with, for example, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Finally, unipolar and multipolar discourses are normative. Unipolarists are influenced by hegemonic thinking and believe the world is better off when there is one world leader providing stability and guidance. Therefore Americans should try to turn unipolarity into a lasting feature of international relations. By contrast, multipolarity is depicted as a recipe for instability and dangerous great power confrontation. Former Foreign Secretary Condoleezza Rice evaluated multipolarity as follows: “The reality is that “multi-polarity” was never a unifying idea, or a vision. It was a necessary evil that sustained the absence of war but it did not promote the triumph of peace. Multipolarity is a theory of rivalry; of competing interests and – at its worst – competing values.”⁵⁵

By contrast, for multipolarists, unipolarity leads to instability and irresponsible and unbalanced behaviour, whereas multipolarity leads to stability. The former French president Jacques Chirac, a strong promoter of multipolarity, saw

it as an alternative to chaotic great power struggles: ‘*Contre le chaos politique qui résulterait du jeu aveugle des rivalités internationales, la France s’emploie à construire un monde multipolaire.*’⁵⁶ Moreover, the argument goes, the fact that the United States is the biggest (military) power does not mean that it has the right to lead the world alone. Other powers should have a say on how the world is run. In his infamous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin said unipolarity was ‘without moral foundations for modern civilisation.’⁵⁷

To summarize, some people believe the world is unipolar and that this is a good thing. So the United States should do everything to prolong the immediate post-Cold War situation. Others, however, are not convinced of the moral benefits of unipolarity, but also believe that, luckily, it will not last too long. So the best policy is to stimulate the evolution towards a more balanced multipolar situation.

WHY WE SHOULD FORGET ABOUT POLARITY

Given the confusion surrounding the concept, polarity is remarkably persistent. This might be because it functions as a shorthand for where you stand in the debate on the American position in the world. Do you believe the United States is still the predominant power, the only real military, economic, financial and ideological leader of the world? Declare yourself a unipolarist. Or are you instead convinced that the world is far too complex and diverse for talking of American predominance, and that the United States has no *carte blanche* to run the world on its own? Call yourself a multipolarist.

Yet apart from the vagueness and confusion, there are plenty of other arguments against using polarity at all.

Firstly, it is clearly self-serving. It is no accident that most unipolarists are found in the United

States, or that an official multipolar discourse is found in the BRIC-countries. Such countries usually see themselves as actual or potential ‘poles’. By using a multipolarity discourse they at least partially want to promote their own influence, position, and status as great powers. Russia is the example *par excellence* of this self-serving use of multipolarity. Just as many American unipolarists, whether or not of a Neo-conservative stamp, implicitly or explicitly want to promote American interests, world views and indeed raw power.

Secondly, just because polarity is so often used in an ideological, self-serving way, it might upset people. This is especially true for Europeans. Admittedly, several partners in the EU partnerships agreement are devoted to multipolarity, and so it is normal that the word pops up in declarations of these partnerships. But David Scott has pointed out that there is no real consensus between European Member States as to whether multipolarity should be a foreign policy goal of the EU.⁸ This is related to differences of opinion on American–European relations but also to differences on the future of the EU as a traditional great power, especially in the military sense. Lack of consensus is then covered by putting the accent on multilateralism, on which both supporters and opponents of multipolarism can agree.

Our point however is this: why use the polarity terminology at all? Most of the time you do not need it to make your point. For example, there is no need at all to refer to multipolarity if you’re pleading for a stronger Common Security and Defence Policy. You can easily argue that in the present complex situation – even unipolarists do not really deny this complexity – there is a need for Europe to take more responsibility for its own security and defence, and that more cooperation is needed. Similarly, we should not forget that both the Clinton and the G. W. Bush administrations avoided any reference to unipolarity or hegemony, but they were both convinced that the United States was the

dominant world power and they wanted to keep it that way.

Take the French–American row over the 2003 intervention in Iraq. Chirac’s multipolar rhetoric in defending his opposition to the intervention became the target of anti-French arguments and led to furious remarks about the dangers of multipolarity from American policymakers, like Rice’s quote above. In an interview, Tony Blair called Chirac’s vision of multipolarity dangerous.⁹ The whole dispute was of course primarily rhetorical, hiding what was really at stake: a different evaluation of the situation in Iraq, and to a lesser extent, diverging attitudes towards NATO and European Security and Defence Policy.

Last but not least, the problem with the polarity literature is that it does not help us to explain military, diplomatic and economic developments. If you look back to the nineteenth century, you might say that it was multipolar as there were at least five great powers. Even this statement needs some qualification, as there were important differences in power between them. But multipolarity does not explain much about the evolution of the balance of power between these powers, or about the profound social, technological, ideological and geopolitical changes and challenges that were so typical of that era. Multipolarity was one of the factors that made crisis management difficult in the run up to the First World War. It is the example *par excellence* for those who believe multipolarity is unstable. But multipolarity was certainly not the only factor, and probably not the most important one. Moreover, polarity theory does not explain why the hundred years since the end of the Napoleonic Wars witnessed hardly any wars between the great powers.

Similarly, a recent reader on the contemporary effects of unipolarity, with contributions from the most outstanding Neo-realist scholars,

most of them unipolarists, surprisingly concludes that unipolarity does not provide a sufficient explanation for most of the cases discussed in the volume.¹⁰ Indeed, it does not explain American failure in Iraq and Afghanistan, the refusal of Germany and France to join the 2003 invasion, the rise of Islamic jihad, the growing influence of China in Asia, or the helplessness of the United States towards a left-populist regime in Venezuela. Likewise many studies that start from a multipolar standpoint do not explain how the rise of new great powers actually affects international relations. Usually they are reduced to some kind of SWOT analysis of the existing and rising powers, with some experts discussing individual states, combined with the eternal question of whether the EU should be considered a great power.¹¹ Unipolarists usually give a negative answer to the last question, most multipolarists a qualified positive one.

However, even unipolarists do not deny that the EU has an important role in some areas (though not a military one) and that new powers, in particular China, are growing in importance. Apart from those who are completely taken in by narrow-minded hegemonic fantasies, everybody agrees the world is much more complex than it was during the Cold War, and though the United States still has a preponderant influence, it cannot run the world alone. So the difference between unipolarists and multipolarists is not really profound. What we witnessed in 1985–1991 was not the ‘end of history’, it was the ‘end of Cold War history’. Now ‘history as usual’ is back. Some call that multipolarity, others unipolarity. It does not matter. Reality is stronger than this kind of simplistic classification.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Krauthammer, C. (1990/1991). 'The unipolar moment'. *Foreign Affairs*, 70(1), 23–33. For examples of the many unipolar analyses see: Brooks, S. G. & Wohlforth, W. C. (2008), *World out of balance: International relations and the challenge of American primacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ikenberry, G. J., Michael Mastanduno, M. & Wohlforth, W. (eds) (2011), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- ² Clinton, H. R. (2009). Foreign policy address at the Council of Foreign Relations. Washington, DC, July 15, 2009 [Online]: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm>, para 21
- ³ Calleo, D. P. (2009a), *Follies of power: America's unipolar fantasy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Etzioni, A. (5.10.2012), 'The myth of multipolarity', *The National Interest*. [Online]: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-myth-multipolarity-7500>
- ⁴ Wagner, R. H. (1993). 'What was bipolarity?', *International Organization*, 47(1), pp. 89–90.
- ⁵ Rice, C. (2003). *Remarks at the International Institute for Strategic Studies*, London, (3.3.2003), para. 25. Washington: US Department of State Archive. [On-line]: <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/21989.htm>.
- ⁶ Chirac, J. (2003). *Discours du Président de la République lors de la présentation des vœux du corps diplomatique*. (Paris, 3.1.2003), para. 7. [Online]: http://www.jacqueschirac-asso.fr/archives-elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/discours_et_declarations/2003/janvier/fi001856.html.
- ⁷ Putin, W. (2007), *Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy* 02/10/2007, para. 14. [On-line]: http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=179
- ⁸ Scott, D. (2013). 'Multipolarity, multilateralism and beyond . . . ? EU–China understandings of the international system', *International Relations*, 27(1), 30–51.
- ⁹ Newman, C. & Stephens, P. (28.4.2003), 'Blair warns Chirac on his vision for Europe', *The Financial Times*, p.1.
- ¹⁰ Legro, J.F. 'Sell unipolarity? The Future of an Overvalued Concept', in G. J. Ikenberry e.a. (2011), pp. 342–366
- ¹¹ For examples see the special issue of *Internationale Politik* (Fall 2008); Peral, L. Ed. (2009), *Global security in a multipolar world*, (Chaillot Papers 118), Paris: Institute for Security Studies.