

## **Polarity of the International System: *Shift to Multipolarity***

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Great Powers, measured by their territory and population, resource endowment, economic capacity, strong military capabilities, and political stability, often impose implications by how they carry their power on the global scale. These balances or distributions of power between the Great Powers within the international system are defined by polarity. Polarity largely speaks on the stability of the system, while factoring in the likelihood of conflict, burdens on leadership to maintain order, and the amount of latitude or freedom smaller states are granted. An international system in equilibrium often appears like a stable situation in which each of the poles, plus allies, has roughly equivalent amounts of power and no urgent need to upset the international order, including both capacity and threat.

In the post-Cold War Era, many scholars have argued that the international system has been under a unipolar distribution of power, with the United States being the single, leading power. For decades, the United States has arguably held status over the international system as the “police” of the world. This still appears to hold true today, but there appears to be a shift toward a more multipolar system, as Russia and China start to politically and economically stabilize. Also, as the United States and China become more economically interdependent on each other, the less the system looks like a unipolar distribution. The system currently is moving from unipolar to multipolar; with the United States and China resembling bipolarity, and Russia being tertiary.

The traditional view on unipolarity is that power becomes a wasting asset and a preponderance of it is time-limited and cannot last forever. One of the substantial reasons being having unipole status comes with extreme responsibility and

cost in retaining one's own power and keeping order as the "police" of the world. Layne suggests that the United States should engage in offshore balancing, end military occupations, and ultimately accept the emergence of a multipolar order (Layne). Looking at the Biden Administration's current handlings in foreign policy, pulling out of Afghanistan and refusing to keep bearing the costs of wars, it is becoming apparent the United States does not want to keep using its resources to maintain order on the global system and may be embracing this idea, as China and Russia begin to emerge as superpowers.

This connects to one of the large implications of being a unipole: the leading state can overplay its hand, engaging in reckless and costly wars to keep order internationally. However, while the unipole gains and conserves their power over the international system, the society itself experiences "moral decay" at the same time (Gibbon). With all this abundance of power, the hegemon can experience a high level of decadence and luxury, which depletes the "marital spirit" of the state and creates a society that no longer wants to fight (Gibbon). It seems as though the United States is comfortable with its economic postures and society no longer is fighting over not having what it needs, but rather who gets more and more goods and services relative to others. This pullback and comfortability has created a climate more primed for other superpowers to come, like Russia and China, especially. A traditional feature of multipolar systems is that wars are less frequent and intense, due to states operating within the limits and there being no need for global conflict or challenge to existing order. This would support the emergence of a more multipolar distribution of power because an all-out world war seems arguably unrealistic to the Great Powers contemporarily.

Under a unipolar system, not being the hegemon, states can become fearful and encourage balancing over time. Some

scholars have argued that balancing happens over time due to the hegemon being the emergence and reign of an empire, rather than a Great Power that can perpetually conserve its power over the global system indefinitely. Unipolarity is typically assumed to be peaceful, however there is tension in this notion because the track record the United States has with its involvement in wars and global military occupations suggests that it may not be deemed peaceful (Monterio). There has been criticism that “the United States is an empire that doesn’t think it’s an empire” and has largely wagered its desire to spread democracy as a form of soft coercion to keep order internationally as its unipole status (hence the joke, “be nice to Americans or they’ll bring democracy to your country”). Connecting with Layne’s theory, “the United States argues that it is a benevolent, non-threatening hegemon, but an overwhelming power resource is inevitably seen as a threat” (Layne). To other actors in the international system, the United States appears largely self-interested and multilateralism does not prevent it from being viewed as a threat. In part, this could explain why Russia and China have increasingly made more of an effort to keep diplomatic relations with the United States, so they can keep a closer eye on their largest threat.

The arrival of technological advances and a more globalized, interlocked economy between the Great Powers in the last few decades is a simple fact that could be affecting how easily polarity can be defined or seen in the current global system. States are no longer balancing or recognizing power just through direct military conflict. Generally, most states have become unconventional in their approaches to balance power from the unipole and attempt to do so in ways that avoid military confrontation with the established hegemon, due to their overwhelming preponderance of power (Pape).

Arguably, China has been effective in employing unconventional or “softer” strategies to balance the United States’s unipole status. Using Pape’s theory, there are two major strategies to do so: soft balancing and leash slipping. Soft balancing refers to finding political, economic, and other ways to cut into the advantage held by the hegemon like refusing to contribute to military expeditions, placing trade embargoes and tariffs, and creating political opposition at the UN (Pape). In regard to leash slipping, states try to develop the capability to act independently of the United States while formally remaining in alliance with it. Specifically, dealings regarding the Iraq War are an example of European allies trying to “slip the leash” by funding Iraqi insurgents to bleed the United States.

There are also some limitations to looking at polarity as a predictor for how unipoles or Great Powers may act. Because theories about unipolarity do not consider the strategies or choices the hegemon makes, it can be questionable whether the system is stable and lasting (Monterio). Unipolarity may only act as a deterrent for major war between the Great Powers, but does not avoid smaller conflicts. Monterio’s theories argue that unipolarity is underdetermined in that it can produce an offense-dominant strategy or a defense-dominant strategy, both of which lead toward wars between the unipole and minor powers. This system can also lead to disengagement, creating a regional war or regional systems with new hegemonies (Monterio).

Understanding all these limitations and tensions with unipolarity, some scholars argue that this emergence of a more multipolar international system may be more suitable. Analyzing the theories of Deutsch and Singer, they claim that “increases in the number of states and dyads (paired relations with states) is a good thing because it multiples interactions opens up for the prospect of cross-cutting cleavages” (Deutsch & Singer). Meaning, states are linked with one

superpower for one set of reasons and linked with another superpower for another set of reasons. Ultimately, this creates significantly less incentive for states to fight either superpower, creating a more peaceful, less war-prone system.

This seems appropriate and fitting for the trend of globalization, specifically economically, that has been growing for the last couple of decades. With the increasing interdependence the United States has with China in regard to exports and imports of goods, the system resembles that of a bipolar economic set-up, with Russia as a trailblazer to create more multipolarity. Smaller states may get in line and link up to each of the superpowers for different sets of reasons or for varying benefits, especially as they see the superpowers link up to each other. Applying Waltz's theories, an economically bipolar relationship between China and the United States, with Russia's emergence into a more multipolar set-up, an arguably stable international system may be created. Because of an absence of peripheries, all competition will be involving the superpowers, and each is acutely focused on their losses and gains (Waltz). This could increase the range of factors in competition and spill into domestic policy due to the constant pressure to focus attention, allow states to acknowledge limitations, and develop tacit bargains (Waltz).

### **Bibliography**

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