

## UNIPOLARITY, BIPOLARITY, AND MULTIPOLARITY IN GLOBAL POLITICS

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the three principal structural configurations of international order — unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity — as analytical categories in the theory of international relations and as competing descriptions of the contemporary global distribution of power. Drawing on the classical realist and neorealist traditions associated with Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, and William Wohlforth, as well as on more recent contributions from liberal institutionalist and constructivist scholarship, the study traces the theoretical properties attributed to each polar configuration, evaluates the historical evidence for their respective claims about systemic stability and conflict propensity, and applies these frameworks to the rapidly evolving distribution of material and institutional power that characterises world politics in the third decade of the twenty-first century. The article argues that while the unipolar moment that followed the Cold War has given way to an increasingly contested and multipolar distribution of capabilities, the conceptual vocabulary of polarity — properly refined to account for the growing importance of economic interdependence, technological competition, and institutional contestation — remains indispensable for understanding the dynamics of great power rivalry and the prospects for international order.*

**Keywords:** *unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity, polarity, international order, great power competition, neorealism, hegemonic stability, balance of power, structural realism, US-China rivalry, international relations theory.*

The concept of polarity — the distribution of material capabilities among the major units of the international system — occupies a foundational position in the structural theory of international relations. Introduced in its modern theoretical form by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), the polarity of the international system refers to the number of great powers — states possessing capabilities sufficient to sustain autonomous strategic action and to influence the behaviour of other states across multiple dimensions of power — that exist at any given moment. Waltz's argument, situated within the broader tradition of structural realism, holds that the number of poles in the system is among the most powerful determinants of systemic behaviour: it shapes the incentives for alliance formation, the dynamics of balancing and bandwagoning, the intensity of security competition, and, ultimately, the likelihood and character of great power war. The three configurations that have dominated theoretical and empirical discussion — unipolarity (one preponderant power), bipolarity (two roughly equal great powers), and multipolarity (three or more great powers) — are not merely descriptive categories but carry significant explanatory weight in debates about international stability, order, and change. [1]

The theoretical properties attributed to unipolarity have been extensively debated since Charles Krauthammer's 1990 essay "The Unipolar Moment" first drew systematic attention to the structural novelty of the post-Cold War international system. Krauthammer's initial assessment that American preponderance was unprecedented, potentially durable, and broadly stabilising was developed into a more rigorous theoretical argument by William Wohlforth, whose 1999 article "The Stability of a Unipolar World" remains the most comprehensive defence of the proposition

that unipolarity is both distinctive as a systemic configuration and more stable than either bipolarity or multipolarity. [2] Wohlforth's argument rested on three principal claims: that the material gap between the United States and all potential challengers was sufficiently large to make balancing against American power prohibitively costly; that this gap was likely to be durable given the self-reinforcing advantages of American technological leadership, alliance relationships, and institutional centrality; and that the absence of a peer competitor removed the principal driver of great power conflict identified by both realist and liberal theories of war. On this account, the unipolar system was not merely a temporary configuration to be overcome by the logic of balancing but a genuinely stable equilibrium that could be maintained for a generation or more by the skilful management of American power. [3]

The principal theoretical challenge to the case for durable unipolarity came from the tradition of balance of power theory, which predicted that the concentration of power in a single state would inevitably generate counter-balancing coalitions as other states sought to redress the structural imbalance and protect their autonomy. Christopher Layne's "The Unipolar Illusion" (1993) was among the first systematic articulations of this critique, arguing that structural incentives would produce "offshore balancing" by rising powers who would resist American preponderance through a combination of internal capability development and external coalition-building. [4] John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) provided the most rigorous theoretical foundation for this expectation, arguing that the logic of great power competition — rooted in the anarchic structure of the international system and the irreducible uncertainty about other states' intentions — would ultimately lead rising powers, and China in particular, to pursue regional hegemony in ways that would provoke fierce resistance from the reigning hegemon. For Mearsheimer, the question was not whether the unipolar moment would end but how and at what cost to international stability. The unipolar configuration, on this view, was less a stable equilibrium than a temporary pause in the cycles of great power competition that structural realism identifies as the defining feature of international politics. [5]

Bipolarity, as a systemic configuration, carries its own distinctive theoretical properties, and Waltz's original assessment that the Cold War's bipolar structure was more stable than the multipolar system that preceded it remains one of the most influential and contested arguments in international relations theory. Waltz's case for bipolar stability rested on several interconnected claims: that in a bipolar system each superpower can monitor the other without the mediation of allies whose reliability is uncertain; that the absence of complex alliance entanglements reduces the risk of inadvertent escalation; that the two superpowers develop a mutual understanding of each other's capabilities and red lines that allows for the management of crises; and that the very concentration of power in two poles creates strong incentives for the superpowers to exercise restraint, since they cannot shift responsibility for maintenance of order onto third parties. [1] The forty-five years of Cold War confrontation provided substantial empirical material for testing these claims, and the outcome — a period of great power peace punctuated by proxy conflicts and nuclear crises but not by direct war between the superpowers — is broadly consistent with the stability thesis, though critics have argued that the absence of great power war owed more to nuclear deterrence and fortuitous crisis management than to the structural properties of bipolarity per se.

Multipolarity, the configuration that characterised the European state system for most of the period from the Peace of Westphalia to the First World War, is theoretically associated with

the greatest complexity of balancing calculations and, in classical realist accounts, with the greatest potential for miscalculation and inadvertent conflict. In a multipolar system, each great power must attend simultaneously to multiple potential adversaries and potential allies, constructing and maintaining shifting coalitions in response to a rapidly changing balance of capabilities. The instabilities that this complexity generates are illustrated by the July Crisis of 1914, in which the interlocking alliance obligations and mobilisation schedules of the multipolar European system transformed a regional crisis in the Balkans into a continental war with catastrophic consequences. Waltz himself argued that the multipolar system was less stable than bipolarity precisely because of the complexity of the calculations it required and the multiple channels through which miscalculation could occur. [1] More recent revisionist scholarship has challenged this assessment, arguing that multipolarity can produce stable balancing equilibria and that the instability of the pre-1914 system was as much the product of specific historical and ideological factors as of its multipolar structure.

The empirical question of which polar configuration best describes the contemporary international system is itself contested, and the answer depends critically on how power is measured and which dimensions of capability are treated as most consequential. On measures of aggregate material power — military expenditure, nuclear arsenals, technological sophistication, and the capacity to project force globally — the United States retains substantial advantages over all potential rivals, lending some continued plausibility to the unipolar description. The United States' defence budget in 2023 exceeded that of the next nine largest military spenders combined; its network of alliances and forward-deployed forces gives it a global military reach that no other state approaches; and its technological lead in key areas including precision strike, ISR capabilities, and undersea warfare remains significant. Wohlforth and other defenders of the unipolar thesis have argued that these advantages are sufficiently large and self-reinforcing to sustain a qualified unipolarity even as the relative gap narrows. [3]

Against this assessment, however, a growing body of evidence suggests that the international distribution of power has shifted sufficiently to render the language of bipolarity or multipolarity more analytically adequate to contemporary realities. China's rise has been the most consequential single development in the international distribution of power since the end of the Cold War. With an economy that has surpassed the United States in purchasing power parity terms and is rapidly approaching it in nominal GDP, a military that has been transformed from a large but technologically backward force into a sophisticated fighting organisation with genuine anti-access/area-denial capabilities in the Western Pacific, and a growing technological capacity in areas including artificial intelligence, 5G telecommunications, quantum computing, and space systems, China has clearly crossed the threshold of great power status and is increasingly asserting itself as a systemic challenger to American primacy. [5] The intensifying competition between Washington and Beijing across economic, technological, military, and normative dimensions — what many analysts have called a “new Cold War,” though the analogy is contested — gives some empirical support to bipolar descriptions of the current system.

The bipolar framing, however, obscures the extent to which the contemporary international system also exhibits genuinely multipolar characteristics that distinguish it sharply from the Cold War. Russia, though significantly weakened relative to its Soviet-era capabilities, retains the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and the capacity for consequential regional action, as its war in Ukraine has demonstrated. The European

Union, while not a unitary great power in the traditional sense, constitutes the world's largest single market and exercises significant normative and economic power through regulatory standards-setting, sanctions, and development finance. India, with a population that has surpassed China's, a rapidly growing economy, and an increasingly sophisticated military, is asserting itself as an independent pole of power in the Indo-Pacific with a declared policy of "strategic autonomy" that resists incorporation into either American or Chinese-led blocs. [6] And the rise of the BRICS grouping — expanded in 2024 to include Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Argentina, with several dozen further states seeking membership — reflects a broader aspiration among emerging powers to reshape the institutional architecture of international order in ways that reduce Western normative dominance and create space for alternative models of governance and development.

The relationship between polarity and international stability, though central to theoretical debates in structural realism, has been challenged by scholars who argue that the polar configuration of the system is a less powerful determinant of stability than other variables including the presence of nuclear weapons, the extent of economic interdependence, the density of international institutions, and the domestic character of the major states. The liberal institutionalist tradition, associated with Robert Keohane, G. John Ikenberry, and others, argues that the international institutions and multilateral norms established under American hegemony after 1945 have created a self-reinforcing order that constrains even a dominant hegemon and that may prove more durable than structural realists expect precisely because it serves the interests of a wide range of states, not merely those of the United States. [7] Ikenberry's concept of the "liberal leviathan" — a hegemon that binds itself to multilateral institutions and thereby makes its power more acceptable to weaker states — offers a more optimistic account of the prospects for international order under shifting polarity than either structural realism or power transition theory provides.

The nuclear dimension of the contemporary great power rivalry introduces a further and potentially decisive variable that existing polarity theories were not fully designed to accommodate. Nuclear deterrence, by raising the costs of direct great power conflict to potentially civilisation-threatening levels, creates a structural floor of stability beneath the competitive dynamics that polarity theory identifies. The mutual assured destruction logic that stabilised the Cold War bipolar competition operates with similar force in the current context, though the spread of nuclear capabilities to additional states — and the development of hypersonic delivery systems, cyber vulnerabilities in nuclear command and control, and destabilising missile defence systems — introduces new uncertainties that complicate the deterrence calculus. [5] The emerging nuclear dimension of the US-China competition, in which China is substantially expanding its nuclear arsenal and the United States is modernising all three legs of its nuclear triad, represents one of the most consequential and least theoretically understood features of the multipolar-trending international system.

Technological competition, and in particular the competition for leadership in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, and biotechnology, is increasingly recognised as a dimension of great power rivalry that does not fit neatly within the frameworks developed to analyse competition in the domains of military hardware and territorial control, but that may prove equally or more consequential for the long-run distribution of global power. The country or countries that achieve and sustain leadership in the foundational technologies of the fourth industrial revolution will acquire compound advantages across military, economic, and

informational domains that could decisively shift the balance of capabilities in ways that existing measures of power do not adequately capture. [8] The recognition of this dynamic has driven the intensification of technology competition between the United States and China, including export controls on advanced semiconductors, investment screening mechanisms, and competing national strategies for artificial intelligence development, in ways that are reshaping the structure of the global economy and the terms of great power competition simultaneously.

The implications of the current transition for smaller and medium-sized states — and in particular for the states of Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Global South that find themselves navigating the competing claims and pressures of the major powers — are profound and in many respects uncharted. In the bipolar Cold War order, smaller states were frequently compelled to choose sides, and the costs of non-alignment, while sometimes politically sustainable, were typically high. In the more complex multipolar-trending order that is emerging, the proliferation of poles creates greater room for manoeuvre — the capacity to pursue “homogeneous hedging” strategies that extract economic benefits from multiple great powers while avoiding exclusive security alignment with any single one. [9] This strategic flexibility is not without its own risks: the intensification of great power competition may narrow the space for hedging, and states that have built economic dependencies on a single great power may find their room for manoeuvre more constrained than they anticipated. The management of these pressures will require diplomatic sophistication, institutional capacity, and a clear-eyed assessment of national interests that the transformations of the international system are making increasingly urgent.

In conclusion, the theoretical frameworks developed to analyse the relationship between polarity and international order remain indispensable analytical tools, even as the complexities of the contemporary international system press against their limits. The unipolar moment that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union has clearly given way to a more competitive and complex distribution of power in which China’s rise, Russia’s revisionism, and the growing assertion of middle powers have collectively eroded the structural conditions for unchallenged American primacy. Whether the emerging system is most accurately described as bipolar, multipolar, or as occupying some theoretically novel intermediate position — “one superpower, several great powers,” in Barry Posen’s formulation — is a question that will be resolved not by theoretical argument alone but by the empirical evolution of material capabilities, institutional arrangements, and the political choices of the major states over the coming decades. [10] What the framework of polarity analysis most clearly reveals is that the current transition is not merely a cyclical return to familiar patterns of great power competition but a structural shift of historic dimensions whose consequences for international order, regional stability, and the prospects for the governance of global challenges will be determined by the quality of statecraft brought to bear by all the major actors in an increasingly contested world.

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