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Sell Unipolarity? The Future of an Overvalued Concept

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11 *Sell unipolarity? The future of an overvalued concept*

JEFFREY W. LEGRO

For at least the past thirty years, scholarship on international relations has been bewitched by a simple proposition: the polarity of the international system is a central cause of great power strategies and politics.[1] The number of "poles" (dominant countries) in the system is like an invisible fence that shapes states as if they were dogs with electronic collars or a Skinner box that conditions national "rats." States can choose to ignore the fence or box, but if they do, they must pay the consequences. The polarity of the international system as defined by the number of great powers – involving more than two (multipolarity), two (bipolarity), or one (unipolarity) – is expected to mold states and international politics in different predictable ways. The central place of polarity in IR theory is such that it is commonly assumed that the appropriate way to study the world is to examine the impact of polarity first and then move on to other lesser factors to mop up any unexplained variance.[2]

For comments and helpful suggestions, I am grateful to Kyle Lascurettes, William Wohlforth, and participants at a CIPPS seminar at McGill University.

[1] The decisive point was the release of the masterpiece on polarity and the importance of systemic theorizing: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). There have of course been many other studies on polarity – some before Waltz and many after. See, for example, Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957); Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, 3 (1964): 390–406; Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization* 39, 4 (Autumn 1985): 579–614; Randall Schweller, "Tripolarity and the Second World War," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 1 (March 1993): 73–103; Edward Mansfield, "Concentration, Polarity, and the Distribution of Power," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 1 (March 1993): 105–128; Ted Hopf, "Polarity, the Offense–Defense Balance, and War," *American Political Science Review* 85, 2 (June 1991), 475–493.

[2] This is the flavor of Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New

Such a view, however, is problematic. What seems increasingly clear is that the role of polarity has been overstated or misunderstood or both. This is the unavoidable conclusion that emerges from the penetrating chapters in this volume that probe America's current dominant status (unipolarity) with the question "does the distribution of capabilities matter for patterns of international politics?"[3] Despite the explicit claim that "unipolarity does have a profound impact on international politics"[4] what is surprising is how ambiguous and relatively limited that influence is across the chapters.

The causal impact of unipolarity has been overvalued for three fundamental reasons. The first is that the effects of unipolarity are often not measured relative to the influence of other causes that explain the same outcome. When the weight of other factors is considered, polarity seems to pale in comparison. Second, rather than being a structure that molds states, polarity often seems to be the product of state choice. Polarity may be more outcome than cause. Finally, while international structure does exist, it is constituted as much by ideational content as by material capabilities. Again polarity loses ground in significance.

The import is clear: sell polarity. Just like a bubbled asset, polarity attracted excessive enthusiasm in the market of IR concepts. It was not always like that. When Waltz wrote his seminal *Theory of International Politics* (1979), scholars were not paying enough attention to the way capabilities define international structure. But like the idea or hate it, polarity has held court over systemic theory discussions ever since. To be sure, there was a lag in polarity studies after the end of the Cold War as experts attempted to come to grips with the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. Moreover there was a wave of literature that was explicitly non-material and typically addressed the distribution of power as a defective alternative explanation, not a conjoint

York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) that features the primacy of external factors yet allows internal causes to "intervene." Individual contributions in this volume vary in this tendency. Classic realist monographs that feature systemic-level logic include Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major Power War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2000); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, strongly cautions against reductionism.

[3] John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William Wohlforth, Chapter 1, this volume, p. 3.

[4] Ibid., p. 4.

cause.[5] Now, however, a number of insightful books have been written specifically on unipolarity.[6] There is in addition a broader literature that leans heavily on the importance of US primacy or its absence.[7]

What the essays in this volume suggest is that polarity retains importance (don't sell all unipolarity assets), but not as the kingmaker of causation (do reduce portfolio exposure). Instead the effects of polarity are often only apparent in conjunction with other factors. If we are to understand both great power strategies and international structure we need better conjunctural theories that explicitly model how different types of causes interact to produce outcomes. The chapters here offer a start on that effort. This chapter builds on that start by exploring one particular conjunction: how international politics is defined, not just by the structure of power, but also by the dominant ideas within nations and across the international society of nations. The point is not that either power or ideas is key but instead that the interaction and conjoint influence of power *and* ideas best explains outcomes.

[5] Some of this literature is reviewed in Ian Hurd, "Constructivism," in Duncan Snidal and Christian Reus-Smit, eds., *Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[6] Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); T. V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited," *International Security* 31 (Winter 2006): 7–41; special issue on Unipolarity, *World Politics* 61, 1 (January 2009); William Zartman, ed., *Imbalance of Power: U.S. Hegemony and International Order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008); and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[7] Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power and World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era*; and Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

What follows has two related parts. First I consider the chapters above to illustrate both the utility and limits of polarity in explaining international politics, especially in this unipolar age. Second, the chapter considers the way that ideas and polarity in conjunction shape international politics – both in terms of state purpose and the nature of international politics.

Polarity as a cause

Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth usefully define polarity in terms of material capabilities ("military, economic, technological, and geographic"[8]) not influence. This distinction is necessary to examine whether the distribution of capabilities where one, two, or three or more great powers stand out from other countries (and hence are poles) actually converts into some sort of influence on international politics.

This conceptualization leaves out at least one dimension of capabilities that Waltz includes: organizational-institutional "competence."[9] That factor, however, looks very close to the influence that we would want to investigate as following from raw power and thus threatens tautology. This is especially true because it is not material in the sense that the others are and it defies a priori measurement. Largely a reflection of strategy and decision making, competence looks dangerously close to counting stupidity and cleverness as "material." John Ikenberry's chapter illustrates there is utility in separating organizational strategy and capabilities – both can influence the nature of the system.

In the hands of accomplished scholars, polarity has been an esteemed concept in international relations since at least World War Two.[10] Walt's 1979 opus set the modern-day gold standard: it had tremendous influence promoting the concept of international structure defined by the distribution of capabilities, specifically the number of dominant powers or "poles." In recent years, scholars have paid special attention to the importance of unipolarity. For example, Brooks and Wohlforth's recent book is a tour de force on how the systemic constraints on the

[8] Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, Chapter 1, this volume.
[9] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 113. Waltz also includes size of population as a determinant of polarity.
[10] See fn. 1 above.

United States in contemporary world politics have been overstated in the international relations literature.[11]

The essays in this volume, however, imply there are declining returns to a single-minded focus on polarity. Polarity faces three significant problems that put in question its elite status as a cause of international politics: it is ambiguous in its impact, endogenous to (rather than a fount of) the purposes of states, and incomplete as the source of systemic structure.

Ambiguous

Some of the most wide-ranging examinations of the effects of unipolarity are found in this volume. They purposefully explore, not a specific outcome in international politics, but instead, a range of potential effects of unipolarity. They look for influence on the (1) unipole (its goals, provision of public goods, control over outcomes, domestic politics), (2) actions of other states (balancing, alliances, use of institutions), and (3) nature of the international system (the level of conflict, the durability of the power distribution). They find that unipolarity does indeed matter for international politics.

This is a noteworthy finding but has to be taken in context. Given that international relations is determined by many factors, any exercise that limits its focus to the impact of a single variable is going to find some effect. In light of the importance of polarity in the IR literature over the past thirty years, it should not be a shock to find that unipolarity matters in influencing some of these things.

What is more debatable is whether polarity has a "profound impact on international politics."[12] This claim demands some sort of test of the magnitude of the impact of polarity relative to alternative explanations for the same outcomes. As Jervis notes, "structure influences but does not determine patterns of behavior."[13] But how much does it influence?

In statistical terms we would want to know what accounts most for the observed variation in the dependent variable. In causal terms we would want to know which theorized mechanisms more accurately capture reality. These are tasks that clearly cannot be taken up in the

[11] See Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance* and the review articles on their book in *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming).

[12] Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, Chapter 1, this volume, p. 4.

[13] Robert Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 256.

limited space of their chapters, so the authors do not engage in any explicit assessment of the effects of polarity relative to other factors. But what is surprising is that to the extent they do, factors other than polarity appear more consequential in shaping the different outcomes.

For Wohlforth, status concerns that pervade international politics are heightened or ameliorated depending on polarity. Different types of polarity unleash different levels of status competition that cause different levels of conflict. Unipolarity reduces status competition because the hierarchy of power is so clear, thus explaining the absence of great power military conflict and competition since 1991. Wohlforth emphasizes the way that relative capabilities shape status. By definition, however, the nature of status competition is, at least partly, exogenous to power (or we would not have to talk about status, but instead just power), so factors other than polarity may account for any reduced competition today. For example, status competition can depend on cultural understandings – as it did in ancient China – not just power. Wohlforth's analysis indicates polarity and status together shape great power behavior. Less clear is whether they have affected the likelihood of war. Status competition should have varied in the move from bipolarity to unipolarity after 1991, but great power war did not. This suggests something else (e.g., nuclear deterrence or norms of warfare) may be behind the absence of great power war both during and after the Cold War.[14]

For Martha Finnemore, the influence of unipolarity is limited by the "social structure" (i.e., the norms) of international politics. Based just on its privileged power, the unipole cannot necessarily get what it wants: it might be constrained by the norms of the international system that infuse institutions, dictate which actors and actions are legitimate, and mediate whether actors are hypocritical. For Finnemore the structure of power is not irrelevant, but power alone is too costly to exercise. States (not just unipoles) must use the social structure of the system to gain leverage over others. The argument makes sense, but is much less about the nature of polarity (it would be true under any distribution of power) than it is about how all actors use social

[14] Joseph M. Grieco, "Structural Realism and the Problem of Polarity and War," in Felix Berenskoetter and Michael J. Williams, eds., *Power in World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 64–82, in a critique of Waltz's use of polarity concludes that "there do not appear to be solid scholarly grounds in support of the view that polarity systematically influences the likelihood of war or other forms of militarised conflicts" (68).

norms to gain influence – and how all can be stymied by those norms as well.

Stephen Walt explores how unipolarity affects alliance formation. He brings to this task his famous formulation on threats: alliances will depend on the threat the unipole presents and the reactions of others to the dominant state. The question is, to what degree does threat depend on unipolarity? For Walt the answer is ambiguous since threat is driven not just by capabilities, but most importantly by offensive capabilities and actor intentions.[15] We might presume that given the US's overwhelming capabilities and its far-flung geographical reach (witness two land wars fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, areas remote from the United States) they would swamp the other determinants of threat clearly marking the US as a danger against which other states should balance.

But no, in this case, Walt finds that benign US intentions, not capabilities, are doing the lion's share of the work. Walt points to the United States' liberal ideas and its historical legacy of global leadership since World War Two as key factors. The result is that there is little overt "hard" balancing against the United States, though some forms of discrete "soft" balancing are taking place that are intended to hedge against possible malevolent US intentions. But overall, much of alliance formation in current conditions is based on the United States "not trying to conquer large swaths of the world."[16] Intentions, not polarity, are the key.

Perhaps this is unique to unipolarity where a single dominant actor is bound to be central to world politics. However in Walt's view the same dynamic is clear in bipolarity: Europe sided with the United States in the Cold War despite the US's more significant power and armed occupation of Europe following World War Two. The Soviet Union's intentions overwhelmed the US advantage in capabilities.[17]

[15] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[16] Stephen M. Walt, Chapter 4, this volume, p. 132.

[17] The Soviet Union's close geographic position also played a role, though the United States occupied Western Europe at the end of World War Two. See Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power," *International Security* 9, 4 (1985), 34–37 and the discussion in Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24 (Fall 1999), 36–38.

Uni-malevolence trumped bipolarity. Today uni-benevolence trumps unipolarity. In both cases, polarity gets swamped.

Michael Mastanduno's study of the international economy and US policy focuses on why the US will not get what it wants in the current unipolar system. It raises challenges for the notion of polarity in a different way by arguing that capabilities are often issue specific. "US dominance in the international security arena no longer translates into effective leverage in the international economic arena."[18] He claims that the world was actually more unipolar in economic terms during the Cold War than it has been since 1991. Today the sources of US leverage – the strength of the US dollar as a global reserve currency, the indispensability of the US market, and the dependence of others on (and the credibility of) the US security guarantee (since the Cold War ended) – is reduced. With waning relative economic power and more dependence on other actors, the United States can be expected to get less of what it wants and there will be more volatility in the international economy. In essence, Mastanduno sees US economic interdependence as more important than unipolarity.

Robert Jervis provides the most nuanced and perhaps elusive account of unipolarity's impact on peace, stability, public goods provision, and durability. His analysis shows most clearly there is not much to say about unipolarity's effects without relying heavily on other factors. There is very little that unipolarity or "structure" (by which he means the distribution of capabilities) can explain on its own. For example the claim that "security concerns are greatly reduced for the unipole and for others it protects"[19] is dependent on the notion that the United States is benign and that others are too. A unipolarity dominated by Nazi Germany would be different. Similarly, if another power were intent on war in the current unipolarity, the world would be very dangerous. For now, none are. But great power intent is not necessarily structural, and as seen below, may in fact determine structure.

Indeed from the structural capabilities perspective that Jervis uses as a launching pad, what is really difficult to understand is why states have not done more to secure themselves against America's power. After all, in an anarchic world where states must rely on themselves and there is no overarching authority to call for help, they should do

[18] Michael Mastanduno, Chapter 5, this volume, p. 142.
[19] Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 258.

anything possible to protect against the potential of an unpredictable hegemon exercising its power wantonly.[20] But that has not happened.

And from a structural perspective, we should expect the unipole to use its power for quite expansionist aims – what Jervis citing Waltz and others refers to as "the characteristic error of unipolarity."[21] But the United States has not done so – or at least it has done so modestly given the nature of its advantages. To the extent it has expanded, the reasons for doing so may be more closely connected to domestic politics than polarity. Indeed Bloch-Elkon *et al.* make the case that any US expansion is as much a result of partisan politics as the international distribution of power.[22] Again polarity pales.

Unipolarity's lack of determinism or independent causal weight requires an appeal to other factors to make sense of unipolarity's effects. For example, besides the nature of the unipole and the intentions of others, Jervis invokes key aspects of "current circumstances" such as the security community among leading states, nuclear weapons, the widespread acceptance of liberal norms, and the danger of terrorism. Of these, nuclear weapons appear to dominate polarity. Jervis ponders "what would remain of a unipolar system in a proliferated world?" and seems to suggest not much. Here in a nutshell is the key dilemma for unipolarity and polarity in general: once we control for other factors, unipolarity's role seems marginal.

The strong flavor of the chapters is not about the impact of unipolarity, but instead what makes the impact of the current asymmetrical distribution of power so limited. Factors such as status competition, nuclear weapons, legitimacy, threat, economic interdependence, and a variety of features unique to the current international environment seem to overwhelm polarity. At a minimum, in each case, it is a conjunction of unipolarity and other factors that together have an impact.

Endogenous

The second issue for unipolarity is that far from being an objective structure that shapes state choice, it appears to be the *product* of state

[20] See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

[21] See Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, pp. 262–263.

[22] Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, Chapter 6, this volume.

choice. If this is so, the priority of systemic theorizing is in doubt and the dangers of "reductionism" (i.e., explaining international politics by relying on unit level traits) are diminished.[23] If polarity is a choice, then there can be no systemic theorizing on the balance of power without some reference to the determinants of state choice. Rather than privileging structure in the study of world politics, this would suggest the need for more attention to the thinking and actions of great powers.

The notion that structure is caused by choice is apparent in several chapters. For Walt it appears in the intentions of the unipole; for Jervis it is values, and for Ikenberry it is organizational style. Such factors are attributes or strategies; they are not products of the asymmetry of material power. Of course, it may be that it is exactly because of the structure – i.e., unipolarity – that the preferences, values, and organizational style of the unipole do play such a huge role. Still such an argument raises a major puzzle: why has the United States resisted the main unipolar structural incentive that should supposedly guide it – i.e., excessive expansion?[24]

For example, since the end of the Cold War the United States has not done a whole lot to reshape the dominant international institutions that structure global politics and largely failed when it has tried to do so. There have of course been some regional pacts (e.g., NAFTA) and efforts based on old institutions (e.g., NATO enlargement, GATT/WTO). The George W. Bush administration did successfully create the Proliferation Security Initiative, but this modest venture was a partial exception that proves the rule. This underambition and underachievement, moreover, has come at a time when there seems to be demand for change given that many international institutions today appear outdated.[25] Scholars such as John Ikenberry, Stephen Brooks, and William Wohlforth and policy makers like Douglas Hurd (foreign secretary of Britain from 1989 to 1995) argue that the United States after 1991 had an ideal opportunity to "remake

[23] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 60–67.

[24] Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume; Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25 (Summer 2000), 13.

[25] See, for example, Kishore Mahbubani, "The Impending Demise of the Postwar System," *Survival* 47, 4 (2005): 7–18; G. John Ikenberry, "A Weaker World," *Prospect* (November 2005): 30–33; Hanns Maull, "The Precarious State of International Order," *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, 1 (2006): 68–77.

the world, update everything, the UN, everything."[26] We are still waiting.

The US inclination to use its power after the end of the Cold War was fairly anemic.[27] It appeared that Richard Cheney as Secretary of Defense attempted to get the government started in a more ambitious direction in the defense planning guidance process that produced the "Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy" in 1993 at the end of the George H. W. Bush administration.[28] But in reality that was more an effort to fend off even greater defense budget reductions than it was evidence of growing US global ambition.[29] The Clinton administration struggled to find a grand strategy. And the George W. Bush administration came into office forswearing global military involvement, nation-building, and maintaining international order.[30]

Then came September 11, 2001 and things changed. Robert Jervis, as usual, puts his finger directly on what happened and its theoretical importance: "Had terrorism not intervened, we might be talking about decaying or potential unipolarity rather than real unipolarity, as

[26] Hurd quote is from Mary E. Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4. See John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Reshaping the World Order: How Washington Should Reform International Institutions," *Foreign Affairs* 88, 2 (March/April 2009): 49–63.

[27] For a longer discussion of US policy see Jeffrey W. Legro, "The Mix That Makes Unipolarity: Hegemonic Purpose and International Constraints," *Review of International Affairs* (forthcoming).

[28] Patrick Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992. See too "Excerpts from the leaked Defense Planning Guidance that *The New York Times* published on March 8, 1992," National Security Archive, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_extract_nytedit.pdf (accessed November 18, 2009).

[29] It was mired in internal controversy and only issued at the last moment without higher level presidential promotion. See Eric Edelman, "The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *In Uncertain Times: American Strategy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[30] See Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America between the Wars* (New York: Public Affairs, 1980).

awkward a distinction as this is from the standpoint of structure."[31] Or put differently, there was no actual unipolarity evident before 9/11 because the United States *chose* not to occupy that role. After 2001, the "Bush Doctrine" was a more expansive strategy closer to that expected from the structure of unipolarity. The Bush administration, however, also consciously abandoned that strategy in its second term from 2005 to 2009.[32] Rather than strategy being a product of polarity, polarity was a product of the choices of the United States.

This is not a phenomenon limited to the contemporary world. After World War One the United States emerged as the most powerful country in world affairs. But rather than grow its military to increase its dominance and embed its troops in the foreign lands it occupied in 1918, the United States cut its defense spending and called the troops home.[33] Rather than seize leadership of the global economy and order, US leaders refused to make commitments.[34] The United States, in effect chose not to create a unipolar world after the war.

Immediately after World War Two the United States was in an even stronger position of "potential" unipolarity as the world's only nuclear power and producer of some 50 percent of the world's economic output (today it is closer to 25 percent). Yet it did not use that power to overexpand. Instead it used that power to secure alliances and build international institutions to protect and nurture an international order compatible with its interests, as described in the chapter by John Ikenberry. That was a different choice than the non-entanglement following World War One and it was also very different than the more expansionist policy we might expect from such a powerful country – one even more dominant than after 1991.

In all these cases, after 1919, after 1945, and after 1991, what the United States did varied more significantly with the way it thought about the world and the strategies it preferred than any incentive

[31] Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 270.

[32] Philip H. Gordon, "The End of the Bush Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* 85, 4 (July/August 2006): 75–86.

[33] David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[34] Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

or constraint of its asymmetrical power. Since those choices are not explained by the structure of international power, we require an exogenous theory of America's thinking and preferences.

The polarity of the system depends not only on the unipole, but also on the choices of lesser powers as well. They after all can also decide to deploy their resources in ways that can alter the basic system structure that is so often treated as the source of choices. Consider, for example, Randall Schweller's analysis of tripolarity in the interwar period. He contends that a key cause of the changes in national strategies in the 1930s was a shift in polarity in the international system from "multi" to "tripolarity" (with the United States, Russia, and Germany as the poles). This change might be seen as simply a product of the grinding gears of the constantly changing world political economy. This, however, was not the case for Nazi Germany. Instead tripolarity was largely the product of a purposeful and intense military buildup by one actor – Germany.[35] Polarity alone did not breed the aggression that started World War Two. Aggressive intentions were the more proximate cause – specifically, a culmination of German resentments from the World War One settlement. National choice caused systemic polarity; the rat conditioned the box, the dog controlled its silent fence.

Polarity today similarly depends on the thinking of at least two other actors: China and the European Union. Widely seen as a future pole, China could reach that status much quicker than expected by analyses that predict a lag of two-to-four decades, if it chose to do so. Its GNP is rapidly rising and even if its per capita income will not equal that of the United States for some time, its aggregate wealth is mounting rapidly. Today China is sitting on a mound of cash – over $2 trillion – that if it were converted into military power could make it a much more significant challenger – at least in Asia. Kenneth Waltz suggested in 1993 that the international system was not unipolar despite the collapse of the USSR because Russia still had a secure second strike arsenal.[36] By these standards at least, China could arguably choose to

[35] Randall Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), esp. 26–29, 93–120.

[36] Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, 2 (1993): 44–79.

be a pole today by focusing on a rapid nuclear buildup and the strengthening of its sea power in the littoral waters of the Pacific and South Pacific.[37]

Similarly, if the European Union could establish its authority over its members and begin to plan like a unitary state, it too could become a peer competitor for the United States in a relatively short time.[38] While both outcomes are unlikely, they do indicate that the polarity of the system is made not just by the existing poles. Other countries, those that are potential poles, can also mold polarity by their choices.

To posit that analysts should start with structure defined as polarity to explain state choices and international outcomes when state choices present a clear and powerful cause of polarity is of course deeply problematic. At a minimum, this endogeneity requires some account of the national policies that are in many cases the beginning of the causal chain. If states make choices about polarity anticipating the structures those choices will cause, it would be misguided to place too much causal autonomy on structure (i.e., polarity) itself.

Incomplete

A final problem in the study of unipolarity is a conception of structure limited to capabilities. This, however, ignores the ideas (i.e., norms, rules, and principles) that provide the rules of different international systems over time. The nature of international order – its durability, the level of conflict, the degree of interdependence – may indeed be affected by the distribution of capabilities. But they also depend on the norms and rules of any particular order – that can vary even as a particular type of polarity is the same. This suggests that we need to understand not only capabilities, but what John Ruggie called systemic "content."[39]

Martha Finnemore addresses this dimension directly by emphasizing "social structure" – i.e., the norms that dominate the international

[37] For an argument that Asia is and will be bipolar see Robert Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: Great Power Stability in Twenty-First Century East Asia," *International Security* 23, 4 (Spring 1999): 81–118.

[38] Kupchan, *The End of the American Era.*

[39] John G. Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36 (1982), 382.

systems such as "sovereignty, liberalism, self-determination, and border rigidity."[40] Wohlforth notes that unipolar systems can differ according to different cultural understandings that affect status competition and conflict. As we have seen, some of these depend on the unipole, but as Robert Jervis points out, "whether others will comply also depends on nonstructural factors, especially the coincidence or discrepancy between the worlds they prefer and the one sought by the superpower."[41] As Finnemore writes, "power alone tells us little about the kind of politics states will construct for themselves."[42] But what does tell us the kind of politics and social structures states will construct for themselves?

Dominant powers appear to spend much time and effort attempting to provide the principles – if not the primary model for national development – in the international system. Michael Mastanduno recounts how the United States since World War Two has been intent on maintaining the liberal economic design of the system in the face of challenges from alternative models from developing economies in the "New International Economic Order" or from the state-directed development of Japan (or China today).[43] The Cold War was fueled as much by a competition to define the content of world politics as it was an exercise in insecurity based on comparable capabilities under bipolarity.

Great powers want to control the values and norms that characterize the international system because it makes exercising influence cheaper. If others are on board with the basic principles, then the unipole does not need to use as much muscle (or grease as many palms) to get its desired outcome.[44] When there are no feasible alternatives to the dominant set of norms and models, we can expect more integration and cooperation.[45] Indeed we might expect a strong and dominant set of systemic values to be a source of stability even as power varies.

[40] Martha Finnemore, Chapter 3, this volume, p. 68.
[41] Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 257.
[42] Finnemore, Chapter 3, this volume, p. 68.
[43] Mastanduno, Chapter 5, this volume, pp. 156–158; on the rise of an authoritarian model, see Azar Gat, "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 86, 4 (July/August 2007): 59–69.
[44] Finnemore, Chapter 3, this volume, pp. 71–72; Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 261.
[45] See Jervis, Chapter 8, this volume, pp. 268–269.

This is in part what Ikenberry predicts in his chapter arguing that the US has become the "Grand Central Station" of the international system not just because of its power, but because its rule-based, open, and inclusive order breeds vested interests, economies of scale, and opportunities to thrive that raise barriers and reduce incentives to overthrow it. Coupled with a lower potential for great power war (thanks to nuclear deterrence and democratic peace), the US unipolar order could live on even as the US's relative power dissipates.

Yet to suggest that the content of the international system (not just polarity) matters still begs the question of where content comes from and when it is likely to remain stable or change. The strong claim would be that the content of the system depends simply on the unipole and its power-molded preferences. But no one in these chapters makes that case. The puzzle of system content again points to the need for a more complex view of the causal role of polarity.

Conjunctural causation

These three problems – the ambiguity, endogeneity, and incompleteness of unipolarity – are issues that trouble not only our understanding of the current international system, but polarity in general. Together they question the significant role polarity (and a view of international structure based on capabilities) has played in international relations theory since Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. If unipolarity is dwarfed by other causes in relative causal weight, if it is endogenous to actor choice, and if systemic structure itself is defined by ideas versus capabilities, then polarity's privileged place as a cause of world politics is diminished. The common wisdom that Jervis puts succinctly – "we should still start our analysis with structure" – hardly seems compelling.[46]

This "primacy of polarity" view risks skewing our understanding of international politics by encouraging a positive finding of polarity influence and discouraging further investigation of other arguments that may provide superior explanations. Why continue to examine situations where polarity gives a seemingly coherent answer?[47] Similarly,

[46] Ibid., p. 252.

[47] i.e., omitted variable bias. See too Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" 52.

the presumption of an "additive" research practice that asks us to start with polarity and then move on to other factors is that the world is one where causes are independent and their effects can be summed. If the world, however, is one where certain factors are only influential in interaction with other factors, then an additive model would be misspecified and lead to faulty results.[48]

These issues strongly suggest that we need to look beyond standard polarity analysis by pursuing conjunctural analysis – where two or more factors interact in regular and conjoint ways to produce results.[49]

As a collective project that focuses on unipolarity's effects, this book clearly risks ignoring the conjunction of causes. Individual chapters, however, are rich in considering, or suggesting the possibilities for, conjunctural causation. Wohlforth explores the intersection of polarity and the status-seeking genetic nature of humans; Finnemore, polarity and international social structure; Walt, polarity and intentions; Mastanduno, polarity and rise and decline; Jervis, polarity and "current circumstances"; Ikenberry, polarity and unipole order strategy; and Snyder *et al.*, polarity and domestic politics.[50] These chapters identify, but mostly do not probe, the dynamics of these conjunctural causes – i.e., how they lead to continuity and change in effects, and how exactly their interactive (not additive "unipolarity plus y") logic produces impact.

To say that polarity has received too much prominence in the study of international relations is not to say it is irrelevant. Instead, it is to suggest that polarity's impact is not as a causal variable that dominates international structure, but instead that it is a factor that works synthetically with other causes to shape outcomes. In what follows, a sketch of one particular conjuncture – i.e., between power and ideas – is explored.

[48] Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Bear F. Braumoeller, "Causal Complexity and the Study of Politics," *Political Analysis* 11, 3 (2003): 209–233. For a similar critique of a different literature, see Benjamin O. Fordham, "The Limits of Neoclassical Realism: Additive and Interactive Approaches to Explaining Foreign Policy Preferences," in Lobell *et al.*, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, 251–279.

[49] Ragin, *Comparative Method*, 24–30.

[50] Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, Chapter 6, this volume.

The interaction of polarity and ideas

If the polarity of the system deserves less of an emphasis in the study of international politics, then the question is, what deserves more? One candidate is found in the ideas that motivate national strategies and that characterize international order.[51] The point is not that polarity has no impact and ideas are the main cause. Instead it is about how pragmatic rational actors (state officials and states themselves) are shaped both by power and dominant social ideas in making the politics that produce national strategies and systemic rules.

States and international orders require dominant ideas and rules to facilitate cooperation, coordination, and collective action. Actors at both levels compete to control the ideas that guide collective thinking. If these ideas were simply a product of who had power at any particular time, or what a particular individual actor thought, they would change when power changed or when new actors replaced old actors – and they would be meaningless. Yet US ideas about international commitments did not change when the United States became the top dog after World War One. German ideas about foreign policy became much more aggressive in the early 1930s even though Germany's potential relative power had not changed dramatically.

Collective ideas are resistant to change both within national and international societies because such notions are often inspired by past events that are tattooed on individual and societal memories, entrenched in practices and institutions, backed by partisans who benefit from them, and subject to collective action hurdles that deter change efforts. Typically it is difficult for individual actors to know if others desire change, and if they do, how much they will risk in acting on their preferences. Lacking such information, they cannot be sure that their own desire and efforts for change will have any effect. They must mount a case for why the old ideas are defunct, which can involve considerable effort; and because doing so threatens tradition, they invite

[51] For a fuller exposition of this argument that follows, see Legro, *Rethinking the World*. Other takes on the interaction of ideas and power are Henry R. Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Georg Sorensen, "The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR," *European Journal of International Relations* 14 (2008): 5–32. A different type of conjunctural argument can be found in Fordham, "The Limits of Neoclassical Realism."

social and political sanction. This is typically the source of findings that "history" or path dependence matter.

These societal ideas are however sometimes subject to change according to a "does it work?" pragmatic logic. When events do not meet the expectations of existing ideas and the results are undesirable, critics of existing ideas have opportunities to convince others to take action to challenge them. To realize change, critics must also agree on a new orthodoxy and its effectiveness. Reform efforts can founder on an absence of alternatives or too many alternatives or a perceived failure of new thinking.

Polarity and power clearly play a role in this synthesis. Relative power can negate or sustain the expectations generated by a state's dominant ideas of appropriate action. Hitler was able to gain momentum and political support within Germany in part because his rapid buildup caught other countries unawares producing early victories that gave plausibility to his radical plans and weakened his domestic critics.[52] Relative power can make a particular type of international structure (one that combines polarity and rules) endure or collapse. Wohlforth explains that Gorbachev's attempt to enshrine new thinking/mutual security as the dominant global model failed because the Soviet Union had no booty to back it.[53]

This view of state intentions and international structure is explicitly conjunctural. It features the way that ideas and power work together to shape incentives for actors and outcomes. Ideas define expectations which provide guidelines to assess outcomes. But the goalposts for action depend on preexisting ideas. The need for this type of conjunctural analysis is clear in looking at sources of the two key foundations of unipolar international politics: national strategies and international structure.

Polar intentions

The nature of great power intentions shapes international structure in terms of both capabilities and content. Great powers can sometimes choose to become poles – or not. If state purpose were simply a product

[52] Legro, *Rethinking the World*, 109–110.
[53] William Wohlforth, Chapter 2, this volume, pp. 64–65.

of the distribution of power, there would be no need to discuss what shapes purpose. But that is not the case.

The history of US foreign policy reflects the fact that US thinking about managing the international arena does not march in lockstep with its polarity. To be sure, increasing power can influence ambition.[54] Yet throughout history, even as its relative power was growing, the United States has been amazingly reticent to change its thinking about the international arena and it has usually not attempted to rewrite international rules. Indeed, it appears that the US approach to major power politics only changed significantly during World War Two. In those years, the United States discarded its longstanding desire to separate itself from the political-military entanglements of the international system and instead choose to integrate itself. The "Bush revolution" represented a potential second effort, but it was abandoned relatively quickly.

A conjunctural approach involving ideas and power is one way to explain this variation. Political leaders adopt broad ideas (strategies) to explain national action and justify their own choices, thus setting a baseline of social expectations of what should result. Domestic political supporters and opponents then use those baselines to assess – and support or critique – existing policies depending on events. Power shapes the ability of different policies to generate results. Ideas without power are ineffective. Power without ideas does not motivate and/or coordinate supporters and critics.

When events match the expectations leaders generate with desirable results there is little pressure for change – even if polarity indicates change is likely. For example, the end of the Cold War did not contradict the expectations of the existing US approach or bring unwanted results. The United States had adhered strictly to its postwar position of active commitments to international order and containment. And the outcome from that behavior – the end of the Cold War on US terms – was widely seen as a success. With no challenge to the US orthodoxy and no negative results for critics and reformers to use to

[54] Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) has explored how this took shape in nineteenth-century America when the United States, at least for a time, took on imperial ambition. The problem is he does not look at other periods like the interwar period when US relative power soared but it checked its ambition at the door.

rally fence sitters, it was difficult to reorient US strategy for the new era away from the old tried and true Cold War formula. Inertia and the defenders of tradition easily deflected a variety of task forces and commissions pushing for change in the United States in the 1990s.

The dynamics of the conjunctural approach help to account for both the effort at change following 9/11 and its failure. In contrast to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 9/11 attacks did contradict expectations that Cold War thinking could continue to provide for US security.[55] Moreover, the ground had been prepared for a replacement strategy. A dedicated and energetic set of social activists – commonly referred to as "neoconservatives" – had developed and promulgated a coherent world view in the 1990s.[56] These thinkers held influence and positions in the government in the Bush administration. Thus when the 9/11 attack unsettled the commitment to the old ideas, they had an approach ready to go that could replace it.

The problem was that effort achieved some successes but, mired in Iraq, resented by international opinion, and largely perceived as ineffective, it lost significant support. In the 2008 presidential election, both the Democratic and Republican candidates promised a retreat from the Bush agenda, and a return to the prior consensus.[57] Indeed the Bush administration itself, in 2005 and after, had already largely returned to a position that was more akin to its Cold War predecessors than the new doctrine initiated after 9/11.[58]

In sum, whether US ambition and its approach to international order changes or not, depends not just on its power, but on preexisting ideas, alternative concepts, the expectations they generate, and events. Polarity still matters – for example, superior capabilities allowed the United

[55] See the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), especially on the "failure of imagination."

[56] See, for example, James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004); Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[57] John McCain, "An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom," *Foreign Affairs* 86, 6 (November/December 2007): 19–34; Barack Obama, "Renewing America's Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* 86, 4 (July/August 2007): 2–16.

[58] See, for example, Mike Allen and Romesh Ratnesar, "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy," *Time*, July 9, 2006; and Gordon, "The End of the Bush Revolution."

States leverage in shaping the content and competence of international order. But the limited power of even the hegemon to ensure success in a world of many challenges was evident in the reversal of the Bush revolution.

The content of polarity

Just as individuals compete to establish the dominant ideas that guide nations, so too do states contest the content of international structure (Finnemore's "social structure"). The logic of what shapes that contest bears resemblance to the pragmatic politics that shape the strategies of states. Orders evolve based on power and perceived effectiveness. Principles and models gain dominance because they fulfill the expectations they offer with desirable results. Events that challenge those rules provide room for potential change in content.

International order is not simply the product of the strongest – others must be accommodated and won over as well.[59] A range of scholarship suggests there must be common interests or shared purpose between the hegemon and other important countries, or they must be persuaded/coerced into joining ranks to form some sort of international order.

This argument takes at least three different forms. The first comes from John Ruggie who argues that order requires congruence of social purpose among states. Power and purpose do not always move in the same direction. For example, the economic program of Holland's rivals in the seventeenth century did not match its own mercantilism. Furthermore there must be a fit between domestic social purpose and that of international regimes. Thus the interwar free market structure of global capitalism was not acceptable to states that turned to a government management model.[60]

Robert Gilpin points to the need for common interests for a "potential" hegemony to translate into "actual" order. The hegemon can "seldom coerce reluctant states to obey the rules... and must seek their co-operation. These other states co-operate with the hegemon

[59] International rules are likely shaped more by power than struggles within states where institutions often mediate the struggle to control the state.

[60] Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions and Change," 384.

because it is their own economic and security interests to do so."[61] Thus the United States played the lead role in organizing the international system after World War Two, but it did so with the strong support of the allies – and to the extent order existed internationally, in tacit collaboration with the Soviet Union.

The third approach to hegemony comes from the Gramscian tradition that sees hegemony as mainly a project of domination where consensus trumps coercion. In this view hegemony is initially established as a result of a deal (historic bloc) that is cut between the strong and the weak (classes, states, etc.). This deal over time assumes a taken-for-granted status that facilitates order.[62]

In short, power alone is not enough to establish order; it also depends on the ideas/intentions/preferences and policies of other states in the international system. The ability to cut deals depends on accommodating these and persuading others that one has a workable set of policies and principles.

The fact that order – even in hegemonic unipolar situations – demands the cooperation and deal making of the dominant powers sets up the dynamics of pragmatic politics at the system level as well. States compete to demonstrate the efficacy of their models as the paradigms for structuring international order. At times particular models/states are able to gain hegemonic roles to which others adapt. The international society school has explicated the way that Europe's rules spread and became the basis for today's global rules.[63] The Cold War saw the United States undertake an extensive effort to spread its own values in the international system as John Ikenberry charts above.

And at least since the end of the Cold War (and for a good bit before that) the United States has continued to attempt to define order – albeit not in equal measure to its power. These US efforts have of course generated pushback at times – illustrating that there are

[61] Robert Gilpin, "The Rise of American Hegemony," in Patrick Karl O'Brien and Armand Clesse, eds., *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846–1914 and the United States 1941–2001* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 165–182; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 3.

[62] Robert Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations: An Essay in Method," *Millennium* 12 (1983): 162–175.

[63] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

other constraints in the international system besides the distribution of power.[64]

At the international level, events that contradict the expectations generated by dominant actors and their ideas will nurture opportunities for critics of the dominant ideas to attempt to alter the content of structure.[65]

Certainly opponents of the US-supported principles of the international system – e.g., human rights, rule of law, liberal economic policies, etc. – have used US deviations from those principles as a tool to undermine American authority and the system itself. Martha Finnemore nicely shows how legitimacy and hypocrisy are used to constrain the United States when it violates existing rules and its own self-proclaimed principles.

Claims of efficacy matter as well. For example, the meltdown of the global economy in 2008–2009 produced many critiques of the US-led system. There were arguments made from different quarters that different national economic systems might provide better models (e.g., state directed capitalism) or international economic rules (i.e., more heavily regulated as in the EU). The stabilization of the global economy and the United States has for the time being stalled such critiques. But the dynamic is familiar – from Western models replacing local ones in Japan and other countries in Asia in the late nineteenth century, to the challenge fascist states made vis-à-vis democracies in the 1930s. States that produce desirable results and fulfill the expectations they generate will be in a good position to act as models for the content of international structure.

As Wohlforth points out, in this battle over whose rules will define the content of international structure, "the ability to persuade is linked to material capability."[66] Yet it is also true that capabilities and claims and competence are assessed vis-à-vis particular ideas. Hence international structure is defined by ideas as well as power. And whether

[64] For a discussion of these constraints, see Legro, "The Mix that Makes Unipolarity."

[65] For an insightful account of the way some international systems become defined by transnational ideological conflict between states offering different domestic political orders – and how those clashes end when great powers that exemplify them fall behind and cannot deliver on their promises, see John M. Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510–2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[66] Wohlforth, Chapter 2, this volume, p. 64.

structure endures or changes depends on the interaction of capabilities and ideas that allow the dominant power(s) to retain legitimacy or those who oppose it (them) to gain momentum.

Polarity is dead, long live unipolarity

If the above is right, perhaps the primacy of polarity in international relations theory has passed from the scene. Because of its ambiguous impact as an autonomous cause, because it appears to be as much a product of state choice as an arbiter of state choice, and because it incompletely characterizes the nature of international structure, polarity should be stripped of its advantaged causal position. That is what these chapters collectively suggest.

Yet polarity as a "normal variable" – along with others such as institutions, political structure, ideology, interdependence, etc. – endures. Polarity matters and deserves attention. Most important for understanding the future of world politics, we need to explain better how polarity works in conjunction with other factors to shape outcomes involving both the intentions of states and the content of international structure. The chapters in this book point to rich possibilities. What is needed is work to illuminate how the interaction of these different variables produces particular policies and structures. A causal portfolio dominated by polarity is a path to impoverished understanding; polarity in the mix with other factors promises dependable returns.

There are good reasons to believe that unipolarity as a description of world politics may be with us for a while. This is true both because the United States has a significant advantage in material capabilities that may wane but will not disappear in the next two decades and because other prominent countries have not yet displayed ambitious intentions that suggest they will make a run at polar status.[67] The answers to how much longer that situation can continue and with what impact will likely depend on the conjunction of power and ideas.

[67] See Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*; Jeffrey W. Legro, "What China Will Want," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, 3 (Sept. 2007): 515–534. China is the most likely current contender.