

American Unipolarity: The Uneven Distribution of Power

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ABSTRACT: Polarity is an often used and yet frequently under-analyzed term in International Relations. It is designed in its usage to shed light on the distribution of power in the global system. This paper seeks to understand the order of the world at the systemic level in a descriptive manner while recognizing the challenges that arise from attempting to do so. It comes to the conclusion that the hierarchical structure remains unipolar in form – dominated both materially and ideationally by the United States. Moreover, this unipolarity is likely to continue over the next half a century and see a whole host of nations become more and more organized under the direction of one global power. Whether or not this is desirable remains to be seen.

Keywords: Polarity, Neorealism, Unipolarity, Military Domination, Ideational Control.

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Introduction

Thus it is possible...for the contemporary student or practitioner of international politics, contemplating the vast and amorphous world body politic, to distinguish the relations among the great powers as its essential skeleton.

Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (1977: 206)

Determining the polarity of the global system is notoriously difficult. Despite such difficulties, in the world of International Relations, scholars are prone to “rely on polarity to measure the distribution of power.”¹

Knowing, then, that polarity is rather commonplace as a concept among those that examine the world and seek to answer questions of war and peace, it would serve us well to ensure that we understand it as best we can. Of course, man is often wont to try and reduce the vast and teeming perplexity of the world to simple logic and formulas. The desire to put into concise boxes the fuzziness of the world is one of the traits of science and reason.

Though we face such difficulties, polarity is important because it helps us understand not only the hierarchical positions of the various state actors on the international stage, but also the very nature of the rostrum itself. Whilst Shakespeare famously observed that “all the world’s a stage,” he did not provide us with much information regarding the type

1 Edward, Mansfield, “Concentration, Polarity, and the Distribution of Power,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (1993):105.

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of platform upon which people made their entrances and exits.

Polarity is also significant because through a fuller understanding of the international situation, we will be better equipped to handle the challenges and prospects that lie ahead in terms of war and peace. Such problems and prospects may arise in a multitude of areas: nation-states, non-state actors, the climate, global financial stability, or the misuse of technological advances. Many of these difficulties are not bound by national boundaries and will thus require a unified approach to combat successfully. Such a method only comes from a holistic and systemic view. The more accurate the comprehension and grasp of International Relations (IR) and the resultant polarity, the more likely it is that well-informed decisions can be made in all of these areas and beyond.

This paper will briefly explain the concept of polarity, explore the various forms in which it exists, and then attempt to ascertain the level of global polarity today. In doing so, it makes the following claims: Despite the claims of many that we have witnessed a transformation in the global structure, the polarity remains unipolar. That is, one country has a far larger share of the distribution of power than any others. As a result of both its material and ideational forces, utilizing both military hardware and the success of its culture and entertainment industry, the United States continues to sit atop the systemic hierarchy and will remain that way for some time. While challenges to its position do exist, the presence of such rivals and the work spent tracing their advances serves only to confirm that it is the US that remains the world's hegemon.

What is Polarity?

It will serve us well to engage in a brief explanation of polarity. This will ensure we are better able to ascertain the most accurate description of where the systemic level is at today. Polarity in IR is a concept that can be traced back to Thucydides. The Greek historian Thucydides documented the inevitable war that arose from Athenian growth, in terms of political and military power, and the resultant fear that this produced in the state of Sparta. Harvard Professor Graham Allison describes the situation thus: "This is the phenomenon that I have labeled Thucydides's Trap: the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one."²

Both Athens and Sparta at the national level reacted in various ways to the turbulence caused by the ever-changing political situation and hierarchical tension. As Allison notes, it is the "structural stress" that results in the likelihood of war. The structure of which he speaks is the stage of IR: polarity.

Another important way of understanding polarity is through the work of scholar Kenneth Waltz. He draws our attention to three levels of analysis in terms of International Relations: the individual level, the national level, and the structural level. Each of these

² Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 30.

is distinct from each other. The individual needs the least explanation for it appears self-evident. Leaders, politicians, and powerful figures are involved in the act of International Relations and they make decisions which have ramifications often well beyond the borders of their own state. The second level, the nation, is a little trickier. Whilst we are all familiar with the nation-state as a concept in the modern age, it does not have any real physicality of which to speak. A landmass may have mountains, rivers, and other geographical features. It may have inhabitants, places of governance, and architectural features. The actual nation, however, is a combination of all of these things and many more: the insignia and anthems that present themselves in societies' collective consciousnesses. The third is the most difficult to comprehend for it exists solely as a theoretical concept. Global polarity as such has no tangible qualities with which to associate it. Waltz says of the difference: "Changes in the structure of the system are distinct from changes at the unit level. Thus changes in polarity also affect how states provide for their security."³

Polarity is thus a *global* term. It describes not any individual number of states but instead the entirety of them all and the form in which they exist. Moreover, it provides those that analyze it with an understanding of hierarchy and how the states are arranged inside such a structure. We know naturally that some states have a larger influence on world events than others. It then follows that we will want to know the order in which influence can be exerted. According to the interior make-up of the major powers inside, we are also able to understand whether the structure is determined to be complex, symmetrical, or singular: determined by multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar arrangements, respectively.

Three Main Polarity Types

There are the three main strands of polarity that have been attributed to the world's systemic architecture: unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. There are others that have been suggested, most notably nonpolarity and tripolarity. However, for fear of being lost in a never-ending sequence of numbers, we will begin our exploration from the firmly-established set of three. We defend such a choice by affirming that history has given evidence of these three existing and that common sense sees them as indispensable to the exploration.

Unipolarity is said to occur when one state dominates the globe in terms of military might, cultural force, and economic power. This can also be seen as hegemonic position, as it is controlled by a single actor. With the fall of the Soviet Union towards the end of the twentieth century, the global structure became unipolar, with the United States taking the reins.⁴

When such a situation occurs, the superpower has the ability to act all around the world – often with impunity and in a way that does not always accord with national interests. A

3 Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no 1. (2000): 5

4 See Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

unipolar system is said to be unstable because many will seek to challenge and usurp its hegemonic control and create a state of multipolarity. The necessary commitment needed to see off all changes for a prolonged period of time is often out of the reach of even the most powerful of states.

Bipolarity is when this domination of various factors is distributed between two – normally competing – states. As a result of such competition between the two, other lesser states are liable then to fall in line behind one or the other for security. Such limited alliance potential provides states with less room to maneuver and provides a more secure international structure. The United States and the Soviet Union have somewhat recently both been contributing factors to a bipolar hierarchical structure. Moreover, the Cold War – despite its name – provided a relatively peaceful time in our history as there were no major hot wars or armed conflicts between any of the larger powers. There was, of course, a large rivalry which produced a lot of unpleasant politics, as well as proxy conflicts in Africa and Asia. However, the battlegrounds during this period of bipolarity were predominantly economic. This time of bipolar stability came to an end with the abandonment of the Warsaw Pact, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and finally, the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991.

Multipolarity takes place when more than two states have an equal distribution of the world's resources and exert military, cultural, and economic pressures upon each other. Such a system raises the possibility of tension and conflict as rival nations and states compete with each other for power and influence. The hostility and friction that exists between large powers in such a systemic structure is a key feature of multipolarity. Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the abdication of Napoleon I, The Congress of Vienna in 1815 divided territories and split spheres of power between the major powers of the time: Austria, Britain, France, Russia, and Prussia. This multipolar global system resulted in such rivalry and hostility that it finally unraveled in the first half of the twentieth century through two devastating wars.

Influenced by the geographic make-up of the region, the cultural diversity, as well as the theorizing of scholars like Acharya, people in Southeast Asia – as well as in other traditionally less powerful countries – might tend towards multipolar views of the international system. They see the world as a series of cultures and peoples, each with their own sovereignty, power, and right to not only act on the world stage, but also to move the system and the other second image nations through the force of their will and ideas.

Which is said to be the most accurate description of the world's polarity is left to be debated, for the polarity of the international system is not something that lends itself to being readily tested in an empirical manner. It floats above us in an almost ephemeral form; elusive, yet there. It is seemingly constructed socially in the world of academic exploration and the minds of scholars yet still remains very real for the nation states

that play out their games on the world's chessboard and move their military pieces in accordance with how they view the world's architecture.

Kenneth Waltz has said that in terms of understanding the polarity of any age "one finds general agreement about who the great powers of a period are, with occasional doubt about marginal cases."⁵ The United States is clearly a great power today. That much seems certain. How great a power and how strong a hold it has on the global polarity is to be assessed. Whether it has a dominant share of the world's power distribution will determine whether the system still remains hegemonic.

How to Measure Polarity

Various architectures can be championed from a normative position in the hope of bringing about greater global security at a systemic level as well as increased peace and freedoms at both the individual and national levels. The multipolar system and the constant, ever-nagging, possibility of war may be seen as far more desirable than a stagnant and repressive tyranny under the promise of peace. A bipolar world from a theoretical perspective provides greater hierarchical stability as it keeps a single hegemon in check. Bipolarity is a system composed of two poles (rather than one or many) and often focus on alliances, a balance of power, and lower levels of economic interdependence.

At the moment, however, we concern ourselves only with the descriptive nature of the third image polarity. It is not our duty here to move beyond merely attempting to describe how the global architecture is seen. Like Hedley Bull and his 1977 text *The Anarchical Society*, we simply seek to understand "order" in world politics. The order that manifests itself exists independently of any organization, law, or normative dimension.

To find a solution to the problem of the measurement of polarity, the most direct route would be that espoused by Waltz in the previous section: "general agreement" and common sense. Pole status can be said to be attributed to a state not solely by itself, but instead by others. If other states treat the actor as if it is a great power and the possessor of a large share of the world's influence, then it is likely to be so. States do not willingly relinquish power or cede authority to others without good reason. However, because polarity is determined by both material and ideational attributes, the search for accurate measurement of the global system should be widened.

Polarity has been measured according to material factors before. Such analysis can be seen in the arms race between Germany and England around the turn of the twentieth century. Both of these European states competed with each other in terms of how many naval destroyers they were able to produce. The number of ships they possessed gave an indication to the state leaders of their respective power (or lack thereof) against the other.⁶ The Cold War also saw an arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union with

⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 131.

⁶ Allison, *Destined for War*.

both participants pushing both their nuclear and space capabilities so as to intimidate and out-gun the other.

Efforts therefore might be made to truly ascertain the global systemic polarity by the measurement of certain competing variables. This provides a more quantitative dimension. Perhaps the most formulaic assessment of polarity was provided by J. David Singer in 1972.⁷

This particular attempt to determine such polarity pitted the number of states in the system against the power possessed by various states. Other ways might include, but not be limited to, gross domestic product, defense budget spending, military armaments, nuclear capabilities, population, percentage of global trade, position and authority in various supra-national and transnational organizations, and engagement and victories in military conflicts.

This brings us to the ideational form of measuring polarity. As has already been asserted, the global systemic structure, known in IR as polarity, is essentially created by individuals that inhabit the various nation states around the world. It does not exist in a physical or tangible form, which allows for objective or empirical verification. Were there no people, it is somewhat safe to say that there would be no polarity.

Our description of the polarity of the international system may therefore be affected by *where* we perceive it to be from; it might also change according to *how* it is perceived by different people endogenously and exogenously. For example, when ideas are formed of the various states' power, they will likely be informed by the political orientation of those that assess the structure. Those steeped in the world of realism and the works of scholars such as Waltz and Mearsheimer see the world as an anarchic battleground for warring states and clashing billiard balls. Such theoretical starting points might produce markedly different notions of polarity when held in contrast to more liberally-inclined thinkers such as Keohane or Nye who favour cooperation and integration. The lens through which the structural polarity is observed will in turn often determine the structure that is seen by the observer.

Such understandings of a state's relative power is created by a mirrored action by other states. Only when a variety of states engage in this behavior, assessing their own image of power as well as that of others, do we truly get the ideational understanding of a global hierarchy.⁸

For polarity to be truly understood we need to understand – as in the work of Thucydides and later analysts of his work – both the growth of Athens and, simultaneously, the fear that this produced in Sparta.

Thus, we might work from an initial starting point that in the third image of systemic analysis the polarity is semi-relative. It is a combination of both material and ideational aspects. We, from a specific and subjective position in a second image perspective,

7 See David J. Singer, *The Wages of War, 1816-1963: A Statistical Handbook* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972).

8 Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2004).

compile the material aspects of power of a state, and add to them those ideational features with which we associate it. Then, that is compared to our perception of other states, for were there just one we would not need to talk of either international relations or polarity, and the concept we know as global polarity is understood. Here we are treading close, it would seem, to Alexander Wendt and his work regarding the anarchy of states.⁹

Polarity is what States Make of It?

*A state that wins a war has acquired what can usefully be thought of as a sort of
“windfall” of power assets.*

G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (2016: 4)

Let us try to find justification for our initial answer to the world’s current polarity as that remains a cornerstone of this work. To do so, we step back a little in order to provide some perspective. Following on from the Congress of Vienna in 1815, major powers in Europe created multiple poles of power. This systemic distribution and volatile hierarchy eventually unfolded into two armed conflicts at the start of the twentieth century. The end of the Second World War saw the arrival of a bipolar world. The United States and the Soviet Union faced off against each other in a cold war that saw proxy battles, an arms race at home and abroad, and the division of much of the world into two distinct spheres of influence. Following the Second World War in Europe, many of the elites and those in positions of power – such as Winston Churchill and Jean Monnet - had not only an affinity for America, but also deeper family, business, and cultural ties. And thus before the Schuman Plan for Europe was ever written, the American Marshall Plan was enacted.

Otherwise known as the European Recovery Program (ERP), this American-led initiative was designed to aid in the reconstruction of the region following the devastation of the war. Beginning on April 8, 1948 it provided more than \$13 billion to the continent so as to support the required trade and industry developments as well as integrate the states with each other and act as a barrier against a communist threat which was perceived from the east. The Russian designs on Europe were known as the Molotov Plan and this was said to have been in place since before the end of the war and aimed at Russian domination of the European markets.¹⁰

Both Russia and the United States had specific visions for the European market and neither of these were that disguised. The Marshall Plan stood against the Molotov Plan and one would be enacted so as to provide the interested countries with what they desired from Europe—regional control and a greater influence on the systemic level polarity. As Brzezinski would later spell out, “It is axiomatic that the security of America and Europe are linked.”¹¹

9 Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2. (1992).

10 Morroe Berger, “How the Molotov Plan Works,” *The Antioch Review* 8, no. 1. (1948): 17.

11 Zbigniew Brzezinski, “A Plan for Europe,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 1. (1995): 26.

The United States, France and Great Britain chose to side and give money to a country they had just engaged in two world wars against – Germany – rather than a country that had not only been an ally in the previous conflict but one without which victory could not have been assured, the Soviet Union. Lord Palmerston’s observation of there being no permanent allies or enemies, but only permanent interests, rarely rang truer than in that particular moment.

Fawcett spells this clear global division and quest for supremacy over a troubled region clearly in saying that, “Regional agencies were subordinated to the broader purposes of the East-West conflict, indeed many were specifically designed to serve the interests of one of the two superpowers.”¹² Hurrell, from a theoretical perspective, supports this idea and references the work of Kenneth Waltz in doing so: “Regionalism is understood by looking at the region from the outside in and by analyzing the place of the region in the broader international system.”¹³ The broader international system is thus made up of factors within such a structure and as Wyatt-Walter indicates, the actors primarily involved in the process of European regional integration were the United States and the Soviet Union: “After US attempts to establish the Bretton Woods system in the early post-war years failed, the USA promoted a solution more in keeping with its security objective of anchoring Western Europe in a firmly anti-Soviet alliance.”¹⁴

More evidence of the American and Soviet conflict being the key idea behind European integration can be found in Mayall: “After 1945 an attempt was made to design an international order based on principles of co-operation rather than conflict. The intention was to reconcile rival claims and interests at the national, regional, and universal levels, but the East-West conflict quickly overshadowed this attempt.”¹⁵ This bipolar world was to come to an end with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Empire. With the newly-formed Russia facing dramatic economic, military, and social problems, as well as an ever-encroaching NATO and expanding EU, the world became unipolar. But what made it so? Kenneth Waltz’s above assertion of common sense still rings true. In the early 1990s, no other countries had anywhere near the prominence that the United States did in world affairs. Most, if not all, nation states perceived the US as being as an undisputed superpower on the world stage – and there were few, if any, that would have been perceived as an equal superpower by others. The American system, composed of its economic power, soft-culture, and military strength, touched nearly every part of the globe. Almost nothing could or would occur

12 Louis Fawcett, “Regionalism in Historical Perspective,” in *Regionalism in World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

13 Andrew Hurrell, “Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective,” in *Regionalism in World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 47.

14 Andrew Wyatt-Walter, “Regionalism and World Economic Order,” in *Regionalism in World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 81.

15 James Mayall, “Regionalism and National Identity,” in *Regionalism in World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 170.

without it being of some importance to American interests. The concept of “American Exceptionalism” was pushed forward and there was a sense that the United States would engage in military conflict if and when it saw fit rather than whether or not it had the support of the wider global community. Such an attitude is adopted only by a state that considers itself to be the single authority in a unipolar world.

The new millennium has seen social and political changes in the West, as well as the rise of developing countries elsewhere. Such progressive movement has led to talk of the multipolar world or even a “multiplex world.” This championing of multiple nodes of influence, however, would appear to be based on notions of individualism, representation, and sovereignty that reflect the humanitarian spirit of the modern age rather than any true reflection of the world’s systemic architecture. There has been the arrival of non-western IR theory (NWIRT) as well as the increased representation of minority groups in both the media and political sphere. This has led many to feel that a sea-change has arrived; this paper suggests that in realer terms, however, no such thing has occurred.

American President Donald Trump has signaled his intent to increase the defense budget of the country by an extra \$54 billion dollars in 2018.¹⁶ The country’s total spending is around \$600 billion: approximately one-third of the entire globe’s total expenditure. Such large amounts point to a clear military supremacy. And not just that, one that seeks to further maximize its position through the use of economic might and budget reallocation. America retains a strong nuclear presence in Europe designed to thwart any potential Russian adventurism. Figures are said to be “between 150 and 200 warheads based in Italy, Turkey, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands” according the 2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength.¹⁷ This is supplemented by major bases in Asia (including South Korea and Japan) designed to thwart any prospect of China asserting claims on regional hegemony.¹⁸

The use of a two power standard means that a superpower will work towards creating a military force that is equal to its two nearest competitors combined. In doing so, it helps secure the position in the global hierarchy and discourage any rivals from disrupting the polarity or balance of power. This is in line with the “two power standard” adopted and carried out by Britain for its naval fleets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Just as the superpower of Britain previously adopted such an approach, the United States seems to be following in those footsteps.¹⁹

16 “Breaking down the US defence budget,” *AlJazeera*, last modified February 28, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/02/breaking-defence-budget-170228183730109.html>.

17 “2017 Index of U.S. Military Streanght,” *The Heritage Foundation*, accessed October 1, 2017, <http://index.heritage.org/military/2017/assessments/operating-environment/europe/>.

18 Department of Defense; Press Reports, Join the Army, See the World, 2016. <https://www.economist.com/news/ united-states/21704817-presence-american-troops-foreign-soil-growing-more-controversial-go-home> (accessed September 1, 2017).

19 “Who are the Largest Defense Spenders around the Globe?” *EU Institute for Security Studies*, accessed September 1, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/nato-defence-spending-europe-america/>.

Overall totals are, however, often confined to a single snapshot and do not provide any sense of longitudinal analysis. The United States' continued focus on military might has come in response to not only China's newfound economic power but rather the dramatic increased spending on defense. Whilst the total spending on China remains far behind that of the US – as well as its forces being confined primarily to the East Asian region – the total increase in spending on products of war and peace has been estimated to be as high as 61 percent.²⁰

Other Poles in the Global Structure?

Such dramatic increases in China's material resources were enhanced in an ideational manner by its staging of a massive military parade in late 2015 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and the defeat of Japan. This huge national event was not simply designed for a domestic and internal audience – it was one very much aimed at the outside world. As more than 12,000 troops paraded through Tiananmen Square – along with other armored vehicles and nuclear weapons – Xi Jinping delivered a speech notable for its anti-Japanese rhetoric as well as a promise to “never seek hegemony or expansion.”²¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin was in attendance as was former Communist party president Jiang Zemin and, perhaps surprisingly, then South Korean President Park Geun Hye. The United States and Japan both declined to attend the event.

Vladimir Putin has attempted to reign in American unilateral decision making. In his well-documented 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, he lambasted the US for attempting to subvert democratic practices through the seeking of unipolarity. Perhaps more interestingly, Putin suggested that the ontological origins of the term – or at least their re-envisioning following the end of the Cold War – was a form of ideational, rather than material, hegemonic action. The very term itself was being discussed in both politics and the academic world to give credence to the very world that the US either sought (in Putin's view) or, more likely, possessed: “what is happening in today's world – and we just started to discuss this – is a tentative to introduce precisely this concept into international affairs, the concept of a unipolar world.”²²

Despite Putin's best efforts to reassert Russian dominance on the world stage – something that he sees as part of a necessary balancing act – his country remains encircled by American forces and weapons. The United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001 under President George W. Bush and then created the Missile Defense Agency. NATO has expanded into Eastern Europe on three separate occasions:

20 Defense spending by country 2012 - 2016.

21 Franz-Stefan Gady, “Beijing: Xi Jinping Slams Japanese Aggression in Military Parade Speech,” *The Diplomat*, accessed October 1, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/beijing-xi-jinping-slams-japanese-aggression-in-military-parade-speech/>.

22 “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” Kremlin, last modified February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

2004, 2009, and 2017. These expansions saw countries previously under some degree of Russian influence move close to American control. The most recently recognized NATO states in 2017 (Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia) have served to increase the tension between Russia and the US but also demonstrate the latter's growing supremacy in the region.

American vessels also patrol off the coast of Alaska, and so Russia finds itself with little place to go and is likely to be further diminished by events in the continuing "Great Game" of the Middle East in which it is historically, politically, and – to some extent – geographically embroiled.

Global Polarity vs Regional Polarity

In International Relations, there is no higher power above the various self-interested states able to keep them in check. Thus, the possibility of war will always remain.²³ Because of this, many states constantly find themselves operating under the umbrella of mightier powers who play the role of the structure's security. The polarity police, if you will forgive both the alliteration and metaphor.

China is no-doubt asserting itself. However, it cannot be said to rival the United States on a global systemic level. Regionally, the competition for hegemony has grown stronger with North Korea's latest nuclear missile test in September 2017 as well as the deployment of the THAAD battery in South Korea. However, this regional struggle is not repeated the globe over. And polarity refers to the distribution of power at a global systemic level rather than a regional level. The Cold War bipolar systemic image had countries siding with both the US and the Soviet Union and thus essentially producing two main blocks of influence (while also accounting for the non-aligned movement). Today though, lesser states do not seem to be siding with China at a noticeable rate – either in terms of bandwagoning or balancing against threat. Russia asserts itself frequently – both in its rhetoric and via proxy in the Middle East; however, such movement seems more of a form of posturing than any real trend towards genuine challenge of the established hierarchical order. There is seemingly no evidence of what was witnessed in a previous age in terms of bipolarity and its characteristics.

Neither is the systemic level multipolar – as demonstrated by the ease with which America dwarves other states in terms of spending and force. Countries that pride themselves on their economic development and global standing do not enjoy any real sense of sovereignty or freedom. Their claims to multipolarity tend to remain mainly aspirational or steeped in more social and democratic ideals of individual rights and state sovereignty rather than any authentic power. Some point to Japan as a possible node of multipolarity because of its recent imperialistic history, technology, and finance. This,

²³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

however, ignores the structure of East Asia.

The East Asian region remains one of the world's most interesting and volatile places – home to democracies, communist countries, friends, enemies, and nuclear weapons. Henry Kissinger observed that no Asian language even had a term for this collective continent until the arrival of Western powers and influence.²⁴ The very idea or notion of “Asia” is thus one that has been created by the West to better understand and, consequently, manage this disparate and yet vitally important part of the world.

Hans Morgenthau specifically identified Korea as a prime example of the balance-of-power theory in action; a land in which theoretical ideas are given life and validity as they are acted out. In doing so, he described it as a country in which more powerful external states, such as China and Japan, fought for control – and when one's grip loosened, the other looked to take advantage: “Thus, for more than two thousand years the fate of Korea has been a function of either of the predominance of one nation controlling Korea, or of a balance of power between two nations competing for that control.”²⁵

Therefore, while systemic realism may be true for a great military and global power such as the United States, the concept of an anarchic world does not necessarily apply to the Korean Peninsula. That particular world is not anarchic. It is not anarchic because there is a clear regional hegemon - the United States - and a challenger to its position - China. Northeast Asia for Korea, therefore, has and continues to be hierarchic. Kang has noted: “Hierarchy can be global as well as regional, and the United States is clearly the dominant state both in the international order and in Asia.”²⁶

When a superpower, such as the United States now or previously the Soviet Union, observes the third level international system from a second level perspective (that of the state), it sees nothing above it. It sees, as realists and others posit, nothing more than anarchy. A self-help world in which there is no sovereign actor other than the state itself. And yet when a country such as South Korea or Japan looks from the second to the third level image, they do not see such anarchy. They see only hierarchy. The nature of this hierarchy of course may change over time; however, the fundamental principle remains the same. There is a barrier for these states between the second and third level images. There exists another level: image 2.5 – the control.

This image has been willingly neglected since inception by the main practitioners, among them Waltz: “It would be...ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica...A general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers.”²⁷ And yet the image certainly does exist and as

24 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 172.

25 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 184.

26 David C. Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks,” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003):71.

27 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 73.

the world becomes ever smaller in terms of knowledge and understanding, it is perhaps time that such an image becomes acknowledged in the systemic analysis of international relations and political science.

This control is akin to the concept of the “glass ceiling” that is well-known in more cultural and social realms. It refers to a barrier and obstacle to progression and development – often one which is discriminatory in nature. The glass ceiling is established by the ruling power in order that it might protect its interests and prevent any others from challenging such hegemonic control. It protects polarity; in this case, unipolarity.

Many lesser states attempt to use regional, economic, or even political integration so as to try and counter the balance of much stronger and more powerful nations.²⁸ This has not been possible in East Asia, however, as America has continued to favour the hub-and-spoke method of bilateral relations to stop any major blocs from forming.

Polarity and Perpetual Promises

The conclusion reached by the author is that the world remains today undoubtedly unipolar. Regardless of whether it is observed endogenously or exogenously, the same interpretation applies. The United States dominates the global systemic architecture. It is also likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future. That is not to say that such a state is desirable – it is merely to state what exists. We might, looking far enough afield, also determine according to the experience of history that the American unipolar world will, too, one day come to an end.

Such a cessation of events, however, does not seem likely to occur within the next few generations. Even with the rise of nuclear weapons among non-aligned states (such as North Korea and Pakistan) the world remains very much at peace. This is not to say that the entire world enjoys such basic qualities – much of the Middle East has been ravaged by US foreign policy and the subsequent actions of all other actors on the stage. For, whenever the United States moves, the stage reverberates and this affects both the delivery of others’ lines as well as their placement.

Rather than any rise of multipolarity or any other form of systemic world order, it is concluded here that the world order is likely to become more unipolar over the next half a century. American influence will become more ingrained through the continued spread of its soft power. Such mediums will tell the story of the twentieth century in a manner that best suits the needs and interests of those making the films. Hollywood after all is neither peer reviewed nor is it subject to historical fact-checking or criticisms.

But the very real and tangible material and empirical factors are important. The United States has recently taken pride in dropping “the mother of all bombs” on Afghanistan in April 2017 and it will continue to advance its military in a way that other states are simply unable or unwilling to do. The US has created a republic in which the military industrial complex in a capitalist system has thrived as it seeks to maintain its two power

²⁸ Hurrell, “Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective.”

standard. The necessity of competition has driven it to make staggering developments and advancements in offensive and defensive capabilities. Moreover, such technological developments as well as the structure of the economic capitalist system will perhaps see military action encouraged abroad so as to continue the growth of the industry and profits rather than face stagnation.

In this final sense it is the capitalist economic system that will push the American military further and further around the globe, seeking new fields and blue oceans for continued expansion and development. This will engulf any form of completion and suffocate much of the globe. The presence of nuclear weapons has ensured that there will likely be no hot war between nations of any size – and such absence of war may result in the total unipolarity of the world – for better or for worse.

Despite such a prediction based on an analysis of the global system and its polarity, let us close with some words from a scholar that always deserves our attention. Kenneth Waltz: “A series of nation-states with a perpetual danger of war is preferred by some to a world state with a perpetual promise of peace but likely tyranny.”²⁹

29 Waltz, Kenneth N. *Man, the State, and War*, 1

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