

Is Bi-Polarity more Stable than Multi-Polarity?

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Abstract

International relations theorists belonging to the neo-realist school of thought suggested the 'poles' systems as a way to understand the international system and the interaction between states. According to this theory, the international system is considered bi-polar when there are two dominant adversarial superpowers and multi-polar if there are numerous powerful states (or organisations) that share power. The most significant example of a bi-polar system is the Cold War that dominated the international system for the second half of the twentieth century. Multi-polarity is much more frequent, as it was the prevalent system both before and after the Cold War. This paper compares the two periods in an effort to assess the relative stability of each and answer the question of which system allows for greater stability. With scholars, politicians and theorists divided over this question, the paper presents both stable and unstable components of the two periods and after balancing those, it reaches the conclusion that despite its evident flaws and hazards, the Cold War was more stable compared to both the contemporary post-Cold War, but also the turbulent pre-World War II multi-polar systems and their associated threats.

Keywords: International Relations, Bi-polarity, Multi-Polarity, Cold War.

Introduction: The power Theory

The international system today is comprised of 195 independent states according to the US State Department (US Department of State, 2011). According to the realist theory, the rational self-interested state is the dominant actor in an anarchical international system and power is distributed across all states (Kauppi and Viotti, 2012, p. 52). Some realists consider power to be a sum of the military, economic, technological, diplomatic and other

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capabilities of the individual states. Others see the power of a state as a comparative value in order to compare between stronger and weaker states (Kauppi and Viotti, 2012, p. 52). In this view, power is an attribute attached to individual states indicating their relative rank in the international scene. Neo-realists, in an effort to understand the distribution of power among states, suggested the 'poles' theory (Kauppi and Viotti, 2012, p. 54). In this theory, a 'pole' represents a major power, a state whose power exceeds, by far, the power of the other states. Balance of power was used to explain not only the distribution of a state's power but also the overall quest for hegemony (Haas, 1953). This theory suggests three possible outcomes: uni-polar (a system with a sole dominant superpower), bi-polar (a system with two great powers who are much stronger than the other states and who share approximately equal power between them) and multi-polar (a system with three or more major powers) (Kauppi and Viotti, 2012). The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of the international system today and assess the relative stability of multi-polarity and bi-polarity. I will assess the relative stability both in terms of conventional wars, but also in terms of nuclear weapons.

During the second World War, the Soviet Union (USSR) and the USA were both in the same coalition, formed to neutralize the threat of the Axis alliance of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Japan. After the end of the war though, the two former allies soon became deadly adversaries. It is suggested that it was the future of the defeated enemy states of Japan and Germany that offered the first source of friction between USSR and USA (Wagner, 1993, p. 80). In the case of Japan, a compromise was easier – Soviet troops never set foot on the Japanese islands. On the other hand, the future of Germany proved to be an intractable issue: the Soviet Red Army had reached Berlin and Soviet troops had managed to advance deep into German territory before the conclusion of hostilities (Wagner, 1993, p. 80). The situation was made worse by the Helsinki accords which allowed for an unstable status quo in Europe, as the continent was divided between the USA and the USSR (Wagner, 1993, p. 80). The result of this tension was a period of dangerous competition between the two powers called the 'Cold War'.

It is not hard to observe the bi-polarity of the Cold War. Both the USSR and the USA possessed immense power compared to the other states. In addition, the power they possessed was threatening the very existence of the planet or, as Oleg Bykov puts it, the whole world was 'hostage to the superpowers' (Bykov, 1994, p. 64). The superpowers possessed so much power between them, that they did not consider their ally states as a sufficient defence to counter a possible attack (Wagner, 1993, p. 81). Ideologically, the USSR was communist, and the USA was capitalist and each created its sphere of control and influence in an effort to spread its ideology (Bykov, 1994, pp. 63-4). The USA was dominating West Europe, while Russia was controlling Eastern Europe including the Eastern part of Germany. But what effect did this dangerous relationship between two extremely powerful states have on the stability of the international system?

The Instability of the Cold War

In approximately the same amount of time that two multi-polar systems created tension and led to the two World Wars, the bi-polar system of the Cold War created tension and fear but not a general war. The First World War came as a result of the division of the superpowers of the multi-polar system into two major camps and the fact that these powers were reluctant to abandon their allies and their interests. Similarly, it can be argued that the Second World War was also a result of an unstable multi-polar system in which it was not clear which states were willing to join in an alliance to check the growing power of Nazi Germany (Wagner, 1993, p. 81). Contrary to both of those multi-polar situations, the bi-polar Cold War was 'fought' by only two actors: the USA and the USSR. As I mentioned earlier, these two superpowers were much more powerful than any other state, ally or foe (Wagner, 1993, p. 89). They were powerful enough to ignore the demands of their allies and, instead, independently track their own foreign policy towards each other (Wagner, 1993, p. 81). Alliances were not tilting the balance significantly – even when France and China (both nuclear states and relatively strong allies) abandoned NATO and denounced the USSR respectively, the behaviour of the two superpowers was not altered (Wagner,

1993, p. 81). In a similar way, the fact that the alliances were also separated by ideological differences offered no opportunity for a change of sides, which meant that both superpowers had almost perfect information of the other and of its allies (Wagner, 1993, p. 81). This meant that both camps knew about the plans of the other side and this, in turn, implied both sides had an awareness of the other side's 'red lines'. Almost perfect information and more or less consistent behaviour on the part of the USA and the USSR meant that they could avoid serious miscalculations, a usual cause of wars (Wagner, 1993, p. 90).

In the previous section, I mentioned that there were a number of crises that increased the friction between the superpowers even further. But crises are not a Cold War phenomenon. In a study on crises between 1929-1975 (a period divided between multipolarity and bi-polarity) the findings were very interesting indeed: in a total of 292 crises, 67% of crises that occurred during the Cold War resulted in a reduction of the tension, while for the previous multi-polar system, the equivalent figure was just 34% (Kegley and Raymond, 1992). The rising tension in times of crises helped the superpowers to understand the other actor's tolerance (Wagner, 1993, p. 81). The most useful illustration of this is the behaviour of the superpowers following the Cuban missile crisis, which was arguably a turning point in the Cold War (Alkadari and Salmon, 1992, p. 122). The establishment of the 'Hot line' after the 1963 Geneva Agreement, alongside the two SALT talks and the nuclear missile agreements of 1971 and 1973, was a measure to accommodate some of the existing tension of the Cold War. The fear of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) led to a mutual deterrence theory, a sufficient theory to explain the fact that the Cold War did not erupt into a thermonuclear military stand-off between the USA and the USSR. However, there are some other parameters that perhaps prevented this. Christopher Coker (1994, p. 30) suggests an interesting theory – he suggests that, as the two centres of political and economic ideologies, each of the two superpowers was also certain about its final victory. Nuclear war would bring destruction to both but the tense, yet peaceful Cold War could produce a dominant power. Although the nuclear threat was a fact, neither side was

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willing to strike first, hence the attention both superpowers devoted to second strike capabilities and missile interception systems (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001).

According to these facts, despite the knowledge that the Cold War was a period where antagonism and tension were high, it seems that at least the bi-polarity of the international scene was more predictable and stable compared to the multi-polar nature of previous eras. There was at least relative transparency and less complexity compared to the systems that dragged the world into two major wars (the World Wars). In the next section, I will explore the nature of the post-Cold War international system.

The stability of the Cold War and the previous multi-polar systems

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The nature of the international system today

The nature of the current international system is a matter of debate among analysts. Is the modern world uni-polar or is the USA just a power in a multi-polar system? In my opinion, the world today is multi-polar. In my effort to show the multi-polarity of today, I will start by providing evidence why the world today is not a uni-polar system dominated by the USA. After the collapse of the USSR, the USA was the remaining Cold War superpower. The US economy is the largest in the world but recent studies show other states gradually catching up. Similarly, its military might (both conventional and nuclear) is not enough to make it the sole superpower as many states now have the technological edge to upgrade their own armaments to the level of US built weapons (Mastny, 1994, p. 59). Since the end of the Cold War, even non-militarily strong states gained a greater share of world power, not only from the defeated USSR but also from a strained USA (Bykov, 1994, p. 65). This means that the end of the Cold War brought to an end the bi-polar nature of the international system, as this was gradually becoming multi-polar (Bykov, 1994, p. 65). Furthermore, as Ernst Haas (1953, p. 444) states, a uni-polar system is a system in which a single state can 'overawe all the rest with impunity' and the USA is not such a state today.

Analysts identify at least 3 more centres of concentrated global power, even though these 'poles' have not demonstrated this power so far. The first is Japan, whose evolved and stable economy has secured its prominent position in both the IMF and the World Bank (Waltz, 2000, pp. 33-4). Japan's defence budget is in the top three globally and in June 1994, the Japanese Prime Minister declared that Japan, a country surrounded by nuclear states

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(China, India, Pakistan, Russia) and rogue states (North Korea), has the full capabilities to develop and sustain nuclear weapons to add to its technologically advanced conventional combat equipment (Waltz, 2000, pp. 33-4). The second case is China, whose economy is modelled to double in a maximum of a decade (Waltz, 2000, p. 32). A nuclear state since the Cold War era (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 98), with five to seven DF-5 class missiles capable of delivering nuclear strikes even in extreme ranges, China is more feared in the regional and global scale for its 3 million Red Guards (Waltz, 2000, pp. 32-3). The third case is the European Union (EU) whose power, although only potential, cannot be ignored. The union of the 27 states (European Union, 2011) boasts leading global actors in industry, economy, weapon manufacturing as well as modern, well trained armies with proven high performance in combat. Also, Britain and France, both leading members in the EU, form 2/5ths of the UN permanent membership and both are nuclear states from the Cold War period (Robertson-Snape, 2001, p. 98 and p. 105). A truly integrated EU clearly has both the military and economic potential to overcome even the USA itself (Bykov, 1994, p. 67).

The instability of the multi-polar international system today

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many thought that nuclear war was no longer a threat (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 94) and money would be diverted to economic and social development schemes instead (Reader and Thomas, 2001, p. 87). The post-Cold War era created some immediate gains for the international community – the apartheid in South Africa was dissolved and peace negotiations resumed in Northern Ireland and the Middle East (Little, Smith and White, 2001, p. 3). But the bloody conflicts in Bosnia, Angola, Kosovo, Congo, Chechnya and elsewhere (Little, Smith and White, 2001, p. 3) resulted in a surge of ethnic division. It was a desperate and angry form of ethnic hatred in a highly unstable global system, with conflicts resulting in genocides and ethnic cleansing (Coker, 1994, p. 30). Ethnic and religious identification, an issue lying dormant during the Cold War, was woken up by the instability of the new system (Little, Smith and

White, 2001, p. 7), as the remaining Cold War superpower USA failed to act as an international peacekeeper (Smith, 2001, p. 69). The EU reverted to its conservatism and failed to respond even to conflicts within the European continent like in the cases of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (Rosenau, 1994, p. 106).

However, there was a way to slowly restore order even in an unstable multi-polar system - by stopping the supply of weapons. Unfortunately, arms trade rapidly increased after the Cold War (Rosenau, 1994, p. 106). Just like any other rational choice in International Relations, weapon sales are a 'cost vs. benefit' decision, with the cost being possible security threats and the benefit being economic gain from selling weapons (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 93). With the emergence of over 20 new states created from the fragmentation of the Soviet Union (Webber, 2001, p. 16), conventional armaments were 'inherited' by these states (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 93). These Soviet weapons were then quickly sold to the highest bidders (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 93). Furthermore, private arms dealers prospered in these new states due to the corruption. Weapon sales were no longer based on rational or ideological grounds as suppliers looked solely on the economic side of the equation. An extreme example is perhaps the 1995 skirmishes between the Russians and the Chechen rebels, where the Russians suffered casualties from Russian made weapons sold to the Chechens by private Russian manufacturers (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 93). In a highly turbulent global scene, weapon sales benefited even designated 'rogue states' like Indonesia or states that intended to use weapons against their civilians like Rwanda (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001). The fact that by the end of 1994, the USA alone was actively supplying weapons and military services to 26 countries involved in either external or internal conflicts is alarming (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 102). Although the supply of weapons in war torn regions is not the spark initiating conflict, the easy access intensified existing conflicts.

In the nuclear field, the threat to humanity was not lifted. In 1995, a malfunction in a Russian 'second strike' weapon system initiated a nuclear missile countdown

interrupted only minutes before launch while the nuclear arsenal of the all five nuclear states was expanded (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001). This happened simultaneously with the increase in the number of nuclear states, as in 1998, India and Pakistan officially joined the five existing nuclear states after developing nuclear weapons capable of destroying each other (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 97). Meanwhile, four states including the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, as well as the battle hardened Israeli state are believed to be developing WMDs while another six states have confirmed their technological ability to produce nuclear warheads (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 98). Unlike the treaties signed during the Cold War that came into immediate effect, the treaties signed in the post-Cold War period failed to be ratified by all nuclear capable states (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 95-7). This reinforces the worries that ex- Soviet Union states may attempt to sell the nuclear knowledge they 'inherited' just the way they sold Soviet conventional weapons (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 97). The breaking of many Cold War alliances and the distrust between states in an unstable political scene led many states to push for nuclear weapon development (Robertson-Snape and Spear, 2001, p. 96).

Conclusion

Although the bi-polar Cold War invented the nuclear threat, I believe I have managed to illustrate that it was a more stable arrangement than the multi-polar systems existing at the beginning of the 20th Century. Alliances were kept constant, arms sales were conducted on ideological grounds and the two superpowers deterred each other while restraining their allies and preventing nuclear proliferation. In my opinion, the nuclear threat has not diminished. The two superpowers would probably refrain from using WMDs even in the face of a serious crisis, but today, with their spread, a minor malfunction or a stolen nuclear warhead can mean an immediate nuclear strike. Furthermore, the uncertainty and lack of transparency in today's world between states, accompanied by the ability of terrorism to strike anywhere, at any time, create an instability that is

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asymmetrical to the stability of the bi-polar Cold War, where the superpowers knew exactly who the enemy was. In the modern post-Cold War world, many states or groups choose to defy both the remaining superpowers (the USA, the EU etc.) and also international organisations like the UN. This, in turn, creates a global uncertainty, as it seems that superpowers can no longer control states that have a tendency towards becoming more 'rogue'. Given these observations, I would say that bi-polar systems seem more stable than multi-polar systems and I would also add that the Cold War, although not completely safe, was in many ways more stable than today's multi-polar international system.

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