

Towards a Multi-Polar International System: Which Prospects for Global Peace?

Written by Andrea Edoardo Varisco

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ANDREA EDOARDO VARISCO, JUN 3 2013

In the discipline of international relations (IR), a great power is a state which excels in “size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence” (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 131).[1] These characteristics, also referred as power capabilities, assure a great power the ability to exert its economic, military, political and social influence on a global scale. The distribution of power capabilities in the international system determines the number of the great powers and, consequently, the polarity of the international system. If the great powers are more than two, the system will be multi-polar; if they are two, it will be bipolar, while systems with only one great power are considered unipolar.

By the end of World War II, the multi-polar international system characterized by the pursuit of the balance of power among great powers, in a way that none of them was strong enough to predominate over others, transformed in bipolarity. The bipolar world was dominated by two opposite great powers with strong economic, military, and cultural influence on their allies. This nearly equal amount of distribution of power between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) created an international system with no peripheries and with two different spheres of influence which resulted in stability for more than 40 years and assured peace between the two great powers and limited wars in the rest of the world. After the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the US emerged as the only great power of a new unipolar international system (Krauthammer, *The Unipolar Moment*).

The well defined hierarchy of power of the unipolar world allowed the US to loom largely unchallenged for many years and resulted in a peaceful and stable world order. This current stability, together with the precedent bipolar balance of power assured by the Mutual Assured Destruction, has been described as “the longest period without war among any of the major powers” (Ikenberry, 150). However, the recent rise of new powers such as the so-called BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China– could soon result in a return to a multi-polar international system.

This essay will examine if a return to multi-polarity and great power rivalry will result in a less or rather more stable world. It will firstly investigate if such multi-polar scenario is a feasible and concrete prevision for the future world. The analysis will focus on today’s world, arguing that a decline of US unipolarity and the rise of other powers could undermine US predominance and create the conditions for a multi-polar world in the near future. Secondly, the essay will canvass history in order to understand if multi-polar worlds are inherently stable or not. It will be shown how multi-polarity led both to stability and instability, yet many multi-polar distributions of power resulted in war-prone, unbalanced and unstable worlds. This finding will lead to the third part of the analysis, which will try to establish the consequences for global security entailed in a future multi-polar order. It will be argued that multi-polarity could result in a less stable world characterized by rivalry among great powers. Moreover, it will be pointed out how a future multi-polar world will be completely different and potentially more unstable than the multi-polar periods witnessed by history so far. The presence and availability of nuclear weapons will indeed allow even middle and small powers and non-state actors to seriously threaten and undermine the global security and peace of the future multi-polar world.

The Current US Unipolarism

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With the end of the Cold War and the collapse and dissolution of the USSR, the bipolar international system transformed in unipolarity and the US emerged as the only superpower. In a unipolar system the power of a state is not balanced and controlled by the other states, this inequality allows the hegemon of the international system to influence and shape the rest of the world. After 1989 the US has been considered the militarily, economically and technologically leading country of the world (Brooks and Wohlforth), a lonely superpower “able to impose its will on another countries” (Huntington, 39) and, in some cases such as the 2003 war to Iraq waged without the United Nations (UN) Security Council consensus, to act outside the laws of the international community.

This unbalanced preponderance has been promoted and reinforced by some factors. The US geographic position assured the security of the country for many years: while other states – for example China, Russia and the European countries – are land powers surrounded by potential enemies, the US is isolated and too far away from its potential threats. As a result, no country in the last 70 years tried to attack American soil. This geographical security is strengthened by an unchallengeable military power. According to latest data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2011 US military spending accounted for more than 40 per cent of the world total, followed by China with approximately 8 per cent, and Russia, United Kingdom and France with a percentage between 4 and 3.5 per cent each (*Background Paper on Military Expenditures*, 5). US military capabilities assure it a strong sea and air power and allow it to project its force globally, enabling it to hit a target everywhere at every time.

Yet the notion of hegemony does not only imply geographical security and military preponderance, but also influence and cultural hegemony. In Gramsci's notion of hegemony – one of the most quoted definitions of the concept – the hegemonic ruling class of a capitalist society has for example the power to influence and persuade the subordinated social classes to accept and adopt its values. As a great power during the Cold War, and as a lonely superpower in the last 20 years, the US played a key role in the architecture of the new world order (Ikenberry). From an economic point of view, the US laid the foundations of the global liberal economic order long before the unipolar era, supporting the Bretton Woods system, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade which was replaced in 1994 by the World Trade Organization, and indirectly controlling some international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Nowadays, the US controls around the 17 per cent of the total votes of the IMF and it is the largest shareholder in the World Bank, leading to the tradition that the President of the World Bank has always been a US citizen nominated by the US President, while the President of the IMF has always been a European.

Furthermore, the US tried to shape and protect the world order also politically. During the Cold War, American power supported anticommunist governments and guerrillas in order to contrast the spread of the socialist values, supplying for example arms to non-state groups in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Nicaragua through its regional allies (Mathiak and Lumpe). Likewise, after the USSR collapse the democratic peace theory with its assertion that two democracies do not go to war each other became the rationale behind US promotion and support of accountable liberal democracies all over the world (Gleditsch; Lake; Ikenberry). This unequal distribution of power and the implicit recognition of the US hegemony resulted in a world characterized by no wars among the major states and the lowest number of interstate armed conflicts of the last 50 years (Uppsala Conflict Data Program). Conversely, the US unipolar world has been characterized by the highest number of intrastate conflicts, most of these erupted in the aftermath of the USSR dissolution (Harbom and Wallensteen). Nevertheless, the intrastate and regional character of these conflicts hardly constituted a potential danger for US hegemony, or a threat for the polarity and the stability of the world order.

In the last decades, US power was thus challenged only sporadically and using asymmetric means, as happened the 11th September 2001 during the terrorist attacks to New York. Yet the lack of respect for the international community rules and the impulse to use hard power without considering other actors of the G.W. Bush administration eroded US image as a benign superpower (Reus-Smith). This loss of influence, together with a slow decline of the hegemon and a rise of new powers, would suggest that US unipolarity could not last forever.

Rising and Resurgent Powers: Unipolarism in Decline?

Many IR neorealists consider unipolarity as a source of potential instability and danger, which eventually leads other

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actors to try to counterbalance the power of the hegemon using their hard (Layne; Mastanduno; Waltz, *Structural Realism*) or soft (Pape; Paul) power. Whereas only few scholars contend that the well defined hierarchy of the unipolar world assures peace and stability (Wohlforth), the majority of them agree that in the long term diminishing returns, rising costs, diffusion of power to rivals and decline in polity will undermine the preponderance of the hegemon and will cause a counterbalancing rise of other powers (Gilpin). The current US economic crisis and the rise of new actors seem to confirm this assertion. In 2002 Krauthammer wrote that US unipolarity could last thirty or forty years "if America did not wreck its economy" (*The Unipolar Moment Revisited*, 17): in the last years, the US is experiencing an economic crisis "of historic proportions" (Obama, *Economic Crisis*) which could seriously undermine its hegemony and eventually lead it to concentrate its efforts on its internal problems rather than in world affairs. Overstretched and facing an economic crisis, the US could finally withdraw from some of its international engagements and open new vacuums of power that could be refilled and occupied by other regional competitors.

Other states are indeed ready to replace the US on a regional basis and could aspire to the role of great powers in the near future (Zakaria; Hurrel). According to SIPRI's latest figures, "China has increased its military spending by 170 per cent in real terms since 2002, and by more than 500 per cent since 1995" (*Background Paper on Military Expenditures*, 6). Moreover, it is acquiring parts of the American economic debt and could economically overtake the US in the next decades.[2] India "was among the ten fastest growing economies of the World since 1980 and projected that in the next decade its growth rate would [...] reach the top three" (Virmani, 1).

India's constant population growth will support and reinforce its steady but inexorable economic rise. Increments of population and growing economy will also underpin and foster the rise of Brazil, a country which in the future could play a pivotal role in the Latin American region (Chase, 40-63, 165-194). Furthermore, new scenarios could shape the future power distribution and contribute to the rise of new great powers: global warming for example could allow a regional actor such as Russia to exploit its natural resources in the Siberian soil, acquiring in this way new power capabilities which could be used to challenge US supremacy.

A return to a multi-polar world characterized by great powers rivalry is therefore more than a fable vagary or a theoretical hypothesis advanced by IR scholars, but it looms as a feasible and concrete scenario and a possible outcome for the near future. This shifting from unipolarity to multi-polarity could affect the stability of the future world order.

Multi-Polarity in History

History has indeed already shown how multi-polarity is more unstable and war-prone than bipolarity or unipolarity. The modern history of Europe for example has been characterized by many multi-polar moments.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the multi-polar European order was swept away by the Thirty Years War, a conflict that lasted from 1618 to 1648 and was triggered by religious, territorial and dynastic disputes over the internal politics and balance of power among various Christian groups and principalities. The conflict involved the Holy Roman Empire of the Hapsburgs, German Protestant princes, the foreign powers of France, Sweden, Denmark, England and the United Provinces and was ended by the Peace of Westphalia, which introduced the concept of state sovereignty and gave rise to the modern international system of states. This system of states was challenged by the expansion of the Napoleonic Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. After the defeat of the Emperor, in 1815 the great powers held the Congress of Vienna to re-establish the previous state order and formulated the Concert of Europe as a mechanism to enforce their decisions.

The Concert of Europe was composed by the Quadruple Alliance of Russia, Prussia, Austria and Great Britain and was aimed to achieve a balance of power in Europe, preserving the territorial status quo, protecting legitimate governments and containing France after decades of war. The Concert of Europe was one of the few historical examples of stable multi-polarity: the regular meetings of the great powers assured decades of peace and stability in the continent. The Concert of Europe suppressed uprisings for constitutional governments in Italy and Spain, secured the independence of Greece and Belgium but did not prevent the Crimean War in 1853 and a return to great power rivalry.

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During the 20th century multi-polar international systems resulted in instability and led to two world wars in less than 50 years. The balance of power and the system of alliances of the early 20th century was swept away by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914. That event triggered World War I, a global conflict that caused the death of more than 15 million people in less than five years. After few decades, the multi-polar world emerged by World War I with a new system of alliances and the multilateral body of the League of Nations was not able to tame the totalitarian aspirations of Hitler. The German invasion of Poland in 1939 triggered World War II, the deadliest conflict of the history which resulted in millions of deaths and in the holocaust. Since the end of the World War II the world has never been multi-polar again, nevertheless these historical accounts seem to indicate how multi-polarity often created an unstable and unpredictable world, characterized by shifting alliances and by the aspiration of the rising powers to change the balance of power and create a new order.

These historical features of multi-polarity will likely distinguish also the future multi-polar world, in spite of its strong economic interconnection and institutionalization. History indeed has also shown how the effects on stability of a global economy and of multilateral institutions have been sometimes overestimated. The multi-polar world at the beginning of the 20th century was highly economically interconnected and characterized by a large cross-border flows of goods, capital and people, at the point that the ratio of trade to output indicates that "Britain and France are only slightly more open to trade today than they were in 1913, while Japan is less open now than then" (*The Economist*, 99; Van den Bossche, 4). Nevertheless, this high interconnection was swept away by World War I. Furthermore, the presence of the League of Nations did not prevent World War II; likewise, the multilateral organization of the UN has not always been effective in promoting peace and security, and membership in the European Union did not prevent European countries from having different positions and antithetic behaviors in the wake of US war in Iraq in 2003. A shifting from a well defined hierarchy of power to a great power rivalry will therefore result in a less stable world order.

Towards a Multi-Polar, Nuclear International System: Which Prospects for Global Peace?

The prospects of a great power rivalry are particularly strong in East Asia, a region characterized by weak regional alliances and institutions, in which the economic rise of some actors could indeed represent a serious source of instability in the near future. The decline of the US and the rise of China could for example undermine the Asian balance of power and bring to light the old rivalry between China and Japan (Shambaugh). A strong rising China armed with middle range missiles could be perceived as threatening by Japan, worried that its historical American ally could not defend it because of US high involvement in other corners of the globe. The stability of the region appears even more difficult to achieve considering that the concept of balance of power requires shared common values and similar cultural understanding, requisites that are not present between the two major powers of the Asia Pacific region, China and Japan (Friedberg).

India has been portrayed as the third pole of the multi-polar world in 2050 (Virmani; Gupta). Yet its constant rise could undermine Asian stability and, for example, worsen Indian relations with its neighbor Pakistan. Moreover, the scarcity of natural resources in a world that is consuming and demanding a high quantity of them could have several implications on global security and stability (Dannreuther; Kenny; Laverett and Bader).

In this framework, the rise of Russia, a country which exports large quantities of oil and gas, controls the European provisions of energy and has had high increases in military expenditure in the last decade could represent another potential source of instability for the future world order. Russia has increased military spending by 16 per cent in real terms since 2008, including a 9.3 per cent increase in 2011 (*Background Paper on Military Expenditures* 5). Before 2008, it had increased its military expenditure by 160 per cent in a decade, (SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2008* 199), accounting for 86 per cent of the total increase of 162 per cent in military expenditure of Eastern Europe, the region of the world with the highest increment in military expenditure from 1998 to 2007 (SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2008* 177). Moreover, the control of the gas prices in Europe and the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Central and Western Europe have already been causes of tension between Russia and the West. The possibility to exploit and supply a large amount of natural resources, the growth of its military power and divergences with the US in some foreign policy issues, such as the Iranian nuclear program or the status of Kosovo, indicate that the stability of the future multi-polar world could be seriously undermined by a resurgent Russia (Arbatov; Goldman; Trenin;

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Wallander).

A return to multi-polarity will therefore imply more instability among great powers. But great power rivalry will not be the only source of possible instability for the future multi-polar world. The current distribution of power allows not only great powers but also middle, small powers and non-state actors to have military capabilities that could threaten the global security. In particular, the presence of nuclear weapons constitutes a further reason of concern and implies that the future world could carry not only the potential instability of multi-polarity and great powers rivalry, but also the dangers entailed in nuclear proliferation. The future multi-polar world will thus be potentially more unstable than all the other multi-polar periods history has experienced until nowadays: for the first time in history, the world could become both multi-polar and nuclear.

While some scholars argue that nuclear deterrence “could reduce the war-proneness of the coming multi-polar system” (Layne, 44-45), the majority of them consider the presence of nuclear weapons as a source of instability (McNamara; Rosen; Allison). In particular, regional powers and states that are not great powers armed with nuclear capabilities could represent a cause of concern for global security. A nuclear Iran could for example attack – or be attacked – by Israel and easily involve in this war the rest of the world (Sultan; Huntley). A war between Pakistan and India, both nuclear states, could result in an Armageddon for the whole Asia. An attack from the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK) on Japan or South Korea will trigger an immediate reaction from the US and “a nuclear proliferation ‘domino effect’ in East Asia” (Huntley, 725). Terrorists armed with nuclear weapons could wreak havoc and target the heart of the most powerful countries of the world (Bunn and Wier).

Iran, Pakistan, DPRK, terrorist groups will rarely be great powers or poles in a future multi-polar world. Nevertheless, the effects of their actions could easily reverberate all over the globe and represent another cause of potential instability. For the first time in history, the stability of the future world will therefore depend not only on the unpredictable effects of the rivalry among great powers, but also on the dangerous potential of middle and small powers and non-state actors armed with nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

On the morning of the 5th April 2009 the DPRK sent a communication satellite into space using a Taepodong-2 ballistic missile. Suspicious neighbouring countries and the US considered the rocket launch as a cover for testing ballistic long-range missile technology and a threat for their national security: South Korea and Japan feared that their unpredictable neighbour could target their population, the US was afraid that DPRK missiles could in the future reach its western shores.

The result of the launch is debated: while Pyongyang asserted that the satellite reached the orbit, US experts considered it as a failure and remarked that the missile travelled 3,200 km before landing in the Pacific Ocean (Broad). Surely DPRK actions achieved the goal to deeply divide the international community: the UN Secretary General regretted the launch and urged Security Council Resolutions (*Statement SG/SM/12171*), the then Chinese Ambassador to the UN Yesui Zhang stressed “cautious and proportionate” (Richter and Baum) responses to avoid “increased tensions” (Richter and Baum), the then Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso considered it an “extremely provocative act” (Richter and Baum), while US President Obama declared that, “North Korea’s development and proliferation of ballistic missile technology pose a threat to the northeast Asian region and to international peace and security” (Obama, *Statement from Prague*).

This essay has explained why a clumsy launch of a communication satellite, or a military exercitation of the nation with the 197th Gross Domestic Product pro capita of the world (Central Intelligence Agency) can become a threat “to international peace and security” (Obama, *Statement from Prague*) and could represent a serious source of instability for the world in the near future. It has been argued that the current decline of the hegemon of the international system, together with a rise of new actors could create the conditions for a shifting to multi-polarity and great powers rivalry. The future multi-polar order will not be different from the other multi-polar moments history has witnessed and will result in more instability and unpredictability than in the current unipolar world. However, for the first time in the history multi-polarity will not only carry the risks entailed in the research of balance of power among

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great powers. The availability of the nuclear weapons will indeed represent another potential source of instability. Middle powers, small powers and non-state actors with nuclear capabilities could become a serious threat for the global security; they could trigger and reinforce the rivalry among great powers which usually characterizes multipolarity, and eventually undermine the peace and stability of the future world.

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[1] Mearsheimer considers great powers "largely on the basis of their relative military capabilities"(5). Since this essay will not focus only on the military aspect of the great powers, it will therefore accept Waltz's definition.

[2] See the projection 'Top 10 GDP Countries 2000-2050': http://www.photius.com/rankings/gdp_2050_projection.html.

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