

The Unipolar Moment Continues

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LISA HOLZ, MAY 8 2014

The international order currently has a single pole and yet, according to Christopher Layne (2006) in his article "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment", the unipolar sky is falling with the arrival of multipolarity due at any moment now. Though historically the rule has been that the power of all great states has been neutralized by the counter-balancing of other great powers, this is not necessarily the pre-ordained misfortune about to befall the United States at any moment.

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyse the article by Layne (2006) and compare his position with the literature of other scholars including Brooks and Wohlforth (2011); Ferguson (2004); Finnemore (2009); He (2012); Ikenberry 2010; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth (2009); Ikenberry and Walt (2007); Krahmman (2005); Legro (2011) and Walt (2009). It will demonstrate that the 'unipolar moment' is what the United States makes of it. It will first define and differentiate some key terms and paradigms including unipolar, hegemony and 'leash-slipping'. The paper will then establish that the concepts of legitimacy and institutionalization, when applied to U.S. foreign policy, could well see the United States continue to hold enormous influence on the international system.

Polarity is a structural concept concerned with the distribution and levels of state capabilities within the international system. With the conclusion of the Cold War in 1991, the global system experienced a dynamic shift of capabilities (Ikenberry et al, 2009:5). Krahmman asserts that, for the most part, it is universally accepted by scholars that the international order is currently unipolar (Buzan 2004:65; Legro 2011:187; Wilkinson in Krahmman 2005:533; Wohlforth in Krahmman 2005:533; Posen in Krahmman 2005:533 and Wohlforth in Walt 2009:92). It has been noted by a number of academics that there is a difference between a state being a hyper-power in a unipolar system and that state being a global hegemon or an empire, and these terms should not be confused (Brooks and Wohlforth 2011:202; Ikenberry et al, 2009:5 and Krahmman 2005:533). Ikenberry et al assert that a 'pole' has long been accepted as meaning a state that has an exceptionally high and vast range of "resources or capabilities" at its disposal to achieve its objectives. It also "excels in all component elements of state capability" including "size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military might and organizational "competence" (Ikenberry 2010:516 and Waltz in Ikenberry et al, 2009:4).

The very definition of a hegemon is itself contestable. While Layne uses the term in the realist manner of hard power, in that a state may be described as being hegemonic if its resources, assets and capabilities are to such an extent that "no other state has the wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it," Krahmman nuances it to add that "capabilities are matched by influence over other states in the international system" (Mearsheimer in Layne 2006:11 and Wilkinson in Krahmman 2005:533). Layne concedes that the United State is constrained in its capacity to influence global outcomes, and cites the inability to stem both the flow of the insurgency in Iraq and the failure to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program as examples of U.S limits of power. Nonetheless Layne asserts that the United States is a hegemon because it gets what it wants most of the time and "it affects other states far more than other states affect it" (Layne 2006:12).

Some scholars assert that due to the anarchical nature of the international system, there will soon be efforts by other states to counter-balance the U.S., thus returning the structure to one that is multipolar in nature, i.e. is comprised of multiple great powers, as opposed to a unipolar with a single hegemon (Posen in Layne 2006:10). Indeed, balance of power theory predicts this very outcome, although this 'balance' appears not to have happened yet (Layne and Waltz

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in Layne 2006:7-8). Instead, Layne argues that whilst traditional balancing of 'hard' power may have not occurred, there have been incidences of what he describes as attempts at 'leash-slipping', and he provides three case studies to demonstrate the concept (Layne 2006: 29-36). Leash-slipping by a state has been defined as a strategy that is "not traditional hard balancing directed at countering an existential" threat from the hegemon, but rather is "concerned about the adverse effects of that [the hegemonic] state's rise" with regard to political and economic positions on the non-hegemonic state (Art in Paul, Wirtz and Fortmann in Layne 2006:30; Posen in Layne and Layne in Walt 2009: 107). He explains leash-slipping as a "negative balancing category since it mainly aims at undermining domination ...without a direct confrontation with the United States" (He 2012:168). If a state acquires an independent security capacity it then creates a "buffer" for creating and implementing its own foreign policy preferences, achieves greater individual state power and returns the system to multipolarity (He 2012:168 and Posen in Layne 2006: 30).

Whilst Layne asserts that with the rise of India, China and the European Union, "multipolarity [is] just around the corner", Brooks and Wohlforth disagree (Brooks and Wohlforth 2011:201). Brooks and Wohlforth acknowledge that whilst "China is rising, no one...thinks it is or will soon be a superpower" (Brooks and Wohlforth 2011:202). Ferguson also suggests that there is no guarantee that the economic boom, which China in particular has benefited from, will continue uninterrupted. Ferguson further adds that "[i]n short, each of the potential hegemonies of the 21st century- the United States, Europe, and China-contains within it the seeds of decline..." (Ferguson 2004:34-35). Brooks and Wohlforth also argue that because the United States holds such an unprecedented dominance in multiple areas, including "raw economic heft, technological prowess, military and naval power, innovation, organizational-institutional competence, size and location", the international order "will remain 'out of balance' for some time to come" (Brooks and Wohlforth 2011:201). The data regarding the economy, defense expenditure (especially in research and development), and science and technology, is hard to ignore (Ikenberry et al 2009:6-9). The United States also holds a distinct advantage of massive superiority in commanding common areas of sea, air and space that allows it to project its military dominance anywhere on the planet that it chooses (Posen in Ikenberry et al, 2009:10 and Posen in Walt 2009:92).

The United States may also extend its 'unipolar moment' depending on the direction it chooses to take in regard to seeking legitimacy and institution creation. Finnemore suggests that "power cannot be legitimate in a vacuum" and for a unipole to effectively utilize its potential and capabilities it must seek legitimacy from other states and institutions, even though this strategy may impose limits on the unipole's power (Finnemore 2009:61). Ikenberry et al assert that this is preferable that the U.S. leads in a "normatively acceptable" manner, in other words, with legitimacy (Ikenberry et al, 2009:26). Ikenberry also asserts that for half a century the United States was at the heart of "creating rules and institutions, solving collective action problems, and providing public goods like open markets and security" and that the "world was happy for the most part to live within [this hegemonic liberal order]" (Ikenberry 2010: 512 and Ikenberry and Walt 2007: 15-16). This U.S-led institutional and rule based order has successfully ushered in global economic growth and prosperity, and has created stability and the longest duration of peace between previous great power rivals (Ikenberry 2010:513).

The issue that engendered a 'push-back' against the U.S. was that the administration of George W. Bush failed to understand that the United States had been providing a "governance structure for the global system" and, contrary to Dr. Rice's view, there is such an entity as the "international community" (Ikenberry and Walt 2007:16). Just because one can thumb its nose at the world and act unilaterally, doesn't mean one should. When the unilateral actions of a unipole become a focal point of crisis with regards to legitimacy within the international system, it may provoke hostility, violence, resistance, and a lack of cooperation and trust (Finnemore 2009:62). Finnemore further asserts that a would-be challenger to the United States' policies could "undercut the credibility and integrity of the unipole" and could offer alternative values and visions that other states may find more palatable (Finnemore 2009:66). Instead, reaching consensus and coalition building can be assisted by institutions that promote and mirror the "interests and values of the dominant state" (Ikenberry et al, 2009:20). Walt asserts that it is natural that the United States would lean towards creating alliances or coalitions with states that hold similar democratic views (Walt 2009:95).

Ikenberry asserts that if U.S. unipolarity and the subsequent institutional creations that the United States has presided over are in crisis, then it is a crisis of their own success (Ikenberry 2010:520-521). This does not mean that

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potential adversarial orders will necessarily rise to rival the current institutional order. As Ikenberry points out, there will be “more reasons and not fewer reasons to cooperate in open and rule-based ways” (Ikenberry 2010:512).

Whilst the United States may have declined in power, it is not any danger of losing its unipolar position within the international order, despite Layne’s assertions. While some states may have attempted to counter-balance against it by ‘leash-slipping’ and other forms of balancing, the United States continues to hold an over-whelming dominance in not just one but all the elements that define a ‘pole’. Multipolarity is not on the horizon just yet. Utilizing the institutions it has so successfully created, and undertaking coalition-building to create legitimacy for its foreign policies, could well see the United States continue in its ‘unipolar moment’ for some time to come yet.

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