

# Why 'Two Supremacies' Rhymes with 'Stability'

Written by Marie Virtt

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MARIE VIRT, APR 3 2011

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The distribution of power among states has greatly varied through the course of international politics. Historically, it has ranged from highly concentrated power—such as the domination of the Roman Empire from 27 BC to 1453, or the United States' hegemony following World War II—to a highly dispersed power distribution like the pre-World War I period when power was divided between European countries, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Structural realists argue that states act in their own national interest and want power because the structure of the international system leaves them little choice if they want to survive; indeed, competition for power can be such that it sometimes inevitably brings states to fight each other and bring the world to a state of instability (Mearsheimer: 1). Why did the two World Wars arise? Several reasons may explain this: be it the changing distribution of power, the rise of nationalism, or the choice of states' leaders based on their individual and their country's interests, all of these reasons are related to the same factor, the greed for power (Kegley: 70-71). The changing allocation of power between states has shaped the world into three major polar systems over time: unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar systems. History shows that none of them has ever brought global peace nor been sustained durably yet. Conflicts and wars are the primary reasons for slipping out of 'great power' system. But if one turns this same idea around making it "the great power system is the reason for entering into conflicts and wars", one can wonder which type of system is the most likely to provoke instability and global conflicts, or in a more optimistic perspective, which one is most likely to bring stability. Is a unipolar, bipolar, or multi-polar system the most stable? It is the aim of this paper to answer this question and to explain why realist thought has more credit in demonstrating that bipolar systems tend to foster more stability than the two other types of polar systems.

To start with, this paper will define the core meaning of stability in international politics. It will then examine the characteristics of unipolar systems, and examples of unipolarity along with reasons why it is unstable. We will then examine multipolarity, and elaborate on deductions that this system also tends to be unstable for several reasons. Next, this paper will highlight the characteristics of bipolar systems. Relying on the Cold War example, it will demonstrate that, in such a system, military and political factors have a greater chance to facilitate stability. Finally, this paper will conclude that although history gives only one example of global bipolarity (the USA versus USSR during the Cold War), a bipolar system allows little chance for major armed wars to arise as power and threats in such a system are more balanced, and the enemy's intentions are easier to capture, which enables states to better sustain their own security.

The term "stability" in international politics is often contested. It can mean peace, but it can also refer to "the endurance of a particular distribution of power regardless of how peaceful it is" (Martin Griffiths: 19). Global peace has never existed, no matter the polar system of any period of modern history. Indeed, France kept the status of hegemon from 1792 to 1815 during the Napoleon French Empire, but great coalitions arose during this period; during the Cold War, bipolarity did not foster peace either since "although the United States and the former Soviet Union never fought a war directly with each other, over 20 million people died in the Third World as the superpowers intervened in a series of so-called 'proxy wars' in the second half of the twentieth century" (Griffiths); and thirdly,

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current regional conflicts in the Middle East obviously show that a multipolar system, the one in which we live, is not an ideal for peace either. Consequently, the stability of a system can only be regarded as the endurance of the distribution of power between the great powers within this system, or the likelihood for it to be sustained in the long-term, whether unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar.

Unipolarity is the situation in which one state or superpower dominates the international system (Griffiths). In such a system, the distribution of relative power between states is extremely unbalanced. According to realists, the international system is anarchic and states must therefore provide for their own security while being concerned with their survival as they face constant threats that another state might attack them. Consequently, the realist vision is that

in a unipolar system, the structural pressures on eligible states to increase their relative capabilities and become great powers should be overwhelming. If they do not acquire great power capabilities, they may be exploited by the hegemon. Of course, an eligible state's quest for security may give rise to the security dilemma because actions intended to bolster its own security may have the unintended consequence of threatening others. (Layer: 12)

States ensure their security by acquiring technology, military power, and economic power. As they acquire power, they will eventually emerge as great powers and bring the world to a state of instability since unipolarity will tend to disappear. This can therefore be considered the first reason why unipolar systems are not stable. Moreover, "the very fact that others believe a state is excessively powerful rebounds to its disadvantage by provoking others to balance against it" (Layer: 14). As soon as states fear for the rise of a hegemon, conflict may then arise with one strong alliance of states fighting against the great power to restore a balance:

In unipolar systems, states do indeed balance against the hegemon's unchecked power. This reflects the fact that in unipolar systems there is no clear-cut distinction between balancing against threat and balancing against power. (Layer).

So the core of unipolar systems are unstable because states naturally seek to balance the power of a hegemon as their instinct pushes them to fight for their own survival. Consequently, the preponderance of power of a state is often seen as fragile and easily negated. The 'unipolar moment' of the United States shows us to what extent this is true.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 produced a major change in world power relationships. The bipolar structure that had shaped the security policies of the major powers for nearly half a century vanished, and the United States emerged as the sole surviving superpower (Wohlforth: 5). At that time, scholars of international relations increasingly shared the wisdom that

US preponderance is fragile and easily negated by the actions of other states [...]. Unipolarity is an illusion, a moment that will not last long, or is already giving way to multipolarity. Indeed, some scholars question whether the system is unipolar at all, arguing instead that it is, in Samuel Huntington's phrase: uni-multipolar. (Wohlforth: 6).

As confirmed in an article in *Foreign Policy*, other states quickly tried to counterbalance US hegemony:

[April 23, 1997] The fear of US unipolarity inspires China and Russia to sign a "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order" in Moscow. [February 2, 2000] Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who earlier dubbed the United States the 'indispensable nation', claims the U.S. is not looking to establish and enforce a unipolar world. Economic integration, she says, has already created the kind of world that might even be called 'multipolar.' (Dickinson)

The contemporary order indeed shows that states are striving for deeper integration into the world's economy. China has recently been ranked as the world's second-largest economic power after the United States, and many accountancy and consulting agencies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers forecast that "it could overtake the U.S. as soon as 2020 and that three other developing economies—India, Brazil and Russia—will also have made it into the top six by then" (Prosser). The American superpower, which once existed, is no doubt fading away—which shows

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the instability of unipolarity.

Multipolar systems exist where three or more states have a significant voice in the international political economy. As Rotberg and Rabb explained, "interdependence of parties, diffusion of dangers, confusion of responses: these are the characteristics of great-power politics in a multipolar world." (48). The interdependence of parties comes from the fact that actors tend to rely on others and create alliances in order to balance against emerging states (Kegley, ed., 2010-2011: 319). Although alliances may seek to foster economic growth (which is the case of the European Union) or even military cooperation (as with NATO), they also entrap member countries in support of the decisions of another member state: when this decision is "going to war", then the alliance becomes a source of conflict instead of stability as states enter in disputes with their allies' enemies. Moreover, because international relations in multipolar systems are very complex, it can become very difficult for states to evaluate who their potential threats are and to protect their wealth and economic positions (Kegley: 115). In other words, "who is a danger to whom and who can be expected to deal with threats and problems are matters of uncertainty" (Rotberg, Rabb.: 46). All these facts are therefore responsible for making multipolar systems unstable.

The outbreak of World War I bears witness of the instability of multipolar systems. Indeed, this bloody war resulted from the decisions taken by the five great powers of the time: Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain (Richard F. Hamilton: 12). Before the outbreak of the war, many treaties were signed and promises were made between those great powers:

Austria-Hungary and Germany promised help and assistance against any aggressor that threatened Romania (...) Russia promised to attack Germany if France were attacked by Germany or Italy supported by Germany (...) and in case one or all of the powers of the Triple Alliance mobilized, France and Russia would also mobilize. (Richard F. Hamilton: 16-19).

Eventually, the war started as Austria-Hungary supported by Germany drew into conflict with Serbia and its ally Russia, and France and Britain, bound by treaty to Russia, moved to counter Germany (Kissane: 97). One can easily deduce that the alliance structure and the interdependence of parties were catalysts of the major global conflict of 1914. This case confirms therefore that alliances do not guarantee balances of power between states, and as a result, great powers in multipolar systems cannot keep their power for long as they will eventually be overthrown by another state feeling threatened. Multipolar systems can therefore not endure or be stable.

Bipolarity corresponds to the equal distribution of power between two states dominating the international scene in terms of political ideologies, economic system, technological and military devices. Kenneth Waltz, the founder of structural realism, argues that: "increased numbers of actors increase levels of systemic uncertainty. Rising uncertainty heightens potential miscommunication and conflict. Bipolarity is therefore the most stable form of international power distribution." (Edward Cunningham: 2). He also argues that a bipolar system enables two powers to continuously adjust their political practices to prevent uncertainty and conflict, as indeed such a system leaves the two actors with much clearer understanding of the opponent's perspective (Midlarsky: 46). Several other studies provide support for this view; in particular, Thompson (1986) found that "significantly less global warfare was associated with bipolarity" and Levy (1985) carried out extensive analyses leveling bipolarity as "the most stable system for eight of nine indicators of stability involving great-power war" (Midlarsky). As a matter of fact, the balance of power generated by bipolar systems is a major element explaining the system's stability: in a bipolar world, leaders can design strategies primarily to advance their own interests—which is the principal concern of all states according to the realistic view—but also to counter with their main adversary (Midlarsky).

Following the Second World War the world was divided into two armed camps led by the United States and the NATO countries, and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries. Both sides protected themselves and prevented the other camp's expansion by adopting an international geopolitical strategy based on the search for allies and the development of military forces (Rourke, Boyer). This bipolar system, which lasted for almost half a century (until 1990), is commonly viewed as an intense struggle for power between the superpowers. This period is known by the name of the Cold War, which refers to the presence of factors that restrained the confrontation and prevented a shooting war (Martin Griffiths: 41). These factors will now be analyzed, with the aim of demonstrating

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that bipolarity is the most stable distribution of power for three principal reasons.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union dominated the global system thanks to their military power and particularly their possession of nuclear arms. Eventually, the two superpowers entered into a nuclear arms race, which escalated through time as both sought to maintain their leadership (Kegley: p100-103). However, both knew that while arms racing would continue to be a significant feature of the competition [...] because of the shared danger of nuclear holocaust, a degree of control, which could only be exercised through explicit diplomacy, was clearly necessary. (Sheehan: 191).

This situation between the United States and the Soviet Union became known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which was the strategic reality that any use of nuclear weapons by any of the two states would inevitably cause its own destruction, as the one attacked would have enough nuclear weapons to inflict destruction of the other in revenge (Shimko: 277). Accordingly, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union ever used nuclear weapons during their fifty years of leadership and competition, as they knew that such an act would result in their own destruction. Waltz and Mearsheimer explain that “nuclear weapons [are] good because they increase the potential costs of war, thereby decreasing the chances of war” (Shimko). In the case of the Cold War, nuclear weapons served indeed as a stabilizer between the United States and the Soviet Union as it was an incentive to not start a shooting war; taking a step back, it is the balance of military power in this bipolar system—the fact that the two superpowers had equal possession of nuclear weapons—which kept the system stable. Extrapolating, bipolarity is therefore stable thanks to the balance of military power that exists between two superpowers.

The Cold War is often defined as a period of political and ideological confrontation between the two superpowers, while the Soviet Union wanted to spread communism in the world, the United States and its Western allies were capitalist economies and democracies which wanted to protect their values (Kegley: 100-103). In the 1950s Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, reintroduced the idea of “political coexistence”, which suggested the “political necessity of promoting the co-presence of conflicting ideologies and political systems in order to avoid war with capitalist states” (Odysseos: 15). Although many political commentators in the West considered political coexistence with the USSR as inconceivable at the time, coexistence of the diverging states was a fact of international political life (Odysseos). Indeed, as Frantsev also noted, “socialism and capitalism exist on the same planet and their coexistence is historically inevitable” (Odysseos). The term ‘confrontation’, when talking about the conflicting ideologies advocated by the two superpowers, may therefore correctly be interpreted as a natural and unavoidable balance of political ideologies between the two camps. This balance did not only force cooperation between the two superpowers but it also allowed others states to choose their side and commit to convictions that best suited their interests. Khrushchev also proposed in an article in *Foreign Affairs* a “peaceful coexistence intended to keep the positions of the ideological struggle, without resorting to arms in order to prove that one is right” (Odysseos). Although this did not apply at the international level as several proxy wars burst out in Afghanistan, Angola, Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East and Latin America, the two superpowers were still able to maintain the balance of ideologies and kept the world relatively stable as they never fought each other directly. Therefore, the balance of political ideologies, encouraged by political coexistence, permitted the stability of the bipolar system to endure.

In his book *The Origins of Alliances*, Stephen M. Walt argues that the reason why regional powers seek to ally with stronger actors is their will to balance against an external threat. According to him, alliances may take two distinct forms: either regional states seek to counter threats by adding the power of another state to their own, or the superpowers will try to manipulate their own image and the image of their rivals in order to attract as many allies as possible and to portray themselves as leaders (Walt). Common to both cases is the desire to acquire support from others in response to an external threat (Waltz: 149). This explanation is very useful to understand the patterns of Cold War alliances and the reason why it contributed to the system’s stability: certain states allied with the United States as they felt threatened by the communist invasion and others allied with the Soviet Union as they feared the Americans would impose their ideologies upon them. Allying to the ‘right’ side was facilitated by the fact that threat is easier to evaluate in a bipolar system than in a multipolar system as the number of actors is reduced. States in both camps used their alliance with one of the two superpowers as an umbrella against their enemy’s potential attack. As a result, the balance of threats naturally adjusted thanks to the creation of two strong alliances—the Warsaw Pact and the NATO states—and this allowed the maintenance of stability between the two major camps as they felt safer

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and ready to counter an attack if necessary (Walt: 156-157). Bipolarity is thus the most stable system because the balance of threat is such that two camps will rather first evaluate the strength of their enemies and look for protecting themselves by seeking for allies than attacking enemies at first sight.

This paper has demonstrated that stability, being the endurance of the distribution of power between great powers, is better achieved in bipolar systems thanks to both the balance of power and balance of threat which explain the creation of alliances that permit states to feel safer as they ensure the protection of their own interests and fight for their survival. Moreover, the inevitable existence of different political ideologies compels superpowers to cooperate and tolerate their mutual existence, which thus slows down the occurrence of armed conflicts. Although tolerating an enemy is very difficult for states to accept as their quest for power will rather incite them to eliminate a rival, it is possible in a bipolar system because superpowers can easily grasp the source of the conflicting political ideology and, therefore, have the time and the means to protect themselves against it. Finally, it has been shown that although the race for nuclear weapons created a very tense atmosphere during the Cold War, it was also an effective means to maintain stability because both superpowers had the incentive to avoid using their weapons knowing it would lead to their mutual destruction. Such conditions and incentives do not exist in either unipolar or multipolar systems. Should we expect the actual multipolar system to result in a period of violence and destructive conflict comparable to the one that the world experienced between 1648 and 1945? Are we ever going to miss the Cold War? The future will tell, but as Mearsheimer suggests,

the next forty-five years in Europe are not likely to be so violent as the forty-five years before the Cold War, but they are likely to be substantially more violent than the past forty-five years, the era that we may someday look back upon not as the Cold War but as the Long Peace (Mearsheimer, *The Atlantic Monthly*: 35).

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**Date written:** Spring 2011