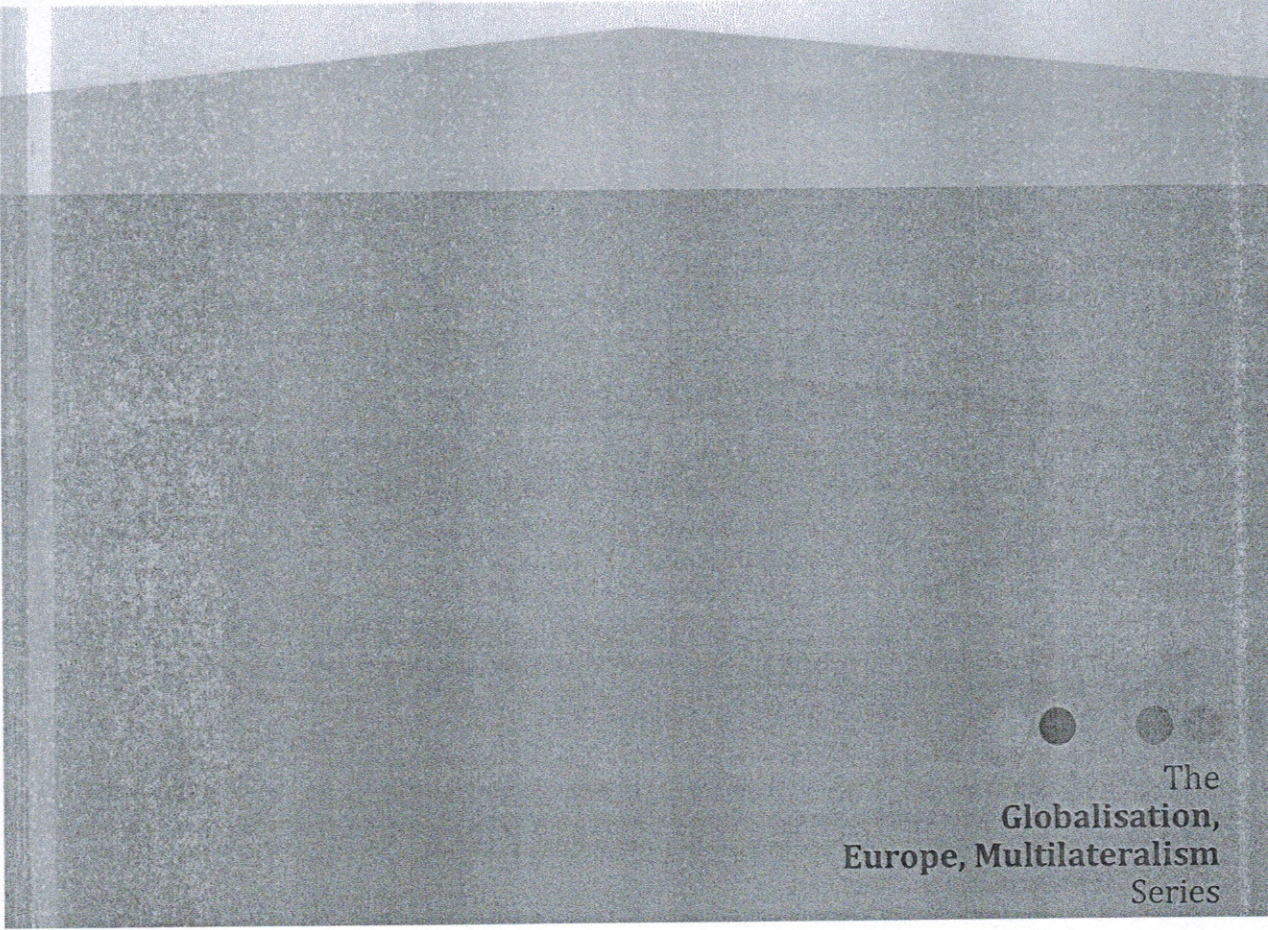


Edited by
Mario Telò



Globalisation, Multilateralism, Europe

Towards a Better Global Governance?



The
Globalisation,
Europe, Multilateralism
Series

Contents

<i>Detailed Contents</i>	ix
<i>List of Figures</i>	xvii
<i>List of Tables</i>	xix
<i>List of Boxes</i>	xxi
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xxiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxxix
<i>Foreword by Andrew Gamble</i>	xxxiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xxxvii

Introduction	1
Mario Telò	

PART I. TOWARDS A COMMON LANGUAGE: CRITICALLY EXPLORING KEY CONCEPTS

1	Globalisation: Trends, Limits, and Controversies <i>Min-hyung Kim and James Caporaso</i>	15
2	The Three Historical Epochs of Multilateralism <i>Mario Telò</i>	33
3	Which Multipolarity? Power and World Order <i>Chen Zhimin and Pan Zhongqi</i>	75
4	Peculiarities of the European Union's External Action <i>René Schwok</i>	91

Chapter 3

Which Multipolarity? Power and World Order

CHEN ZHIMIN and PAN ZHONGQI

CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. The Polarity Debate: Power Structure and International Stability
 - 2.1 Multipolarity
 - 2.2 Bipolarity
 - 2.3 Unipolarity
3. The Multipolarism Inquiry: Evolving and Contending Conceptualisation
 - 3.1 Balanced vs Unbalanced Multipolarity
 - 3.2 Power vs Cluster Multipolarity
 - 3.3 Uni-Multipolarity and Bi-Multipolarity
 - 3.4 Nonpolarity and a 'Third Way'
4. A Multipolar World from the Chinese Perspective
 - 4.1 Multipolarisation as an Inevitable Trend
 - 4.2 Multipolarity as a Desirable World Order
 - 4.3 Towards a Governable Multipolar World Order
5. Conclusion

SUMMARY

International stability is widely believed to be dependent on a specific structure of the international system: either multipolarity, bipolarity, or unipolarity. The polarity debate is all about what kind of polarity is the most peaceful, stable, and durable. With both pros and cons, all systemic theories of stability are at least partially reasonable and justifiable. To an extent, they have become the way of thinking of their respective advocates. Multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity are thus better conceptualised as multipolarism, bipolarism, and unipolarism. In comparison to the other two, multipolarism seems to be more attractive. For many countries in the world, including China, the most desirable world order will be a multipolarity that is stable and governable.

1. INTRODUCTION

In history, great powers rise and fall. They interact in an international system that is assumed to be primarily anarchic. Anarchy characterises relations between great powers although their interactions are often hierarchical. However, just as hierarchy is no guarantee of order or stability in either domestic or international politics, anarchy should not be taken as synonymous with disorder or instability. A spontaneous order, such as the balance of power, can emerge in an anarchic international system. Hedley Bull argues that an international order is 'a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of States'.¹ Notwithstanding any contested theorising about an international order, almost no theorist of any school of thought would dispute that international stability is one of the essential values that we can expect an international order would bring about. This chapter thus looks at the linkage between power structure and, in particular, multipolarity and international stability.

Interactions among great powers constitute specific types of structure in the international system that have been categorised in terms of their polarity by realist theorists. A polarity means that a great power or a group of powers are at the centre of the international system. According to Kenneth Waltz,² in order to qualify as polar powers, States must score well on all the components of power: size of population and territory, endowment with resources, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence. A causal relationship between polarity and international stability has been envisaged and theorised by many realists. To begin with, this chapter will present a theoretical debate on the relationship between power structure and international stability. Then, we will inquire into several evolving and contending concepts of multipolarity in order to see how the argument of multipolar stability has changed into multipolarism. A Chinese perspective on multipolarity follows.

2. THE POLARITY DEBATE: POWER STRUCTURE AND INTERNATIONAL STABILITY

It is hard to identify who initiated the debate on what kind of distribution of power among States is more conducive to international stability. Many theorists contributed with their seminal inputs. For instance, Hans Morgenthau finds that 'the opposition of two alliances ... [i.e.] the most frequent configuration within the system of the balance of power' is of direct importance for assessing the stability of international systems. In contrast, Morton Kaplan, while clarifying various forms of the international system, comes to a conclusion that multipolar systems are more stable than bipolar ones. This view has been further explored by Karl Deutsch and David Singer who provide a more comprehensive analysis of a 'diffusion-stability relationship' and argue that the frequency and intensity of war should decrease with an increase in the number of States.³ However, Waltz almost simultaneously develops an alternative theory that interconnects the stability of the international system with a bipolar structure.⁴ The starkly contrasting views between the multipolar stability theory of Deutsch and Singer with Waltz's bipolar stability theory provoked debate among many scholars. Richard Rosecrance tried to come up with a compromise. He argues that bipolarity and multipolarity may each have their costs and benefits and that a 'bi-multipolar' arrangement would combine the best features of both alternatives.⁵

Nonetheless, the polarity debate did not stop here. Subsequently, other theoretical and empirical approaches broadened and deepened this debate even further.

A rise in the theory of unipolar stability or hegemonic stability must be added to this debate. Its central idea is that the international system is more likely to remain stable when a single dominant State develops and enforces the rules of interaction among members of the system. Many people associate Charles Kindleberger with the theory of hegemonic stability since he ascribes the Great Depression to the lack of a world leader with a dominant economy in the interwar years. Among others, George Modelski, Robert Gilpin, Robert Keohane, and Stephen Krasner extended Kindleberger's argument about the necessity of a leader in international economy to the arena of international politics. Different from multipolar and bipolar stability theories, however, hegemonic stability theory does not only follow realist logic. An alternative liberal logic which is centred on an explanation of the public good through international institutions and regimes has been articulated. Its realist logic is better captured by the theory of unipolar stability that has been advanced by William Wohlforth. According to Wohlforth, a war among great powers is unlikely in a unipolar world because the unipole will prevent any conflict from erupting among major powers.⁶ Following a power and structural approach and consistent with our analysis of multipolarity and bipolarity, we will examine unipolarity from a realist perspective in this chapter.

2.1 Multipolarity

From the perspective of the distribution of power among nation-states, multipolarity signifies that more than two power centres with nearly equal amounts of military, political and economic power exist in the international system. The theory of multipolar stability argues that an increase in the number of independent actors is conducive to international stability. Deutsch and Singer defined stability from a systemic point of view as 'the probability that the system retains all of its essential characteristics; that no single nation becomes dominant; that most of its members continue to survive; and that large-scale war does not occur'.

Deutsch and Singer provide several arguments in support of their theory of multipolar stability. Firstly, multipolarity offers more opportunities for interactions that have a stabilising effect on the international system by fostering social stability via cross-cutting cleavages and increase in the range of possible interactions. 'The most obvious effect of an increase in the number of independent actors is an increase in the number of possible pairs or dyads in the total system'. In a multipolar world, international politics is not a zero-sum game. No State needs to respond to another State's action in a tit-for-tat way. Secondly, multipolarity diversifies the attention that a State pays to other States. It is claimed that, 'as the number of independent actors in the system increases, the share of its attention that any nation can devote to any other must of necessity decrease'. Multipolarity is thus likely to have a stabilising effect on the international system. Thirdly, multipolarity diminishes the necessity and possibility of an arms race. If there are only two powers in the international system, then an arms race becomes inevitable because one State attempts to match the latter's growth of arms while the former attempts to keep its proportionate lead. In a multipolar world, however, Deutsch and Singer hypothesise that each country would only respond to an increase in arms in the amount that is likely to be deployed. An increase in the number of powers not only slows down the arms race, but it also allows for

States to shift their alliances in order to maintain the balance of power. The flexibility of multiple block coalitions increases the prospect that balancing will occur and aggressors will be deterred. Uncertainty works to discourage aggression.

While Deutsch and Singer argue for the stabilising consequences of a multipolar system, they admit its instability in the long run. The critics of Deutsch and Singer raised at least two deficiencies that are unique to multipolarity. Firstly, while multipolarity may be possible to avoid any large-scale wars between big powers, it will probably increase the number of international conflicts at a lower level. As Rosecrance argues, '[I]f a multipolar order limits the consequences of conflict, it can scarcely diminish their number. If a bipolar system involves a serious conflict between the two poles, it at least reduces or eliminates conflict elsewhere in the system'. Secondly, while multipolarity may downplay the significance of any single action by a State, including even a military build-up, it complicates the cost-benefit calculations that in turn may spark unnecessary conflicts. On the one hand, greater consequences as a result of power shifts make States more fearful and sensitive. On the other hand, a greater uncertainty about power and allies also increases the likelihood of miscalculation. For Rosecrance, '[W]ar may occur, not through a failure of will, but through a failure of comprehension'. For Waltz, when crises occur in a multipolar world, 'the dangers are diffused, responsibilities unclear, and definition of vital interests easily obscured'. Waltz thus attributes greater instability to a multipolar world.

2.2 Bipolarity

From the perspective of the distribution of power among nation-states, bipolarity signifies that exactly two power centres with nearly equal amounts of military, political, and economic power exist in the international system. The theory of bipolar stability contends that a bipolar distribution of power can guarantee international stability. According to Waltz, stability should be measured by 'the peacefulness of adjustment within the international system' and by 'the durability of the system itself'.

Based on these two criteria, Waltz argues in favour of his theory of bipolar stability. Regarding 'the peacefulness of adjustment within the international system', Waltz believes that four factors will reduce international violence in bipolarity. An absence of peripheries is the first factor. In a bipolar world, 'with only two world powers there are no peripheries'. That is, the United States and the Soviet Union as two poles in the Cold War period saw one another as the all-consuming danger and they were both concerned with all the events across the globe since no third power lay in-between. The range and intensity of competition is the second factor. Bipolar competition is not only intensive, but also extensive. Neither side can tolerate any territorial loss or falling behind in economic growth, military build-up, the space race, and so on. The persistence of pressure and crisis is the third factor. It is not to argue that crises *per se* decrease any danger and promote stability. Instead, we can claim that today's crisis is preferable to tomorrow's war. In a bipolar world, '[C]autiousness, moderation, and the management of crisis come to be of great and obvious importance ... resulting [in] bipolar stability'. The preponderant power of the two poles is the fourth factor. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were so powerful that a slight shift in power did not change the general balance. The United States 'lost' China in 1949 and the Soviet Union 'lost' China in 1962. However, neither 'loss' drastically altered the American-Soviet

equilibrium. A single conflict dyad between two poles makes their interactions more predictable and thus reduces the risks of uncertainty and miscalculation.

In terms of durability of the system, Waltz argues that the Cold War bipolarity is very durable since any of the two poles overshadows the others. Bipolarity will continue as long as 'there is a great gap between the power of the two leading countries and the power of the next most considerable States'. Although Waltz does not see nuclear arms as a stabilising factor mainly because bipolarity had come before a two-power nuclear competition, he nonetheless contends that nuclear weapons helped consolidate a condition of bipolarity. The inflexibility of a bipolar structure is considered to be more conducive to systemic stability than the flexible balance of power among three or more States that seek to cooperate with each other or compete for their existence in a multipolar world.

There are several criticisms against the theory of bipolar stability. Firstly, some authors believe that the relative equality between the two superpowers makes miscalculation easier. That is especially true when the relative balance between the two powers is in flux. This could result in a revisionist war or a preventive and pre-emptive war. Secondly, a theoretical difficulty clearly exists in the theory of bipolar stability. On the one hand, this theory argues that any slight shift in power, such as China's and France's moves towards independence away from the two competing blocs, does not change the bipolar balance. On the other hand, however, this theory also asserts that each side is very sensitive to any move of the other side and is inclined to see all international changes as of vital significance that affects the balance between the two. Thirdly, a 'peace by crisis' is hardly a desirable prescription for international stability. Bipolar competition encourages a zero-sum mentality that drives each side to keep expanding its sphere of influence and thus makes crises happen more frequently. Commenting on Waltz's argument of 'the recurrence of crises', Rosecrance observes that '[I]t seems equivalent to saying that the world's most peaceful place is on the brink of war'.

2.3 Unipolarity

From the perspective of the distribution of power among nation-states, unipolarity signifies that only one superpower with an almost unparalleled amount of military, political, and economic power exists in the international system. The theory of unipolar stability claims that with a single hegemon in the world, the international system tends to be more peaceful and durable. Following Waltz's initial definition, Wohlforth defines stability as 'peacefulness and durability'.

According to Wohlforth, the international system in the post-Cold War period is unambiguously unipolar. Referring to the United States as the sole pole of the post-Cold War system, Wohlforth argues that unipolarity is both peaceful and durable. It is peaceful mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the power advantage of the leading State removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from international politics. A clear preponderance of power deters any potential challengers. The hegemon does not need to attack because it can achieve its goals without any war. The larger the power gap in favour of the leading State is, the more likely it is that the international order is peaceful. Secondly, the power advantage of the leading State reduces the salience and stakes of the balance-of-power politics among the major States. The hegemon can serve as a third-party arbiter and offshore balancer. By providing collective goods, maintaining the key security institutions and easing of the local security conflicts, the hegemon as the system's leader drives

the other major States to jump on the bandwagon rather than balance. In a unipolar world, the security competition among other great powers has thus been minimised. Unipolarity makes both hegemonic rivalry and security competition among great powers unlikely.

Unipolarity is also durable for two reasons. Firstly, power and geographical advantages are two unique pillars of the United States which make its unipolarity lasting. In any of the underlying elements of power, no State is likely to be in a position to take on the United States for many decades to come. Moreover, as an offshore power separated by two oceans from all other major States, the United States can retain its advantages without risking any creation of a counterbalance and can thus preserve its likely longevity of unipolarity. Secondly, no potential candidate for a polar status (Japan, China, Germany, and Russia) can pose any real threat to unipolarity since any such effort would inevitably spark a local counterbalance well before it could create any global counterweight to American power.

Nonetheless, the counterargument that unipolarity is also destabilising is perhaps justifiable. To begin with, while the theory of unipolar stability rules out any possibility of a large-scale war, it also ignores possible fights between the superpower and less powerful States as well as armed conflicts between two or more less powerful States. Following the critique by Nuno Monteiro, because unipolarity prevents the aggregation of conflicts that would lead major and minor powers to a conflict between great powers, scholars must look beyond the great power interactions when analysing the structural incentives for a war in unipolarity.⁷ Secondly, the theory of unipolar stability rests on an assumption that defensive dominance is the only reasonable strategic option for the unipole with other choices such as offensive dominance and disengagement thus being overlooked. However, conflict-producing mechanisms between the unipole and other States may easily be triggered by the unipole through its strategy of offensive dominance. If the unipole follows the strategy of disengagement and fails to play its role as an offshore balancer, as possibly implied by Wohlforth, major wars between the second-tier States would then be likely.

3. THE MULTIPOLARISM INQUIRY: EVOLVING AND CONTENDING CONCEPTUALISATION

The polarity debate does not stop with the boundaries of the realist paradigm. The theoretical criticism by scholars from other schools than realism tends to refute the causal relationship between the power structure and international stability. For example, Ted Hopf criticises Waltz for relying on only a single case of the post-Second World War bipolarity to ground his claims about bipolar stability. Hopf finds that multipolar Europe from 1495 to 1521 (Austria, England, France, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, Venice) was no less stable than the bipolar Europe from 1521 to 1559 (the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires). Moreover, the constant level of instability during both periods can be better explained by Hopf's theory of offense–defence balance than by Waltz's bipolarity–stability argument. Likewise, contrary to Waltz's theory, Hopf argues that the defensive advantage of nuclear weapons rather than bipolarity accounts for the post-war stability.⁸

Empirical studies also do not unequivocally support either the theory of multipolar, or bipolar, or unipolar stability. After examining the European, Asian and Hawaiian subsystems

since Westphalia, Michael Haas finds that 'Multipolarity entails more violence, more countries at war, and more casualties; bipolarity brings fewer but longer wars'. By contrast, '[U]nipolar systems are clearly the most pacific'.⁹ Nonetheless, even so, Haas concludes that unipolarity is hardly a more preferable and desirable option in comparison to other alternatives. As a result, endless efforts have been made to further explore multipolarism and conceptualise various new categories and terms.

3.1 Balanced vs Unbalanced Multipolarity

Regarding the structure of the international system, it is not multipolarity that John Mearsheimer favours. It is bipolarity. However, when he develops his idea about bipolar stability, Mearsheimer contributes with two concepts of multipolarity: a balanced multipolarity and an unbalanced multipolarity.

Based on the relevant distribution of power among major States during the European history from the outbreak of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1792 until the end of the Cold War in 1990, Mearsheimer defines three different patterns of power distribution among the great powers: unbalanced multipolar systems, balanced multipolar systems, and bipolar systems.¹⁰ The major difference between the first two systems is whether there exists an aspiring hegemon. In case there is a disproportionate power gap among States, then the number one State is a potential hegemon. The unbalanced multipolar system is ruled by three or more powerful States where one of them is a potential hegemon. In the balanced multipolar system, three or more powerful States rule the game but none of them is an aspiring hegemon. It is the aspiring hegemon that makes the multipolar system unbalanced. By contrast, a bipolar system is dominated by two great powers with roughly equal strength or, in other words, it is the system where neither State is decidedly more powerful than the other.

Mearsheimer insists that there is a direct link between power structure and the probability of war in the international system. He argues that among the three types of polarities, '[B]ipolar systems are the most stable of the three systems'. In bipolarity, wars between the great powers are infrequent and when they occur, they are likely to involve one of the great powers fighting against a minor power, but not the two rival great powers. From the comparative point of view, the unbalanced multipolar systems feature the most dangerous distribution of power mainly because potential hegemons are likely to get into wars with all of the other great powers in the system. The balanced multipolar systems lie in-between. While a war among the great powers is more likely than in bipolarity, it tends to be a one-on-one or two-on-one engagement, but not a system-wide conflict as it occurs when there is a potential hegemon. Therefore, bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity and the balanced multipolarity is more stable than the unbalanced multipolarity. The unbalanced multipolarity is the most perilous distribution of power.

3.2 Power vs Cluster Multipolarity

Drawing on the data set, the *Correlates of War*, Frank Wayman examines the relationship between war and the concentration of power and alliance configuration among major powers.¹¹ He suggests that both multipolarity and bipolarity have two components: power distribution and

alliance clustering which have opposite effects on warfare in the system of the major powers. He thus redefines various polarities. As far as multipolarity is concerned, he differentiates 'power multipolarity' from 'cluster multipolarity'. According to Wayman, an international system is power multipolar when capabilities of States are more evenly distributed than in the power bipolar condition when hostility is still high. It is the cluster multipolarity when the States are more evenly distributed throughout the space with many opportunities for intermediaries and many cross-cutting loyalties moderating the hostility.

Wayman emphasises that an international system that is power bipolar could either be cluster bipolar or cluster multipolar and that a power multipolar system could likewise be either cluster multipolar or cluster bipolar. Taking the European system during the interwar years between 1919 and 1939 as an example, the system at that time was both power multipolar and cluster multipolar. During the Second World War, the European system was cluster bipolar (between the fascist and anti-fascist coalitions) but also power multipolar (with Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union). In the early stages of the Cold War (1948–55), the European system was power bipolar and cluster bipolar. Later on (1965–75) it shifted to a combination of power bipolarity and cluster multipolarity.

Putting these theoretical hypotheses to the test, Wayman finds that power bipolarity minimises the magnitude of wars that break out, while cluster bipolarity increases the likelihood that a war will occur. In comparison, cluster multipolarity is less likely to lead to a war than cluster bipolarity. Subsequently, he contends that both Waltz's and Deutsch and Singer's thesis may be somewhat valid. On the one hand, Waltz's bipolar stability theory is correct 'insofar as he refers to power bipolarity'. On the other hand, Deutsch and Singer's multipolar stability theory is correct 'insofar as they refer to cluster multipolarity'.

3.3 Uni-Multipolarity and Bi-Multipolarity

The system of major powers is sometimes neither unipolar nor bipolar nor multipolar. Samuel Huntington revealed a mixture of unipolarity and multipolarity.¹² With the end of the Cold War, some people have envisaged that the international system is entering into a unipolar period. Contrary to this optimism, Huntington contends that being the only one superpower 'does not mean that the world is unipolar'. With the multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar scenarios in mind, Huntington argues that '[C]ontemporary international politics does not fit any of these three models. It is instead a strange hybrid, a uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers'.

In Huntington's uni-multipolar system, three levels exist. At the first global level, only the United States as the single superpower promotes its interests with its pre-eminence in every domain of power in virtually every part of the world. At the second level, there are major regional powers that are pre-eminent in their areas of the world without being able to extend their interests and capabilities as globally as the United States. They include the German–French condominium in Europe, Russia in Eurasia, China and, potentially, Japan in East Asia, India in South Asia, Iran in Southwest Asia, Brazil in Latin America, and South Africa and Nigeria in Africa. At the third level, there are secondary regional powers whose interests are often in conflict with the more powerful regional States. These powers include Britain in relation to the German–French combination, Ukraine in relation to Russia, Japan in relation to China, South

Korea in relation to Japan, Pakistan in relation to India, Saudi Arabia in relation to Iran, and Argentina in relation to Brazil.

The system is uni-multipolar because the superpower lacks any major power challenging it, but settlement of any key international issues requires action by the single superpower always in a combination with other major States. As a result, the defining characteristic of a uni-multipolar world is a tension and conflict between the superpower and the major regional powers. While the United States prefers to drive this uni-multipolar system to becoming more unipolar, the other major powers prefer a shift towards the multipolar extreme. As global politics has moved from the bipolar system of the Cold War to a unipolar moment (highlighted by the Gulf War), it is now passing through one or two decades of the uni-multipolar system before it enters 'a truly multipolar twenty-first century' when the major powers will inevitably compete, clash, and coalesce with one another. However, the multipolar world of the twenty-first century will not be as conflicting as the uni-multipolar was.

While Huntington describes a mixed uni-multipolarity that is more realistic than desirable, Rosecrance imagines a mixture of bipolarity and multipolarity and coins the term a 'bi-multipolar' system that is more desirable than realistic. Based on the relative merits of bipolarity and multipolarity, Rosecrance proposes a system of bi-multipolarity which as an intermediate international system may be the most stable form of a systemic structure. Rosecrance contends that several advantages make it a better alternative in comparison to either bipolarity or multipolarity. Firstly, in a bi-multipolar system, the pattern of interests would not resemble 'a zero- or constant-sum game'. Therefore, bipolar powers would not directly confront one another, multipolar powers would not develop irrevocable antagonisms among themselves and the multipolar and bipolar worlds would not be completely opposed. Secondly, the probability of war, whether local or general, would be much smaller than in a multipolar system. A conflict would be mitigated by two means: a multipolar buffer might help prevent the two nuclear giants from coming to blows, while the restraining influence of the bipolar States might in turn prevent any extreme conflicts among multipolar powers.

3.4 Nonpolarity and a 'Third Way'

Richard Haass also observed the transient nature of the post-Cold War unipolar moment. However, in contrast to many others who predicted the end of unipolarity and the dawn of a multipolar world, he sees that unipolarity is replaced by nonpolarity. Haass argues, '[T]he principal characteristic of twenty-first-century international relations is turning out to be nonpolarity: a world dominated not by one or two or even several States but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power.'¹³ Nonpolarity is an international system with numerous centres of power where no centre dominates any other centre. The centres of power can be nation-states, corporations, non-governmental organisations, terrorist groups, and so on.

According to Haass, today's world is fundamentally different from the world of the classic multipolarity. Power is diffused, but not concentrated. 'Indeed, one of the cardinal features of the contemporary international system is that nation-states have lost their monopoly on power and in some domains their pre-eminence as well. States are being challenged from above, by regional and global organizations; from below, by militias; and from the side, by a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOS) and corporations. Power is now found in many hands and

in many places'. Subsequently, nonpolarity will bring more threats and challenges to the world. 'Nonpolarity will be difficult and dangerous'. To deal with such a nonpolar world, Haass proposes multilateralism as his prescription. He writes, '[M]ultilateralism *à la carte* is likely to be the order of the day.' With multilateralism, we may make the world a 'concerted nonpolarity'.

From the perspective of the English School, Barry Buzan, similarly argues for 'a world order without superpowers'.¹⁴ For Buzan, at the global level, the structure of the international system during the Cold War period was not simply bipolarity but '2 + 3' (2 superpowers plus 3 great powers) which has been followed by '1 + 4' after the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, the future international system will most likely be transformed into a '0 + x' structure with no superpower and several great powers. Buzan argues that superpowers are a historically contingent phenomenon which emerged thanks to a large inequality of power between the West and the rest of the world that had developed during the nineteenth century. As this inequality diminishes, 'decentred globalism' is the most likely scenario for world politics where there will be only great powers but no superpowers. He terms this scenario a 'third way' between those who believe in an ongoing US hegemony and those who believe in the necessity for the US to take a more accommodative leadership role in a multi-power world order.

For Buzan, this world order without any superpowers might be seen both as the successor to the unbalanced Western era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when a civilisation massively imposed itself on all the others and as the restoration of the classical order where the distributions of civilisation and power were fairly evenly matched and distributed. For the first time, the unique feature of this 'third way' is that it combines both a relatively even distribution of power worldwide and a densely integrated and interdependent global system and society. Based on his framework of material and social factors, Buzan argues that a world with only great powers is likely to take a more regionalised form.

Both Haass and Buzan present fresh perspectives on the world order. While they are quite sure that 'unipolarity has ended', they do not believe that the international politics will return to traditional multipolarity. Neither Haass' 'nonpolarity' nor Buzan's 'world order without superpowers' should be confused with the classical realist definition of a multipolar world. Nonetheless, they could perhaps be regarded as a new type of multipolarity which is non-State-centric for Haass and non-centred-globalism for Buzan and is thus different from any classical multipolar system.

As indicated by Haass and Buzan, with the burgeoning multiplication of powerful actors that play at the level of the international system, the world order is undergoing a faster-paced evolution. A variety of international actors begin to articulate their visions about the world order. Among others, the visions of new rising players, such as China, are those that increasingly matter.

4. A MULTIPOLAR WORLD FROM THE CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

The end of the Cold War brought down the bipolar structure of the international system. For China, it paved the way for a system-wide progress towards multipolarity. At the same time, the Chinese are fully aware of the hyperpower of the remaining superpower, the United States, and hence the existence of a competing trend towards unipolarity. Trying to capture the twin forces in the post-Cold War era, the Chinese scholars generally accepted the notion of 'one

superpower, multiple great powers' (*Yichao duoqiang*) since 1992. Nevertheless, the Chinese believe that, sooner or later, the current mixed structure will give way to multipolarity.

4.1 Multipolarisation as an Inevitable Trend

From the Chinese perspective, two contradictory forces – multipolarisation and unipolarisation – coexist since the collapse of the Cold War's bipolarity. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the Bush administration, there were serious concerns in China that the unipolar trend was winning over the multipolar trend. In the eyes of Chinese observers, the neoconservative forces in the United States decided to make the maximum use of the American comprehensive preponderance and its dominant position in international politics in the post-Cold War era and to establish a new world under American leadership. However, even though the United States achieved easy military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, people in these two countries continue to suffer from internal conflicts. Moreover, the United States itself was dragged down by the two wars in terms of its human and financial resources and the decline of its global image. In the end, the American effort to build a unipolar world in fact accelerated the opposite multipolarisation process.

As the financial and economic crisis hit heavily the Western countries, Yang Jiemian offered a broad remapping of the shift of power in the world with his theory of 'Four Groups' in early 2010.¹⁵ Yang argued that after the 2008 global financial crisis, the co-relation of international forces is evolving in favour of developing countries with emerging powers as their representatives which is a process that is unprecedentedly shaking the dominance of the Western powers in world affairs. The regrouping of international forces leads to the formation of the Four Groups of gaining, defending, losing, and weak forces. Specifically, in Yang's view, the Gaining Group is comprised of the major emerging countries such as China; the Defending Group includes the United States which has lost its 'dominant' status; the Weak Group is formed by developing countries in difficulty and the EU, along with Japan and Russia, belong to the Losing Group. For the Chinese analysts, the fact that China and emerging powers have managed to weather the financial and economic crisis while the US and European economies heavily suffered is a clear indication that the multipolarisation process is accelerating.

4.2 Multipolarity as a Desirable World Order

China has championed the multipolar world for a long time. Neither the bipolar world in the Cold War era nor a possible unipolar world after the end of the Cold War are seen by China as desirable for China and other developing countries. First and foremost, for China, a multipolar world can restrain the development of hegemonism and unilateralism by dominant superpower(s). In the post-Cold War years, China has been looking forward to the emergence of a real multipolar world where the hegemonic behaviour by the remaining superpower, the United States, can be checked and restrained in the real sense. Secondly, in such a multipolar world, developing countries can be better protected in their own pursuit of economic and social development without any unwarranted external intervention which would be motivated by the Western efforts to universalise their values and systems. Thirdly, in a multipolar world, a real

reform of the existing international institutions established by the United States and its Western allies can possibly be foreseen and would lead to fair rule-making powers and representation of interests of developing countries in regional and global governance. Last but not least, China would surely obtain an upgraded position as one pole in this multipolar system, would be able to better protect its own political institutions and development model, and more capable to defuse the restraining or containing efforts by a relatively declining superpower.

From the mid-1990s, China hence conducted an active diplomacy promoting multipolarisation. For some scholars in China, however, this kind of multipolar diplomacy could be problematic for China. First of all, as history indicates, the multipolar world used to be unstable and no-one can guarantee that a future multipolar world would be peaceful and stable. Secondly, in an increasingly unipolar world after the American invasion of Iraq, the championing of multipolarity represents a challenge to the hegemon, the United States, and hence it may trigger a backlash from a pointed counterbalance by the unipole. Thirdly, multipolar diplomacy represents a big power diplomacy which would unnecessarily alienate the other middle and small States, mostly developing countries, which have been China's natural allies for a long time.

Hence, increasingly, official Chinese discourse starts to water down its emphasis on multipolarity as a desired policy goal, but sees it rather as an objective description of the unfolding trend in the international system. New concepts, such as multilateralism, were introduced as a replacement. A 'harmonious world' has also been articulated as China's design of an ideal model for the world order. Nevertheless, promotion of multipolarity did not entirely disappear from China's official discourse. For example, as recently as in 2009, President Hu Jintao in his speech celebrating the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Russia praised the two nations for their unremitting efforts to promote multipolarity in the world and democracy in international relations.

4.3 Towards a Governable Multipolar World Order

A world heading towards a multipolar system has its blessings and misgivings. For China, it seems that the trend itself is inevitable and desirable, even if China has muted its support for such a new international system. While instability is often associated with multipolarity, the Chinese analysts and leaders still have confidence in the stability and governability of a future multipolar system.

From the stability point of view, as seen from China, the forthcoming multipolarisation is not a simple repetition of the past. As the 2011 White Paper on China's Peaceful Development issued by the Chinese government specified, there are at least three aspects that differentiate today's world from the past ones. First of all, today's multipolarisation is coupled with other irrevocable global trends such as peace, development, and cooperation. In the world today, the common desire of the people in the world is to share opportunities that are presented by development and jointly ward off risks. Secondly, economic globalisation has become an important trend in the evolution of international relations. Countries of different systems, different types, and at various development stages are in a State of mutual dependence with their interests intertwined. This has turned the world into a community of common destiny where its members are closely interconnected. Thirdly, global challenges have become major threats to the world. Terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, financial crises, natural disasters, climate change,

energy security, resources, food, and public health, they all have a major impact on human survival and sustainable economic and social development. No country can handle these issues on its own, but they should be addressed by all countries together.

From the governability point of view, China also believes that a sovereignty-based intergovernmental cooperation can address the problem of cooperation and produce more just and lasting solutions to the challenges that States face in today's world. It is undeniable that in the future multipolar world, the majority of the poles will be proponents of sovereignty. The European States tend to see sovereignty and nation-states as the roots of international wars and conflicts and, therefore, they are embracing a kind of supranational regional integration with strong institutions and rules. For China and many other developing countries, strong States and sovereignty are the starting point for international cooperation.

From a philosophical angle, Qin Yaqing developed a new concept of 'relational governance' (*guanxi zhili*) to capture the Chinese thinking of societal governance.¹⁶ For Qin, the Western tradition of governance adopts a rationalist and individualistic approach, focusing on how to govern through contracts, governments, rules, and institutions. While not rejecting the value of this kind of institutional governance, Qin believes that relational governance which is based on the relational interconnectedness, that is, the view that is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, can play an important role in the governance of international affairs. He defines relational governance as the process of managing the complex relations within a group through a deliberative political and social arrangement in order to establish an order, make group members conduct mutually beneficial cooperation, and build mutual trust through the forming of a common understanding of the social norms and human morality. Relational governance could thus pave the way for a stable and governable multipolar world.

5. CONCLUSION

Many theorists agree that international stability depends on the distribution of power among States, but they disagree on what type of polarity – multipolarity, bipolarity, or unipolarity – is the most capable of preventing large-scale interstate wars. All theories of systemic stability are at least partly reasonable and justifiable and supported by various historical periods: multipolarity in the nineteenth century 'Concert of Europe', stable bipolarity during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and stable unipolarity in the post-Cold War era. Nonetheless, none of them is both coherent in theory and impeccable in reality.

Notwithstanding their inherent theoretical and empirical deficiencies, the theories of multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar stability have to a certain degree become a way of thinking of their respective advocates. Multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity are thus better conceptualised as multipolarism, bipolarism, and unipolarism. In comparison to the other two, multipolarism seems to be more attractive for two simple reasons. Firstly, multipolarity has characterised international politics for much of world history since Westphalia. By contrast, both bipolarity and unipolarity have been historical anomalies. Secondly, the logic of balancing power in international politics suggests that the 'unipolar moment' after the end of the Cold War may soon give a way to a multipolar era. Nonetheless, for many countries in the world including China, multipolarity that is stable and governable will be the most desirable world order.

TEST QUESTIONS

1. How is multipolarity arguably conducive to international stability in terms of its 'peacefulness' and 'durability'?
2. How would you define the structure of the international system since the end of the Cold War by using the terms that this chapter explores?
3. From your personal perspective, if the world is moving towards being multipolar, how can we strengthen its structure in order to ensure its stabilising effects?

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