

Must We Fear a Post-Cold War Multipolar System?

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The probable transition from a bipolar to a multipolar international system has inspired divergent predictions about the likely consequences for global stability. This article places two recent exemplary deductive models under examination, in order to evaluate the validity of their conclusions about the alleged stability of the cold war's bipolar competitive world relative to that of multipolar systems. A review of the empirical evidence generated by inductive investigations of this relationship suggests that acceptance of the pessimistic thesis that multipolar systems are inherently unstable would be premature, and that, if intervening variables are considered, a rival, more pacific image of a future multipolar world is equally plausible.

In the wake of the cold war and disintegration of its bipolar structure, a protracted debate has intensified about the stability of bipolar distributions of power relative to their multipolar counterparts. Although this issue has occupied the attention of scholars for many years, no consensus has emerged over whether bipolar systems, characterized by two leading great powers, are more stable than multipolar systems, characterized by several leading powers (Levy 1992, 65).

The probable consequences of alternative polarity configurations are not merely abstract academic puzzles, of interest only to theoreticians. The prospects for peace under different distributions of national capability will affect the ways policymakers visualize the "menu of choices" (Russett and

AUTHORS' NOTE: Earlier versions of this article were presented to the Colloquium on International Relations at the University of Helsinki, September 27, 1991, and at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, November 8, Tampa, Florida. We have benefited from the helpful suggestions of Harvey Starr, Steven Hook, Jack Levy, John Vasquez, and Raimo Väyrynen.

JOURNAL OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION, Vol. 36 No. 3, September 1992 573-585
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Starr 1989) opened by the advent of a system of diffused global power. The issue, moreover, is a timely one, inasmuch as most observers (for example, Eagleburger 1989; House 1989) now predict that a truly multipolar system is on the horizon. This system is fraught with great challenges that threaten to end the longest period of great-power peace since the modern interstate system was created by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. What John Gaddis (1991) calls the "long peace" is a propitious but largely unanticipated outcome whose preservation may be contingent on an adequate understanding of the relationship between system structure and stability.

Various approaches have been taken to test whether the long postwar peace was a function of the competitive bipolar system. Recently, Alvin M. Saperstein (1991, 68) used a *formal* mathematical model to deduce the conclusion that "stability decreases as the system complexity increases." His results parallel the controversial projections advanced by John J. Mearsheimer's (1990a, 1990c) celebrated *informal* structural realist model, which also asserts that the 45 years of durable superpower peace were a product of the bipolar division of the world into two opposed blocs.

Are these intuitively reasonable assessments based on reasonable premises? Both studies are rooted in *realpolitik*, but are the realist assumptions realistic? Their validity warrants careful evaluation because, as Saperstein (1991, 69) acknowledges, deductive models "inherently contain arbitrary assumptions and gross simplifications. . . . Results based on such models cannot be taken as definitive; answers obtained . . . are only suggestive." Thus it is important to examine critically the axioms on which these models are based as well as the conclusions that are derived, and ask whether we should avoid reaching closure on this important theoretical question.

Unfortunately, whereas deductive methods of inquiry often prove advantageous in generating intriguing, counterintuitive insights, they can also easily suggest plausible hypotheses that, when confronted with reproducible evidence, prove to be wide of the mark. In the context of the polarity/stability relationship under review, the limits of deductive modelling are suggested by the fact that deduction has often led to contradictory conclusions. Compare, for example, the inferences derived by Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer (1964) about the stability of multipolar systems with the contrasting deductions of Kenneth N. Waltz (1964 and 1979) and Manus I. Midlarsky (1988 and 1989) about the stability of bipolar systems. The epistemological principle suggested by these divergent observations is that deductive reasoning from different sets of axioms will yield wildly discrepant representations of the causal association between polarity and stability, and that, at a minimum, the inferences generated by both formal and informal deductive modelling must be tempered by the insights generated by inductive empirical analysis.

In the last analysis, if fact and fiction are to be differentiated and sense is to be separated from nonsense, deductive conclusions must be sobered by careful comparative analysis of historical data.

The purpose of this article is to redirect our attention to the picture of the polarity-stability relationship presented by inductive scientific investigations, in order to broaden and balance the picture presented by Saperstein's (1991) formal and Mearsheimer's (1990a, 1990c) informal deductive models. The conclusions advanced by their work depend on the validity of the premises from which they spring and the definition of stability they employ. The realist assumptions on which Saperstein's and Mearsheimer's analyses rest may be highly dubious. Whereas both inductive and deductive approaches to discovery are vulnerable to criticism and have inherent limitations, each can benefit from the contribution to understanding provided by the other approach. Just as theory exerts pressure for data, data exert pressure for theory; both approaches are indispensable to the acceptance of hypotheses.

Professor Mearsheimer's (1990a, 1990c) provocative and widely read predictions illustrate especially well the limitations of reliance on informal inferences and structural realism. His pessimistic conclusions have been criticized as a simplistic representation of neo-realism (Hoffmann 1990), an underestimation of the impact of international institutions on cooperation (Keohane 1990), and for ignoring evidence that democracies rarely fight each other (Russett 1990/1991). Mearsheimer's (1990b) replies to these criticisms are likely to be judged by some as cogent, and by others as unconvincing. Debates over forecasts like these are seldom resolved easily, and, as with all predictions, must wait for the passage of time before a prophecy's wisdom or error is demonstrated.

Two major problems with deductive predictive models, such as Saperstein's (1991) and Mearsheimer's (1990a, 1990c) arguments, may be identified. The first is the dubious validity of their characterization of the bipolar world as stable and therefore preferable to a multipolar world. The second is the failure of these two controversial prophecies to heed (and build into their models) the available empirical evidence about the intervening factors that, in combination with polarity, affect stability. Let us consider each of these limitations in turn.

BIPOLARITY AND (IN)STABILITY

Central to the validity of the characterization of the bipolar world as stable, of course, is the way stability is defined. Does stability mean merely the absence of major war, or (as others maintain) something broader, including

systemic equilibrium wherein despite shocks the international system's essential properties are preserved within certain boundaries? Unfortunately, discourse about different polarity configurations has not adhered to a consistent definition of stability. Still, in defining stability narrowly as the avoidance of great-power war, Saperstein and Mearsheimer fail to capture the turbulence and recurrent threats to global peace that were a salient characteristic of the bipolar cold war system. Moreover, as shall be suggested, their restrictive conception of stability as the absence of war risks making their arguments tautological.

To describe the cold war division of the globe into antagonistic blocs as stable is to ignore the fact that this system was chronically crisis ridden. By its very nature, bipolarity created conditions conducive to a struggle for dominance, in which "the leaders of each bloc [tried] to destroy and revolutionize their rivals [and sought] to wear down the other [by] using force to maintain and expand their blocs" (Pelz 1991, 74, 75). Moreover, bipolarity gave each superpower incentives for conflict. The pregnant fear of aggression and hegemonic domination diminished the superpowers' perceived security and exacerbated their perception of threats. In almost a self-fulfilling manner, bipolarity fed the arms race and contributed to the superpowers' mutual security dilemma. The undeniable result: the ostensible cold war "stability" was fragile and constantly on the brink of collapse. As Hans J. Morgenthau (1985, 379) grimly but accurately described it, the bipolar system reduced the international system

to the primitive spectacle of two giants eyeing each other with watchful suspicion. They [bent] every effort to increase their military potential to the utmost, since this is all they [had] to count on. Both [prepared] to strike the first decisive blow, for if one [did] not strike it the other might. Thus, contain or be contained, conquer or be conquered, destroy or be destroyed, [became] the watchwords of Cold War diplomacy.

If we recall the dangers and tensions intrinsic to the bipolar system, it would appear to be a flight of fantasy to portray this cold war competition as stable. It is surely mistaken to equate bipolarity with stability, because bipolarity embodied zero-sum politics that promoted pure competition and high levels of tension.

Hence, models of bipolarity cannot realistically define stability in a manner that fails to capture why the cold war was so intensely feared worldwide while it lasted. It was not merely because the spectre of nuclear annihilation inspired terror — although that, to be sure, was a component of the problem. It was also because tension was exacerbated by the extraordinary importance that was attached to recruiting new allies alongside pregnant

fears that an old ally might desert the fold. As a result of this "propensity to impose superpower conflict upon local conflict all over the globe, the era of Great Power peace . . . coexisted with an extremely large number of wars in the Third World, some of them extremely bloody" (Jervis 1991, 10, 9). In addition, this bipolar bloc structure provided little room for compromise. Neutrality and nonalignment were chastised; the dyadic great-power conflict was universalized and spread to every corner of the globe. Every hostile act was to be met by a hostile retaliatory act. Because conciliation was perceived as unrealistic, only momentary pauses in the exchange of threats, tests of resolve, and challenges to the territorial status quo were expected. It also should not be forgotten that in the bipolar world the superpower contestants' exorbitant expenditures for the weapons of war nearly bankrupted their economies, or that both superpowers pledged to prevail in the ideological contest by "burying" the other's system.

The bipolar competitive world, in short, was populated with repetitive crises (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1991). As Kenneth Waltz (1990) has recently acknowledged, it is mistaken to equate the absence of great-power war with stability. Because threats to peace were endemic during the cold war, the bipolar world was peaceful but not stable—in the broader meaning of that term. Given the ubiquity of threats to international peace during the cold war and the impact of bipolarity on the prevention of *détente* (see Waltz 1990), it would appear more accurate to classify the phase "bipolar stability" an oxymoron.

INATTENTION TO AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

More troublesome is our deductive modelers' disregard for history to ground the assumptions on which their models have been constructed. We are not dealing with a problem that necessitates exclusive dependence on deduction and counterfactual arguments. The findings emanating from scientific studies regarding the operation of previous bipolar and multipolar systems provide valuable clues about the conditions under which the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world might be managed peacefully and about the most accurate premises on which predictive and mathematical models might be based.

The neglect by the recent studies here under review of the available empirical evidence produced by comparative historical studies is disturbing. Saperstein (1991, 69), for example, takes the curious position that a comparison of each kind of system is "impossible." But the emergence of a nuclear

multipolar system arguably not comparable because, like the nuclear (and highly asymmetrical!) bipolar system that preceded it, it is extremely unlikely that the actors within it would align themselves exclusively in terms of their adversaries' nuclear capabilities (see Kaplan 1957; Walt 1992). Previous comparisons of past and potential polarity structures have proven informative and instructive, and are highly relevant to the inquiry undertaken. Indeed, they offer a wider, more enriching perspective on the behavioral dynamics of multipolar systems than the circumscribed view afforded by Saperstein's (1986) conceptualization of multipolarity in terms of a trilateral arms race among three competing powers. What is more, instead of providing a precise specification of or evidence on the presumed causal connection between arms races and the onset of war, we are merely told that

the breakdown of predictability in a mathematical model of a system of international adversarial relationships *seems* a good characterization of war in such a system, [and] the transition from predictability to chaos a good analog for the transition from "peace" (Cold War) to war in an "arms race" configuration. (Saperstein 1986, 90, emphasis added)

Similarly, in a deflective response to his critics, Mearsheimer (1990b) contends that "listing examples of bipolar conflict does not prove that bipolarity is as unstable as multipolarity," even though he properly recognizes that "a comprehensive survey of history would be needed to make that judgment on empirical grounds" (p. 194). But then he claims that "since we do not have such a survey, my argument [is] based largely on deduction" (p. 194). Yet a large number of comprehensive empirical surveys based on sophisticated comparative and statistical data analysis have been conducted on the relationship between polarity and stability, and he and other deductive theorists could benefit greatly by examining them. This does not mean that these inductive investigations are not without limitations, or that further replicative research is not needed. Nonetheless, the extensive empirical studies in existence arguably give us as firm a basis for understanding the operation of a future multipolar system as do the clues generated by deductive modeling.

Yet, even though they disregard this body of evidence, on the surface Saperstein's and Mearsheimer's conclusions are nonetheless seductively plausible. The argument that a bipolar world is more stable than a multipolar one is supported by the singular fact—consistent with their restrictive definition, in the cold war bipolar environment, when the threat of war was endemic, major war did not occur. Although the superpowers repeatedly went

to the brink of war and engaged in unrestrained arms race, they never went over the brink.

Still, the absence of great-power war during the cold war does not demonstrate that bipolarity was instrumental in this outcome. It is just as logical to attribute the long peace to the restraining influence of nuclear weapons. Conceivably, the annihilating capabilities of nuclear weapons inhibited their use (although, as Vasquez [1991] shows, the proposition that nuclear weapons preserved superpower peace also may be a myth). Regardless of the relative causal impact of bipolarity vis-à-vis nuclear deterrence, it is clear that we cannot reach a safe conclusion unless we can disentangle the confounding effects of bipolarity and nuclear weapons in the post-World War II era (Levy 1989, 235). That intellectual task would be exceedingly difficult to accomplish, but without a basis for estimating the independent causal influences, it may be unreasonable to assume that the long peace was shaped more by the influence of the cold war's bipolar distribution of power than the caution and restraint elicited by the paralyzing fear of nuclear annihilation.

The pacific attributes of bipolarity and the ascribed risks of multipolarity, moreover, can easily be exaggerated when systematic, historical evidence is ignored. Research investigating the relative merits of different polarity configurations suggests that, contrary to our deductive theorists' argument, the distribution of power within the state system historically has *not* been related to the onset of war. After marshalling data on the capabilities of individual major powers and their coalitions, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (1981, 564) finds no relationship between the distribution of power and whether or not war broke out at any particular point in time during the post-Napoleonic era. Looking at the onset of war from a different vantage point, Charles Ostrom and John Aldrich (1978, 765) also fail to discover a significant relationship during the 1824 to 1938 time span between the number of prominent, independent actors in the system and the probability of war. And Jack S. Levy (1985, 58) finds that, whereas with respect to threats to peace, "bipolar systems have historically been more stable than multipolar systems," it "is true that wars, and even Great-Powers wars, have been the least frequent in multipolar systems." This, he concludes, raises doubts about the existence of a linear "relationship between the distribution of power and stability within each of the categories of polarity" (Levy 1985, 59).

Saperstein's (1991) and Mearsheimer's (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) conclusions that multipolar systems are inherently unstable may be traced to their narrow definition that risks confusing instabilities that threaten sovereignty

(system stability) with instabilities that pertain to the constant maneuvering by states for relative advantage (resource stability). This is important because resource scarcity appears to be a key factor in creating the turbulence in multipolar systems. Based on a comparison of the origins of the Peloponnesian War, the Thirty Years' War, and World War I, Manus Midlarsky (1988, 48-52) concludes that multipolarity engenders serious inequalities among system members under conditions of scarcity, inequalities that in the long run lead to envy, political intrigue, and systemic instability. As Emerson M. S. Niou and Peter C. Ordeshook (1990, 1230) also argue, multipolar systems can be system stable without being resource stable: "stability does not require any specific number of countries of great powers, nor does stability require either a uniform or a highly asymmetric resource distribution." This conclusion is supported further by examination of both multi- and bipolarity in Europe from 1495-1559, an examination that demonstrates that the constant level of instability observable in this spatial-temporal domain cannot be accounted for by changes in the polarity-military balance (Hopf 1991).

In general, then, a number of important investigations strongly suggest that a direct relationship between multipolar systems and the probability of war cannot be safely drawn. *Ceteris paribus*, multipolarity may be relatively more turbulent than bipolarity, but not necessarily more prone to culminate in war. Indeed, the available evidence indicates that "bipolarity can, at times, be just as destabilizing as multipolarity" (Thompson 1988, 220). Among the examples of unstable bipolar systems that could be cited are the rivalries between ancient Athens and Sparta and between the Greek confederations and the Persians, between Hapsburg and Valois in the sixteenth century, between England and the Netherlands a century later, and between England and France in the eighteenth century.

In contrast to Saperstein's and Mearsheimer's opinion, then, historical evidence suggests that capability deconcentration is unlikely to increase the odds that war will occur, although it may affect the amount of war should armed conflict erupt (Wayman 1985, 131-33; Vasquez 1987, 132). We are not dealing with a direct causal connection for which a single factor explanation can be sufficient. An adequate account of the absence of major war during the bipolar cold war must also entertain the possibility that a cluster of causal factors produced the long peace, including the medicinal contribution of tightening complex interdependence, European integration, international organizations, the rules of a superpower security regime, and the prosperity fostered by the growth of international trade. To be sure, cold-war bipolarity and great-power peace did covary. But correlation is not causation.

Whereas it is true that no major war occurred during the cold war, it does not necessarily follow that bipolarity prevented such a war. In fact, the skeptic could argue with equal effectiveness that the long peace transpired despite, not because, of bipolar competition, and that the cold war would have come to an end sooner had the diffusion of power been more rapid. Because we cannot definitely answer the causal question of what would have occurred in the absence of cold war bipolarity, it would be safer to suspend judgment about the claim that bipolarity produced peace.

INTRODUCING MEDIATING CONDITIONS

To suggest that the presence or absence of any particular polarity configuration, by itself, may not raise or lower the likelihood of war is not to imply that such configurations do not have an impact when taken in conjunction with other variables. If polarity is combined with other systemic conditions, a more complex image of the sources of global instability emerges. Missing in these deductive accounts is attention to what is known about the influence of polarization as a mediating variable in the polarity/stability relationship. Whereas polarity normally is defined in terms of the distribution of power, polarization refers to the propensity of actors to cluster around the most powerful states. Thus a system with multiple power centers can be said to be moving toward a greater degree of polarization if its members gradually form two separate blocs whose external interactions are characterized by increasing levels of conflict and their internal interactions become more cooperative (Rapkin and Thompson with Christopherson 1989, 261-95).

Polarization is often portrayed as hazardous because the structural rigidity it fosters significantly reduces interaction opportunities which, in turn, decreases the changes of crosscutting rather than overlapping cleavages among nations. At the same time, polarization elevates the share of attention that can be allocated to the issues that divide potential adversaries. Under these circumstances, minor disagreements easily become magnified into larger tests of will where reputations are perceived to be at stake. Lacking suppleness and discouraging a non-zero-sum outlook, polarized configurations of power have historically deteriorated into struggles for preeminence between two armed hostile camps.

Numerous studies provide evidence of the importance of systemic polarization and its dangers. Simply put, polarized blocs (such as the European system on the eve of World War I) are exceptionally war prone (Wallace 1973, 597; also Kegley and Raymond 1982, 572-95), although a moderate amount

of flexibility in the structure of alliances has inhibited the onset of war. As Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (1978, 241-67) and A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler (1980, 54) demonstrate, the tightening of alliances is especially perilous. Further, substantial evidence indicates that when tight, polarized alliances are approximately equal in capability, the incidence of war rises (Kim 1989, 269).

Another systemic condition that the available evidence indicates can exacerbate global instabilities is the degree to which prevailing international norms support a fluid rather than a binding conception of alliance commitments. The expectations of proper action expressed by international norms define the cultural climate within which international interaction takes place. At any given point in time, this rudimentary political culture historically has placed greater or less stress on the permissibility of terminating an agreement unilaterally if a fundamental change occurs in those circumstances that existed at the signing of a defense treaty. By emphasizing a fluid interpretation of commitments over the view that commitments are binding and should be honored in good faith, the cultural climate facilitates rapid alliance formation and swift realignments. The deductive accounts under examination do not give this intervening variable sufficient weight, and ignore the body of theory and evidence that speaks to its potential impact.

Critics of a fluid interpretation of commitment typically stress the importance of reducing systemic uncertainty (e.g., Kelsen 1952; Jenks 1958). When agreements are routinely kept, so their argument goes, uncertainty is reduced because the cultural climate encourages greater confidence in the behavior of others. Conversely, they argue that systemic instability increases when allegiance is ruled by expedience. Honoring alliance agreements clarifies expectations, enhances credibility, and promotes predictability; breaking them causes both friend and foe to question even the most solemn oath, with the results that miscalculations abound and the likelihood of war soars.

Based on the empirical evidence that has been generated thus far, these critics seem to be correct: fluidity in commitment norms does not auger well for a peaceful world order. Time-series data on the formation and decay of international norms from the Congress of Vienna through the 1970s show that, when prevailing norms have supported a binding conception of alliance commitments, the international system has experienced both a lower probability of war as well as a decrease in the magnitude and severity of those wars that were fought (Kegley and Raymond 1990, 220-32). This, more so than the duopoly of power during the cold war, might have been the cement that bound nations in secure alliance pacts during the cold war and deterred the outbreak of another general war.

PICTURING A MULTIPOLAR FUTURE

In light of what has been learned from scholarly efforts to examine systematically the consequences of multipolarity under different alliance configurations and commitment norms, it would appear that Professor Saperstein's (1991) and Professor Mearsheimer's (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) predictions should be treated with caution. Both scholars overlook much of the evidence that three decades of scholarship has painstakingly accumulated. Taking cognizance of this body of scholarship, we can say with some level of confidence that *different forms of multipolarity* have existed: Some multipolar systems have been polarized and possessed fluid commitment norms, others have been polarized and possessed binding commitment norms, still others have contained flexible alignments with fluid commitment norms (and so on), and that different combinations can lead to different consequences. To be sure, some types of multipolar systems are fraught with friction. In a study of 292 crises from 1929 to 1975, Michael Brecher, Patrick James, and Jonathan Wilkenfeld (1990, 72) find that, whereas 67% of the crises that occurred during periods of bipolarity resulted in tension reduction, only 34% exhibited subsequent tension reduction during multipolar periods. Similarly, another study that examined 331 interstate disputes from 1815 to 1969 discovered that third parties were less successful at resolving conflicts over highly salient issues when capabilities are widely diffused among the great powers (Raymond 1980, 98). Yet this friction need not result in systematic breakdown and transformation. As Duncan Snidal (1991, 721) has demonstrated, although the insecurity of international anarchy may lead states to worry about how well they fare compared to rivals, in a multipolar world rational state behavior is less affected by considerations of relative gains, thus making cooperation easier under multipolarity. In sum, because "there is no real consensus on whether systems with a certain number of poles are more war prone than others" (Russett and Starr 1989, 112), it would be prudent to await the results of further investigations before accepting the theory that bipolarity in itself breeds stability.

Rather than embracing an undifferentiated image of multipolarity, we might be on firmer ground if we recognize the potential emergence of different *types* of multipolar systems, take into account that some of them may be more war prone than others, and base our predictions and policy recommendations on projections that recognize the diverse ways in which previous multipolar systems have performed. Because quite different scenarios are both possible and plausible, we have many reasons to celebrate, not mourn, the passing of the cold war's competitive bipolar world.

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