

The Perils of Polarity: The Danger of Absolute Terms in International Politics

Miguel A. CRUZ¹

Abstract:

Within the field of international relations, and in particular political realism, the term polarity is used to describe power distribution amongst international actors. In 2008, Richard H. Haass coined the term nonpolarity to describe the current state of international affairs. Haass argued that power is now diffused amongst a plethora of actors - state and non-state alike - in such way, that a distinct pole (unipolarity) or group of poles (multipolarity) exist exerting significant influence on others. The author challenges Haass' assertion by arguing evidence exists to suggest polarity can manifest itself in various ways depending on context and that as such, absolute terms are almost always wrong in international politics. Because international relations theory is often used to describe state behavior and actions, the author warns overreliance on one particular term can lead to ineffective state policies.

Resumen:

Dentro del campo de las relaciones internacionales, y en particular del realismo político, el término polaridad se usa para describir la distribución de poder entre los actores internacionales. En 2008, Richard H. Haass acuñó el término no polaridad para describir el estado actual de los asuntos internacionales. Haass argumentó que el poder ahora se difunde entre una gran cantidad de actores, tanto estatales como no estatales, de tal manera que existe un polo distinto (unipolaridad) o grupo de polos (multipolaridad) que ejerce una influencia

¹ Col Miguel "MAC" Cruz is a United States Air Force officer with 22 years of experience in space operations, strategy, and planning at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. He also worked as a Political Officer at the United States Embassy in Bogota, Colombia and is a certified Foreign Area Officer. In his current capacity, Col Cruz advises the Secretary of the Air Force on plans, policies, acquisition strategies, and future joint capability requirements affecting Department of Defense space operations and systems. Colonel Cruz holds three Master degrees: Public Administration (University of Puerto Rico), Air Power Art and Science (School of Advanced Air and Space Studies), and Hemispheric Defense and Security (Inter-American Defense College). The Colonel is also a graduate of the United States Air Force Weapons School and the Air Force Fellows program.

significativa en los demás. El autor cuestiona la afirmación de Haass argumentando que existe evidencia que sugiere que la polaridad puede manifestarse de varias maneras según el contexto y que, como tal, los términos absolutos son casi siempre erróneos en la política internacional. Debido a que la teoría de las relaciones internacionales se usa a menudo para describir el comportamiento y las acciones del estado, el autor advierte que el exceso de confianza en un término en particular puede llevar a políticas estatales ineficaces.

Keywords: International Relations, Realism, Polarity, Non-polarity

Palabras Claves: Relaciones internacionales, realismo, polaridad, no polaridad

The term polarity is used to describe the way power is distributed amongst international actors, particularly in political realism. The traditional view posits the world became distinctly unipolar following the end of the Cold War, with the United States (US) clearly at the top. Subsequently, the effects of globalization helped produce concentrations of power composed of several actors, making the world visibly multipolar.² In 2008, Richard H. Haass challenged this notion and argued that the world is now nonpolar.³ Haass argues power is now diffused amongst a plethora of actors (some of which are not nation states) in such way, that there are no distinct poles exerting significant influence on others. However, on close inspection, nonpolarity fails to explain two key existing conditions in international politics. First, the US' ability to act unilaterally on matters of vital national security interests. Second, the tendency of states to band together to form distinct and influential concentrations of power to advance common agendas. In short, there are different types of power impacting international actors and it is not sufficient to say the international system has a particular polarity. Context matters. As

² Peter Harris, "How to Live in a Multipolar World," *The National Interest*, 3 January 2016, accessed 14 October 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-live-multipolar-world-14787>.

³ Richard Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May-June 2008): 44.

such, this paper advances the argument that absolute terms are almost always wrong in international politics.

My key assumption is that Haass' concept attempts to explain the current international environment in terms of distribution of power. Thus, it is only fair this paper assesses the concept of nonpolarity with a realist perspective. To do so, this examination submits Haass' argument through an assessment criterion composed of two main elements. First, his concept's explanatory power, that is, how well it explains the current international environment and the relationship amongst actors within the construct of the realist theory. Second, the theory's power of predictability. In other words, how likely is this theory to explain the likelihood of future events. This is done in three sections. The first section will summarize Haass' theory and analyze his main assumptions. The second and third, will bring forward the unipolar and multipolar arguments, respectively, in order to help explain what Haass' non-polarity concept does not.

Diffused Power: A case for Nonpolarity

The world has changed. At least this is Richard Haass' perspective with regards to the current distribution of power in the international system. Haass argues that the current international system is now dominated by a multitude of actors, all vying for power. That is, there is neither a single state dominating the international system (unipolarity) nor is there a group of states managing it (multipolarity). The world, according to Haass, is nonpolar.⁴ He builds a relatively convincing argument based on two main assumptions: the role of states in the international system, and the nature of power as influence mechanism within it.

⁴ Haass, 44.

Haass' assessment of a nonpolar world brings forth a significant change to the current international politics paradigm. The international structure, he argues, has changed to the point that states are no longer the only significant actors in international politics. In a globalized world, power now resides in multiple non-state and state actors alike. Actors such as multi-national corporations, non-government organizations, and even terrorist groups have joined nation states to become centers of power capable of influencing the international system. Furthermore, the influence of these non-state actors is so powerful that "nation-states have lost their monopoly on power and in some domains their preeminence as well."⁵ The rise of non-state actors in the international community combined with nation states have opened the door for a configuration of power not realized until now. The influence of power is not what it used to be.

Furthermore, one of the main characteristics of nonpolarity is that power is diffused. The sheer number of actors in the international fora makes it impossible for power to reside in a single actor or a distinct group in a significant manner. It is important to note Haass does not go as far as to renounce the role of power as a central piece in the realist way of thinking. Power, and how it is distributed, still matters. The difference lies on how power is now dispersed amongst many actors versus concentrated in one or a few. In turn, this level of dispersion brings instability. There are multiple reasons for this. First, the number of actors in a nonpolar world makes it harder to "build collective responses and make institutions work."⁶ In addition, not all the new actors are friendly. In fact, some non-state actors like terrorist groups, actively seek to threaten and attack powerful states. The notion of an anarchic international system is not new to

⁵ Haass, 45.

⁶ Haass, 52.

the realist understanding of the state behavior as discussed in the next section. The issue is, anarchy is now exacerbated by the presence of non-state actors with international influence.

The question is whether the two notions above are sufficient to explain how the world is arranged today. Nonpolarity does well in explaining the increase of the number of actors in world politics brought forth by globalization. The more actors involved, the more power is diffused; its influence minimize by the sheer number of poles trying to exert it. At the very least, Haass' theory does help explain the increasing complexity of international politics. However, nonpolarity falls short when attempting to explain some key aspects in the current state of world affairs. For example, if diffusion makes power less likely to exert influence in a nonpolar world, why is the United States willing, and most importantly, successful at acting alone in situations of vital national security? A more traditional look does better at answering this question.

Power Politics: A case for Unipolarity

Unipolarity can help explain why the United States sometimes acts unilaterally. During his first United Nations (UN) speech, President Trump stated that “if forced to defend itself or its allies, [the United States] will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.”⁷ This was no idle threat or off-hand comment. The UN's main mission is avoiding conflict between its members. That President Trump chose to put North Korea on notice in this forum is telling. It means that while the United States is willing to cooperate in most instances, in matters of vital national security, it is willing to act alone and put the full weight of its' military might behind it.

⁷ David Nakamura and Anne Gearan, “In U.N. speech, Trump threatens to ‘totally destroy North Korea’ and calls Kim Jong Un ‘Rocket Man’,” *The Washington Post*, 19 September, 2017, accessed 1 October, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/19/in-u-n-speech-trump-warns-that-the-world-faces-great-peril-from-rogue-regimes-in-north-korea-iran/?utm_term=.6fd129869fbb.

To be fair, the ability to act unilaterally does not necessarily equate with unipolarity. Powerful states can and have acted alone in pursue of vital interests, especially in the absence of suitable alternatives. The distinction here does not emanate from mere willingness, but from the ability to successfully act unilaterally in shaping the desired outcome. In the military realm, the United States is still the uncontested champion. There should be no doubt the United States could totally destroy North Korea. It would be costly both in lives and resources, but quite possible nonetheless. From a military perspective, the world is clearly unipolar.

President Trump's statement at the UN should not come as a surprise. Glennon suggests the UN's rules governing the use of force have failed.⁸ Ever since the Iraq conflict the United States has expressed it reserves the right to preemptively strike adversaries, a policy that contradicts the precepts of the UN Charter. In fact, it is precisely the UN's inability to anticipate the United States as the lone superpower that has rendered the UN's Security Council's influence ineffective in matters such as the US invasion in Iraq and the looming North Korean crisis.⁹ Nonpolarity cannot explain a world where a superpower acts alone to achieve its interests, and more importantly, successfully gets away with it. Unipolarity can.

From a power politics perspective, the answer to why the United States is willing to act alone is twofold. Firstly, it does so because a nuclear North Korea poses an existential threat to its security. The main premise of the realist view centers on the fact that states always search for power as a mean to advance their interests.¹⁰ As alluded to earlier, a key assumption from the realist perspective is that the international environment is anarchic.¹¹ In other words, it lacks a central ruling figure. It is only natural that strong states will use their prowess; be it military,

⁸ Michael J. Glennon, "Why the Security Council Failed," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 16.

⁹ Glennon, 18.

¹⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, "A Realist Theory of International Politics" in *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed., revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 13.

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 88.

economic, diplomatic, or a combination of them, to safeguard their interests. However, having the capability and willingness to act is not enough to justify unilateral action in the international realm. Only when the threat can be justified as real, do powerful states resort to solitary action. The threat's likelihood of occurrence (e.g. the threat of a nuclear North Korea) provides the action with legitimacy. Since in an anarchic system, "security is the highest end," the United States is not afraid to push its weight around to obtain it.¹²

Second, in the defense realm, the United States is willing to act alone simply because it can. No other country is capable of planning, mobilizing, and executing military operations simultaneously anywhere in the world and at a time of its choosing. Unilateral action, even preemptively, is still an option for powerful states. The United States has proven itself quite unipolar, at least militarily, when it comes to defending itself against existential threats. As Kenneth Waltz posits: "economically, the United States is the world's most important country; militarily, it is not only the most important country, it is the decisive one."¹³ From a power politics point of view, the construct of nation state still matters because states maintain a substantial measure of sovereignty even under multinational structures like the UN. States, as it turns out, can still be the main actors in international politics, at least when it comes to addressing existential threats to their security. In such cases, and given the United States' military power projection capability, unipolarity provides a better explanation.

Unipolarity, however, is no panacea when it comes to explaining the current international system. The unipolar view may help explain why the United States can resort to force successfully to guarantee its security. However, it does not explain why the United States

¹² Waltz, 176.

¹³ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Globalization and Governance", *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 4 (December 1999): 699, <http://www.rochelleterman.com/ir/sites/default/files/Waltz%201999.pdf>.

joins other nations in tackling complex threats. Neither does it explain why less powerful states band together to counter the influence of larger states, in essence, forming larger concentrations of power. An examination of the balance of power theory helps shed some light.

Balance of Power: A case for Multipolarity

Multipolarity also helps explain some aspects of the current structure of international politics. Members of the international community started to work towards multipolarity the moment the US emerged as the world's sole superpower after the Cold War. French President Jacques Chirac captured it most succinctly in the early 1990s when he said: "any community with only one dominant power is always a dangerous one and provokes reactions."¹⁴ The tendency of states to balance each other out is evident even in large multilateral organizations like the UN. For example, the Security Council's veto is a tool for countries like France, Russia, and China as they seek to return the world to a multipolar system; "a battering ramp to check American power" because "[US] hegemony sits in tension with equality."¹⁵ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's attempts to counter Russian aggression in Europe is another case in point. However, military buildups are not the only way states balance each other out.

Balance of power is still a main motivator as evidenced by state actors push for multilateral and regional agreements. They choose to band together for many reasons, but mostly, because it is convenient to them. The international system may be anarchic as mentioned before, but anarchy does not necessarily mean chaos and instability. States (or any international actor for that matter) do not look forward to instability. States constantly assess the international environment to discern disproportionate advantages from other states or groups of

¹⁴ Glennon, "Why the Security Council Failed," 19.

¹⁵ Glennon, 28-29.

states, and seek stability by either working to increase their inherent capabilities or by joining with other states as a balancing function to the perceived imbalance of power.¹⁶ For example, China's economic incursions in Latin America opens the door to much needed commerce while minimizing the US' influence there. Multinational organizations and regional agreements such as Mercado Común del Sur, European Union, Association of Southeast Asia Nations, Pacific Alliance, and the Organization of American States may provide an opportunity for collaboration, but also the means to balance powerful states and even other organizations. There is safety in numbers and while it is true that there is a larger pool of international actors, as Haass suggests, power has not diffused to the point of irrelevance. It has simply reformed into different concentrations of power. These concentrations of power, whether political or economic, are best observed and understood from a multipolarity point of view.

Haass assumes that multipolarity is only composed of a few centers of power and that power has scattered so much as to render its influence useless. He suggests a much more complex political environment were the traditional realist view on power does not apply. But Haass' conclusion is a double edge sword. By diminishing the importance of power in international politics, Haass weakens realism's key variable. Eliminate power, and the realist theory has no way to explain and no way to predict. Haass denies unipolarity, yet acknowledges the United States will be the most powerful state for the foreseeable future.¹⁷ He dismisses multipolarity, yet knows multinational organizations will continue to provide states with venues to balance each other out.¹⁸ For all its merits, nonpolarity rests at the same level as unipolarity

¹⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126.

¹⁷ Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity," 46.

¹⁸ Haass, 45.

and multipolarity. They are all useful lenses with which to observe a complex international system.

Conclusion

Haass presents a clear and justifiable thesis to support the concept of nonpolarity. His work is not without merit. Nonpolarity helps explain some aspects of the current international order. There is a larger distribution of power in the international community. There is indeed a rise in non-state actors asserting different pockets of influence. Yet, to say that we live in an age of nonpolarity is only partially true. The concept of nation-state is still relevant in international politics. Unipolarity still exists in the military realm as exemplified by the United States ability to act unilaterally in matters of vital national defense. Neither is power so diffused, its influence so watered down as to make it impossible for international actors to band together to form meaningful concentrations of power. A realist theory (as with any other) must be able to both explain and predict.¹⁹ Yet, if power is so diffused as to lose its influence, what is there to study? The concept of nonpolarity dilutes power as the key variable in realism. By doing so, Haass has also stripped his concept of its ability to predict.

Nonpolarity, like unipolarity and multipolarity, is no panacea. Power can manifest itself, shape events, and influence outcomes differently. Context matters. Attempting to encapsulate the complexities of the international system into a predetermined definition of polarity weakens the explanatory power of the realist theory. When it comes to explaining the international system, absolute terms are almost always wrong. As such, if the question is whether the world is nonpolar, unipolar, or multipolar, the answer is a resounding YES!

¹⁹Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 69.

Bibliography

- Glennon, Michael J. "Why the Security Council Failed." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May/June 2003).
- Haass, Richard. "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance." *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May-June 2008).
- Harris, Peter. "How to Live in a Multipolar World." *The National Interest*, 3 January 2016. accessed 14 October 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-live-multipolar-world-14787>.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. "A Realist Theory of International Politics." In *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. Revised by Kenneth W. Thompson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985.
- Nakamura, David and Anne Gearan. "In U.N. speech, Trump threatens to 'totally destroy North Korea' and calls Kim Jong Un 'Rocket Man'." *The Washington Post*, 19 September, 2017, accessed 1 October, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/19/in-u-n-speech-trump-warns-that-the-world-faces-great-peril-from-rogue-regimes-in-north-korea-iran/?utm_term=.6fd129869fbb.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. "Globalization and Governance". *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 4 (December 1999). <http://www.rochelleterman.com/ir/sites/default/files/Waltz%201999.pdf>.
- _____. *Theory of International Politics*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1979.