

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future

By Nina Græger, Bertel Heurlin, Ole Wæver and Anders Wivel (eds.)  
Palgrave Macmillan, eBook, 2022, 428 pages, ISBN: 978-3-031-05505-8

Following the Cold War, the academic and political discussions on international relations (IR) have been shaped by debates on the current structure and potential transformation of the international order. Although these discussions were closely related to the polarity concept in the first decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, more recent discussions have tended to focus on the liberal structure of the post-Cold War international order and how actors inside and outside the Western world have challenged this structure. *Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future* aims to synthesize these two discussions by investigating the nature and logic behind unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity and nonpolarity. Contributing authors focus on current challenges and opportunities by discussing how different types of polarity affect the international order and foreign policy action space. The book aims to contribute to the concept of polarity while exploring those challenges and opportunities in international order posed by reduced U.S. dominance and greater Chinese influence (p. 7). *Polarity in International Relations* is divided into three main sections grouped around three aims. The first aim is to conduct research on polarity in IR: What do we know about polarity and the logics of uni-, bi-, multi- and non-polarity? The second section develops the polarity concept to comprehend contemporary security and foreign policy challenges, including crises in the new world order: What are the idiosyncratic features of today's international relations, and how do these features condition the impacts of systemic power distribution? The third section aims to apply a fine-grained polarity perspective to

understanding specific foreign policy cases: What does polarity say about how small countries and big powers address their foreign policies and how they approach the challenges of world order? The questions posed in the second and third sections lead to discussions and analyses of transformation and change in IR itself (p. 10–13).

The first section, “Theorizing Polarity” (Chapters 2–8), unpacks the theoretical and conceptual challenges of today’s IR after focusing on the concept of polarity. In Chapter 2, Ole Wæver investigates the concepts that are used in understanding how power can assume the shapes outlined in polarity theory. Wæver is especially interested in the concepts of power balance and polarity and explores what states do when considering concepts in power balance. In Chapter 3, Kai He adopts a neoclassical and realist perspective to examine some of the concepts researched by Wæver regarding polarity and balance. He argues that the interaction between threat perception and polarity shapes the behavior of states as internal balancing, external balancing or both. He further discussed theories of power balance and threat balance, the two foundations of dynamic balancing theory. In Chapter 4, Georg Sørensen highlights the significance of the domestic level and argues that increasing state fragility (including in the Global North) forces states to prioritize domestic issues, leaving some of the most pressing issues that require international cooperation unresolved. At the same time, he argues, special attention should be given to the vulnerable states in the South and that any problems related to liberal economic and its political models should be handled accordingly. In Chapter 5, Øystein Tunsjø explores recent debates on polarity in the international system. Tunsjø compares the balance and stability of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and claims that geopolitics is the critical factor when explaining the differences in balance and stability in these periods. In Chapter 6, Hans Mouritzen associates geopolitics and systemic polarity with foreign policy in his analysis of states’ external maneuvering freedom. He recalls how the Nordic states tested the borders of their freedom of maneuver and came to know them through the difficult process of being disciplined by a great power. In Chapter 7, Revecca Pedi and Anders Wivel present a general view of the connections between different polarity types, and the opportunities and challenges they pose for small countries. These authors recommend what small countries should do

to maximize their influence and interest. In Chapter 8, Sten Rynning disclaims the idea that liberalism and realism are opposite concepts and that they can be detached. Instead, he argues that realism should be considered a corrective agent for liberalism to prevent marginality and boundless demands.

The second section, “Polarity and International Security” (Chapters 9–18), focuses on current issues affecting international peace. Robert Lieber, in Chapter 9, defends the view, held by the U.S., that democracy is of the utmost importance for the international order, in that it encourages market economy and regional peace and is based on rules. According to Lieber, domestic developments in the U.S. might be more challenging for it than international issues regarding the maintenance of the U.S.’s leadership position. In Chapter 10, Jennifer Sterling-Folker proposes that nationalism impacts behaviors on the international stage, and maintains that this is also valid for the U.S. Because of the overwhelming power of the U.S., this fact has significant impacts on IR. In Chapter 11, André Ken Jakobsson evaluates the relationship between the political agenda of the unipolar U.S. and post-Cold War U.S. administrations. In this context, Jakobsson discusses the impacts of the policy changes made during the Trump administration on U.S.-China relations. In Chapter 12, Andreas Bøje Forsby utilizes social identity theory to improve a new logic of structural identity, one that permits the theorization of systemic ideological competition. Forsby claims that ideological problems and overall social identity is critical in determining the general progress of the rivalry between the U.S. and China. In Chapter 13, Camilla Sørensen examines how weakened unipolarity has encouraged and enabled a more assertive and proactive Chinese security and foreign policy. Sørensen further discusses the impact of U.S. foreign policy on stability and peace in East Asia and beyond as part of a post-unipolar international system.

In Chapter 14, Peter Toft develops proposals on polarity and international patterns that change based on the extended theory. In Chapter 15, Eliza Gheorghe explains the differences between the disarmament regime created by the U.S. within the unipolar structure to the disarmament between the Washington and Moscow in the Cold War period. Gheorghe goes on to discuss the victories Washington has claimed thanks to the export controls inherited from the Cold War. In

Chapter 16, Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen opposes the traditional opinion that the Arctic is an exceptional region; on the contrary, for centuries the Arctic region has been part of the international system and continues to reflect developments in systemic relations. According to Bertelsen, the side chosen by Russia in the context of the China-U.S. bipolarity will determine the future of collaboration in the Arctic. Barbara Kunz, In Chapter 17, focuses on the implications of the rivalry between the U.S. and Russia for Europe. Kunz aims to describe those elements that tie the security of Europe to that of the U.S. After discussing the U.S.-Russian dilemma, Kunz analyzes why and how Europe became involved in this rivalry. In Chapter 18, Henrik Larsen examines those actors and international forums that were considered to be most critical for Denmark's post-Cold War foreign policy.

The third and final section, "The Future of Polarity and International Order," concludes with three chapters on the future of polarity in IR. Charles Kupchan, in Chapter 19, states that if U.S. leaders are to construct a new consensus, they need to do so with the "judicious retrenchment" approach, thereby constraining the military commitments of the U.S. in the strategic arena, maintaining the role of great powers to secure peace and accelerating collective action to handle global issues. In Chapter 20, Randall Schweller claims that U.S.-China rivalry is considerably different than that of the former rivalry between the Soviet Union and the U.S. during the Cold War; the current bipolar structure merely exerts weak structural impacts and is best understood as nonpolarity. Finally, in Chapter 21, William Wohlforth, by focusing on the connection between international order and polarity, claims that neither bipolarity nor multipolarity describe anything related to the future order. He views the current polarity less crucial than in the past, since power now is more widely distributed.

Considering *Polarity in International Relations* as a whole, two important distinctions should be made: one empirical and one theoretical. Theoretically, the logic of the polarity of the traditional structure of the international system and an analysis of polarity itself are thoroughly discussed in this book. The international system can indeed be described as multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar; however, the logic of peace and international order presented in the volume cannot be followed completely. Second, empirical results mostly agree with

the predictions of the contributing authors. The U.S. and China have emerged as the great powers of the day; however, regional powers and small states still endeavor to influence the events with their perspectives rather than collaborating with the U.S. or China. Russia, for its part, is no longer polar in its aims and alignment. Nevertheless, it remains a crucial player regarding security and peace in several areas. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlights the importance of this fact and demonstrates Russia's potential to wreak havoc on states that were once part of the USSR. In short, the volume would be strengthened by additional attention to Russia's role and the nuances of multipolarity.

In conclusion, the editors and contributors collectively present a valuable reference for the discipline of IR. *Polarity in International Relations* includes chapters on comprehensive theoretical works with thematic subjects that are relevant today and likely to remain important in the long term.

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