

In Chase of Vanishing Poles: Gaps in Conceptualization of International Politics

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Abstract

This paper offers an overview of the academic and practical discussion on 'polarity' as a fundamental element of the system of international relations and IR theory. The history of the question shows that the abstract, speculative, and essentially reductionist concept of the 'pole' hit the taste of political leaders as an indicator of a country's power potential and international status, and a pillar of the world order. An academic concept has eventually turned into an instrument of international politics. As a

result, the current 'polar' discussion has got stuck, unable to expand the analytical framework beyond the concepts that emerged in a completely different historical era. Today, the discussion about 'poles' constantly leads the academic community away from studying the reality of world politics, shifting the focus to a plot that has little to do with the changes that form the fabric of international life. Hence it seems it is the time to close it.

Keywords: pole, unipolarity, multipolarity, academia, practical policy.

An IR student can rightfully rejoice as perhaps the most abstract theoretical construct created by our discipline over several decades has become central to the intellectual and political discussion about interstate relations in the modern world. As you can guess from the title of this article, we are talking about 'polarity' that has long been present one way or another in most academic works, expert assessments, and statements of national leaders.

If IR theory is always an abstraction, 'polarity' within this theory is even more so. This whole discussion, in fact, is more of methodological than applied relevance. This certainly adds significance to the question of how it helps to understand the nature of the relationship between social communities. However, it does not in any way eliminate the paradox that such an abstract concept takes center stage in political debates.

One can assume that the words 'unipolar,' 'bipolar,' and 'multipolar' simply represent concepts that are equally understandable and magical to save us the need for independent reflection. But the magic of political slogans would not be enough here. A more fundamental reason is that these concepts reliably rest on the obvious force-based nature of international politics while being abstract enough to create vast opportunities for interpretation. The latter, in fact, is the main task of the social sciences.

It is not at all surprising that the 'polar' discussion becomes particularly popular when realist and liberal schools of thought begin to move towards each other, completely erasing the conceptual

border between constructs that were originally based on different interpretations of the most basic notions in international politics. Western studies of international relations have been notable for this trend since the early 1960s, when the ‘polar’ discourse actually started. In political debates, as we can see, academic concepts generally live their own lives. Our hypothesis, therefore, is that the ‘polar’ discourse is the product of a purely academic science of its special stage, but in the political (applied) field it has definitely outlived its relevance as part of IR theory. It is difficult to say what this will lead to in the future, but we can already assume that discussions about the ‘poles’ will soon no longer be a sign of serious academic constructs.

INTERCONVERSION OF THE POLITICAL AND THE ACADEMIC

Attention to the ‘polar’ nature of the international system is equally characteristic of those who seek to preserve the existing unfair world order, and those who call for changing it in a bid to build a better and more equitable global system (Kupchan, 1998; 1999; Layne, 1993; Mearsheimer, 2001; Ikenberry, 2004; Webb and Krasner, 1989; Karaganov and Suslov, 2018). This is why we find the most brilliant examples of conceptual reasoning about multipolarity in the works of authors who hold diametrically opposed views on the state of world politics and its necessary evolution. This suggests that this concept could, hypothetically, serve as some general (universal) IR theory, if, of course, it were possible at all, and the very idea of a “polar” structure of the world would not be so widespread in a discourse that is far from academic conventions.

Starting from the 1960s, American IR theory scholars published a number of outstanding works covering both theoretical and applied levels. In other words, after the Cold War, the ‘polar’ approach took center stage both in the academic community and in the foreign policy concepts of leading powers, which, in fact, happens quite rarely (Kegley and Raymond, 1994; Keohane, 1983). In Russia, the topic of ‘polarity’ was first raised by Sergei Rogov (1992), Alexei Bogaturov (1996; 2006; 2017), and academician Evgeny Primakov (1996). It was further elaborated by Vladimir Kulagin (2010), Vladimir Baranovsky

(2010), Alexander Dugin (2013), Andrey Kortunov (2018), and other prominent authors.

But the main question remains completely practical: What definition would best describe world order, given a subjective assessment of its stability in terms of the basic security interests of individual states? As we can see, the concept of ‘polarity’ is just a theory that explores the causes of war, and so are most traditional theoretical approaches towards interpreting the international nature of politics and individual events. The well-known view held by neorealists that the security of a state is a derivative of the structure of the international system only proves this axiom (Waltz, 1979).

This is why the question of which ‘polarity’ is the best in terms of the basic problem of international relations (problem of war and peace) invariably remains at the center of the debate. An excellent review of this discussion can be found in Patrick James’ work “Structural Realism and the Causes of War” (1995, pp. 184-191). The solution lies in the analysis of how each type of abstract “structure” of the international system can influence the behavior of states and create coercive factors that would push them towards conflict or, on the contrary, deter them from it. In this sense, the basic argument of the supporters of what we habitually call ‘multipolarity’ boils down to the idea that the more major players there are in the international system, the more flexible it is: “a larger set of major powers allows for a greater number of interaction opportunities. This property makes confrontation less likely, because each notable state directs a smaller share of its attention to any other. Therefore, sporadic conflicts involving different subsets of states—all other things being equal—are less likely to produce a build-up of hostility in the system as a whole” (James, 1995, p. 185).

So, if the fate of the world and the likelihood of a general war depend on the structure of the international system, it is not surprising that for thirty years the reading audience has been trying to figure out which structure of the system—bipolar, unipolar or multipolar—exists at the moment and, most importantly, which is most suitable for ensuring international security and the survivability of individual states. This is what the fiercest political debates and academic discussions are about.

The reason is quite simple: the pillar of the ‘polar’ approach to assessing the stability of the international system is the balance of power theory, well known to us for centuries as the main regulator of relations between states (Barnett and Duvall, 2005; Chatterjee, 1972; Claude, 1962; Wohlforth, 1993; Wright, 1989; Healy and Stein, 1973; Hoffmann, 1972; Pozdnyakov, 1993; Degterev and Hudaikulova, 2018; Zobnin, 2014; Timofeev, 2008). According to Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1979), this elusive condition is simply extrapolated to new ‘poles.’ So, we can easily imagine that major powers of the 18th-century European “pentarchy” or the 19th-century Concert of Nations also represented different ‘poles’ of the international system of that time, as did the Roman and Parthian Empires in the first centuries AD.

In historiography, however, the balance of power is associated precisely with a period characterized by stability and the absence of major wars that followed the Congress of Vienna of 1815 and lasted for a century (Kissinger, 1956, pp. 278–280). This theoretical category was thoroughly explored by Ernst Haas in his 20th century classic work (1958).

Remarkably, Haas was the first to conceptualize such an abstract notion that had existed in the diplomatic vocabulary but had never been seriously examined before. The main argument proving that the balance of power works is that states are less tempted to start a war if they are aware of the comparative strength of the adversary. In other words, as Thucydides described it, morality in relations between states (i.e., order as a product of the balance of power) is possible only when states have equal strength. In its classical form, structural theory, as Franz Kohout (2003) notes, states that the process of balancing is automatic and does not need any special control on the part of wise statesmen. Henry Kissinger (1956) insists on this premise when arguing about the role of personalities in the emergence of the stable Vienna order after 1815. In any case, polarity and the balance of power are related concepts and the former is a derivative of the latter (Kohout, 2003, p. 58). This means that we are dealing with a situation where a significant portion of historiography and subsequent political discussions focus on what we can call the ideal balance of

power, which, on the one hand, would not create incentives for the revolutionary policies of individual states, and could be quite enduring, on the other hand.

“THE GOLDEN NUMBER” AND ITS GENESIS

The focal point in all discussions is the number of ‘poles.’ This “arithmetic” is the defining element that characterizes the balance of power in the international arena. The reason for this universal obsession with numbers is that the use of this theoretical category simplifies the extremely complex picture of international reality to the maximum, making it clear not only to politicians but also to ordinary people. In addition, the notion of ‘pole’ can easily be operationalized as a way to indicate the status of a state in the global hierarchy, if we still agree that there is any. Many colleagues use the notion of ‘pole’ to indicate that a country has a certain set of power potential components.

There is no doubt, the true significance of what we now call ‘multipolarity’ is extremely great, which allows some methodological flaws to be neglected for the sake of a good cause. For a couple of decades, the banner of impending multipolarity has been held high by the countries that seek to change the international order established after the end of the Cold War. Similarly, there is no doubt about the evil imbedded in what we know as a ‘unipolar order.’ The manifestations of its triumph were, in fact, among the most obvious causes of the current crisis (Layne, 1993; Mearsheimer, 2001).

However, while leaving the unconditional right to use convenient notions to our national leaders and the general public, we must admit that the current ‘polar’ discussion is the result of our lack of willingness to expand the analytical framework beyond the concepts that emerged in a completely different historical era and have, among other things, a very speculative nature. This can now be a problem because the discussion about ‘poles’ constantly leads the academic community away from studying the reality of world politics, shifting the focus to a plot that has little to do with the changes that form the fabric of international life. But admittedly, it keeps us from succumbing to the temptation to throw away theoretical constructs as too abstract and embark on an analysis

of international politics as an art. This temptation is very great now precisely because the conditions determining the context of our research into interstate relations are gone. So we must not keep the reader in the dark about the fact that in this case we definitely return to where we started when this discipline had developed a bias for abstraction.

The story about ‘poles’ comes up as part of (rather abstract) approaches to the analysis of world politics first outlined in 1957 by Morton Kaplan (1957a). This work was quite revolutionary for its time, because, as the concerned reviewer notes: “It represents perhaps the first systematic, integrated attempt at a theory of international relations. It gives us a useful frame not only in which international history can be studied but also in which future developments may be appraised. It points, like all good theory, from the actual toward the potential” (Boulding, 1957). We can find another elegant and intelligible analysis of Kaplan’s theoretical constructs in Pavel Tsygankov’s classic work on the theory of international relations (Tsygankov, 2003) as well as in his later work (Tsygankov, 2012).

Kaplan’s approach was indeed quite revolutionary for that time, since even prior to Kenneth Waltz’s systemic theory it provided a methodological framework for analyzing international politics as an area relatively autonomous from the foreign policy of states. So the author could be forgiven for both abstraction and detachment from many obvious facts in practical politics, which was immediately noticed. It is no coincidence that Kaplan’s work appeared at precisely that time. The Cold War between the USSR and the United States was approaching its climax—the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962—with the possibility of a certain balance in relations between the world’s two strongest military powers already looming on the horizon. Therefore, attempts to systematize conceptions about the nature of international politics as much as possible became a distinctive feature of the second half of the last century. It was, in fact, the most stable period in terms of the distribution of power capabilities among leading states.

One can argue forever about the significance of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War, or about the special role of China and India. But the bottom line is that only two powers, surrounded by a group

of client states, were of paramount importance to the fate of the world from 1945 to 1991. This is why the end of World War II, won by the Soviet Union and the United States, and the beginning of an era defined as the Cold War inexorably pushed the academic community and then politicians towards conceptualizing the relatively stable distribution of power in the new conditions. All the more so because the relative agreement of the two opposing superpowers about the international order, the distribution of roles and the hierarchy in it (this, in turn, was formally enshrined in the composition of the UN Security Council, no matter whose idea it was) really gave a chance for some stability.

Also, the striving for a “universal theory of international relations” matched the aspirations harbored by political scientists in the West, where the desire for maximum systematization had generally prevailed: “widespread feeling that it is not enough—that there is need for more theory, more model-building, more quantification, more integrated study drawing on the resources of all the sciences of life, man, and society” (Boulding, 1957, p. 330). The academic community had somewhat got tired of studying the history of diplomacy and the activities record of outstanding statesmen and wanted to engage in a “pure” science that would not depend on someone’s individual preferences or indigestion (Dunn, 1948).

It should be noted that the creator of the ‘polar’ tradition in the IR studies did not use such notions as ‘unipolar’ or ‘multipolar’ in relation to the organization of the international system: being a very bright scholar, Kaplan did not go so far as to question the laws of physics that allowed the existence of only two ‘poles’ (Kaplan, 1957b; Kaplan, Burns and Quandt, 1960). In other words, initially the system was supposed to be ‘bipolar’ or organized in some other way (there were four more options to choose from) but no longer related to such a notion as ‘pole.’

DEMOCRACY OF DICTATORSHIPS (AND OTHER ‘POLAR’ OXYMORONS)?

Until the early 1980s, none of the parties to the global conflict was able to conduct active offensive operations and, in fact, both the United States and Europe, on the one hand, and the USSR, on the other,

had become permanent status states, concerned with retaining their position in the world and only then expanding their influence. This did not rule out, of course, the fierce struggle between them at the regional level in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, on the principal stage of world politics—Europe—the main battles were temporarily over. As a matter of fact, European lull is the reason why the Cold War is considered an era of stability. This is true because even now Europe can still be the world's main “powder keg.”

After the end of the Cold War, the idea that ‘polarity’ is at the core of the international system was developed further (Krauthammer, 1991). The indisputable advantage of the West over all other actors in international politics sustained the hypothesis that the world had acquired a unipolar structure, where the United States was its only ‘pole’ due to its overwhelming aggregate capabilities and influence (Ikenberry, 2004; Webb and Krasner, 1989). The justification of temporary hegemony thus became an important plot in popular literature and discussions about international politics, although in reality it had nothing to do with the structure and methodology.

Attempts were made almost immediately to refute this hypothesis in both practical politics and intellectual reflections. Countries claiming that the new order limited their interests and opportunities started promoting the idea of multipolarity. In 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese leader Jiang Zemin signed the Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order. In the academic field, the question of multipolarity was addressed by abovementioned Alexei Bogaturov, academician Yevgeny Primakov, Andrei Kortunov, and others pundits.

Active debates started about what exactly indicates that a country has the signs of a ‘pole.’ The discussion unfolded with the active support of Europe, whose leaders, until the end of the 2000s, had hoped to consolidate their union as equal to United States, China or Russia in aggregate power capabilities so that it would let it influence world affairs (McCormick, 2006). In fact, it was Europe, its politicians, and observers who made the greatest effort to expand the interpretation of what made a participant in international affairs an independent

‘pole.’ But this did not give them much as the EU’s positions began to weaken in the early 2010s, with its security dependence on the United States increasing. However, in theory, this opened up considerable opportunities for everyone else in terms of interpretation.

Nowadays the talk of the upcoming multipolarity has become so widespread that perhaps only American intellectuals keep aloof, preferring to stick to the idea of complete U.S. dominance over the rest of the world. The role of compromise seekers has been assigned to America’s closest allies in Europe, who keep talking about the coming ‘new bipolarity’ as they compare the aggregate capabilities of China and the United States. But this is a rather old plot for a part of Western historiography, dating back to at least ten years ago.

Those who are actively talking about the advent of a ‘multipolar world’—and this is not only Moscow and Beijing, but also many other capitals of the World Majority—mean greater democratization of international politics and the end of diktat in it. Strictly speaking, in its academic version, the theory that world politics is centered around the ‘poles’ does not imply any democracy. It rather implies the physical number of relatively autonomous countries-dictators that extend their dominance to significant groups of middle and small powers.

However, this interpretation clearly fails to correlate in any way with what the leaders of Russia or China mean when they try to convince us that a multipolar world is coming. However, the example of their rhetoric—and there are many likeminded leaders—clearly shows how concepts are easily substituted and what is being discussed as multipolarity is really the balance of power on a global scale. The reason is presumably our intuitive understanding that the balance of power is so elusive a notion that it can only be grasped and operationalized if replaced with a more understandable notion of polarity. As a result, the highly abstract notion of ‘pole’ becomes easily applicable in practice (at least rhetorically), while the more measurable (and historically rooted) concept of ‘balance of power’ remains part of academic science.

Those who talk about ‘poles’ are quite right, because none of the modern powers has the ability to join the United States as a force capable of firmly controlling a significant group of its closest allies.

We cannot imagine, even theoretically, Moscow or Beijing, let alone others, being able to exercise control over the actions of individual states in a way similar to how Washington bosses around Europeans, Japan or South Korea.

This takes us back to the question of what is a 'pole'—one country having a pivotal effect on the international environment, or a coalition of states led by the sole hegemon? The multiplicity of such questions shows that a theory conceived more than sixty years ago has so far not gained conceptual integrity, which makes us question its relevance despite its former revolutionary significance.

So, it appears that not only our academic canon is outdated, but also political interpretations of 'polarity' have gone so far as to practically lose any connection with it. This, apparently, is the inevitable price to be paid for political leaders' taste for this abstract concept. Moreover, we have to admit that they will continue to fill the concepts from academic literature with whatever meaning they see fit.

But this does not rid the intellectuals seeking to conceptualize international politics of the discursive framework set by the 'polar' construct and of the way of reasoning that emerged in a completely different era. So, in order to remain able to adequately assess current events, it would be reasonable to think about what will come in place of the strongly politicized theory of international politics that develops by its own relatively autonomous rules.

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