



Is Bipolarity a sound recipe for world order – as compared to other historically known alternatives?

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"Looking back, the article on stability of a bipolar world was published in 1964. It was strangely controversial. It made people mad. I first gave the paper as a talk to the Harvard/MIT Arms Control Seminar. There was a lively and heated discussion following the presentation of the simple idea that this has become a world of two powers, in other words, a bipolar world. People were saying, "No, wait a minute. Europe still counts." Well, of course, Europe still counted, but not nearly as much, obviously, as it once did, and not merely as much as the United States and the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the world's fate depended on the United States, the Soviet Union, and the interaction between them"¹.

Kenneth Waltz, Professor

"Bipolarity is a condition that can prepare the unipolar moment, as was seen after the Cold War, but unipolarity cannot replace bipolarity"².

Dr. Simon Serfaty, Professor and Eminent scholar

"The unipolar structure of contemporary international politics discourages potential rivals from making a concern effort to check America's preponderant position"³.

Stephen M. Walt, Professor

Introduction

Political history tells us that the world order is remained in transformation since its inception. Various collective norms and shared preferences frame structures of system (order) and with the passage of time it replaced or upgraded by another one. As Palmer and Perkin (2003) aptly said, that in international relations the 'world community is in transition'. It seems an appealing argument and true in a sense, when we delve back into the pages of history, we observe that world politics is in transition, and change is a constant phenomenon either at system/ structural level or within the system. Waltz believes, changes with system occur all the time, how change of structure or whole system takes a while. Whether, it's a multipolar world order, Bipolar or unipolar, we witness all the transitory phases that culminate to frame today's unipolar settings of world politics.

Question

¹ Kenneth Waltz Interview: (2003) Conversations with History; Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people3/Waltz/waltz-con4.html>

² Simon Serfaty. (Spring 2008). A Bad War Gone Worse. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2 , p.175.

³ Stephen M. Walt. (2002). "Keeping the World "Off-Balancing": Self-Restraint and US Foreign Policy." . . In G. Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*. . New York: Cornell University Press, p 128.

This paper is trying to discuss that whether bipolar world order is an effective system for world politics or any alternative will be more appropriate. The discussion is primarily focusing on number of arguments from distinct scholarships who advocate the bipolar system, whereas, the paper also focuses on inculcate the criticism of bipolar world by other scholarships who advocate either for unipolar or multipolar settings. It is quite complicated to admit that bipolarity can be the solution towards stability, because war is always an inevitable phenomenon in politics, extreme in any condition whether bipolar or multipolar may leads conflicts⁴.

Back Ground

The Cold War period is recognized as an era of bipolar world and discussing the Cold war structure is like 'imagining the past'⁵ and its applicability for future. The term bipolarity in modern times emerged after end of World War II. During Cold war period, the world community became polarized between then superpowers US and former Soviet Union. Some states preferred to stay non-aligned (neutral) smug in grey area with lingering fears about their future (realist believe in politics neutrality is inexpedient). However, both Superpowers engaged in a struggle to adjust their positions in a re-ordered world. By re-imagining the past, it seems that the bipolar structure during Cold war was a complete 'game plan' between both powers. Because, the bipolar world was basically an ideological struggle between two powers primarily limited to military terms through arms race. As Brzezinski coined the term, 'geopolitical linchpin states'⁶, which become so important for former Soviet Union therefore

⁴ John Lewis Gaddis. (Winter, 1992-1993). International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War. *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 p.23.

⁵ The phrase is taken from Dr. Serfaty's article. Simon Serfaty. (Spring 2008). A Bad War Gone Worse. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2, p.166.

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski. (1986). *Game Plan: A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S. - Soviet Contest*.

Soviets became ready 'up for grabs'. The linchpin states were South Korea, Philippines, Poland, Eastern Germany, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In response, US had to step in and bridle the notion of imperial over stretch and desire to grab the linchpin states, pursued by former Soviet Union. In addition, the two global wars and bipolar struggle fostered US to learn quickly in order to 'accommodate (in) the bipolar world... (it also) welcomes alliances as the most effective way to contain'⁷ the Soviets. This bipolar struggle hatched grounds for world order to become unipolar.

Discussion

As in the beginning of paper, we referred to the process of transition in world politics. Dr. Serfaty's article 'a Bad War Gone Worse (2008) has vividly highlights the transformation phases of bipolar to unipolar and probably unipolar into multipolar in future. It aptly expounds that the contemporary unipolarity is result of bipolar politics and it is hard to replace unipolarity again with bipolarity. Though some authors understand that in near future the emergence of European Union (EU) may create a balance to US and in long terms China, which may resurrect the old phenomena bipolarity in practice. In reality, it will be quite inapt to accept this notion, because the balancing a superpower with only economic capabilities does not infer that it is heading towards a sheer balancing, rather it's a one dimension of capability. In contrast US has multidimensional strengthen over its capability, which is at least in near future unmatched.

Saperstein (1991) work 'the long peace'⁸ did some model test and comparison of

Boston/New York: the Atlantic Monthly Press, p.52.

⁷ Simon Serfaty. (Spring 2008). A Bad War Gone Worse. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2 , p.175.

⁸ 'The Long Peace' is a phrase basically coined by John Gaddis (1986) elaborating the virtual absence of war among major powers during Cold war, which become the longest period in history without war between major powers of the time.

between two systems. The work try to answer the question that whether tripolar worlds less stable than bipolar worlds?⁹ The work concludes that bipolar world is more stable than any other system because "in a bipolar world uncertainty lessons and calculations are easier to make"¹⁰, so it helps powerful states to deal situations quicker than in multipolar one. The work, considers it as a transition of cold war to hot war that may threaten global peace at broader scale.

Waltz also endorses the notion that bipolar system is a sound recipe for world politics. Waltz believe there is always possibility of change within the system as during Cold War Richard Rosecrance referred to the emergence of "tripolar" world and Walter Lippmann talked in his columns about emerging role of France and Communist China during 1960s which in a way go contrary to bipolar system¹¹. However, it didn't work out and bipolarity continued for further two to three decades. Bipolar system keeps an effective balance in the system, though commenting on contemporary unipolar system, Waltz find it undesirable. Waltz understands that unipolarity is a temporary transition in world order, where the US is largely unrestrained and 'it is faced with unbalanced power'. He further advocates that the changes within system occurs all the time, therefore changes within unit is different that the changes in occur at structural level. In a world of anarchic nature, Waltz believes unipolarity is inappropriate, because it provides a single hegemon to over ride and expand its power, as Paul Kennedy call it 'imperial overstretch'. Moreover, Waltz find contemporary settings as a brief moment in history, in which other rising powers will create a new balance. The reason Waltz believe is

⁹ Alvin M. Saperstein (Mar91). The "Long Peace" -- Result of a Bipolar Competitive World? *Journal of Conflict Resolution* , Vol. 35 Issue 1, pp.68-72

¹⁰ Ibid, p.78

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz. (Summer,1964). The Stability of a Bipolar World. *Daedalus, Population, Prediction, Conflict, Existentialism* , Vol. 93, No. 3, p887.

'international equilibrium is broken; theory leads one to expect its restoration'¹². No political structure can guarantee the stability both at domestic vis-à-vis at international level. However, keeping the experience of early Cold War decades, it helps us to assume that 'bipolar is highly stable'¹³ system. Because, super powers are not being dependent on their allies, rather they are free to design strategies according to the best interests and it creates a balance and did not let either side to accumulate more power.

Waltz uses the 'stationing of arm in Europe, the establishment of bases in Japan and elsewhere, the waging of war in Korea and Vietnam and the 'quarantine' of Cuba'¹⁴ are best efforts which shows the balancing against Soviets, Waltz avoids them considering as a threat posed by Soviets in a bipolar settings. Whole world is witness of the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet installation of war heads in Cuban threatened entire world peace, small Soviet error can put whole world's peace in peril. As Dr. Serfaty, writes, "bipolarity is potentially more dangerous because any regional conflict can escalate into an unwanted global confrontation. To that extent, bipolarity too can only be a short-lived moment of geopolitical transition during which one of the two preponderant powers surpasses the other on grounds of capabilities, will, values, and legitimacy unless they first reach an arrangement, or condominium, that creates two parallel empires poised for a more or less peaceful coexistence until final convergence or confrontation"¹⁵. The core critique of bipolar world could be it did not reduce the motivations for expansion or increase of capabilities over others, which ultimately cause threat for a large

¹² Kenneth N. Waltz. (2002). Structural Realism after the Cold War. In G. J. Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (pp. 29-67). New York: Cornell University Press, p.54.

¹³ Kenneth N. Waltz. (1969). International Structure, National Force, and the Balance of World Power . In J. N. Rosenau, *International Politics and Foreign Policy: a Reader in Research and Theory* (pp. p304-314). New York: The Fress Press, p.313.

¹⁴ Ibid, p, 314.

¹⁵ Simon Serfaty. (Spring 2008). A Bad War Gone Worse. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2 , p.175.

extent.

Morton Kaplan, believes the Cold War period had number of hard realities, it nourished more instability, and bipolar system become more 'loose bipolar system'¹⁶, due to supranational arrangements of UN, NATO and other similar kind of settings. Though, Kaplan agrees that the multipolar settings since Congress of Vienna 1815 had many shortcomings, and bipolarity mitigated the intensity of conflict, but emergence of new actors further diluted the strain¹⁷. Some scholarships believe this loose bipolar situation primarily a way or transition towards multipolar settings. The equilibrium of power gradually moved from two powers to many other actors. Fliess considers them as 'neutralists a third force'¹⁸ in bipolar international relations. Deutsch and Singer account it as increase number of interactive opportunities. Therefore, a rise in the 'number of independent actors is an increase in the number of possible pairs or dyads in the total system'¹⁹. They further stress on communication and increase level of interaction between societies that will bring more integrity, appropriate division of power and better understanding between societies. The growth of many players at international level due to increase number of interaction also raised number of ifs and buts in our minds, primarily 'the specter of multipolarity is whether usher in a period of great power peace and cooperation, or a perilous one with great power conflict and confrontation'²⁰. We discussed in the class as, Kissinger who did a study on European concert system of 1815, where multipolarity setting

¹⁶ Morton A. Kaplan. (1969). Variants on Six Models of the International System. In J. N. Rosenau, *International Politics and Foreign Policy: a Reader in Research and Theory* (pp. 291-303). New York: The Free Press, p296.

¹⁷ Morton A. Kaplan. (Spring/Summer90,). The hard facts of international theory. *Journal of International Affairs* , Vol. 44 Issue 1, pp, 39-57.

¹⁸Peter J. FliessJ. (1968). *International Relations in the Bipolar World*. New York: Random House Inc, p.150.

¹⁹ Karl W. Deutsch & J. David Singer. (1969). Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability . In J. N. Rosenau, *International Politics and Foreign Policy: a Reader in Research and Theory* (pp. p315-324). New York: The Free Press, p,317.

²⁰ Charles W. Kegley, Jr and Gregory A. Raymond (1994). *A Multipolar Peace? Great-Power Politics in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp,8-12.

practiced, and keeping it in mind, Kissinger also show less inclination towards bipolarity, however, he also stress that mulipolarity is hard to handle. That shows mulipolarity will breed more rifts and power struggle among many powers, and a mistake of one player as defect or cheat will cause havoc in modern world history. It is still so early to guess that world become multipolar while living in a time of unipolar settings. I believe unipolarity is contributing effectively in the prosperity and provision of public goods to entire world. Dr. Serfaty writes that 'multipolarity, which is the most likely outcome of the unipolar moment, is defined by power but also by the inability of one to surpass or even equal the many'²¹.

Conclusion

After demises of former Soviet Union also caused the collapse of bipolar world, and contemporary unipolar setting dominated the new world order. As Fukuyama (1989) writes, that it is 'the end of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government'. US has emerged as a world 'leader' and 'indispensable nation'²² power of new order. William Wohlforth sees the unipolarity is a stable time period with more peace and prosperity across the world. One needs to admit the effective contribution of US in transform the world system on equal basis focusing more on democratic norms advocates societal equity and freedom of rights. Therefore, it is hard to think about bipolarity or multipolar settings as a sound recipe for world order.

It is also hard to imagine about balancing the US, because it needs capabilities in many dimensional ways. During first decade of post Cold war, no one try to struggle for balancing with unipolarity. Rather, by and large of state and non-state actors acknowledged unipolarity as

²¹ Simon Serfaty. (Spring 2008). A Bad War Gone Worse. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2 , p.175.

²² William C. Wohlforth. "The Stability of a Unipolar World." *International Security* (Summer 1999, Vol. 24 Issue 1), p,5.

a more peaceful system with more hope and prosperity. However, we may see some past maneuverings were initiated like, the 'European Troika' between France, Germany and Russia; the 'special relationship' between Germany and Russia; the 'strategic triangle' between Russia, China and India; and the 'strategic partnership' between Russia and China tried to aggregating their capabilities vis-à-vis some present struggle of individual rise of few states in order to match with American power²³. However, US power is so great that transcends its boundaries, which is hard to match by others. More importantly, the US located on an ideal isolated location, which is far away from any major powers of world. In this regard, US does not feel any direct threat. Therefore, one can argue that it's difficult to balance US at global scale rather these rising regional powers like China, EU may create a balance in their respective regions.

Since in unipolar settings, US locates on a geographically isolated land, and it deploys strategic weapons for defense purpose, but that might create a sense of threat for others. So that others might take it offensive and try to enhance their capabilities, which will cause 'balance against threat'. In addition, Walt identifies US commitment at multilateral level with institutions that helps to reduce US ability either as a threat or abandon its major allies²⁴. Moreover, US for being winner of liberal and democratic ideals, US not only promote the liberal democratic ideals in larger parts of the world but also it is maintaining the safeguard of provision of public goods. Therefore, there unipolar settings are more feasible. Though various scholarships made predictions about restructuring of World order based on balancing is not yet possible. Despite, many political developments, 'world did not return to a multipolar balance of

²³ William C. Wohlforth (2002). US Strategy in Unipolar World. In G. Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (pp. 98-118). New York : Cornell University Press, p,100.

²⁴ Stephen M. Walt. (2002). "Keeping the World "Off-Balancing": Self-Restraint and US Foreign Policy." . . In G. Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*. . New York: Cornell University Press, p 129.

power system'; rather one can see a substantial and overwhelmingly growth in American military, political, economic and cultural power²⁵. (p. 284). The US as a holder of Western order, which primarily based on structure of institutions and an open diplomacy and politics that keeps all states together. It is one of the reason, American power is also institutionalized now, because, American order is organized around democratic politics and a complex web of intergovernmental institutions. This 'institutionalized hegemonic strategy' serves US power, interests and policies to legitimize, expansive and durable²⁶. It shows US power is relative in gain. The durability of unipolarity will continue.

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²⁵ Ikenberry, G. J. (2002). *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* . New York: Cornell University Press, p,284.

²⁶ Ibid, p, 293.

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