

Polarity in international relations is any of the various ways in which power is distributed within the international system. It describes the nature of the international system at any given period of time. One generally distinguishes three types of systems: **unipolarity**, **bipolarity**, and **multipolarity** for four or more centers of power. The type of system is completely dependent on the distribution of power and influence of states in a region or globally.

It is widely believed amongst theorists in international relations that the post-Cold War international system is unipolar: The United States' defense spending is "close to half of global military expenditures; a blue-water navy superior to all others combined; a chance at a powerful nuclear first strike over its erstwhile foe, Russia; a defense research and development budget that is 80 percent of the total defense expenditures of its most obvious future competitor, China; and unmatched global power-projection capabilities."

Unipolarity

Unipolarity in international politics is a distribution of power in which one state exercises most of the cultural, economic, and military influence.

Nuno P. Monteiro, assistant professor of political science at Yale University, argues that three features are endemic to unipolar systems:

- Unipolarity is an interstate system and not an empire. Monteiro cites Robert Jervis of Columbia University to support his claim, who argues that "unipolarity implies the existence of many juridically equal nation-states, something that an empire denies." Monteiro illustrates this point further through Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright, who state that "in empires, inter-societal divide-and-rule practices replace interstate balance-of-power dynamics."
- Unipolarity is anarchical. Anarchy results from the incomplete power preponderance of the unipole. Columbia University's Kenneth Waltz, whom Monteiro cites, argues that a great power cannot "exert a positive control everywhere in the world." Therefore, relatively weaker countries have the freedom to pursue policy preferences independent of the unipole. The power projection limitations of the unipole is a distinguishing characteristic between unipolar and hegemonic systems.
- Unipolar systems possess only one great power and face no competition. If a competitor emerges, the international system is no longer unipolar. In

1964, Kenneth Waltz maintained that the United States is the only “pole” to possess global interests.

Apart from excelling in indicators of power such as population, resource endowment, economic capacity, and military might, unipoles are associated with certain foreign policy behaviors like actively participating in binding regional institutions; building ad hoc coalitions of the willing to deal with major security or economic challenges; struggling for legitimacy without applying much coercion; and respecting the sovereignty of second-tier states, who are considered crucial partners.

Wohlforth believes unipolarity is peaceful because it “favors the absence of war among great powers and comparatively low levels of competition for prestige or security for two reasons: the leading state’s power advantage removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from world politics, and it reduces the salience and stakes of balance of power politics among the major states.” “Therefore one pole is best, and security competition among the great powers should be minimal.” Unipolarity generates few incentives for security and prestige competition among great powers. This idea is based on hegemonic stability theory and the rejection of the balance of power theory. Hegemonic stability theory stipulates that “powerful states foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state for leadership. The clearer and larger the concentration of power in the leading state, the more peaceful the international order associated with it will be.” The Balance of power theory, by contrast, stipulates that as long as the international system remains in balance (without unipolar power), peace is maintained.

Nuno P. Monteiro argues that international relations theorists have long debated the durability of unipolarity (i.e. when it will end) but less on the relative peacefulness unipolarity brings among nations within an international system. Rather than comparing the relative peacefulness of unipolarity, multipolarity, and bipolarity, he identifies causal pathways to war that are endemic to a unipolar system. He does not question the impossibility of great power war in a unipolar world, which is a central tenet of William C. Wohlforth in his book *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*. Instead he believes “unipolar systems provide incentives for two other types of war: those pitting the sole great power against a relatively weaker state and those exclusively involving weaker states.” Monteiro's hypothesis is influenced by the first two

decades of the post-Cold War environment, one that is defined as unipolar and rife with wars. “The United States has been at war for thirteen of the twenty-two years since the end of the Cold War. Put another way, the first two decades of unipolarity, which make up less than 10 percent of U.S. history, account for more than 25 percent of the nation’s total time at war.”

Bipolarity

Bipolarity is a distribution of power in which two states have the majority of economic, military, and cultural influence internationally or regionally. Often, spheres of influence would develop. For example, in the Cold War, most Western and capitalist states would fall under the influence of the US, while most Communist states would fall under the influence of the USSR. After this, the two powers will normally maneuver for the support of the unclaimed areas. Which in the case of the Cold War means Africa, etc.

- Great Britain and France in 18th century since the end of the War of the Spanish Succession until the Seven Years' War (1754-1763).
- The United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (1947-1991); however, the Sino-Soviet split (c. 1960) led to the rise of China as a possible third superpower.

The bipolar system can be said to extend much larger systems, such as alliances or organizations, which would not be considered nation-states, but would still have power concentrated in two primary groups.

In both World Wars, much of the world, and especially Europe, the United States and Japan had been divided into two respective spheres – one case being the Axis and Allies of World War II (1939–1945) – and the division of power between the Central Powers and Allied powers during World War I (1914–1918). Neutral nations, however, may have caused what may be assessed as an example of tripolarity as well within both of the conflicts.

The NATO and Warsaw Pact groupings could also be considered to be bipolar if one does not include the Non-Aligned Movement.

Multipolarity

Multipolarity is a distribution of power in which more than two nation-states have nearly equal amounts of military, cultural, and economic influence.

Opinions on the stability of multipolarity differ. Classical realist theorists, such as Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr, hold that multipolar systems are more stable than bipolar systems, as great powers can gain power through alliances and petty wars that do not directly challenge other powers; in bipolar systems, classical realists argue, this is not possible. On the other hand, the neorealist focuses on security and inverts the formula: states in a multipolar system can focus their fears on any number of other powers and, misjudging the intentions of other states, unnecessarily compromise their security, while states in a bipolar system always focus their fears on one other power, meaning that at worst the powers will miscalculate the force required to counter threats and spend slightly too much on the operation. However, due to the complexity of mutually assured destruction scenarios, with nuclear weapons, multipolar systems may be more stable than bipolar systems even in the neorealist analysis. This system tends to have many shifting alliances until one of two things happens. Either a balance of power is struck, and neither side wants to attack the other, or one side will attack the other because it either fears the potential of the new alliance, or it feels that it can defeat the other side.

One of the major implications of an international system with any number of poles, including a multi polar system, is that international decisions will often be made for strategic reasons to maintain a balance of power rather than out of ideological or historical reasons.

The 'Concert of Europe,' a period from after the Napoleonic Wars to the Crimean War, was an example of peaceful multipolarity (the great powers of Europe assembled regularly to discuss international and domestic issues). World War I, World War II, the Thirty Years War, the Warring States period, the Three Kingdoms period and the tripartite division between Song dynasty/Liao dynasty/Jin dynasty/Yuan dynasty are all examples of a wartime multipolarity.