

# Understanding Paradigms and Polarity in International Relations

---

Paul Horness

---

International Relations is a broad field with importance in understanding world politics. People without background knowledge often become frustrated that world issues, such as the Middle-east conflict, are complicated and unresolvable. The unrelenting cacophony of information makes it difficult to distinguish between the superficial and substantial. In the first part of this paper, the major paradigms of international relations are briefly outlined in order to give those unfamiliar with international relations the basic theories of international relations so that they can orientate themselves to the different theoretical perspectives. In addition, it is hoped that by limiting the number of theories to four, readers will be able to identify and understand the different theories, so that they can distill information more easily and apply them to real world events more readily. It is also hoped that the explanations will encourage readers to delve more deeply into the theories and discover the intricacies of them and to help the reader formulate their ideas more soundly. In the second part of the paper, the concept of polarity, a core idea in International Relations, will be explained. Polarity is a pervasive concept used in international relations and is an essential tenet of the most prominent paradigm. In the third part of the paper, polarity will be examined through the lenses of each paradigm. As polarity is often treated as a separate issue, by comparing the concept across the four paradigms, it is hoped that the readers can understand how the concept is used. In the fourth section, a typical example of a realist argument will be given. It is intended to demonstrate the most common arguments from the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War. In the final section, current thinking and issues will be examined. It is hoped that the readers will be able to see how the different theories have adjusted to the end of the Cold War and how they are adjusting to the current situation in international relations.

## Paradigms

There are four common paradigms to view international relations: Realism,

Liberalism, Marxism, and Constructivism. Realism simplifies the complex world by assuming states seek security above all else. Realists view states as sovereign actors seeking to establish and maintain themselves. Therefore, the international structure is a self-help system in which each state seeks means to protect itself against other states. In a self-help system, considerations of state security subordinate economic gain to political interests (Waltz, 1979). Although the system is anarchic in that there is no supra-government beyond an individual state, states do recognize commonality, and that facilitates cooperation. States recognize, however, that power is distributed throughout the system unequally. Therefore, states cannot rely on 'global policemen' to uphold law and order; thus, they use balance of power among themselves to insure survival and peace. As McKinlay and Little (1986) pointed out,

To establish an international society, therefore, the realist recognizes that it is necessary to reconcile two conflicting conditions. One is the demand by states for equality, a condition which is inherent in the idea of sovereignty and independence. The other is the recognition that states possess very unequal power capabilities, generating differential capacities to defend boundaries and pursue interests. The realist relies upon two main mechanisms to reconcile, though not eliminate, these conflicting conditions. The first is reciprocity, which encourages states to deal with each other on an equal footing, and to search for common interests. The second is balance of power, which can, to some extent, accommodate power differentials in a way which does not lead to a state of nature. It provides the setting where reciprocity can flourish (p. 82).

Realism assumes the nature of the international system is adversarial and states need to actively protect their national interests.

A second common paradigm to view international relations is called liberalism. Unlike realism, liberalism does not limit the international system to states' capabilities. Rather, liberalism includes a plurality of actors such as multinational companies or non-governmental actors, to influence state behavior where preferences vary from state to state. It also takes into account the internal politics of a country and how internal politics manifests itself outwardly in the international arena. At its basis, liberalism's goal is the promotion and protection of freedom, both political and economic. According to Moravcsik (1992), liberalism has three core assumptions in international relations. First, the fundamental actors in world politics are individuals and privately-constituted groups with autonomous preferences. Second, governments represent subsets of domestic actors. Finally, behavior between states is shaped primarily by preferences, not power. Taken

together, liberalism focuses on the individual to participate freely in both the political arena and economic market, thus promoting an interrelated social dynamic that benefits not only the individual, but also those that share in the relationship.

Marxism is the third common paradigm in understanding international relations and it rejects the realist and liberalist paradigms in two basic ways. First, inequality is not inherent to the system. Both realists and liberalists accept inequality as a natural element to the system whereas Marxists claim inequality is an outcome of the system. Second, the basis of power is not the military; rather, it is economics because the wealthy capitalists created the state system to insure their wealth. Military power is an outgrowth of a desire to protect the economic system of wealth. The present institutions have been designed to encourage inequality, and therefore they eliminate any chance for structural change necessary to implement social equality that would lead to other forms of equality (McKinlay & Little, 1986).

A fourth common paradigm in viewing international relations is called constructivism. Contrary to liberalism and realism, constructivism looks at how social interactions create perceptions, and these perceptions continually change based upon further social interaction. Over time though, social interaction becomes social practice, thus the unit of analysis is neither the state nor the individual, but the results of social interaction over time. Wendt (1992) argued that his goal was to build a bridge between the realists who focused on the structure of international relations (anarchy) and the liberalists who focused on the process of international relations (individual freedom). He does not deny realism's claim of a self-help system, but rather he denies the conclusion drawn by the realists from the self-help system. Anarchy does not necessarily imply a security dilemma to the state as assumed by the realists. In addition, constructivism frees up the liberalist's notion of individual change. By examining the intersubjective understanding and expectations between an institution and individual, constructivism can show how an institution influences individual behavior, which is a problem for liberals epistemologically. The meanings constructed from political, economic, and cultural norms determine state behavior (Wendt, 1999). For example, Canada and China view America's military strength very differently; it is not the material fact of the weapons but how they are perceived by different actors that affects international events.

## **Polarity**

As described in the preceding theoretical paradigms, none of viewpoints con-

sider the distribution of power to be equally apportioned throughout the international system. As a result, the nature of power distribution in the international system changes over time. Throughout history political power has been distributed into three types of systems: Unipolar, bipolar and multipolar. Although the criteria for distinguishing between these systems are not clear-cut, they are usually related to military and economic power. These different systems basically reflect the number of powerful states vying for power and their hierarchical relationship. In addition, these systems assume that each pole is of comparable strength. That means that the two states in bipolarity are roughly equal in strength (e.g. the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War); or the states in multipolarity are roughly equal in strength (e.g. the great powers of Europe prior to WWI).

In a unipolar system, one state has the most political, cultural, economic and military power. According to Monteiro (2011), a unipolar system is defined by three characteristics. First, unipolarity is in an inter-state system, which implies the existence of several states. Second, as there are several existing states, a unipolar state is significantly constrained by anarchy, which means that it cannot completely control the other states. Unipolarity is different from a hegemonic entity because a hegemonic state is able to control the foreign policies of other states. Third, unipolarity obstructs the international system's usual tendency towards power balancing. Unlike in bipolar and multipolar systems, there is no systemic balance of power in a unipolar system because the strongest state is too powerful to meaningfully balance against it.

The bipolar and multipolar systems share the same basis in that one state does not hold predominate power, and therefore the states must balance the power between them. The bipolar system reflects two dominant states with less powerful states allying with either of the two superpowers. The system reflects the idea of a zero-sum game in that if one superpower gains, then the other necessarily loses. Bipolarity allows two states to control all conflicts in the international system of order. Often the Cold War is used as a representative example of the bipolar system.

The multipolar system has been the most common throughout history with the time period around World War I as an oft-cited example. The multipolar system usually reflects many equally powerful states vying for power. It differs from the bipolar system in that these states can change their relationship via other states without necessarily gaining or losing power.

## Paradigms and Polarity

As it might be expected, polarity is interpreted differently by each paradigm. Mainly due to theoretical positions, however, realists use polarity, as in balance of power, to explain international relations more than the other paradigms. Interestingly, realists disagree among themselves as to the effect of polarity. Some realists, based on Morgenthau (1948/1985), argue that a multipolar system is more stable than a bipolar one, whereas other realists, based on Waltz (1979), argue that a bipolar system is more stable. Morgenthau uses the following logic to make his argument. Politics is like human nature in that states continually lust for power, just as humans continually look to dominate one another. If there are only a few number of states, then that means states will have fewer constraints to overcome, and thus more likely to create conflict. If there are more states, conflict is less likely because a state will have more states to contend against. Waltz, however, uses the following argument. A state is concerned about its capabilities, not its intentions. If there are fewer states, then conflict is less likely because the states can focus on the other's capability and adjust accordingly. If there are fewer states, then measuring another state's capability relative to one's own is easier. These realists also argue that unipolarity is a threat to peace because states will join together to limit the greatest state's power. Thus, unipolarity is a transition to multipolarity. Recently though, even that tenet has been challenged within the realist group.

Liberalists see polarity as an extension of their paradigm. As stated earlier, liberalists focus on the individual and the state is a reflection of a group of individuals with ideals. States therefore build alliances to share in these ideals. As Moravcsik suggests (2006), the international order is not unipolar, nor can it exist. Even multipolarity is a misnomer because it fails to capture the interdependence and interconnectivity brought about by globalization. Liberal institutions are far more ranging than the concept of polarity because states outside of the liberal international order can still benefit from its existence (Ikenberry, 2011).

Although they use different reasons, both Marxists and constructivists argue against the very notion of polarity. Marxist scholars perceive the emphasis on state relationships in the international order as a way of obscuring the fundamental dynamics of class relations in a global setting. Only by understanding the movement of global capital can a state's behavior make sense (Sinclair, 1996). For constructivists, Wendt (1999) argues that polarity obscures the interdependent relationship states have with each other. He outlined three versions (Hobbesian,

Lockean, and Kantian) of how a state could interpret the international order based on the relationship with other states. In the Hobbesian version, a state sees other states as an enemy and therefore conflict is perpetual and violence is the norm. In the Lockean version, a state sees other states as rivals. That is to say state sovereignty is accepted and other states are not necessarily considered enemies. In the Kantian version, a state seeks friendship and mutual aid from other states so that peace can become the norm. The key point of international order is how a state interprets other state behavior to determine their own.

## A Heuristic Process

The purpose of this section is to elucidate some advantages and disadvantages of polarity through the realist paradigm. This example might be how a realist using Waltz's (1979) ideas might argue that a bipolar system is more stable than a multipolar one, and that alliances in a bipolar system deter war more effectively than in a multipolar system. The advantages and disadvantages of each system are addressed. Starting with bipolarity, one advantage of stability is there are no peripheral powers that can control or conflict with two states' interests because they lack the strength to tip the balance in favor of one superpower or the other. Hence, the philosophy of massive retaliation between the states is a logical conclusion, because one state's gain is the other's loss. Massive retaliation works as an advantage to bipolarity, because each state has incontestable power through the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Other advantages of bipolarity are outflows of the first. Two states cover a broader range of power in the system that allows them to gain leverage and control conflicts. Since the superpowers can control conflicts, they manage low-level crises effectively. Even if a conflict recurs constantly, the superpowers can suppress it enough so that it does not affect their survival. Low-level conflicts are not escalated by the superpowers because war would eliminate one of the states, which is counter to their security. The final advantage of bipolarity is that states need only to analyze their own power. Since the two states do not use allies as a means to increase power, they do not need to fear that one of their allies will defect (contrast this with the steps Germany took to prop up their ally, Austria-Hungary, prior to WWI). Hence, internal evaluations are done to measure capabilities that lessen uncertainty and miscalculation of the adversary's strength or intentions. The result is fewer major wars and more stability.

The prominence of conflict is a disadvantage of bipolarity. There are only two states competing for power, and therefore, their confrontation is a zero-sum

game. There is constant pressure to retain power in a bipolar system because the loss of any substantial power threatens a state's survival. Perhaps the most disturbing disadvantage of bipolarity is the maxim that peace is best served by the threat of mutual destruction!

The advantage of multipolarity is the constant moderation among multiple states (i.e., greater than two) of power. Interaction between several states decreases the intensity of conflict by eliminating the zero-sum game. The advantage of multipolarity is short lived though because of its disadvantage that it cannot maintain stability. There are more states constantly striving to advance their own security. The more these states struggle with each other, the greater the chance of conflict. Each state must analyze several different states to determine its proper level of security. Interestingly, with the advent of nuclear weapons, state survival and security can be secured relatively easily, thus allowing a state with such capacity to engage other forms of power. Haas (1970) argued that bipolarity tends to produce less frequent, but longer wars than multipolar systems. Multipolarity produces more wars with more countries involved and more casualties than any other system. Therefore, Haas argues, since no system can eradicate war, bipolarity tends to be more stable than multipolarity.

Why do states form alliances? According to Kenneth Waltz (1979), "alliances are made by states that have some but not all of their interests in common. The common interest is ordinarily a negative one, fear of other states" (p. 166). Military, political, economic, and geographical are other common interests, but these interests are used to enhance the alliance, not to form the basis of the alliance.

In bipolar system and multipolar systems, alliance leaders try to maximize the contributions received from other states. Since military interdependence among allies is not necessary in a bipolar system, leaders' strategies are more flexible. The gross inequality between the two superpowers over the other states in the alliances makes any realignment insignificant. It is unlikely that any alliances will cause a war in a bipolar system because of the superpowers' military capability. In an alliance among unequal states, the superpower leaders do not need to worry about the unfaithfulness of their allies for two reasons. First, the weaker allies do not get to choose the alliances scheme, rather, the superpowers do. Second, superpowers can quickly reinforce the alliance with negative or positive incentives. Although concessions are made to allies, neither superpower will alter its strategy nor change its military disposition in order to prevent an ally defecting. Therefore, alliances in bipolarity are less likely to lead to a war between the superpowers, because changes in alliances do not alter the balance of the two superpowers.

In a multipolar system, alliances made among equals necessarily mean that the defection of one state will threaten the security of other states. Since all states wish to avoid domination by another state, states may not cooperate together even though it is in their best interest. According to Olson (1971), the collective good may be attained by several parties that interact with one another. One party, however, may wish the other parties to interact with one another to attain the collective good. Thus, that one party will still benefit from the collective good, but it does not have to interact with the other states. If the other parties disagree and do not interact to attain the collective good, then all the parties lose. Thus, multipolar systems must rely upon the group to attain their security. However, the logic that they will cooperate to achieve security may not be true. Therefore, flexibility and decision making freedom is severely constrained in a multipolar system of alliance. Alliances in a multipolar system are more likely to lead to war, because the security of the state is harder to attain.

During the Cold War, outlining the advantages and disadvantages of bipolarity like these was common. Now that the Cold War is over, these arguments do not seem to be persuasive because realists believed that a bipolar system would not end. Furthermore, as the argument would lead you to believe, unipolarity (our current system, in which the United States is the only true superpower) was originally expected to just be a transition stage to multipolarity (e.g. with the United States, Germany, Russia, Japan and China and comparable powers), and therefore international relations presently should be less stable. However, the world has changed in ways which challenge this expectation.

## Current Thinking

### Realists

The Cold War is over and the most prominent paradigm, realism, has been challenged in numerous areas as to why the theory could not predict the end of the Cold War and why multipolarity has not supplanted unipolarity. Realists acknowledging the limits to their theory have incorporated different approaches, but the main focal point has been to include ideas beyond a state's capability and the state's desire to maintain balance of power. One group of realists (Rose, 1998; Wohlforth, 1993) sought to make the theory more rigorous by including a state's internal decision-making process to its foreign policy agenda. Although the international system reflects a state's power, the inadequacy of theory was that a state could not judge another state's capability well enough. This led to state behavior that did not maintain the balance of power in the system because the

state was constantly underestimating or overestimating its capabilities, and therefore this led to unwanted conflict. By incorporating a state's internal decision-making process through the distribution of power in the international system, the theory can explain a state's foreign policy decision. As Wohlforth (1993) noted,

Perceptions of power are more dynamic than measurements of material relationships. Rapid shifts in behaviour may be related to perceived shifts in the distribution of power which are not captured by typical measures of capabilities. The relationship of perceptions to measurable resources can be capricious and unfortunately discovered only through historical research (p. 294).

Another group of realists also incorporated perceptions into the theory by adding another level of analysis to the theory. Bull (1977) argued that a great power is not defined solely by its capabilities, but also its perceived power. He introduced this distinction by outlining the difference between an international system and an international society. His concept of an international system is the following:

A system of states (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave - at least in some measure - as parts of a whole" (p. 9).

Whereas his concept of an international society is the following:

A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions (p. 13).

The benefit of including the distinction between these terms is that realism can now incorporate an appropriate framework where not only military and economic capabilities, but also social factors can be accounted for. By examining the common social institutions, realism can now plot out how stability and order might occur over time when a state's power might not be able to explain it.

### Liberalists

At the end of the Cold War, liberalists could argue that the democracies of the world were able to defeat communism through shared democratic values. Through the international institutions created after WWII, such as Bretton Woods Conference creating the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), and in 1948 the General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, which evolved into the WTO), liberalists were able to argue that interdependence based on shared values was what dictated relations in the international system. Unfortunately, the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 led to a divide between its European allies, such as Germany and France, that opposed the regime change through military means. Public opinion within democracy is important because it is the collection of individual opinions that dictate policy. As public opinion in Europe was not in favor of the war (USA Today), how did the United States get support for the war? The United States also ignored the United Nations lack of support for the invasion. The Iraq war is problematic for liberalists as they cannot explain the United States actions in seeking a regime change through undemocratic means, or through pursuing these means in the face of opposition from their liberal democratic allies.

### Marxists

As the focus for Marxists is the inequality of power that the wealthy use against the non-wealthy, the end of the Cold War has not changed the international system. The Cold War was about threats to capitalists' businesses, and the Gulf Wars after the Cold War were similarly just about the capitalists insuring their access to oil. The present international system supports wealthy capitalists and the military is used to protect the economic system. According to world-system analysis (Wallerstein, 2004), a sophisticated form of IR-focused Marxist theory, the world economy is integrated into a single capitalistic system that includes three levels of hierarchy: the core, semi-periphery, and periphery. The core zone accumulates its wealth at the cost of the peripheral zones, and therefore the core holds the power that induces the periphery to supply the necessary raw materials at low costs. This unequal relationship is stabilized through the structure of international relations. Over time the world-system of capitalism will overcome cultural differences and be the only remaining system because it focuses on the accumulation of capital and political power at the expense of social development.

### Constructivists

As many constructivists analyze international relations by looking at the social reality through a state's goals, threats, fears, cultures, and identities, they have gained credibility after the Cold War. Since the realists could not explain why the Soviet Union did not adhere to the fundamental systemic rule of state security and survival, constructivists argued that states could change identities and transform their roles in the international system. Wendt (1992) stated that the

Cold War could end if the United States and Soviet Union did not perceive each other as enemies. Due to a variety of societal factors, such as Soviet Union's inability to maintain itself with the West's economic, political, or technological development, the Soviet Union dissolved itself. In addition, the West sent overtures to the Soviet Union that it would not invade and encouraged its new policy of Perestroika (Snyder, 2005). Constructivists argue that relations among states are not limited to a state's military power and the system is not inherently structured so that balance of power is maintained. As their ontological and epistemological positions differ from realists and liberalists in that international system is determined by the interaction between the social interpretation of the world and the state's material capability. A state's power does exist in a vacuum. It has to have the material resources as well as the social capability to use power.

## Conclusion

This paper outlined four common paradigms of international relations, polarity, and the interconnections between the two ideas. Although the explanations were meant to capture the ideas in the broadest terms, there are layers and intricacies within each paradigm that blur the distinctions between them. Much of the difference between them is the assumptions made about the underlying structure of the international system. By understanding the differences, one can see the arguments more clearly as they are guided the basic tenets of the paradigm. Currently where does the theory of international relations stand? How can the theoretical framework of international relations help us understand the new international order? These questions are just the tip of the iceberg, but more importantly one needs to understand that the different theoretical perspectives can help bring clarity in understanding today's events. Slaughter (2011) sums it best by concluding,

While various theories may lead to more or less compelling conclusions about international relations, none is definitively 'right' or 'wrong'. Rather, each possesses some tools that can be of use to students of international politics in examining and analyzing rich, multi-causal phenomena (28).

## References

- Bull, H. (1977). *The anarchical society: A study of order in world politics*. London: Macmillan.
- Haas, M. (1970). International subsystems: Stability and polarity. *American Political Science Review* 64, 98-123.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). *Liberal leviathan: The origins, crisis and transformation of the american*

- world order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Olson, M. (1971). *The Logic of Collective Action*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge University Press.
- McKinlay, R. D., & Little, R. (1986). *Global problems and world order*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Monteiro, N. P. (2011/12). Unrest assured: Why unipolarity is not peaceful. *International Security*, 36, 9-40.
- Moravcsik, A. (1992/rev. 1993). Liberalism and international relations theory. *Center for International Affairs Working Paper Series 92-6*. Harvard University Press.
- Moravcsik, A. (2006). *The myth of unipolarity in a post-cold war world: Lessons about power from the US and Europe*. China and Global Institutions Project. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Morgenthau, H. (1985). *Politics Among Nations* (Rev. 6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, (Original work published 1948).
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51, pp. 144-172.
- Sinclair, T. (1996). Beyond international relations theory: Robert Cox and approaches to world order. In R. W. Cox & T. J. Sinclair (Eds.), *Approaches to world order* (pp. 3-18). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slaughter, A. M. (2011). International relations, principal theories. In *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Snyder, R. S. (2005). Bridging the realist/constructivist divide: The case of the counterrevolution in soviet foreign policy at the end of the cold war. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 1, 55-71.
- USA Today. (Gallup International Iraq Poll 2003). *Many europeans oppose war in iraq*. Retrieved from <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2003-02-14-eu-survey.htm>
- Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-System analysis: An introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. New York: Random House.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization* 46, 391-425.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wohlforth, W. C. (1993). *The elusive balance: Power and perceptions during the cold war*. New York: Cornell University Press.