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Journal of Global Analysis

A (Neo)realist Explanation of the Post-unipolar International System

By Alessio Stilo*

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, old-fashioned power plays have been back in international relations, as confirmed by recent events and trends. Despite the growth of interdependence among states, borders are not crumbled and international actors continue to pursue their interests through the use of all the necessary means. Paradoxically, the liberal order has strengthened some realist principles and confirmed realism as a practical theory that has not necessarily a state-centric vision and does not deny any progress in international cooperation and change resulting from interdependence. The ability of governments to pursue domestic policies effectively is increasingly influenced by developments in the international system. Moreover, the return of geopolitics and power politics supports the (neo)realist postulate according to which the system tends towards the balance of power between the declining hegemon (U.S.) and the rising powers (China, Russia, India, Japan, Brazil, Germany, etc), given the fact that every rising power is used to seeking to revise the status quo. This article provides an empirical explanation of the (proto)multipolar order in the light of the assumptions of political realism in its neoclassical declination.

Keywords: *Post-unipolar international system; Realism; Neo-realism; Balance of power; Multipolarism; Geopolitics.*

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A (Neo)realist Explanation of the Post-unipolar International System

Introduction: a theoretical starting point

The aim of this paper is to examine the post-unipolar international system through the lens of a neoclassical realist framework. Many scholars have long been involved in disputes about the theoretical validity of Realism in foreign policy.

In one sense, the theoretical issue takes on a relative value because in concrete cases, realists do not always provide definite answers, or answers different from those of idealists. Yet the theoretical question remains important, as reported by Richard K. Betts (2015), *“because it calls attention to the difference between utilitarian or consequentialist moral concerns on one hand and absolute moral principles on the other - why the former should take priority when they conflict, and how the balance of power should drive states’ choices”*.

Realists agree that power is what drives international politics, but they disagree about exactly when and where it should be conserved or exerted. They also diverge on the architecture of the international distribution of power – the international system – and its expressions to better preserve peace and stability: multipolarity (favored by most traditional realists), bipolarity (Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer), or unipolarity (*hegemonic stability theory*). In other words, according to Richard K. Betts, Realism can be considered as an attitude rather than a doctrine, given the fact that

Realism is grounded firmly in consequentialist morality, or a materialist version of situational ethics. It simply sees the probable balance of costs and benefits in the outcome of a contest, rather than the justness of either contestant’s claims going in, as the proper moral basis for action. Realists focus more on results than on motives and are more attuned to how often good motives can produce tragic results.

For these reasons, Realism is more than a static, amoral theory, and cannot be accommodated within a scientific interpretation of international relations. It is rather a practical theory which depends on the contingent historical and political conditions, and is ultimately judged by its ethical standards and by its relevance in making prudent political decisions (Morgenthau, 1962).

Realism also performs a useful cautionary role. However, when it becomes a dogmatic assumption, Realism fails to perform its proper function. Realism becomes a sort of ideology when it remains stuck in a state-centric and excessively simplified “paradigm” and when it denies

any progress in interstate relations. Its emphasis on power politics and national interest can be misused to justify aggression, and this factor has often led Realism to be supplanted by theories that take better account of the cooperation and changing picture of global politics. To the merely negative and cautionary function, Realism should take into account the normativist feature, typical of positivism, which extends from the rationality and prudence stressed by classical realists – through the vision of multilateralism, international law and an international society emphasized by liberals and members of the English School – to the cosmopolitanism and global solidarity advocated by many of today's scholars (Korab-Karpowicz, 2013).

The major contribution of realists (and neorealists, especially Waltz), as underlined by Keohane, is the notion that the international system shapes state behavior and the other way round (Keohane, 1986, p. 27). But Waltz does not point out “new ways of seeing” international relations. He reformulates and systematizes Realism, thus developing the so-called Structural Realism (Waltz, 1979), consistently with the fundamental assumptions of his classical predecessors (Carr, Morgenthau, Niebuhr).

Once these necessary clarifications have been made, the actual reality (in Machiavelli's terms) shows the substantive validity of the four central propositions to which realists tend to converge (Wohlforth, 2008):

- Groupism: politics takes place within and between groups or, as argued recently, networks (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, & Montgomery, 2009);
- Egoism: individuals and groups are politically driven principally by narrow self-interest;
- Anarchy: the nature of international politics is characterized by the absence of a (global) government. In agreement with the power transition theory, anarchy ceases to be an ordering principle when a nation achieves hegemonic power and then is challenged by a great power. This leads to a war which, in the past, has created a transition between the two powers (Organski, 1958).
- Power politics: the intersection of groupism and egoism in an environment of anarchy makes international relations, regrettably, largely a politics of power and security. Anyway, as argued by William R. Thompson (1988), each of the three major IR approaches to the study of long-term processes of change in international relations – structural realism, the world-economy approach, and long cycle theory (Modelsky, 1987; Modelsky G. & Modelsky S., 1988; Denmark, Friedman, Gills, & Modelski, 2000) – has underlined the role of global leadership (or hegemony), highlighting the links between the positions of great powers, major wars, and the economy.

Moreover, the cumulation of new and important research by scholars working within the realist tradition (Copeland, 2000; Davidson, 2006; Lobell, 2003; Ripsman, 2002; Schweller, 2003, 2006; Taliaferro, 2001, 2004) has made Realism a pragmatic theory which has not necessarily a state-centric vision and does not deny any progress in international cooperation and change resulting from interdependence in a globalized world.

The post-unipolar international system: a selective literature review

Since the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar system, a lot has been written and said about the transformation of the international system. In an article on *International Security* (Layne, 1993), Christopher Layne foresaw the inevitable emergence of new great powers: in such a multipolar world, the United States would follow a policy of strategic independence by assuming the posture of an “offshore balancer” (Layne, 1993, p. 47).

During these years, when the United States enjoyed its “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1991), international politics – as it had been usually understood – seemed to have been eclipsed. While most of the commentators of the time argued that the alternative to unipolarity is “*not a stable, static multipolar world [...] but chaos*” (Krauthammer, 1991, p. 33), Layne supported the idea of changing the means of attaining U.S. overriding strategic and geopolitical objective (ensuring that a potential hegemon does not dominate Eurasia): rather than assuming primary responsibility for containing the rise of a potential hegemon, the United States should rely on global and regional power balances to attain that goal. This strategic independence, supported by Layne, differs from the selective-commitment variant of offshore balancing articulated by John Mearsheimer (1990) and Stephen Van Evera (1990), whereby the United States would be relatively indifferent to Third World events but would remain militarily engaged in Europe and Northeast Asia in order to preserve stability. According to Mearsheimer and Evera, strategic independence would be a hedging strategy that would commit the United States militarily if, but only if, other states failed to balance effectively against a rising Eurasian hegemon. Also Samuel Huntington, a few years later (1999), argued that we have entered not a unipolar world but a “uni-multipolar system” with one superpower and several major powers. In such a system, as emphasized by Huntington (1999, p. 37),

The United States would clearly prefer a unipolar system in which it would be the hegemon and often acts as if such a system existed. The major powers, on the other hand, would prefer a multipolar system in which they could pursue their interests, unilaterally and collectively, without being subject to constraints, coercion, and pressure by the stronger superpower. They feel threatened by what they see as the

American pursuit of global hegemony. American officials feel frustrated by their failure to achieve that hegemony. None of the principal power-wielders in world affairs is happy with the status quo.

In the meanwhile, the world began to focus more on the liberalization and globalization of the world economy, the spread of democracy, and the threats posed by non-state actors. Despite the fact that security dilemmas that used to be at the heart of relations between states seemed to be losing appeal, conflicts all over the world did not cease and arms race did not end. In hindsight, it is clear that certain members of the system have always hungered for more power to rectify perceived wrongs and to restore an order to which they feel entitled.

After September 11 and the resulting “global war on terror”, international balances have gradually changed. The West-centric international order has experienced a restoration of Russian global power, a rapid rise of China to the status of global player and the emergence of other rising powers (Germany, Japan, India, Brazil and other middle powers such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Africa) which demand a change of both the global structure and the international financial institutions dominated by Western powers (IMF, World Bank), where they feel underrepresented.

However, not all rising powers are dangerous revisionists, and revisionism is not always dangerous, as reported by Randall Schweller. He argues that there are four dimensions in revisionism that, taken together, determine the extent to which the revisionist power poses a dangerous threat to the established powers (Schweller, 2015, p. 8):

- 1) the extent of the revisionist state’s aims;
- 2) the revisionist state’s resolve and risk propensity to achieve its aims;
- 3) the nature of its revisionist aims (does it seek changes in international norms, or territory, or prestige?);
- 4) the means it employs to further its revisionist aims (whether peaceful or violent).

In the realist approach, violent means used by the revisionist power to subvert the *status quo* lead to hegemonic war. According to Robert Gilpin’s theory (1981) and John Ikenberry’s amendment (2001) to it, hegemonic wars end with the emergence of an overwhelmingly dominant power which is both able and willing to transform the system. In other words, the new hegemon is expected to revise the system (becoming a revisionist state), constructing its own vision of order upon an international landscape wiped clean of its prior institutions.

The recent tectonic shifts – so-called Arab Spring, economic crisis, Syrian civil war, Ukraine issue, Persian Gulf rift (Götz, 2015) – show the guidelines and the dynamics of the changes taking place along the fault lines of friction among the rising regional and global powers.

The revival of geopolitics (Patrick & Bennett, 2015), albeit this paradigm is not completely accepted in the literature (Ikenberry, 2014), has been considered as the definitive refutation of Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, as argued by Walter R. Mead (2014) in a recent article on Foreign Affairs. Mead refutes the Hegelian idea (resumed by Francis Fukuyama) of progressive history ontologically tending towards an end. Hegel himself underlined that, even though the revolutionary state had triumphed over the old type of regimes for good, competition and conflict would continue:

He predicted that there would be disturbances in the provinces, even as the heartlands of European civilization moved into a post-historical time. Given that Hegel's provinces included China, India, Japan, and Russia, it should hardly be surprising that more than two centuries later, the disturbances haven't ceased. We are living in the twilight of history rather than at its actual end. A Hegelian view of the historical process today would hold that substantively little has changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. To be powerful, states must develop the ideas and institutions that allow them to harness the titanic forces of industrial and informational capitalism. There is no alternative; societies unable or unwilling to embrace this route will end up the subjects of history rather than the makers of it. (Mead, 2014, p. 78).

The contemporary world order may appear to be paradoxical. On the one hand, since 2000 we have seen a steady dynamic of social and economic development, probably the fastest and deepest redistribution of economic might in history: there is no great shortage of resources that could lead to large-scale conflicts and a violent change of the existing order. On the other hand, there are several powers whose political relations and security policies may shake and overturn the world order. In other words, more than two decades after the end of the Cold War, historical territorial disputes are reemerging (Arun, 2015) as "politics follow geopolitics" (Kagan, 2015, p. 21). The return of geopolitics portends a hard road for international cooperation, which has always depended on a convergence of great power interests.

Towards a regionalized, unstable and asymmetrical multipolar world?

The decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany ushered in a period of significant prosperity. It is an order based on the superstructure of a US-led network of alliances, institutions, geopolitical bargains, client states, and democratic partnerships, where the United States acted as an "empire by invitation" (Lundestad, 1986). This globalist hegemonic order rests on the US' ability to exercise extra-territorial sovereignty through military

supremacy and global reach. At the same time, the US occupied a position at the centre of world politics through leverage of the global financial system, complex regional alliances, and cultural soft power, which John Agnew defined as the “globalist sovereignty regime”, where various international and global norms over human rights, economic and monetary policy, and governmental behaviour – largely conceived and promoted by the US – have spread to other states’ political and judicial practice (Agnew, 2009).

According to George Friedman’s analysis (2015), two geopolitical results derived from this globalist hegemonic order. On the one hand, the European Union expanded its influence both eastward into the former Soviet sphere and southward, incorporating disparate states whose differences were temporarily hidden by the prosperous period. On the other hand, after the end of the Japanese economic miracle, China became the global low-wage, high-growth country, and has been leading a charge to create parallel institutions, which the United States is resisting, revealing a potentially dangerous fissure in the international economy. The first indication of a global destabilization can be traced back to September 11, 2001. The limits of American (super)power were not visible until later in the 2000s. At that point two other significant events occurred. The first was the re-emergence of Russia as a regional power when it intervened against Georgia in 2008, and then as a global player with its renewed interest in the Middle East (especially Syria, Egypt, Persian Gulf), in the Arctic, in the post-Soviet space (Ukraine crisis, among others), in Africa and in Latin America. The other was, of course, the financial crisis that led to a return of “economic patriotism” (Clift & Woll, 2012), a novel terminology which *“offers an analytical lens to study how policy-makers seek to resolve the tension between interdependent economies and political territoriality in a variety of political economic settings. It brings into focus the reconfiguration of political economic space which the interdependence of markets and multi-levelled economic governance regimes entail”* (Clift & Woll, 2012, p. 320).

In this framework, BRICS countries – an association of five major emerging national economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) – reinvented themselves as a diplomatic club for rising regional powers to challenge Western dominance of global economic institutions, so much so that some scholars are wondering whether the BRICS are building a “non-Western concert of powers” (Roberts, 2015) that focuses on their priorities rather than on those of Washington or Brussels. Concerts are known to involve deep international cooperation among major powers, but they are distinct from alliances and do not reduce competitive power politics. They are intended to operate parallel to the US-led order established in Bretton Woods in 1944, by creating – or supporting – other alternative institutions to the Western-led ones. Paradoxically, BRICS countries have benefited from participating in Western economic institutions. Yet, they are keen to

build their own capacity to serve their development needs which they see as often neglected or adversely impacted by advanced countries' policies (Patrick, 2015).

All the abovementioned elements clearly show the evidence of slow but progressive redistribution of power. Among other factors that explain this international redistribution of power there are the processes known as "new regionalism" (Hurrell, 1995; Mansfield & Milner, 1999) and "regionalization" (Lawson, 2009). Regionalism contrasts with regionalization, which is, according to the New Regionalism Approach, the expression of increased commercial and human transactions in a defined geographical region. Regionalism refers to an intentional political process, typically led by governments with similar goals and values in pursuit of the overall development within a region. Regionalization, however, is simply the natural tendency to form regions, or the process of forming regions due to similarities between states in a given geographical space. The major powers in the system may take the opportunity to exploit regional cooperation (and conflicts) to their own advantage and to engage in offshore balancing in precisely the way in which neo-realist theory would predict. Moreover, the regionalization makes the emerging post-Westphalian order as a system characterized by a plurality of fundamentally contradictory (sub)orders coexisting in parallel (Kreuder-Sonnen & Zangl, 2015)¹.

The recent events allow a theoretical connection between the process of regionalization (especially with economic purpose) and classical geopolitics. The two high-standard trade and investment agreement proposed by US – *Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership* (TTIP) and *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP) – would exclude, respectively, Russia and China from two great free trade areas dominated by the wider US economy. Such a system would reify the neo-realist assumption according to which the (supposed) declining hegemon (US) need to avoid² that the rise of a rival (China), or a block of antagonistic powers (China and Russia), could oust the hegemon itself (US) from the world-island (Eurasia). This idea has common roots in classical geopolitics worked out by Halford J. Mackinder (1904) and by the realist thinker Nicholas J. Spykman (1944, 2007).

After the stalemate in the implementation of TPP and TTIP, the only existing project of macro-regional integration – focused on economic and infrastructural leverage – is the China-led *One Belt and One Road Initiative* (OBOR), a strategy proposed by Chinese Government which is centered on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries (especially China), the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the ocean-going Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The strategy underlines China's push to take a larger role in global affairs with a Beijing-centered trading network. The main financial institution created to support these

infrastructural projects is the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB), which is also aimed at challenging the West-centric financial institutions. The Chinese economic activism, which underlies a sort of strategic assertiveness through the means of economic expansionism, has led the US to adopt a more protectionist agenda. As a matter of fact, after Donald Trump's election as US president, Washington began a policy of tariff increases on imports from China, causing a retaliatory action from Beijing. In Trump's vision, the bilateral exchange is excessively unbalanced in favor of China: US wants China to import more American goods and to stop forcing American companies to hand over their prized intellectual property if they want to do business in China. These events triggered a vigorous debate on the looming trade war between US and China.

The combination of these factors and shifts can define the current situation, described by Robert Kaplan as a result of the "revenge of geography" (Kaplan, 2012) in order to portray a kind of return of geographical determinism in the geopolitical projection of the rising powers (Richardson, 2015). Not for the first time, classical geopolitics has found a new appreciation as a device for interpreting contemporary events in world politics.

Concluding remarks

The return of *realpolitik* and the emergence of the global economy as a platform for competition pose risks that threaten to change global trade dynamics, integration and development, the international rules-based system and business climate.

The interplay of the described factors allows a comprehensive explanation of the current international system in the light of the realist paradigm, although most of the states are relying less on military power and more on economic means (Cini, 2015) to advance their interests and increase their relative power. Realism does not reject economic power as a major factor to qualify a state, as well as to understand how power is distributed. Despite its limitations, there is much more in the system than is contained in (neo)realist theory, as foreign policy analysis of the major countries clearly demonstrates (Hurrell, 2006, p. 6), and this matters not just for accurate empirical analysis but also for the development of a successful theory.

A general theory of international relations requires a theory of state action. Realism claims to provide such a theory, as reported by Mastanduno, Lake & Ikenberry (1989). Realism remains effective in substance even if the state was replaced by other sub-national (NGOs, corporations) or supranational entities, considering that the validity of the four central realist propositions would not be substantially affected. Moreover, as stated in Waltz's *Structural Realism* (2000, p. 10) in referring to the nature of political regimes, the structure of international politics is not transformed by changes internal to states. From a structuralist point

of view, every actor – even non-state actors – on the international stage acts according to the four realist propositions, and tends to pursue its own interests (in terms of a utilitarian interpretation), to increase its relative power, and to ensure its survival (in terms of security).

A realist approach should also emphasize the multidimensional perspective of state action, as well as its possibility of using both *soft power* and *hard power* or *smart power* (Nossel, 2004; Nye, 2009), that is a clever combination of them. According to Chester Crocker (2007, p. 13), smart power “*involves the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and the projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and have political and social legitimacy*”, essentially the engagement of military force, economic means, and all forms of diplomacy. Finally we may conclude, as argued by Timofei Bordachev (2014), that the current phase of international shift, in the light of this combination of political vectors of state action, could be defined as “the era of power diplomacy”: a cycle of controlled instability, centripetal regionalization and asymmetrical multipolarism.

Notes

1. The authors argue that in such post-Westphalian era international organizations are becoming increasingly independent sites of authority. This internationalization of authority is often considered as an indication of the constitutionalization of the global legal order. However, this article highlights that international organizations can also exercise authority in an authoritarian fashion that violates the same constitutionalist principles. In other words, the article conceptualizes the post-Westphalian orders as a two-dimensional continuum linking the ideal-typical end points of constitutionalism and authoritarianism.
2. In particular through the institution of an institutional and economic system of (regional) check and balances, as reported by Brzezinski (2012) and Stilo (2015).

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