Polarity in International Relations
Past, Present, Future

Edited by
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The series addresses issues related to an international system that is increasingly dominated by changing and inter-linked processes of governance involving formal and informal institutions and multiple processes of change and continuity within security and development. In the area of security the processes involve traditional key actors in international society and new much less traditional actors engaging with new forms of security and including individuals, groups, and states. In the area of development, focus is increasingly on improvements in political and economic conditions for individuals and groups but from an understanding that development is dependent on good governance and security. Books published in the Series may engage with any one of the three topics on its own merits - or they may address the interplay and dynamics that occur when Governance, Security and Development interact (or collide) in an increasingly interconnected and constantly changing international system.
Polarity in International Relations

Past, Present, Future
In memory of Birthe Hansen (1960–2020)
Discussions on the state of the current international order and its potential transformation have shaped both academic and policy debates on international relations for most of the post-Cold War era. However, whereas these discussions were closely tied to the concept of polarity in the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, more recent debates have focused more on the liberal content of the post-Cold War international order and how it is challenged from actors inside and outside “the West”. This volume seeks to connect these two debates. It explores the nature and logics of uni-, bi-, multi-, and non-polarity. The authors discuss how different types of polarity affect international order and foreign policy action space and zoom in on current challenges and opportunities. In doing so the book seeks to contribute to our understanding of polarity as well as the challenges and opportunities of an international order with less US dominance and more Chinese influence.

We would like to thank a number of people for their contributions and support. First and foremost, we thank the contributors for believing in the project and taking time out of busy schedules to engage critically with the concept of polarity and the effect(s) of polarity on world politics. We learned a lot from working with the contributors, and we are confident that their insights will be of value to anyone seeking to understand polarity and changes in the international order. We also would like to thank series editor Trine Flockhart, who believed in the project from the
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We dedicate the book to our colleague Birthe Hansen (1960–2020). Birthe pioneered conceptual developments in the study of unipolarity. She advocated an understanding of polarity, which highlighted the importance of the political agenda of great powers as well as the distribution of capabilities; an argument which has only become more important in recent years. An expert on international security in the Middle East, her work documented how system structure had regional effects on peace and war. In addition, Birthe played important roles as colleague, teacher, supervisor, and mentor for numerous students and colleagues.

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Current debates on international politics seem to agree on one thing: we are witnessing profound changes in the international order. There is, however, less agreement on the nature and impact of these changes and how we theorize and think about that order. Do they constitute a transformation of the international system and international politics in...
general, necessitating a fundamental rethinking of concepts and theories in order to understand what is going on? Or are we witnessing changes in the system with strong historical parallels, which may be understood by reapplying classical tools and concepts? This volume engages in the contemporary debates on international order by taking its point of departure in a classical concept: polarity, i.e. “the distribution of capabilities among the major structure-producing states” (Grieco, 2007: 65; Waltz, 1979: 88–97). This take signals a shared belief among the contributors to this volume that polarity remains a valuable analytical lens if we are to understand the characteristics of a particular international order (including the present), how it changes, and what these changes imply for states, societies and human beings.

Polarity continues to play a prominent role in scholarly debates on the future of the international order. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, some analysts were quick to predict a return to the pre-1945 multipolar order, although they disagreed on the implications for war and peace (Buzan, 1991; Mearsheimer, 1990). Others argued that the world was experiencing a unipolar moment likely to last for a period of one to four decades with the United States as “the only country with the military, diplomatic, political and economic assets to be a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself” (Krauthammer, 1990, 1991: 24). The stability of a unipolar world was underpinned by the historically asymmetric distribution of power following the end of the Cold War, making the United States the strongest great power vis-à-vis potential rivals in the history of the modern state system (Wohlforth, 1999). A position resulting not only from the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also from the strength of the American superpower in the last decade of the Cold War (Wagner, 1993). To some, mostly US scholars, the continued peace and stability of the system depended on the continued strength of the United States (Kupchan, 1998).

The 2000s and 2010s saw an increasing diversity in the interpretation of the polarity of the international system. Some continued to interpret the system in terms of unipolarity (e.g. Gowa & Ramsay, 2017; Hansen, 2011; Monteiro, 2014). Others found evidence of an emerging multipolarity (e.g. Garzón, 2017; Lieber, 2014; Waltz, 2000) or bipolarity (e.g. Maher, 2018; Tunsjø, 2018; Xuetong, 2013). Still others found that while the system was solidly unipolar when assessed in terms of the relative distribution of power, the implications of polarity had changed for both
the unipole and other states as a consequence of systemic changes such as globalization (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015, 2016). Since the mid-2010s, the debate has been paralleled by a debate on the crisis in and possible end of the liberal international order (occasionally equated with the American world order). This debate is less focused on relative power and system structures and more concerned with international norms and institutions, and it tends to engage more with current events and, in particular, the international consequences of a less powerful and more inward-looking American superpower. In this volume, we connect these two important debates beginning from the concept of polarity while actively exploring the implications of structural characteristics and change for the current and future fabric of international order as well as the conduct of foreign policy.

This chapter proceeds in five steps. First, we explain the aim of the volume. Second, we unpack our shared assumptions and starting points. Third, we provide an overview of the polarity literature and how it has evolved since the early Cold War. Fourth, we outline the structure and content of the volume. Fifth, we summarize the findings and discuss their implications.

**The Aim**

The aim of the volume is three-fold. First, to take stock of research on polarity in international relations. What do we know about polarity and the logics of uni-, bi-, multi and non-polarity? Second, to develop the concept of polarity in order to understand the foreign policy and security challenges today, including the crisis in the liberal international order. What are the particular characteristics of international relations today and how do these characteristics condition the effects of the systemic distribution of power? By answering this question, we translate the logics of polarity to an international system of rising powers, overlapping climate, security and health crises and strong regional security dynamics. Third, to apply our fine-grained understanding(s) of polarity to understand particular foreign policies. What does polarity tell us about the foreign policies of great powers and small states and how they address the challenges of a changing international order?

The two latter aims of the volume inevitably lead to discussions and analyses of change in and transformation of international relations. As argued by Ole Wæver in Chapter 2, the concept of polarity is closely
coupled to an even more prominent concept in the study of international relations, the balance of power. Students of balance of power typically claim that “changes in the distribution of power are often dangerous” (Lobell, 2016: 33). Likewise, power transition theorists argue that military conflict is most likely when uneven growth rates result in a dissatisfied challenger that reaches power parity with (or superiority over) a declining hegemon (Lemke, 2004; Organski, 1958). While some continue to view this as a compelling logic inevitably leading to a conflict between a declining United States and a rising China (Mearsheimer, 2014), others warn against self-fulfilling prophecies and seek avenues for peaceful change (Paul, 2018).

The contemporary debate on the changing nature of the international system has rearticulated two "traps" of direct importance to system structure and systemic change. Graham Allison points to the Thucydides trap (Allison, 2017). Taking his point of departure in ancient Greek historian and general Thucydides’ observation that “it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable”, Allison identifies a tendency towards war, when a rising power threatens to replace an existing great power as the most powerful state. Joseph S. Nye points to the Kindleberger trap (Nye, 2017). Charles P. Kindleberger, an intellectual architect of the Marshall Plan, argued that the collapse of international order and stability before World War II was the result of the United States replacing the United Kingdom as the most powerful state in the international system but without taking responsibility for the provision of public goods. Nye’s fear is that as China rises, the United States will begin to withdraw from international responsibilities, which already happened during the Trump administration, while China will remain unable and unwilling to take over. In the last section of this introductory chapter, we use these two “traps” as prisms for discussing the future of the liberal international order.

**Shared Assumptions and Focal Points**

All contributions to this volume depart from three shared assumptions. First, we begin from the assumption that the state as actor remains vital for the dynamics and developments of international relations. To be sure, we do not view international relations as a gladiatorial competition between the state and other actors for primary importance or assume
that the foreign policy action space of states is unaffected by institutional or normative developments. Rather, the contributors to the volume explore how and to what extent the effects of polarity on international order and foreign policy are conditioned upon the nature and role of norms and institutions and how different types of polarity may obstruct or facilitate the spread, strengthening and resilience of international institutions and norms. Second, we share the assumption that challenges and opportunities of states are conditioned upon the anarchic nature of the international system and heavily influenced by the distribution of power within that system, i.e. polarity matters. We explore—theoretically and empirically—how polarity matters. Third, we all agree that how polarity matters, varies across time and space. Thus, past lessons from, e.g. the European Concert, cannot be transferred seamlessly to international relations today and the great power experience of the United States is not necessarily directly applicable to that of China. Consequently, the chapters in this volume contextualize polarity.

These three, shared assumptions serve as analytical anchors rather than straitjackets. Our aim is not to produce a new “grand theory” of polarity but an “[i]ntegrative pluralism [which] accepts and preserves the validity of a wide range of theoretical perspectives and embraces theoretical diversity as a means of providing more comprehensive and multi-dimensional accounts of complex phenomena” (Dunne et al., 2013: 416). Departing from the three analytical starting points, contributions vary along two dimensions. The first dimension is the degree of system focus. Some contributions emphasize the international system and order, whereas others focus on geopolitics and regions, or on the foreign policy of specific states. The second dimension is the degree of materiality, i.e. the extent to which the effects and implications of a given polarity are a direct result of the distribution of material power in the international system.

Shared assumptions as well as variations along the two dimensions reflect that all contributions in the book engage with the work of Birthe Hansen (1960–2020) to whom this book is dedicated. Starting from a structural realist—even Waltzian—position, Birthe took the lead in developing a theory of unipolarity (Hansen, 2011). In addition to the distribution of power, her theory also included the political project of the unipole, i.e. the ideational international order promoted by the superpower. She took a keen interest in security dynamics in the Middle East and the link between these dynamics and the global distribution of power (e.g. Hansen, 2001). Her work combined her fundamental structural
assumptions with systemic forces such as globalization and their impact on regional dynamics (Hansen, 2002), and she unpacked the foreign policy consequences for losing great powers, middle powers and small states in an international system with only one superpower (Hansen & Heurlin, 1998; Hansen et al., 2009).

**Polarity in Theory and Practice**

Polarity is both an analytical concept and a political concept. As noted by Barry Buzan, it is “one of those rare concepts used frequently in both the public policy and academic debates” (Buzan, 2004: 36). Analytically, polarity has been used to understand (part of) international order since the end of World War II. Harold Lasswell argued in a 1946-analysis of the emerging post-war international system that “[t]he nature and timing of world organization depend upon the global correlation of power with other elements in society” (Lasswell, 1945: 889). Laswell did not argue that the power structure is determining world order. Rather, his understanding came close to more recent arguments that the political projects (Hansen, 2011) and social systems (Finnemore, 2009) of the great powers influence the nature and effects of polarity. In 1954, in the second edition of *Politics among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau characterized the Cold War system as bipolar, i.e. a system with two great powers so overwhelmingly powerful that alignments between other states could not upset the balance of power (Morgenthau, 1954: 325–326).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the debate focused more narrowly on the direct effects of polarity on peace and stability. The debate was initiated by Morton Kaplan (1957), who argued that multipolar systems were more stable than bipolar systems, and Kenneth Waltz (1964), who argued that bipolar systems were more stable than multipolar systems. Waltz stressed the importance of the combination of capabilities for how powerful a state is, a position later developed in *Theory of International Politics*, when he noted that “[s]tates are not placed in the top rank because they excel in one way or another. Their rank depends on how they score on *all* of the following items: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence” (Waltz, 1979: 131). John Herz, in *International Politics in the Atomic Age*, acknowledged that the United States and the Soviet Union were in a league of their own, because of their relative power, but found that the possession of nuclear weapons solidified their position
and predicted that “unit veto” politics would replace traditional balance of power politics, when more and more states acquired nuclear weapons (Herz, 1959: 35). Two decades later, in 1981, and again after the Cold War, Waltz would explore the alleged pacifying effects of nuclear weapons arguing that nuclear proliferation would make the world safer in both bi- and multipolarity, because of the fear of mutually assured destruction (Sagan & Waltz, 1995; Waltz, 1981).

Not everyone viewed either multipolarity or bipolarity as conducive to peace and stability. Richard Rosecrance argued that both bipolarity and multipolarity had virtues and pitfalls (Rosecrance, 1966). Rosecrance agreed with Waltz that there is no periphery in a bipolar world and therefore less competition for allies and colonies, and that changes in power would often have little effect on peace and stability. However, at the same time, a few changes in the relative power of the great powers are highly significant in bipolarity, and international relations tend to be crisis-ridden and highly politicized. In multipolarity, the effects of changes in relative power are typically difficult to predict. Conflict is more frequent and unpredictable but with less devastating consequences for the international system. Consequently, Rosecrance advocated “bi-multipolarity”, i.e. a system with two major powers regulating conflict in parts of the international system at the same time as secondary powers mediating between the two superpowers (Rosecrance, 1966: 322).

From the mid-1960s, not only the logics and consequences of bipolarity and multipolarity but also the actual polarity of the international system became a “major point of contention” (Dean & Vasquez, 1976: 8). Until then there had been a near consensus that the system was bipolar, but increasingly students of polarity argued that the system was multipolar or tripolar with China as the third pole (e.g. Copper, 1975; Nogee & Spanier, 1976; Platte, 1978). The ensuing debate in the 1970s and 1980s on the nature and consequences of polarity was largely based on formal and quantitative methods (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita, 1975; Bueno de Mesquita & Singer, 1973; Deutsch & Singer, 1964; Singer et al., 1972; Wayman, 1984). Much of the research was related to the Correlates of War project and the Journal of Conflict Resolution became a major publication outlet for research results (Zala, 2013: 39–40).

Interestingly, by the end of the Cold War, few contested the assessment that the Cold War system had been bipolar. At the same time, the collapse of the bipolar order resulted in a return to more foundational debates, less focused on measuring effects and more concerned with
discussing the logic(s) and implications of different types of polarity. John Mearsheimer’s grim prediction in *International Security* that as a result of multipolarity, Europe after the Cold War would resemble the unstable order of the interwar period resulted in two rounds of reactions from prominent IR scholars and an edited volume (Lynn-Jones & Miller, 1993; Mearsheimer, 1990). To many observers, the international system was experiencing a “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990, 1991), rather than an enduring system on par with previous bipolar and multipolar systems, although there was wide disagreement on how long this moment would last. Efforts to understand what was going on in this US dominated international system and what to expect in the future soon resulted in “a wide array of grand terms such as empire, hegemony, unipolarity, imperium, and ‘uni-multipolarity’” (Huntington, 1999; Ikenberry et al., 2009: 3).

Gradually, from the late 1990s, students of unipolarity—“an anarchical interstate system featuring a sole great power” (Monteiro, 2014: 40)—sought to identify the nature and effects of this type of international structure. William Wohlforth, in a seminal article in 1999, documented the overwhelming and historically unprecedented power of the United States (Wohlforth, 1999). At the same time, a collection of essays by prominent IR scholars analysed how the United States and its main cooperation partners and competitors had responded to the unipolar structure during the first decade after the collapse of bipolarity (Kapstein & Mastanduno, 1999). The book showed how most states chose to cooperate with the single superpower in the first decade of unipolarity. At the same time, they sought to find ways of maintaining their autonomy and make sense of the—sometimes contradictory—policy choices of the United States.

To an increasing number of analysts, unipolarity was now “a fact, but one whose meaning is far from clear, as we have neither a powerful theory nor much evidence about how unipolar systems operate” (Jervis, 2009: 188). The stability of a unipolar world seemed to confirm Charles Krauthammer’s prediction that it could last for a “generation” (Krauthammer, 1990, 1991: 24). Taking their point of departure in Kenneth Waltz’s original structural realist framework Nuno Monteiro and Birthe Hansen offered theories of unipolar logics. Monteiro, the more pessimist of the two, argued that unipolarity left the superpower with a difficult task of calibrating its international engagement. Regional disengagement could remove incentives for peace and lead to conflict, but at the same time continued engagement could trigger a violent
response from those states unwilling to accommodate to the unipolar order (Monteiro, 2011, 2014). Hansen, on the other hand, argued that power asymmetry created strong incentives for non-pole states to flock with the superpower and that the unipole’s stake in the system created a strong incentive for the unipole to act as a manager and leader of the international system (Hansen, 2011). The result would be an international system with few military conflicts. Politics in this international system would be shaped by the political project of the superpower, in the US case promotion of liberal democracy and market economy and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

However, as noted by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “unipolarity proved deceptive in terms of controlling events in world politics” (Nye, 2019: 68). The global recession in 2008 and its aftermath highlighted a systemic economic power shift from West (most notably the United States) to East (most notably China) and questioned the future economic leadership of the United States (Layne, 2012). The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq failed to create democracy and peace, Syria and North Korea were allowed to defy basic principles of the unipole’s political project, and China and Russia increasingly defied or challenged the United States and its allies. Following the election of Donald Trump as US President even the United States began to question fundamental principles of the international order, including global trade and US leadership through multilateral international institutions (Nye, 2019: 70). Trump’s successor as US President, Joe Biden, promised that “America is back”, but the United States seemingly continued military retrenchment in the Middle East including the abandonment of Afghanistan, which was soon taken over by the Taliban declaring an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan following 20 years of military engagement by the United States and its allies.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the past two decades have seen an increasing diversity in the interpretation of the polarity of the international system. However, it is possible to discern distinct phases in which one narrative or another tends to dominate the academic discourse on polarity. According to prominent observers, between the late 2000s and the mid-2010s, a near consensus on US dominance was replaced by the narrative that “we are currently witnessing a return to the kind of balance of power politics that characterized the multipolar system of the 19th and early twentieth centuries” (Flockhart, 2016: 6; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/2016: 7–8). However, judging by the contributions to this volume, by the early 2020s, there is no agreement among scholars on
the polarity of the international system, although an increasing number of analysts seem to point to an emerging weak bipolarity with increased importance of regional and domestic factors.

An increasing number of observers claim that we have “less polarity”. However, in contrast to the 1970s where such claims usually meant either that power had decreasing importance, or that power was less aggregate and cross-issue fungible (Keohane & Nye, 1977), observations about the changing nature of polarity are today more often made as elaborations and improvements on polarity analysis. Within polarity analysis it can be argued that we witness a weakening of the global level and therefore a shift towards a world with no superpowers, only great powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Less polarity effect can be explained by polarity theory.

The next section provides an overview of the volume, while the last section summarizes the main findings of the book and discuss their implications for policy and research.

### Structure of the Volume

The book is organized into three sections. The first section, *Theorizing Polarity*, focuses on conceptual and theoretical challenges following from a focus on polarity. After this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2, conceptual history meets IR theory/realism in Ole Wæver’s discussion of how polarity works its effects. Wæver explores what concepts have to be in play for power to take the forms assumed by polarity theory. Examining three concepts—"power", "balance of power" and "polarity"—Wæver argues that polarity is not what states make of it—it is what they make when they think in terms of balance of power. In Chapter 3, Kai He engages with some of the same concepts as Wæver—polarity and balancing—but from a neoclassical realist perspective. He argues that the interplay between polarity and threat perception shapes state behaviour as external balancing or internal balancing, or both. Georg Sørensen, in Chapter 4, highlights the importance of the domestic level. Sørensen argues that increasing state fragility (also in the Global North) compels states to prioritize domestic problems leaving some of the most pressing problems requiring international cooperation unsolved. To understand the challenges ahead, we need to draw on several theories and explore how the challenges varies across different types of states.

The following two chapters both engage with challenges and opportunities when systemic polarity meets geopolitical location. In Chapter 5,
Øystein Tunsjø argues that a geostructural realist theory that adds geopolitics to Waltz’s emphasis on anarchy and distribution of capabilities can better explain why patterns of behaviour and structural effects differ between bipolar systems of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Hans Mouritzen, in Chapter 6, links systemic polarity and geopolitics with foreign policy in his discussion of states’ external freedom of manoeuvre. He argues that a state’s freedom of manoeuvre is the missing link between polarity and its foreign policy and illustrates his argument in an analysis of the foreign policies of the Nordic countries. Polarity analysis tends to focus on the great powers: the pole powers and their challengers. However, in Chapter 7, Revecca Pedi and Anders Wivel provide an overview of existing knowledge of links between different types of polarity and the challenges and opportunities of small states and discuss what small states should do to maximize their interests and influence. They argue that in a world dominated by US- and China-led bounded orders, small states must choose their battles wisely, prioritize their resources, and build networks with like-minded small states.

The American world order and the liberal international order are sometimes used as synonyms, even though the former zooms in on the power base of the order and the latter’s focus is on the ideological content. In Chapter 8, Sten Rynning rejects that realism and liberalism are opposites or can even be detached. In contrast, we should understand realism as an enduring corrective to liberalism guarding against excess and unbounded aspirations.

The second section, Polarity and International Security, focuses on current challenges to international peace. Robert Lieber, in Chapter 9, provides an overview of how challenges and opportunities have changed from the end of bipolarity over unipolarity until today. Lieber argues that the United States remains pivotal for a rule-based international order promoting democracy, market economy and regional security. According to Lieber, US domestic developments may prove a greater challenge to continued US leadership than international challenges. Jennifer Sterling-Folker, in Chapter 10, zooms in on one of these challenges arguing that nationalism shapes international behaviour and that this is also the case in the United States—with important consequences for international relations, because of the overwhelming power of the United States. André Ken Jakobsson, in Chapter 11, building on Birthe Hansen’s work, re-evaluates the relationship between the United States as a unipole and
the political project(s) of post-Cold War US administrations. Jakobsson argues that US pursuit of benign hegemony promotes the rise of balancing powers. He discusses the effect of the policy change under President Trump and implications for the US-China relationship.

The following chapters focus on this relationship. Andreas Bøje Forsby, in Chapter 12, uses social identity theory to develop a new structural logic of identity allowing us to theorize systemic ideological competition. He explores how to combine the structural logic of identity with that of power—polarity—to understand US-China great power rivalry. Camilla Sørensen, in Chapter 13, explores how weakened unipolarity encourages and enables a more proactive and assertive Chinese foreign and security policy and discusses the effects on US foreign policy and peace and stability in East Asia and beyond in a post-unipolar international system. The wider historical context of East Asian security is the subject of Peter Toft’s analysis in Chapter 14, explaining realignment patterns in the region 1945–2020.

In Chapter 15, Eliza Gheorghe explores the logics of nuclear non-proliferation, a corner stone in the Cold War and post-Cold War orders. Gheorghe argues that restraint is more effective than interventionism. In Chapter 16, Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen challenges the conventional narrative of the Arctic as an exceptional region. In contrast, Bertelsen argues, the Arctic has been an integrated part of the international system for centuries and developments in the region continue to mirror systemic developments. According to Bertelsen, Russia’s place in US-China bipolarity will determine the future of Arctic cooperation. The last two chapters of the section zoom in on European developments. Barbara Kunz, in Chapter 17, focuses on the consequences of US-Russian rivalry for Europe. She argues that Europe cannot escape the US-Russian security dilemma but should focus on contributing to managing this dilemma. Henrik Larsen, in Chapter 18, moves the focus from material power to security discourse. He shows an interesting disconnect between systemic US unipolarity and a greater role for the EU in Danish foreign policy after the Cold War.

The third section, The Future of Polarity and International Order, concludes the volume with three discussions of the future of polarity in international relations. Charles Kupchan, in Chapter 19, argues a pluralistic global order will be a consequence of US retrenchment. Consequently, the United States will need to operate in a world of
political diversity and competing visions from rising powers. In this post-Western order, the United States needs to work with both democratic and non-democratic regimes. Randall Schweller, in Chapter 20, argues that US-China rivalry differs in important respect from US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War. This new bipolarity exerts only weak structural effects on international relations and is best understood as non-polarity—a new structure with new requirements for success in international relations. Finally, in Chapter 21, William Wohlforth returns to the work of Birthe Hansen, which has informed the volume and many of the analyses. Focusing on the link between polarity and international order, Wohlforth argues that neither bipolarity nor multipolarity tells us much about the future order. Great powers command a smaller share of material power vis-à-vis the rest of the international system than before. For this reason, the liberal international order may be more resilient than we would expect from an exclusive focus on the consequences of polarity.

Conclusions

Two main conclusions, one theoretical and one empirical, follow from the analyses of this book. Theoretically, the contributions to the volume question discuss and deconstruct the systemic “this polarity or that” logic of conventional structural realist polarity analysis. The system may be characterized as multipolar, bipolar or unipolar, but logics of war, peace and international order do not follow seamlessly. In general polarity effects are weaker today than they were for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The analyses of the book point to at least two reasons for this. First, the texture of international relations has changed. Due to technological, economic, military and ideational developments, systemic pole powers can do less than in the past. Consequently, the international system has become more diverse. Several competing powers have competing understandings of what international relations is and competing visions for what it should be, often with a regional rather than a systemic focus. Second, and closely related, international politics are now more regional and less systemic than in the past century. This is a consequence of the reduced ability of systemic pole powers to dominate international politics as well as a backlash against globalization and interventionism from domestic audiences.

Three implications follow from this conclusion. First, if we want to know the effects of polarity on international war, peace and order, we
need to explore—theoretically conceptually and empirically—the interaction of material power asymmetry (polarity) and ideational structures and status hierarchies such as international pecking orders (Pouliot, 2016). Second, we need to understand better how polarity effects travel from the systemic level to the regional level and to domestic audiences and how the feedback from domestic and regional politics affects both what polarity is and what polarity does to international relations. This points to a potentially fruitful dialogue with English School-inspired work on the co-existence of several orders within the international system and how this “multi-order world” is likely to change the nature and identity of international institutions and the liberal international order more generally (Flockhart, 2016). Finally, this conclusion points to the importance of rereading and reinterpreting some of the early but now largely forgotten interpretations of the nature and effects of polarity. Authors such as Harold Lasswell and Richard Rosecrance provided rich readings of polarity in the early Cold War pointing to complexities and contradictions in polarity effects that we continue to grapple with today. These three implications are all in the spirit of Birthe Hansen, who pointed to the combination of material power and ideological content and compatibility for international order, analysed the effects of systemic polarity on regional politics in the Middle East and explored the complex interaction between globalization and national interest and between states and non-state actors such as terrorist organizations.

The empirical conclusion is closely related to these insights. The United States and China stand out as the strongest powers, but regional powers and small states seek to navigate US-China rivalry from their own perspective rather than getting co-opted by one or the other. Russia is not a pole power, but as the analyses of Europe and the Arctic shows, Russia remains highly important for peace and security in some regions. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has accentuated the importance of this observation and illustrated Russia’s potential for disruption and damage, in particular for states that were once part of the Soviet Union. Even if we are headed for bipolar rivalry, it is unlikely to matter as much for international relations as the Cold War.

What are the implications for the liberal international order? Graham Allison’s Thucydides trap has received much attention for highlighting the risk of a great power war if China threatens to replace the United States as the most powerful state (Allison, 2017). Will a Chinese order replace the US-backed liberal international order after a great power war? Based on
the analyses of this volume that would be highly unlikely. China is both unable (e.g. too far behind technologically) and unwilling to engage in a military conflict for global hegemony. Furthermore, the United States has considerable room of manoeuvre for signalling to China that it accepts a more pluralist international order with regional variations and avoid confrontation.

While this is likely to avert great power war, it points to a second more pressing challenge identified by Josef Nye’s Kindleberger trap (Nye, 2017). US and Chinese behaviour seem to confirm Nye’s prediction that the United States will begin to withdraw from international responsibilities, but China will remain unable and unwilling to take over. US domestic politics, not the challenge from China, seems to be the biggest threat to the liberal international order, at least to the extent that liberal internationalism needs the backing of US power. Even more challenging, great power cooperation on global challenges such as climate change, poverty, pandemics and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction will be difficult if none of the powerful actors are willing to take the lead. Inward-looking states catering primarily to domestic audiences are likely to pass the buck and remain inactive—“the structurally stimulated first choice” (Wæver, 2017: 473).

NOTES

1. De Keersmaeker provides a good example of this diversity. In the autumn of 2008, the German journal *Internationale Politik* published a special issue on the multipolar international order with contributions from European, Indian, Brazilian and Chinese scholars. Only a few months later, *World Politics* published a special issue with a number of prominent US scholars based on the premise that the world was unipolar (De Keersmaeker, 2017: 3–4).


3. These debates were as usual dominated by North American scholars. Viewed from Europe, Mearsheimer’s predictions—although allegedly about Europe—were strangely oblivious to the way European integration produced a power centre generating regional unipolar dynamics which