Power, Polarity and the Present

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Introduction

An earthquake struck Europe in February 2022. This was not a natural disaster, but a political earthquake. Russia invaded Ukraine. The military temblor shook European policymakers' foundational beliefs to the core. It had an even greater impact on the decision-makers in Washington. A new phase in the post-Cold War international system emerged. Throughout the Cold War, bipolarity maintained a stable international system. The end of this decades-long political stalemate and its subsequent transformation into a unipolar world led to optimism about the future. American hegemony would continue the stability of the past and be a progressive force for the rest of the globe.

Washington initially considered the unipolar transformation generational,

whereas others thought it was a passing phase (Krauthammer 1990). The latter proved correct. Other powers — China, as an example — aspired to a seat at the world's power table. One aspect that the Russian aggression in Ukraine has highlighted is the slow but seemingly inevitable transition from unipolarity to multipolarity. It can be argued that there is a return to the Cold War period, whereby China replaces the Soviet Union as an antagonist to the United States position. There is validity to this assertion, though as recently as the end of 2022, it is hard to argue that China has the wherewithal the Soviet Union possessed throughout the Cold War years of the 1960s and 1970s.

To understand and predict polarity in the international system, it is best to start any investigation with reference firstly to power and secondly to Kenneth Waltz, who authored *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 in hopes of explaining the recurrence of a central and general dynamic observable in international politics: the balance of power (Waltz 2010).

Power

Characterizing a central concept of international relations, such as power, demands deciphering the complicated task of shaping a polysemic notion, whose identification is a commitment to one or another particular current of thought. By shedding light on certain edges and hiding others, the form that power obtains in this approach is functional for the realist approach, to the detriment of the use that could be given to it in another interpretive framework. In this same sense, it is necessary to have as a compass the characterization of power, not its definition. The objective is to outline a descriptive and not normative notion of the term, which applies to an analytical model of relations formed among the agents of the international system.

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Having delimited what is sought in terms of power, it is also necessary to establish the utility of the effort. From its particularities, neorealism — the basis of polarity

— is concerned with the meaning of the accumulation and maximization of power and how this demarcates the differences in hierarchization between the system's units — in this case countries vying for the controlling spot. Neorealist conceptual proposals explore appropriate ways of seeking power as a means for security, or as an end in classical realism — competition for power as an end (Waltz 2015). However, this central effort is weakened by a delimitation of the concept, which at the base of the theory is somewhat basic and has been evolving in a fragmented way throughout its development.

Power, from this perspective, becomes a means directed toward a gain within the spectrum of action, which translates into a better ability to promote one's ends, even against the opposition of other parties. In proposing power as a means to gain a foothold in any arena of action or dispute, the logical step is to try to understand the characteristics of power — descriptive conceptualization — and how they intervene in the competition. Four elements through which power will be understood as a relationship factor between units are highlighted below.

1. Power is a relational concept, which is based on the formation of a link between the parties, where one or more prevail over the other;

2. Power is multiscalar and multidimensional;

3. Power is based on the existence of a certain agenda or objective that is pursued in the social system;

4. Power must possess certain characteristics, real or perceived, that those influenced or controlled consider of immense value, either because they are considered threatening or valued as proof of the power exercised.

German sociologist Max Weber understood power as the probability of imposing one's own will, within a social relationship, even against all resistance, and whatever the foundation of that probability (Wallimann, Tatsis & Zito 1977). Power is also understood as a probability of obedience within a relationship between one or several parties, in which some desires and preferences are imposed on others. The point here is this: Power is the possibility for the agent to impose his/her will on others. It would not then be power — a proper or innate condition of an existing agent — but the expression, apparently measurable, of behaviour

patterns in a relationship. In this case, the link, although it is unidirectional in terms of the imposition of the will, becomes a two-way proposition. It also follows the Weberian approach to the idea of domination — a specific type of power — as the probability of finding obedience to a command. Both power and domination are based on a series of commands (as manifestations of the will of the dominator) being obeyed. This submission takes place in a bilateral bond where the parties expect that if the behaviour determined does not appear, then there is a decomposition or loss of the command-obedience relationship. In its relational condition, the competition for spaces of action is determined by the borders in which an agent can exercise domination over the others. Concerning this, the others see their action conditioned by the will of the first.

Imposition of the will may be motivated through the threat and recourse to direct violence and the construction of meanings that guide the agents' behaviour and allow for persuasion. In this sense, recalling what Weber proposed, force is configured as a tool that guarantees obedience. However, it cannot manifest relational power since serious violence is the resource through which the breach of the bilateral relationship of obedience is corrected; what guarantees force is the control of non-response or obedience to a command (Albrow 1990). In this direction, force is part of power, as a latent element. For our purposes, competing states would attempt to consolidate their respective domains through immaterial elements that link the parties in a relationship of legitimacy which is understood as obedience to something beyond force.

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When the relationship is accepted by those who are subject to it, those who value the benefits or the convenience of following the dictates of the other, power reaches its maximum expression. This means that in discussions of power relations, one is alluding to a combination of power over other actors, who appear as subordinates, and the power to achieve certain ends, both aspects being dialectically interrelated.

Therefore, power, in general, is the capacity of an individual or group of individuals to secure, directly or indirectly, what they want. Power presupposes ends — desires or preferences, and means. Power does not remain mere intentions. Various

forms of power can be categorized across a broad spectrum, from destruction to construction (Gray, Bougon & Donnellon 1985).

There are two complementary elements of power: the means and the ends. On the one hand, whoever exercises command in the relationship needs a series of means, real or perceived by the other parties, on which the connection is based. These elements are the inputs that allow both the possibility of appealing to force and building joint meanings through mass communication tools.

Power relations are not sustained in perpetuity. At one point, an agent promotes his interests over others and achieves the objectives they sets for themselves. However, when the agenda — objectives and preferences — is exhausted, another must appear, either because the dominator can generate a new one or because it is replaced by another that now has the possibility of imposing its will on others (Kalb 2013). Power must have meaning for a horizon or purpose; otherwise, the bilateral relationship would fragment because the dominant side stops fulfilling its part, giving space for the ties to be reactivated (Rasheed 1995).

Waltz at work

In Waltz's formulation, in an anarchic environment such as the international one, the behaviours of states and their conditioning was important. They set the international political structure. These conditionings took place at the level of selectable strategies to satisfy the primary interest of survival which, under normal conditions, could only be achieved by equalling the capabilities of the most powerful state in the system at a given moment. The nucleus of the reasoning of Waltz — a preeminent political scientist in the field of international relations — can be synthesized from the concept that international politics does not tolerate power vacuums (Schweller 2016).

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Waltz never hid his preference for the bipolar system. In his journal article "The Stability of a Bipolar World," his first treatment of the topic, he highlighted the particular configuration of the bipolar system, presenting the two superpowers with a series of problems linked to the coordination between the actors and to the uncertainty related to crisis management, enacting the balance of power (Waltz 1964).

He also enumerated four characteristics of the Cold War bipolar system which, analogously, he extended to bipolar systems in general: the absence of peripheries, the extent and recurrence of crises, the persistent presence of a certain political pressure, and the military preponderance of the two poles (Waltz 1964). These characteristics help to make the power balance produced within the bipolar system one that is solid, inflexible. This makes the eventuality of a systemic war between the two contenders highly unlikely. The bipolar order is stable as long as systemic pressures create the conditions that allow for the adoption of internal balancing strategies.

In his analysis of the stability of a bipolar system when compared to a multipolar one, Waltz frequently referred to the topic of scarce systemic incentives to internal balancing that leads to the flexibility of alliances and systemic instability (Jervis 1987). In multipolar systems, Waltz noted, the instability is encouraged by two elements. The first is that the actors are incentivized to favour external balancing over internal balancing, therefore there exists a preference for a system of alliances. In the systems of alliances, in a multipolar system, it can be extremely volatile and flexible, due to the problems related to coordination between the actors themselves; there is a need to balance constantly against the actors capable of threatening the existing balance. However, it is not the alliance system itself that makes it an unstable multipolar system, rather it is the trends of the states regarding bloc dynamics when compared to their individual policies.

In general terms, Waltz sought to explain the continuities of international politics, prioritizing a systemic perspective in which maximum importance is given to the interactions between a set of units — whose internal political composition is irrelevant (Waltz 2014). Given the relationships between the few holders of the greatest power resources, the hierarchical structure is configured where the units are located, one above the other, according to the possession of

a greater or lesser number of these strategic resources. From where Waltz sat, the subordination factor is the ability to guarantee one's security through the resources one possesses. Once the central actors configure the structure, which is an ambivalent condition of the theory, the latter begins to condition the behaviour of its creators (Carlsnaes 2008). Through socialization, through which the parties create patterns of behaviour that are accepted or rejected, and competition, through which behaviours that are understood to be successful and necessary to replicate are generalized in the system, the range of actions that the units can develop is limited by the same structure (Schimmelfennig 2000).

Within Waltz's proposal, the central units are understood as poles or great powers. Under the idea that power and the resources that determine it are possible to accumulate or lose, these primordial agents must act in such a way as to maximize their resources and improve their security (Waltz 2000). The self-help principle states that the system rewards correct policies and punishes inappropriate behaviours in anarchic reality (Waltz 2014).

Thus, the change in the hierarchical position of the parties is constituted as a natural condition since, as a primary element, the parties will try to improve their relative position in front of the others. It is key to remember that for Waltz, the balance of power — as the set of manoeuvres designed to limit the capacity of a preponderant agent — is a condition to which the system tends more or less spontaneously after a period of hierarchical change. The number of powers that are configured at any given time demarcate the structure — unipolar, bipolar or multipolar — and the relationships established between them condition how the other actors interact with each other and with the powers, be they unilateral, multilateral or pluralateral (Bhala & Cooper 2014).

There is an absence of a relational dynamic in Waltz's 20th-century conception of power. He identified it only as a capacity that derives from the possession of strategic factors, which grant power regardless of their counterparts. With this as a reference, there is a relational link that is equal to, or even more important than, the eventual capacity of an actor to exploit some resources that it possesses.

In this same sense, recalling the contributions of Joseph Nye, one of the most influential of today's scholars on American foreign policies, the demarcation of

the dual nature of power comes into play (Bakalov 2020). The importance of the classic physical resources of power such as population, territory and military resources continues to be significant as a hierarchical factor within the structure. State units have gradually displaced their interests from material to immaterial resources, focusing on the ability of an agent to make others want what their competitors want and not to impose it by force (Nye 1990). There are different typologies given to sets of powers under denominations such as superpower, hegemonic power, great power, regional power, middle power and emerging power, where it becomes a matter of adequately dimensioning the type of power resources and the scope of the state (Nolte 2010).

Rethinking polarity

In trying to identify polarity, the idea of anarchy must be preserved as a starting point, as a fundamental principle of the system, and as the configuration of a hierarchical structure based on the interactions between the units. Within the structure, states position themselves based on their power resources, which become a means to preserve their existence and security. This security is defined in defensive and offensive orbits. Once its survival is assured, the agent will try to influence the system to maintain the status quo that benefits it within an offensive framework. Power resources are not conceived exclusively in physical properties; immaterial factors, such as culture, soft power and political ideology, can also become tools exploited for the state's security.

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The basic idea, applicable to each scale and following the delimitation made of the idea of power, focuses on proposing that the recognition of power falls on the existence of a relational link. The link is sustained by the possession of a significant amount of resources of power, which allow the state to develop an international agenda. The state is considered a leading player in the system's structure. The state configures the behaviour and expectations of those residing within the system,

based on predictions of the behaviour of the power. In differentiating the powers by the type of power resources they possess and their scope, analyses at different scales are necessary. Some preponderant states will appear at the systemic level and others will stand out at the regional level, being regular that the former has a space of regional preponderance, to sustain their interests of global scope. If the systemic level is focused upon, the U.S., China, India, Russia, European Union, Brazil, and South Africa would attract attention. When comparing the global and regional scale, actors can be repeated or introduced, which in their respective contexts — due to a limited number of resources that forces a regional projection agenda — have dynamism and recognition from the other States.

To support its power status, the state will support its own actions, especially its survival, within a defensive orbit. The actions of the powers are framed within the development of an agenda aimed at improving their security and configuring or sustaining a world or regional order convenient to their interests. The resources of power are divided between the material — military, economic, population, territorial resources — and the immaterial, those of political leadership, cultural influence, persuasion capacity and production of knowledge and information.

It is also necessary to locate the non-state agents of the system within power relations without losing sight of the preponderance of states within the world order. Remembering that the structure is formed from the interaction between powers, the intervention of these new agents in the system occurs concerning the links between the states.

Non-state agents are independent units with their unique interests and objectives, which act in specific dimensions and on various scales of analysis. They can take multiple forms, with different degrees of organization and levels of international activity. To understand their role in the system, it is essential to recognize the functional difference between state and non-state agents. The former, whose action reference is the safeguarding of its security through the accumulation of power resources, has the same functional order, given its obligation to guarantee its own survival. Meanwhile, non-states are not obliged to the same condition of self-protection — the preservation of a social group does not depend on their existence. Therefore, they can develop a flexible role within the power relations in the system, adapted to the issues on which they decide to intervene such as the

environment or focus on human rights. Within the spectrum of action, in their intervention in power relations, they are characterized by configuring themselves as enhancers, facilitators or obstacles.

In the first case, the non-state agent and the state develop a connection in which, consciously, both parties understand that the better positioning of one results in benefits for the other. Given this relationship condition, the non-state agent will undertake beneficial actions for his official ally, understanding them as indirectly beneficial for himself.

In the second type of relationship, the non-state agent, in the development of its agenda, indirectly and casually can benefit a certain state. Actions will only sometimes be useful to the power, but the state agencies can exploit the activity to their benefit.

In the third type, the non-state agent becomes an obstacle, even an opponent, to the activities of a certain power. This relationship is usually based on an opposing ideological perspective, where the state itself bases its rejections on the fundamental principles or elements it defends in the system. Diplomatic networks, international law, international organizations and even the media can influence power relations, affecting their dynamics and acting as structural modifiers (Allott 1983).

Finally, it is necessary to recognize two fundamental factors of the current world order, which are constituted as the context in which powers interact. In the first place, the agenda on which the agents operate has become complex, both in the issues addressed and in the way they intersect. Secondly, the interconnection that the system has reached means that all processes are subject to a constant state of change, in which disturbances in one area of the globe can have consequences in the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Regarding Russian aggression in Ukraine, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger advocates rewarding Russia with territory. The implosion of Russia carries much greater incipient threats to the international system than the diminution of Ukraine. In terms of polarity, Kissinger accepts that Moscow

cannot be considered an effective pole, but rather as a nuclear threat. What is clear, however, is that one cannot classify the international system as being unipolar with the single power able to guarantee allies territorial integrity, as the superpowers were able to do so during the Cold War. During the Cold War the superpowers were able to guarantee their allies territorial integrity. At present, it is clear to see that one cannot classify the international system as being unipolar as the "unipolar power" is unable to enact this guarantee, as witnessed in Ukraine.

Taking a snapshot of the world in 2023, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the Russia of today is not the Soviet Union of the Cold War (Yiğit 2022), especially in terms of its military profile. Having said this, one must bear in mind the Soviet military intervention into Afghanistan. At the time, many thought the Red Army would easily overcome the internal opposition and strengthen the Afghan communist regime. That was not to be; the Soviets withdrew after a decade and a substantial number of casualties and deaths. Thus, in some respects Russia is not too dissimilar to the Soviet Union in terms of its military effectiveness when invading a neighbouring country. The war in Ukraine, therefore, severely harms its prospects of becoming a polar power.

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A brutal war is raging in Ukraine. This armed conflict has captured the attention of those trying to explain the contemporary international system of power. Some cling to the notion of the United States as the unipolar power (Fettweis 2022). Some, such as international affairs specialist and academic Charles Kupchan believe that bipolarity — in the form of an emerging China — has already arrived (Kupchan 2021). Still others like political scientists Benjamin Martill and Lisa ten Brinke accept a multipolar world with the European Union as a third pole. (Martill & ten Brinke 2020). One can certainly add as potential future polar powers India and Brazil. (Krasilshchikov 2022)

China is the likeliest polar prospect. Beijing is not home to a monolithic stagnant

economy like Russia's, but one which is expected to be the largest in the world by 2035 (Tang 2022). In fact, evaluated through purchasing power parity measures, China's GDP passed U.S. GDP nearly a decade ago. It has steadily increased its military spending and though its massive infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, is engaging with the developing world economically, simultaneously projecting its soft power. Welcome to a brave new world.

About the Author

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Yiğit is the author of several books and book chapters on energy security, United States–China trade relations, citizenship, European foreign policy, the war in Ukraine, Eurasian Economic Union developments and Mongolian democratisation. His current research interests are chiefly focused on polarity in international relations, African Union-EU relations, EU migration, Mongolian foreign policy, digital transformation and Georgian 20th–century developments.

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