

The Unipolar Challenge
Power, Culture and Authority and the Advent of War

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International relations in the post-Cold War era have been characterized by US hegemony and globalization, whereas the international political landscape in the next 20 years will be largely determined by whether the unipolar systemic structure will be replaced by a multipolar one (Layne, 2009b, p. 147). The specificity of polarity hinges predominantly on the distribution of material power, hence projections of long-term economic growth in favor of rising powers, especially China, weighs heavily on many visions of future international politics. In the meantime, as America's share in global economic output continues—a trend further aggravated by the most recent financial and economic crisis in 2008, debates over a diminished international role for the United States in a changing world have again heated up. With no war of global scale in imminent sight, most scholars envisage a simple, linear relationship between a predicted power distribution among major states and the future system's structure. Curiously, scant attention has been paid to how US preponderance thus far—as reflected by the systemic constraints of unipolarity—can help reconfigure the evolving relations among the big powers and reshape the character of the future international system.¹

More importantly, in mentally and conceptually fast-forwarding the pace with which the system's structural transition occurs, IR scholars have turned a blind eye to how unipolarity actually works. For instance, how do secondary states interact with the unipole, bilaterally and multilaterally? Specifically, how do these states decide whether to toe the lines as determined by the hegemon, or to challenge the system? Is material power the ultimate parameter that regulates inter-state relations as implied in the term "unipolarity" itself? Questions such as these are especially critical for any assessment of the post-Cold war international order, which is moving toward a direction that is far from certain.

In contrast, we know more about the multipolar and bipolar worlds owing to extensive studies of the Concert of Europe in the 19th century and the Cold war in the 20th century. While empires toppled and succeeded one another in human history, from the Persians to the Romans and then to the Ottomans, they fail to arouse the interest of international relations scholars largely because other than conquest, those political mammoths were had no stable territorial boundaries and institutional structures to be able to perform regularized inter-state relations in the post-Westphalian sense. The rare historical occurrence of unipolarity meaningful and relevant in the IR context thus renders any major claims pertaining to unipolar international relations theoretically untested and empirically impoverished. And precisely because of this lacuna in our knowledge, many

¹ Exceptions are Zhu (2008), Brooks and Wohlforth (2008).

scholars uncritically choose to apply the concepts and theories developed in the bipolar and multipolar scenarios to the post-Cold war world without asking first whether such a move is appropriate, given that unipolarity may well work in drastically different ways. More obviously and as a result of this negligence, scholarly discussions of unipolarity are invariably intertwined with the policy debates over US primacy and the orientations of American international strategies, be it unilateralism or multilateralism (e.g., Nye, 2002; Walt, 2005).

Hampered by conceptual confusion, lack of empirical analysis as well as ideological tussle, our understanding of the logic and character of the unipolar international system remains fairly shallow. In this article I will try first to ferret out the differences between bi- and multipolarity and unipolarity, focusing especially on strategic options and patterns of behavior for the secondary states in the context of systemic constraints. Also examined will be the origins of systemic change according to neorealism, power transition theory, liberal institutionalism and constructivism. I will then proceed to make the case that premodern East Asia for many centuries, being a self-sustained unipolar international system, is an untapped goldmine for IR scholars. A brief history of this China-centered international system is proffered, highlighting the diverging behavior among ancient China's neighbors, especially between Korea, Vietnam and the *Ryukyus* on one hand and Japan on that other hand. This will lead to brief discussions of why the former were willing to submit to the hegemon whereas the Japanese sought several times to challenge the system. At this point several major empirical observations will be examined against extant IR theories, and point to the intersection of power and culture² for further research. In the end, the paper extrapolates from the Asian experiences and reflects on the future of U.S. primacy in view of predicted power fluctuation amongst contending world powers.

Unipolarity, hegemony and international order

The international system has long been defined by the number of poles in it. These poles are states that (1) controls a great proportion of resources or capabilities that can be used to achieve their ends and (2) excels in all the component elements of state capability, conventionally defined as size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military prowess, and organizational-institutional "competence" (Kenneth Neal Waltz, 1979). Distribution of capabilities is central to the concept of polarity, with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and military spending the most commonly

² By culture, I refer to the political ramifications of culture that regulate or coordinate inter-unit relationships. I therefore use culture and ideology interchangeably.

used measures. A unipolar system suggests that one and only one state, relative to all other states in the system, has such an intense concentration of capabilities in all relevant categories that it is “unambiguously in a class by itself” (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, & Wohlforth, 2009, p. 5). With its annual GDP accounting for nearly one-quarter of the global total as of 2006 and its military expenditure more than the rest of the world combined (Ikenberry, et al., 2009, p. 6), there should be no doubt whatsoever about the United States being the unipole nearly two decades since the end of the Cold war.

Obviously the materialist underpinning of polarity is in line with the neo-realist conceptualization of international relations predicated upon the anarchical structure of the international system. Hence scholars often caution that unipolarity should be differentiated from hegemony and empire, which both go beyond distribution of material capability to include political relationships and degree of influence (Ikenberry, et al., 2009, p. 4). Moreover, hegemony symbolizes hierarchy and hence contradicts outright the Waltzian notion of anarchy. IR scholars in recent years have begun to question Waltz’s rigid characterization: Wendt and Friedheim (1995, p. 690) criticize both the materialist and rationalist assumptions of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism for neglecting international inequality among sovereign states that can be “characterized by de facto authority relationships that construct the identities and interests of their members”. That is, the system being anarchical does not automatically rule out the possibility that external restrictions on some states by a powerful state constitute hierarchical authority relationships (Lake, 2003, p. 311).

Donnelly (2006) further rescues polarity from the Waltzian grip by separating polarity and authority from anarchy.³ In his reformulation, the post-Cold war world and ancient Athens and Rome are all featured by unipolarity; the major difference is that the former consists of horizontal/coordinate authority relationships most commonly seen in bilateral treaty obligations, whereas the Athenian and Roman Empires commanded superordinate authority over smaller states. Therefore, hegemony is one form of unipolarity. Flexing its muscles of relative material advantage is one way of exerting unipolar dominance by the hegemon; equally important but nonetheless often underestimated is the “substantive beliefs” that the hegemon uses to articulate rules and norms consistent with its notion of international order that secondary states willingly accept and internalize thereafter (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990, p. 283). Viewed this way, insofar as a unipole is able to

³ Donnelly (2006, p. 143) claims that hegemony and empire break away from international anarchy. I would disagree because throughout history no empire ever dominated the whole globe, but this difference is miniscule.

weave a cobweb of norms, and/or intellectually and ideologically affect and constitute the identities of at least *some* secondary states so as to assist sustaining its international primacy in the international system, the differences between unipolarity and hegemony are trivial. I will use unipole (unipolarity) and hegemon (hegemony) interchangeably in this article.

Strategic options for secondary states

According to neorealism, structural constraints are the invisible hand that dictates states' behavior. As Waltz (1979, p. 117) aptly puts it, "If there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it". Big powers are like fire and water in the sense that "We do not expect the strong to combine with the strong in order to increase the extent of their power over others, but rather to square off and look for allies who might help them" (1979, p. 126). As survival is the ultimate *raison d'etat*, a weaker state can only bandwagon with a big power before it can balance against a more menacing power. In a multipolar system, however, misperception of offense-defense advantage can lead to two pathologies of alliance behavior that impede efficient balancing to prevent war: an unconditional alliance with a reckless ally and the perception of offensive military advantages—such as the pre-1914—Europe gives rise to chain-ganging, whereas an alliance with a shirking ally and the perception of defensive military advantage can lead to buck-passing, as in the case of Europe before 1939 (Christensen & Snyder, 1990).

Various other reformulations of balance of power (BoP), from balance of threat (Walt, 1987), balance of interests (Schweller, 1998) to balance of risks (Taliaferro, 2004) as well as the probabilities of overbalancing, nonbalancing and underbalancing (Hui, 2005; Kaufman, Little, & Wohlforth, 2007; Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004; Schweller, 2004, 2006) have all exposed BoP as an overgeneralized, indeterminate parameter of state behavior in the uncertain world. The mounting evidence suggests that however we stretch the concept of balancing, we are better off "treating 'balancing' and the 'balance of power' as objects of inquiry in their own right, rather than as the province of realist theory" (Nexon, 2009).

In spite of his profound influence in the field, Waltz has surprisingly little to say about the inner working mechanisms of a unipolar system. Unlike in times of bipolarity and multipolarity, secondary states either have to solve the Herculean problems of collective action, trust and information to put up a meaningful fight, or they will have to face off the hegemon alone. Because realists of all stripes agree on the short lifespan of unipolarity,

most seem to get stuck in the two fundamental opposing choices: while bandwagoning would only perpetuate unipolarity since there is only one “band” to jump onto, conventional balancing (both external balancing and internal balancing) against the hegemon is by no means palatable as it defies the logic of rationality. Similarly, quiet appeasement is no optimal option either, as secondary states can only pin their hope on the indefinite future to turn the tide around to their favor.

Judging from how major powers reacted to the unpopular, unilateralist policies of the first term of the George W. Bush administration, Robert Pape (2005) uses “soft-balancing” to differentiate from traditional balancing in the military sense, and to conceptualize the many efforts to “delay, frustrate, and undermine U.S. policies” through international institutions, economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangements. Paul (2005) goes beyond Pape and pinpoints the United Nations as the main locale where second-tier major powers (France, China, Russia) and emerging powers (Germany and India) apply soft-balancing against the U.S.⁴ In a three-way debate, Brooks and Wohlforth (2005) uses alternative explanations, such as economic interest, regional security concerns, policy disputes and bargaining, and domestic political incentives, to test against the soft-balancing argument and conclude that the latter has no empirical basis; Lieber and Alexander (2005) largely concur with Brooks and Wohlforth and find no evidence of balancing, which they deem may due to the limited number of states that found U.S. threatening; Robert Art then defends the use of soft-balancing and takes issue with the case studies and the conception of what balancing entails according to Brooks Brooks and Wohlforth as well as Lieber and Alexander (Art, Brooks, Wohlforth, Lieber, & Alexander, 2005).

Economic prebalancing is another potential strategy for great powers, which derive from BoP but extends into international economic realm. Time is a critical factor in this respect as the balancer needs to take into account both “when the threat will arise and how long it will take to arm” (Brawley, 2004, p. 98). States intent on economic prebalancing will work to avoid engaging in “premature” arms race with the unipole by concentrating on closing the economic and technological gaps between them (Layne, 2006b, pp. 8-9).

⁴ Paul (2004a, p. 3) claims that soft balancing “involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft power is often based on a limited arms buildup, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions: these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening”.

Responding to the new circumstances in the age of globalization as well as terrorism, Paul (2004b, p. 3) invents the term “asymmetrical balancing” to refer to the exchange of indirect threats between nation-states on one hand and subnational actors such as terrorist groups and their state sponsors on the other hand. Unable to spell out the conditions in which state or non-state actors resort to this practice, asymmetrical balancing is descriptive at the most. Other derivatives of BoP include opaque balancing and “semi”-hard balancing (Layne, 2006a, pp. 144-147). Because scholars are yet to specify the differences among various types of balancing and explain the variegated state motivations behind each option, it seems that anything and everything a state does, including the very basic and ordinary functions of a state such as facilitating economic growth and maintaining a minimal armed force for self-defense, can be characterized as a certain form of balancing.

A final strategic option, leash-slipping is reserved for either neutral states or allies of the hegemon. According to Layne (2006b, pp. 29-30), these states do not perceive “a nonexistential (or soft) threat” to their sovereignty and national interest. Rather than hard balancing the hegemon, by striving to act independent of the hegemon, these states can “slip free of the hegemon’s leash-like grip and gain the leverage needed to compel the United States to respect their foreign policy interests”. Layne considers leash-slipping by these states as “a form of insurance against the hegemon” that could later become overbearing and predatory at their expense.

Table I: Strategic options for non-hegemons in different systemic structures

Multipolar	Bipolar	Unipolar
External balancing	External balancing	Soft balancing
Internal balancing	Internal balancing	Economic prebalancing
Economic prebalancing	Soft balancing	Leash-slipping
Soft balancing	Economic prebalancing	Asymmetrical balancing
Bandwagoning	Leash-slipping?	Appeasement
Asymmetrical balancing	Asymmetrical balancing	
Buck-passing	Bandwagoning	
Chain-ganging	Appeasement	
Appeasement		

Based on the many variations of realist theories, Table 1 above lists all the major strategic choices for non-hegemonic states vis-à-vis the major power(s) they interact with. We can see that as the number of poles decreases from more than two to only one (unipolarity), these non-hegemon states have their strategic elbow room drastically squeezed. One notable phenomenon is that hard balancing and bandwagoning both became much less

attractive to these states either because of their lack of capability or the absence of such necessity. Furthermore, as a result of their heavy binary emphasis on balancing and bandwagoning, scholars are slow to realize the changing imperatives of systemic structure. In fact, as bandwagoning disappears from their cognitive map owing to their underlying assumption about the ephemerality of unipolarity, realists become hung up on categorizing balance of power in a manner close to hair-splitting.⁵

Such structural shift can be best presented in a layer-like format. In a multipolar system, the divergence is between great powers and weaker states that have to ally with at least a great power to ensure their survival. In a unipolar world, there are at least three categories of states: a hegemon that pulls far ahead of all other states in all major categories of power, great powers that can potentially challenge the hegemon, and weaker states.⁶ From this perspective, contrary to realist preconception, it is at least feasible for weaker states to ally with the hegemon.

The “upkeep” of unipolarity

As briefly mentioned above, most realists beginning with Waltz see unipolarity as an inevitable and short-lived transition period to another era of multipolar balancing. International relations are like a teeterboard: the more powerful a state gets, the stronger become the incentives for other states to pit against it. That is, “hegemony leads to balance through all of the centuries we can contemplate” (Kenneth N. Waltz, 1993, p. 77). Understandably, this conviction was intellectually informed and developed based on the multipolar Europe in the 19th century and the bipolar nature of the Cold war. Over the long run, however, neorealists argue, the emergence of other great powers is unavoidable as a result of the interaction of differential growth rate and anarchy, and therefore, so is their balancing against the hegemon (Layne, 1993).

But how does unipolarity come into being in the first place? While Waltz (1979) casts doubt on the feasibility and desirability of unipolarity, Mearsheimer (2001) is much more convinced of states’ innate desire to dominate, but claims that the United States is a “regional hegemon” in the Western Hemisphere and an “offshore balancer” in Europe and East Asia. Layne (2006a), however, believes that US hegemony is a global one. And in tracing the formation of U.S. grand strategy since around World War II, he adopts a

⁵ For instance, Layne (2006b, p. 9) insists that “unipolarity has not altered the fundamental dynamics of international politics”.

⁶ A bipolar system can be seen as either a two-layered or three-layered structure depending on how we conceptualize the relationship between the superpowers and great powers.

neoclassical realist approach and sees the interaction of three variables—the system-level power distribution, U.S. economic expansion, and ideology—at play. While beneficial material condition consists of the necessary condition for eligible states to become great powers, so much so that failing to attain great power status will have themselves “punished”, we remain mystified as to how unipolarity is sustained,⁷ nor do we know exactly how fast it will be displaced by bipolarity or multipolarity.

Another major contention of neorealism is that a balance of power between major states helps sustain international peace and stability, with Waltz and many of his followers arguing that bipolar system is the most stable of all systems. Contrary to this view, power transition theory asserts that as the leading state is caught up by a rising power, the occurrence of a positional reversal between the two will potentially result in a system-wide conflict that other countries can be dragged into. According to Organski and Kugler (1980, p. 19), “An even distribution of political, economic, and military capabilities between contending groups of states is likely to increase the probability of war; peace is preserved best when there is an imbalance of national capabilities between disadvantaged and advantaged nations; the aggressor will come from a small group of dissatisfied strong countries; and it is the weaker, rather than the stronger; power that is most likely to be the aggressor.”

For power transition theory, the degree of satisfaction of the two competing states with the international status quo is as critical as the power distribution itself. The assumption is that the dominant state wants to cling to its privileged position, which the rising state covets but nonetheless is depressed by as it is yet to obtain it (Gilpin, 1981). Both sides anticipate the other side to jostle for the top position, and “when a dissatisfied great-power challenger achieves parity with the dominant power, the probability of international war rises dramatically” (Lemke, 2004, p. 57). Power imbalance, especially an imbalance favorable to the dominant power, is consequently conducive to maintaining peace. By extension, the reason that the Cold war never became “hot” is exactly because the Soviet Union never achieved genuine power parity with the United States (Lemke, 1997). With the USSR long gone and China’s power and prominence rising, scholars studying power transition have shown intense interest in China, and how China will reshape international relations (e.g. Legro, 2007; Lemke & Tammen, 2003; Ross & Zhu, 2008; Tammen & Kugler, 2006).

⁷ Layne (2006a), for that matter, advises that off-shore balance is a better grand strategy for the United States than a grand strategy of extraregional hegemony.

Because power transition can easily be a game-changing factor, it is not a monopoly of power transition theory alone. For some neoclassical realists, the character of the domestic regime also matters. For instance, Randall Schweller (1992) argues that a declining democratic power would accommodate a democratic challenger but counterbalance a nondemocratic one. For all the endeavors by power transition scholars to relate their theories to the power fluctuation of the contemporary world, the methodological rigor and the relevance of their arguments to the unipolar environment are highly questionable: they neglect to specify the polarity of the international system the theories operate in. As demonstrated above, a unipolar system is qualitatively different from a multipolar one, in which the constraining effect of multipolarity has a ponderous impact on the freedom of choices strong powers have when confronted by a rising power. Overall, according to these scholars, the source of the paradigmatic change is as psychological as material but the former mostly derive from the latter. Their concept of status quo and ideas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the system arrangement are fraught with ambiguity (Chan, 2004; 2007, chapter 6), nor does the “mental status” of the actors prior to the material power change seem to matter. Fear is the only emotion, whereas other elements, such as cultural affinity, sense of honor and justice, remain out of the purview.

In examining the sustainability of contemporary American power, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, p. 8) find it remarkable that other competing theories share the pessimism uttered by realism and power transition theory—that systemic constraints on US security policy will increase along with its share of power in the international system, albeit via some causal pathways “less direct and linear” than the notion that “power [begets] countervailing power”. To begin with, liberalism points to global economic independence that can limit the security options of states bound by the shared economic interests. Even powerful states are no exception to the rule (Keohane & Nye, 1989; Oneal & Russett, 1997). In more concrete terms, the United States is a “system maker” as much as a “privilege taker” in that it has ‘created, maintained, defended, and expanded a liberal economic order’ that allowed other states to tap into its enormous domestic market without forcing the United States to strike a balance amongst “guns, butter and growth”. These recurring deals, however mutually beneficial, cannot endure forever. As a matter of fact, in the wake of the end of the cold war, the United States can no longer dictate the terms of system readjustment in spite of its power preponderance because it no longer possesses the same type of security leverage it once did (Mastanduno, 2009).

Not unlike economic liberals, leading institutionalists treat the conclusion of a major war as the genesis of the current international system. They find mutual eagerness toward international institutional building in connection with power imbalance: the greater the disparities, the greater the incentives for the leading state to “lock in” the windfall of power assets and for the weaker and secondary states to reduce the risks of domination and abandonment—both by establishing durable institutional arrangements, which can increasingly take on constitutional characteristics (Ikenberry, 2001). Institutionalists is very fond of calling American hegemony an “empire by invitation”, in which secondary states requested rather than resisted American leadership (Ikenberry, 1989; Lundstad, 1991). In addition, “a distinctively liberal cast—one more consensual, cooperative, and integrative than coercive” breeds far more reciprocity and legitimacy than a traditional balance-of-power system (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). Although multilateralism is the norm, scholars also note that as the United States became more powerful with the fall of the Soviet Union, its hands are strengthened to “exempt itself from inconvenient institutional rules of the game without being punished in the short term (Martin, 2003). As a result, “the more that a powerful state is capable of dominating or abandoning weaker states ,the more the weaker states will care about constraints on the leading state’s policy autonomy” (Ikenberry, 2003). Nonetheless, a state has to be in the US-dominated Western order to be able to in this push-and-pull dynamics with the United States. The fact that many emerging powers remain marginal to it shows that in spite of their belief that these potential challengers can put an end to the United States’ unipolarity (Ikenberry, 2008), institutionalists have very little to contribute to our understanding of this process itself.

Compared to institutionalists who are keen on the instrumental aspect of international institutions, constructivists put much more emphasis on its normative aspect. Rejecting the neoconservative conception of power that is propagandized “ as something that flows unproblematically from unmatched material sources and ideological and cultural magnetism and as something that is ‘moral’ when exercised in the pursuit of values one claims to be universal”, Christian Reus-Smit (2004, pp. 40-41) argues instead that “all political power is deeply embedded in webs of social exchange and mutual constitution; that stable political power...ultimately rests on legitimacy; and that institutions play a crucial role in sustaining such power”. By defining legitimacy as “an actor’s normative belief that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed” (Hurd, 2007, p. 7), constructivists insist those international organizations, the United Nations in particular, and their embedded rules and norms, can mediate the tough and tumble of inter-state relations as to shear the rough edges of hegemonic rule. But from the perspective of the hegemon,

contradictions are inherent nevertheless between the unilateralist propensity to pursue its self-interest and the need to perform as a considerate system-leader, hence the “paradox of hegemony” (Cronin, 2001).

Too often scholars of legitimacy, institutionalists or constructivists, found it irresistible to chastise the Bush administration’s unpopular unilateralism in connection with the Iraq invasion and war on terror. The corollary is that failure for Washington to hew to international norms of appropriate behavior will damage the United States’ soft power, corrode its moral leadership in the world and compromise its hegemony—as if legitimacy is something objective out there. Ironically, it is not that hard to image that the big (and old) powers usually installed the foundation of those rules and norms that legitimize their own actions to their own liking at the time in the first place. As Ian Clark (2005, p. 4) succinctly puts it, “Legitimacy constrains power, but also enables it; power suffuses legitimacy, but does not empty it of normative content”. As history goes, domestic power struggle in light of elite discourse legitimated popular sovereignty (Bukovansky, 2002); a balance of power among members of the international society has been conducive to both legitimacy and legitimation (Clark, 2005, 2007). This lacuna between power and legitimacy remains obvious with constructivists: exactly how does legitimacy work for unipolarity when the international society is stripped to its naked core of power politics?

Table II: Unipolar longevity according to IR theories

Schools of thoughts	Unipolar lifespan	Causes for concern
Neorealism	Short	Uneven economic growth and balance of power
Power transition theory	Short	Uneven economic growth and balance of power
Liberalism	Short	Global economic independence
Neoliberal institutionalism	Unclear	Legitimacy
Constructivism	Unclear	Legitimacy

So what have we learned about unipolarity? In general, very few people are betting that US hegemony will last long. Based on the logic of balancing and the trend in the reshaping of global economic makeup since the 1980s, especially projections that China will surpass the United States in overall economic output in about 2 decades, most realists are resigned to the idea that the US primary is definitely winding down. The much more sanguine view by Wohlforth and Brooks (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008; Wohlforth, 1999) too is in fact composed of realism’s structuralist and materialist core,

with neorealism's predictive content modified of course (Harrison, 2009, p. 77). Even as they are plagued by the absence of many necessary micro-foundations to support the falsification of their propositions (James, 2009), variants of realism are at odds with one another in their treatment of unipolarity that seriously undermines the paradigm's theoretical and policy relevance (Harrison, 2009).

Power transition theorists share realists' deterministic belief that economic development shapes power balance, and strive to be more accurate by adding certain psychological element into their formula. Institutionalists, liberals and constructivists, by contrast, are yet to engage the realists and speak about unipolarity and hegemony in a more forceful and straightforward manner. When they do relate to unipolarity, they are keener on the institutional and normative constraints on the hegemon that drastically restrict US' freedom of action in international affairs than on material power. Given their focus on identity formation, it is surprising that constructivists have not yet studied the way material and intellectual preponderance of the hegemon configure the identity of secondary states and their relationships with the hegemon.

Turning the conventional wisdom on its head, the positivist intellectual enterprise on unipolarity is seriously impeded by not just conceptual confusion but also the lack of methodological rigor. Conceptually, most researchers, many realists included, are slow to realize that the character of unipolarity is fundamentally different phenomenon from bipolarity and multipolarity and that the study of unipolarity presupposes a new set of analytical assumptions most of the time, if not always. Methodologically and theoretically, the obsession with contemporary US hegemony gives the impression that unipolarity is historically unprecedented, such that scholars use the evidence based on which their hypotheses are developed to test their theoretical propositions, a huge taboo in positivist research (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). The upshot is often that their policy projections leap far ahead of their theoretical and empirical analyses: the same evidence can be interpreted in rather divergent ways, or that the falsification of their theory still awaits what China or the United States will do in the future.⁸

Unipolarity in pre-modern East Asia

⁸ For instance, Brooks and Wohlforth (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008; Wohlforth, 1999) claim that unipolarity is stable and predict that the US retains a 20-year window of opportunity to recast the international system as it wishes. Owen (Winter 2001/02) argues that their logic is tautological as they basically claim that the lopsided concentration of power in the United States denies any chance of counterbalancing against it, see also (Layne, 2009a).

The United States is by no means the first, nor the only, unipole in human experience. Throughout world history, hegemonic domination was exercised incessantly by empires, whose boundaries could well be as far as they could reach by military conquest. In an empire, “the dominant metropole exerts political control over the internal and external policy—the effective sovereignty—of the ...the subordinate periphery” (Doyle, 1986, p. 12). Imperial hegemony is performed by the power core of the empire that “rules over, rather than simply influences (or even controls) subordinated polities” (Donnelly, 2006, p. 140). Rather than letting “the existence of many judicially equal nation-states” (Jervis, 2009, pp. 190-191) be the conceptual wedge between unipolarity and hegemony, as is conventionally perceived, Donnelly subsumes hegemony and empire under unipolarity along with military preponderance. As indicated in the beginning of the article, Donnelly sees the two forms of unipolarity differentiated by their types of authority relationships, i.e. coordinate and superordinate.

Authority relationships are about the nature of control or lack thereof, be it hierarchical or horizontal. In the text below, as a first cut at analyzing the character of unipolar domination, I argue that the pre-modern international system in East Asia through much of the past 2000 years is unipolar, especially when a unifying empire controlled much the Chinese heartland that include both the Yellow River and Yangtze River regions, was economically vibrant, politically dynamic, and had a formidable military force. Not that China was always unified, with internal strife and invasions by the northern and western nomadic peoples resulting in dynastic replacement almost every 200 years.⁹ At times such as the Song dynasty when the Han-populated empire was not strong enough to fend off successive invasions by different tribes across its northern frontiers, the system was better characterized by hard balancing than by hierarchy. Of the last three Chinese empires (Yuan, Ming, and Qing), only the Ming was ruled by the Han people, the dominant but diverse ethnic group. Powerful as it was that the system may well qualify as unipolar, the Ming did not always enjoy absolute superiority over the Mongols on the other side of the Great Wall who previously ruled China,¹⁰ and was annihilated and superseded by the Qing whose rulers, the Manchus, came from Manchuria (northeast China). Regardless of their non-Han origin, rulers of those empires established by the ethnic minorities, too, embraced the traditional Middle Kingdom mindset and asserted their legitimacy and authority in relation to surrounding ethnic groups and neighboring states including Korea, Vietnam and Japan (Y. Li, 2006).

⁹ And so goes the proverb: long peace breeds disruption, which leads eventually back to unification.

¹⁰ At one point a foolhardy Ming emperor was even captured by the Mongols and held for ransom. Part of Ming’s precarious relationships with the Mongols and Manchus may be that the capital, after it was moved from Nanjing to Beijing, is too close to the frontier.

A second dimension of Asian history is that when the system was indeed unipolar, it was in many ways closer to the contemporary US hegemony than to the many empires in the West, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. This critical difference lies in the fact that most imperial dynasties in China, indisputably the hegemon in terms of economic and military might, technological advantages as well as geographical size, acknowledged the “statehood” of Korea, Vietnam, Japan and the *Ryukyus* such that even as they often desired to conquer these states by force, especially Korea and Vietnam, rarely did they, after their military successes, try to absorb them into Chinese homeland that they directly administered. This point cannot be better put in words by historian and geographer Kären Wigen, according to whom “China, Korea, and Japan are among the most venerable nations in the world: although their boundaries have shifted over time, and the style of their imagining has been continually debated, the notion of nationhood has resonated long and deeply with the majority of each country’s inhabitants. This produces a sense of region quite different from what might be encountered elsewhere in Eurasia or in Africa, where national space is often complicated to greater degree by cross-cutting affiliation from a colonial or pre-colonial past” (Wigen, 1999, p. 1187).

Unlike the four states in the east and south that were familiar political entities with usually stable institutional structures, it is with the nomadic tribes of the Turkic peoples, the Mongols and the Manchus in the north and the Tibetan peoples in the west that the traditionally Han-inhabited Middle Kingdom had the most uneasy relationships with and against some of whom or whose ancestors the Great Wall was built and rebuilt for more than two thousands of years. In his pioneering work on the sources of Chinese grand strategy, Iain Johnston (1995) identifies two deeply enduring strategic worldviews that consist of some central paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of the war, the inevitability of war, and the enemy. Based on his investigation of the war behavior and textual narratives of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) that had continued tense engagements first with the Mongols then with the rising Manchus, Johnston (1995, p. x) claims that the Confucian-Mencian-inspired, symbolic or idealized set of assumptions and ranked preferences were preferred over in practice by an operational set that he calls “a *parabellum* or hard *realpolitik* strategic culture that, in essence, argues that the best way of dealing with security threats is to eliminate them through the use of force”.

Acknowledging Johnston’s important contribution, Kang (2009) goes on to address what he thinks is the other side of the coin: the relative rarity of hostilities between China on the one hand and Korea, Japan and Vietnam on the other. **Aggregating** the four states into

a category of “Sinic states”, Kang argues that the shared Confucian worldview among them generated a common culture that separated the Sinicized states from the “uncivilized” nomadic world, with which China’s relations were regulated by a different set of rules and characterized by war and instability. The cultural affinity among the four Sinic states, by contrast, facilitated in the Confucian world order a shared understanding of legitimacy, which ensured a ritualistic form of hierarchy that materialized in the tribute system with the secondary states’ autonomy well preserved against excessive domination and intervention from the imperial court in China.

While I recognize Kang’s major insights I argue that in emphasizing the stability of the tribute system and the rare occurrence of war among the four states (while it should be five with the *Ryukyus* being the fifth), he plays down the obstacles the time-bound constraints of war-fighting technologies and geographical isolation posed to imperial expansion on the sea, especially with respect to Japan. By limiting his purview to Ming and Qing dynasties up to the Opium War (1839-1841) – and recall that the history is vast – his analysis excludes not only the Mongol Yuan’s disastrous invasion via the Korean peninsula of the Japanese islands—a nation-defining event in Japanese history—but also the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and 1895 that struck a fatal blow to the pre-modern China-dominated Asian order. Also untold is the fate of another Sinicized state, the *Ryukyu* Kingdom in the Pacific Ocean, which continuously paid tribute to the Chinese court, and less frequently, to the Satsuma-han of Japan, but was formally annexed by the Meiji Japan in 1879 and became today’s Okinawa. Overall, the agenda that naturally follows from Kang’s analysis is to explain the genesis and dissolution of the pre-modern Asian system. Even with his major exposition in place, we still have yet to fully comprehend the Japanese resistance and challenge to Chinese hegemony. Areas that deserve more attention in particular are the Hideyoshi invasion of Korea in the late 16th century as a historical anomaly as well as in the role of Japan along various dimensions.¹¹

In summary, three major patterns of interactions in the China-centered unipolar world promise to offer illuminating insights on how unipolarity works in pre-modern East Asia: 1) incessant state of war between the Chinese empires (with the possible exception of Mongol Yuan) and their tribal/nomadic neighbors in the north and west; 2) continued submission to successive Chinese dynasties by Korea, Vietnam and the *Ryukyus* through the traditional tribute system; 3) Japanese challenges to the Chinese hegemony, as exemplified by the Hideyoshi invasion of Korea in the late 16th century, its annexation of

¹¹ Kang (2009, p. 39) says that after the Hideyoshi invasion “although Japan remained formally outside the tribute system, it did not challenge the system”. Japan did not— until 1894.

the *Ryukyus* in 1879 and its defeat of the Qing empire in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) that inflicted a fatal blow on the ancient Asian order.¹²

Knowing some of the fundamental historical facts about China-centered international system—so far I know the only unipolar system that parallels contemporary U.S. hegemony—should help us reflect on the many theoretical conjectures about unipolarity and IR theories in general as well. First and foremost, while the Korean and Vietnamese valiant resistance to imperial expeditions of myriad Chinese empires lends support to the defensive realist claim that states at minimum seek to ensure its own existential survival, material power is not always a good predictor or parameter of state behavior in international relations as many realists have asserted. For instance, his motives diverse and still debated by historians, Hideyoshi nevertheless initiated the war against Korea with the ostensible goal of attacking and conquering China, knowing that the Ming would come to the aid of its vassal state. Although the protracted war contributed to weakening the Ming militarily and economically, *post hoc* analyses would easily come to the conclusion that ultimate advantage in the war was with the continental alliance. Asymmetric conflict launched by a weaker power is not uncommon (Paul, 1994), strategic calculations based on limited aims do not fit the picture here, however, neither is Snyder's (1991) domestic model for explaining imperial overexpansion applicable. Certainly Hideyoshi's unusual personality was critical, but insofar as Japanese expansionists in the Meiji era venerated him and strived to continue his "unfinished business" by throwing themselves into a second East Asian Great War (Swope, 2009, pp. 5-7), states' behavioral intensions, if not entirely exogenous to material capabilities, are also informed and fermented by historical memories.

Secondly, that Vietnam and Korea (and *Ryukyus* as well to a lesser extent) were able to eke out an independent existence alongside a hegemonic entity through two tortuous millennia was a miracle itself and a straight-on negation of the absolutist characterization of great powers as intent on seeking global domination, insatiable, and perpetually revisionist, a claim most famously articulated by Mearsheimer (2001). This is by no means saying that the hegemon left them alone. In fact, both Vietnam and Korea retained deep awareness in the historical consciousness of Chinese rulers and numerous Chinese attempts were made to bring them to their knees. They soon found that crushing the two far-flung, rebellious enemies was easier said than done and absorbing them into their

¹² Note that the Qing Empire had already been drastically weakened in a series of wars with Western colonial powers that include the First Opium War (with Britain, 1839-1842), the Second Opium War (with Britain and France, 1856-1860), and the Sino-French War (1884-1885) over the control of Vietnam.

formal empires was even more daunting. By the time Zhu Yuanzhang (Emperor Hongwu) reigned as the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty, he listed in a guideline to be followed by his heirs 15 states “not to be invaded”, many of which were tribute states included Korea, Vietnam, the *Ryukyus*.¹³ When the Ming court announced in the wake of its defeat of the Yuan Mongols that its border be where Yuan-Korea border was in the Korean peninsula, it led to a coup that installed the Choson dynasty in Korea, which nonetheless asked the border be moved up north along the Yalu River into traditional Chinese territory. Emperors Hongwu and Yongle chided the Koreans for being greedy and treacherous, but nonetheless generously granted their demands as good-will gestures (D. Wang, 1997).¹⁴ When the Manchu Qing rose in northeast China (Manchuria) and forced the pro-Ming Koreans into subjugation, they held Korean princes as a collateral for their loyalty (H. Li, 2007b); as the Manchus quickly secured the whole Chinese homeland,¹⁵ Korea and Vietnam once again topped the string of most favored tribute states, as they did under the Ming.

Thirdly, pre-modern East Asian international relations attest that balance of power is by no means universally practiced. An instinctive defense mechanism, BoP was masterfully practiced in China during the Warring States period (475 BC-221 BC) and the Three Kingdom era (220 AD-280AD); the two Song dynasties (960 AD-1279 AD) too played off against the three minority dynasties (in time sequence of their emergence: Khitan Liao, the Jurchen Jin and the Mongol Yuan) through intermissions of war endeavors, submissiveness and alliance. Rarely, if ever, did the Koreans or the Vietnamese join hands with a military powerhouse inside or outside China *proper* in order to gain territory and population, even when China was at its weakest at the time of dynastic replacement.¹⁶ The Vietnamese, as long as their independence was acknowledged by the Chinese empires, turned their attention toward southward expansion in Southeast Asia. In contrast, the Korean elites were more interested in consolidating their unification of the

¹³ He made it clear that the main enemy that they should be vigilant about is the Mongols in the north. His will was not strictly followed, however, when the Ming became entangled in a domestic chaos in Vietnam for 20 years (1407-1427) after Emperor Yongle sent troops to help restore the throne of a deposed king.

¹⁴ Some historians claim that the initial border dispute was a historical misunderstanding as the Ming intended to establish a military garrison in Tieling of Tiaodong in Manchuria rather than the Tieling in the Korean peninsula (H. Li, 2007a).

¹⁵ Having squashed the Mongols in the north, the Tibetans in the southwest, and the Uyghur people in the west (Perdue, 2005), the Qing at its zenith was much more powerful than the Ming.

¹⁶ I submit to the contention that due to geographical distance and technological limitations at the time it would be almost inconceivable for Japan or Korea to form a defense alliance against China, possibilities existed for the Koreans to connive with the Mongols and the Jurchens (later changed their name to Manchu) against the Ming, and the Vietnamese with the unruly minorities in Southern and Southeast China against the Chinese dynasties.

peninsula, first under Silla,¹⁷ later under Goryeo (918 AD-1392 AD). Dissatisfied with Emperor Hongwu's demarcation of the Korea-Ming border, Goryeo sought to attack the Ming by allying with the Mongol Yuan that had fled Beijing to the north but the plan never came to fruition as general Yi Seong-gye swung back, overthrew the Goryeo ruler and requested Ming's investiture to proclaim himself king of Choson Korea.¹⁸ In the run-up to his Korean invasion, Hideyoshi sent emissaries to neighboring states as far as the Philippines and Thailand, seeking tribute and war contributions; afraid of antagonizing him, the *Ryukyus* sent a delegation to Japan but tried to weasel out of direct military support and immediately alerted the Ming of his aggressive intentions (Swope, 2009, p. 62).

Finally, these interesting observations push us to think again about the intersectionality of power and culture. If Chinese empires indeed practiced *realpolitik* by adopting a more offensive strategic approach commensurate with their increasing physical power and expanding war aims in the absence of military or systemic constraints, all of which is considered “normal” and expected by realists, then ample evidence lies in long stretches of embattlement between the Middle Kingdom empires and their non-Han neighbors (Johnston, 1995; Y.-k. Wang, 2010).¹⁹ On the other hand, the bittersweet experiences of the Koreans and Vietnamese affirmatively indicate that material power is inadequate to explicate why their pattern of interactions are qualitatively different from a simple depiction of “jungle” politics, such that Kang argues shared cultural understanding is critical. Both sides tend to downplay Japanese behavior and sentiments toward international affairs on the continent, i.e., their massive learning of Chinese culture did not assuage their yearning for domination and expansion into the Asian continent. Consequently, a more historically accurate and theoretically stimulating question should be: why did the Koreans and the Vietnamese faithfully stay in—and contribute to—the tribute system, whereas the Japanese and the myriad ethnic entities tend to fight the Middle Kingdom to the teeth? By extension, in a unipolar world, why would some states rather comfortably succumb to the hegemon, while others dare to challenge the existing order even when they are considerably weaker than the hegemon?

¹⁷ With the support of Tang dynasty in late 7th century, Silla ended the division in the peninsula by subjugating Baekje and Goguryeo.

¹⁸ Choson (朝鮮) literally means “the bright Orient” and was one of the two choices Yi presented to Emperor Hongwu to decide on for his new kingdom's name. It is still used in Chinese and Japanese that refers to North Korea and the Korean peninsula. The English word “Korea” came from Goryeo.

¹⁹ Both authors choose to explicate the relations between Han Chinese empires and their enemies. Johnston(1995) focuses exclusively on Ming's relations with the Mongols, which Wang (2010) covers in addition to Song's interactions with the Khitan Liao.

US Primacy between power and culture

Anarchy aside, hierarchical order among states is prevalent in every international system. International hierarchy is about authority relationships, whether in a unipolar, bipolar or multipolar system. What distinguishes a unipolar system from other types of systems is that the unipole is able to dominate most other states by tapping into its massive stock of material power. But physical dominance is not sufficient to sustain subordination, as the Japanese challenges to ancient China and the U.S. during the World War II conveniently testify. After all, an inter-state hierarchical relationship is an unequal one, as outlandishly anachronistic as it might sound in the age of equal sovereignty for nation-states. As in inter-personal relationships, inter-state inequality (hierarchy) requires legitimation in a political and cultural context to make it normatively acceptable so that the secondary state will not resort to revisionist means to change this relationship.

On the other hand, material power may well be indispensable to enforce and inculcate the cultural underpinning of domination among the secondary states. In dyadic terms, for this a hierarchical connection to last, it has to be harmonized by a positive integration of power and culture. Ancient Korea and Vietnam's subservience to China was a revealing testimony in this respect: Confucianism itself was an ideology that was used to justify a hierarchical ordering between the ruler and the subject. It was appropriated by the Koreans and Vietnamese for domestic purpose through their countless interactions with the Chinese, such that when they were militarily crushed by the latter, a Confucian synergy was established linking the domestic political arrangement in Korea and Vietnam with a new ruler-subject relationship putting the Chinese emperors above the Korean and Vietnamese kings. Conceptually, how can the inter-state state hierarchy be harmonized? The opposition and competition between positivist research focusing on power and constructivism more interested in ideas and identity results in little knowledge in this regard. The interplay between material power and culture deserves greater attention from IR scholars, and the "analytical eclecticism" approach that combines material forces with ideas may be the direction to go (Katzenstein & Okawara, 2001; Sørensen, 2008; Suh, Katzenstein, & Carlson, 2004).

The United States will remain the most economically and militarily powerful country in the world at least for the next two or three decades. It may lose, however, the tremendous asymmetric advantage it has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War because power distribution leans favorably toward countries such as China, India and Brazil that have a higher rate of economic growth. While the future international system may no longer be

unipolar in strict terms of material power, whether and how much the US can retain the benefits it accumulated as the unipole depends on whether Washington can carry over the myriad authority relationships. A cohesive bond between the big power and a secondary state can last long after the erstwhile hegemon has lost its luster, but it can also be cut off by a transformative war as in the case of Japan's taking control of Korea and France snapping Vietnam from the traditional Chinese orbit. In the absence of war, two questions relate to America's ability to extend its international primacy: first, to what extent these dyadic hierarchical relationships are the result of US power and/or US-led ideology that legitimates these relationships; secondly, to what extent a reduced power gap between the US and its client states affect these relationships, especially if the power status of a client state rises substantially.

Owen (Winter 2001/02, p. 120) argues that "the degree to which a state counterbalances US power is function of how political liberal that state is, measured by the degree to which its internal institutions and practices are liberal and the degree to which liberals influence foreign policy". He may well be right about secondary states' reaction to the hegemon, but whether these states are willing to submit to the leadership of a declining hegemon is a different question. Russia and China have never acknowledged or accepted a willingness to dance to the tune of Washington. They may acquiesce to US dominance in many international affairs, and protest vehemently against US's treading on their own core national interests (Christensen, 2001). Considering the vigorous domestic opposition in India to a nuclear deal with the United States, which many thought denigrate India's equal status in spite of its geopolitical benefits, it would be hard to image a much more powerful India to join the US's sphere of influence.

Future US primacy thus depends heavily on whether Washington can rally much of the Western hemisphere and its traditional allies elsewhere. It seems questionable for Brazil to let the United States treat Latin America (especially South America) as its old-time backyard. The recent strains in the US-Japan relations over the military base in Okinawa are indicative that the bilateral military alliance forged following the end of World War II is yet to be harmonized because the Japanese populace is discontent with an institutionalized junior position in the partnership. The apprehension that Japan may slip away and get closer to China may be an exaggeration, but whether a more equal partnership can persuade Japan to stick to the traditional alliance remains unclear. The best hope for continued U.S. primacy resides in much of Latin America and Western Europe, whose military and economic might cannot match that of the United States and

where the United States is still regarded as a bastion of liberalism and Western civilization.

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