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**FROM (ALLEGED) UNIPOLARITY TO THE DECLINE
OF MULTILATERALISM?**

A POWER-THEORETICAL CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This working paper deals with the claim that the decline of multilateralism is but a logical outcome of the present distribution of international power. In a first part, it analyses a double causal claim, namely that the distribution of international power (unipolarity) determines the nature of US foreign policy (primacy-plus-unilateralism) which is antithetical to multilateralism as an institution. On the basis of recent conceptual analyses of power, which challenges the assumptions necessary to make such aggregate power analysis, I argue that the general thesis of a causal relationship between unipolarity and a decline of multilateralism does not hold. A second part argues applies a constructivist twist to the conceptual analysis of power in order to assess whether a particular conception of power, if shared, has an actual effect on world order. Precisely because the distribution of power resources does not determinate outcomes, but are often understood to do so, the capacity to shape the definitions of power is not mere semantics, but has political effect. This move reverses the relationship between the two central concepts. Rather than seeing unprecedented preponderance as the cause of unilateralism, it shows how a successful (neoconservative) policy of US unilateralism could foster a certain understanding of power which, if it becomes shared by the international society, will have real power effects akin to the alleged effects of unipolarity.

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From (alleged) unipolarity to the decline of multilateralism? A power-theoretical critique

Stefano Guzzini

This chapter deals with the claim that the decline of the institution of multilateralism¹ is but a logical outcome of the present distribution of international power.² This claim, more easily found in non-academic contexts, is inspired by power materialist approaches which assume both a significant impact of international structural change on state behaviour, and that institutions are ultimately just a reflection of the distribution of state power.³ In case of a large power preponderance, the leading state can be logically expected to pursue a policy of primacy which maximises its foreign policy autonomy.⁴ It will guard itself from international institutions that acquire an autonomous dynamic antithetical to its power position. In such a circumstance, it would unilaterally bypass or retreat from them in order to reassert its primacy.⁵ Since multilateralism is an institution based on *generalized* principles and diffuse

¹ In the following, multilateralism is understood as a primary or fundamental institution of international society, as distinguished both from secondary institutions like organisations and regimes, as well as from simple acts of multinational coordination. See Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 and Christian Reus-Smit, "The constitutional structure of international society and the nature of fundamental institutions", *International Organization* 51(4), 1997, pp. 555-89. Such an understanding is compatible with Ruggie's more qualitative definition of multilateralism, as an institution which coordinates relations among states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct. See John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: the Anatomy of an Institution", *International Organization* 46(3), 1992, pp. 561-98.

² See Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment", *Foreign Affairs* 70(1), 1991, pp. 23-33.

³ For one classical statement, see Stephen Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables", *International Organization* 36(2), 1982, pp. 185-205.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters", *International Security* 17(4), pp. 68-83 (70).

⁵ For this argument, see Stephen Krasner, "Regimes and the Limits of Realism: Regimes as Autonomous Variables", *International Organization* 36(2), 1982, pp. 497-510 and his *Structural Conflict: The Third World against Global Liberalism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, written in the context of the Reagan administration's withdrawal from UNESCO.

reciprocity - hence diluting exceptionalist prerogatives simply based on power - it almost by definition clashes with a strategy of primacy. For, although (defensive) realists can envisage the increased use of multilateralism in order to reassure other states⁶, the institution of multilateralism requires the leading power to curtail its autonomy and capabilities. It will have to forego part of its power, if not its preponderance, in the name of its own security and world order.⁷ This being unlikely, or so the argument goes for power-oriented realists, common principles will yield to power when primacy faces multilateralism.

In the following chapter, I will analyse what amounts to a double causal claim, namely that the distribution of international power (unipolarity) determines the nature of US foreign policy (primacy-plus-unilateralism) and that such policy is antithetical to international multilateralism. My analysis will not question the existence of a unilateralist turn in US foreign policy (accelerating recently, but dating back earlier) which challenges several areas of the existing multilateral order.⁸ But on the basis of recent conceptual analyses of power, I argue that the general thesis of a causal relationship between unipolarity and a decline of multilateralism does not hold. Such systemic explanations misconceive the role power can play in social science explanations. I will make this point in three steps.

First, I illustrate the indeterminacy of systemic power analysis for assessing the general causal claim by comparing the present debate with the hegemonic decline debate of the 1980s. This comparison shows that systemic power analyses have explained the same outcome by opposite power dynamics, once a decline and once a rise in US power. It also shows that US unilateralism is not necessarily antithetical to all components of multilateralism. Hence, the causal chain does not work in its two main links.

Second, I show that this contradiction is not fortuitous but intrinsic to the properties of the concept of power in International Relations. For the very assessment of this unipolarity is

⁶ Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War", *International Security* 21(4), pp. 49-88 (61).

⁷ Stanley Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order: American Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1978; Robert Jervis, "International Primacy: is the Game Worth the Candle?", *International Security* 17(4), 1993, pp. 52-67 (66).

⁸ For the unilateralist turn, see e.g. the essays collected in David M. Malone and Yuen Foong Khong, eds, *Unilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy: International Perspectives*, London, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003.

contingent on a series of often implicit definitional moves which have been discarded in political theory. They end up privileging a view of power as a property concept and not a dispositional and relational concept, and as being unidimensional (mainly military or material) and not multidimensional. Once these assumptions are questioned, two implications follow: it undermines the possibility of an overall concept of power necessary for polarity analysis, as well as the overall assessment of US power which turns out to be much more ambivalent. Linking this finding up with the first section, I conclude that, since power is not measurable, claims to a specific unipolarity cannot be independently checked to save the causal links of a systemic power analysis going from unipolarity to the decline of multilateralism.

In a third step, I will use a constructivist twist to the conceptual analysis of power in order to assess whether a particular conception of power, if shared, has an actual effect on world order. Precisely because the distribution of power resources does not determinate outcomes, but are often understood to do so, the capacity to shape the definitions of power is not mere semantics, but has political effect. This move reverses the relationship between the two central concepts. Rather than seeing unprecedented preponderance as the cause of unilateralism, it shows how a successful (neoconservative) policy of US unilateralism could foster a certain understanding of power which, if it becomes shared by the international society, will have real power effects akin to the alleged effects of unipolarity.

THE INDETERMINACY OF POLARITY EXPLANATIONS: UNIPOLARITY, UNILATERALISM AND THE LOGIC OF HEGEMONIC STABILITY THEORY IN REVERSE

The implicit hypothesis of most observers is that the present preponderance of the US in world affairs explains its increased use of unilateral and bilateral policies. Such a hypothesis trades on a theoretical assumption that power differentials significantly shape the definition of state interests and behaviour, whether directly and somewhat naturally or via the decision

making elite's perception of them.⁹ This theoretical assumption is flawed, and systemic power approaches with it, as a comparison with Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) shows.

The causal link between the distribution of power and the nature of the international system (or its regimes) is purely systemic. Its basic causal relationship is not new. It has been played out in the 1980s during the debates about the alleged US decline. But then, its logic ran in reverse. Whereas today it is allegedly obvious that unilateralism is the result of unipolarity, during the heyday of HST, US decline was held responsible for the decline of multilateralism. I will use this curious reversal to illustrate the indeterminacy, if not arbitrariness, of general systemic power arguments in International Relations.

HST had its heyday after the US had started to dismantle the system of Bretton Woods, a system it had significantly helped to inaugurate and manage. The theory drew on a historical analogy with the inter-war period. The inter-war breakdown of the international liberal order was interpreted as the direct result of missing leadership.¹⁰ Then, the UK, seen as the declining hegemon, was no longer able, whereas the US was perhaps able, but not yet willing to support the international liberal order. When the Nixon Administration unilaterally declared the fixed Gold-Dollar link suspended, commentators saw the US repeat the British experience.

HST is an extension of a classical realist thesis, that high power differentials are conducive to stability. In the words of Kenneth Waltz, "Extreme equality is associated with extreme instability".¹¹ It derives its specificity by linking this idea to a rationalist theory of public

⁹ In other words, the present chapter does not follow Kenneth Waltz in his claim that structural realist approaches can function and yet be indeterminate for state behaviour, a claim hardly shared by any realist and often not followed by himself. For realist rejoinders to Waltz, see e.g. Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment", pp. 52-3; Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: why not Neo-Realist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies* 6(1), 1996, pp. 7-53.

¹⁰ For this analogy, see in particular Robert Gilpin, "The Politics of Transnational International Relations", in Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, jr., eds, *Transnational Relations and World Politics*, Cambridge, Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 48-69, Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, and Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987 [1973].

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, "International Structure, National Force and the Balance of World Power", in James A. Rosenau, ed., *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory*, New York: Free Press, 1969 [1967], pp. 304-14 (312).

goods.¹² Such public goods can be understood in the classic realist way as the provision of international order,¹³ as an international economic order for mercantilists,¹⁴ or as international regimes for neo-institutionalists.¹⁵ Multilateral institutions are usually connected to the last two. And indeed, that hegemony has been at the origins of multilateral institutions is at the core of standard approaches to multilateralism.¹⁶

Flowing from its collective good formulation, HST makes three central propositions.¹⁷ First, the emergence of a hegemon is necessary for the provision of an international public good (Hegemony thesis). Second, the necessary existence of free riders (and thus the unequal distribution of costs for the provision) and/or a loss of legitimacy will undermine the relative power position of the hegemon (Entropy thesis).¹⁸ Third, a declining hegemonic power presages a declining provision of the international public good (Decline thesis).¹⁹

Showing with some detail the causal propositions of HST illustrates an obvious puzzle for the causal link between the present unipolarity and the alleged decline of multilateralism in both its causal links. For the US of the immediate post-1945 period had a similar unipolar/hegemonic position and yet did not pursue a policy which was antithetical to multilateralism.

¹² Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory", *International Organization* 39(4), 1985, pp. 579-614, p. 581.

¹³ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981 and Michael Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An empirical assessment", *Review of International Studies* 15(2), 1989, pp. 56-76.

¹⁴ Charles P. Kindleberger, "International Public Goods without International Government", *The American Economic Review* 76(1), 1986, pp. 1-12 and Robert Gilpin with the assistance of Jean Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

¹⁵ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

¹⁶ John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism".

¹⁷ For a more thorough presentation from which this is taken, see Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: the continuing story of a death foretold*, London, New York: Routledge, 1998, chapter 10.

¹⁸ For an explicit use of "entropy", see Charles P. Kindleberger, "Systems of International Economic Organization", in David P. Calleo, ed., *Money and the Coming World Order*, New York: New York University Press for the Lehmann Institute, 1976, pp. 15-39 (18, 24).

¹⁹ Robert Keohane does not belong to those who subscribe to this aspect of HST, arguing that multilateral regimes, once created, can be perfectly sustained without a hegemon.

The logically most satisfying solution to the puzzle would consist in devising a hypothesis in which the optimal provision of an international public good would be connected to a certain equilibrium of power, not more and not less. In one case, the weakened hegemon would be no longer able to go multilateral; in another the emboldened hegemon would, by objective forces propelled, be no longer willing. However, this solution trades on the existence of a general measure of power, which, as the next section shows, is missing.

A SPECIAL “UNIPOLARITY”? THE PITFALLS OF POWER AS AGGREGATE RESOURCE ANALYSIS

It is a curious feature that the ubiquity of power analysis in IR has largely remained unshaken by the multiple warnings that the concept of power cannot shoulder the explanatory weight assigned to it. This section shows that the “unipolarity breeds the decline of multilateralism” thesis systematically misconceives of the dispositional, relational and multidimensional character of power in the understanding of social interactions and their outcomes. Through the detour of conceptual power analysis, it questions the very possibility of a general polarity analysis and hence of the starting point of the causal link under scrutiny: unipolarity. For this reason, I argue that assigning to the present unipolarity a special quality is eventually arbitrary.

Power: dispositional, relational and multidimensional

The very idea of unipolarity assumes an overall concept of power in which different resources can be consistently aggregated. It moreover assumes that resources as such are sufficient to predict or understand outcomes (such as unilateralism). The critique of such assumptions is legend and I will only briefly rehearse it here.²⁰

The difficult relationship between power understood as resources and power as control over outcomes has been an evergreen in IR power debates.²¹ On the one hand, power analysis is

²⁰ For more extensive treatment in IR, see in particular David A. Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, and “Power and International Relations”, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, eds, *Handbook of International Relations*, London: Sage, 2002, pp. 177-91; as well as Stefano Guzzini, “Structural power: the limits of neorealist power analysis”, *International Organization* 47(3), 1993, pp. 443-78, and “The use and misuse of power analysis in international theory”, in Ronen Palan, ed., *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories*, London, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 53-66.

²¹ An early and still valid statement can be found in Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Boston: Little Brown, 1977, and its revised editions.

most interested in the control of outcomes, not resources as such. Yet, defining power in terms of control over outcomes produces an obvious risk of circularity.²² Hence, mainstream power analysis goes back to resources and basically stipulates its link to control over outcomes in probabilistic terms. The underlying idea of causality with regard to the outcome is kept.

This is either at odds with the dispositional character of power, or needs to be very heavily qualified for the relational character of power. Peter Morriss has shown that in its most general understanding, power is neither a thing (or property, or resource), nor an event (which shows itself only if realised in an outcome), but an ability: a capacity to effect a certain action.²³ Dispositions translate into effects only under specific conditions. In a social context, such a disposition is understood in a relational way. In its Weberian understanding, power refers to the capacity to get others to do something they would not have otherwise done. For understanding the latter, one needs to know the preferences and value systems of the actors at hand.²⁴ To use an extreme example: killing a person who wants to commit suicide at all costs is usually not understood as an instance of power. Power does not reside in a resource but stems from the particular relation in which abilities are actualised. Hence, in order to find out whether a certain action (*not* just the possession of the resource) indeed realises an instance of (social) power, the distribution of resources says quite little independently of the specific conditions which apply to the social relations at hand. Power is situation-specific.

Moreover, power is a multidimensional phenomenon. This is linked to the fact that power in political relations cannot be thought in an analogy to money in economic exchange, both in practice and theory. Whereas different preferences and different markets can be gauged through the fungibility of money, which allows also the observer to reduce this multiplicity on a single aggregate scale, no such scale exists for power in real world politics.²⁵ While (in monetarised economies), money is the real world measure of wealth, there is no equivalent

²² Realists are perfectly aware of this. See most recently John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

²³ Peter Morriss, *Power: a philosophical analysis*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002 [1987], p. 19.

²⁴ As well known, Steven Lukes would also include a third dimension of power in which this very value system is affected so that no visible conflict arises. See now the revised edition: Steven Lukes, *Power: a radical view*, 2nd ed., London: Palgrave, 2004.

²⁵ The central place of the missing money-power analogy for the use of an economic approach to political science/IR has been discussed in Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, 8th ed., Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1962, chapter 3.

currency to measure power. This is not merely a theoretical problem that would be resolvable with some conceptual work²⁶; it derives from the different status in practice. As a result, there is no overarching issue structure, as suggested by polarity analysis. And abilities in one area might not affect from one issue area to another (or the effect cannot be controlled for). The multidimensional character of power goes hand in hand with an issue-specific vision of world politics. It also means that attempts to construct a more general theory of linkage are doomed from the start: such a theory of linkage would assume that we had indeed a measure which would allow us to move from one issue area to another, a measure whose very absence is however the reason why we have different issue-areas to start with.

There have been different reactions towards these findings. Although realists are usually committed to neglect or downplay these difficulties²⁷, some have contributed to the debate by rethinking the role of power even if it cannot be measured²⁸, by accepting that issue-specificity applies to world politics²⁹, or arguing that the problem of fungibility is not as big as assumed³⁰, yet without really answering Aron's and Baldwin's critiques.³¹

Unipolarity, influence and legitimacy

These characteristics of power have significant implications for the "unipolarity breeds the decline of multilateralism" thesis by questioning the taken-for-granted assessment of unipolarity. On the one hand, it qualifies (and simultaneously widens) the assessment of significant resources. Here, US preponderance appears less clear cut. More importantly, it

²⁶ As attempted by Kenneth N. Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory", *Journal of International Affairs* 44(1), 1990, pp. 21-38.

²⁷ See Kenneth N. Waltz, "A Response to my Critics", in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 322-45.

²⁸ See in particular the thoughts by William C. Wohlforth, *The elusive balance: power and perceptions during the Cold War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993, and "Measuring power - and the power of theories", in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds, *Realism and the balance of power: a new debate*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003, pp. 250-65.

²⁹ Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

³⁰ Robert J. Art, "American Foreign Policy and the fungibility of force", *Security Studies* 5(4), 1996, pp. 7-42. See also the ensuing debate: David A. Baldwin, "Force, fungibility, and influence", *Ibid.* 8, 1999, pp. 173-83 and Robert J. Art, "Force and fungibility reconsidered", *Ibid.*, pp. 183-9.

³¹ Stefano Guzzini, "The enduring dilemmas of realism in International Relations", *European Journal of International Relations* 10(4), 2004, pp. 533-68.

moves from resources to the analysis of actual influence and then to authority showing that legitimacy is not just a function of resources, even soft ones.

Wohlforth's reference study does acknowledge the difficulty of having a single issue area, and hence bases the assessment on the "decisive preponderance in *all* the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological and geopolitical."³² Yet, there are several difficulties with this assessment.

First, as in this case, unipolarity analysis tends to concentrate on mere material resources (see below for "soft power") for assessing power. This misses two qualifications. First, the nature of international society affects the respective value of abilities, their resources and the relevant issue areas.³³ This is an old idea, running from Wolfers through Keohane/Nye and the English School to constructivism-inspired approaches.³⁴ It simply means that, in a context of international relations which can no longer be satisfactorily described as Hobbesian in most parts, but has aspects both of a society of states and a transnational world of societies³⁵, power is to be thought of in quite different ways at the same time. It is not obvious that US (or any other) military resources are usable against friends in the same way as against enemies. The important implication is that they then no longer qualify as unconditional sources of "power" in those relations *in the first place*.

A second qualification derives from the reductionist understanding of influence through resources alone, where the distribution of resources is a shorthand for international order or governance. Such an approach assumes that by aggregating instances of influence in particular social interactions, one can get a comprehensive picture of authority relations in the

³² William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", *International Security* 24(1), 1999, pp. 5-41, p. 7 (original emphasis).

³³ This is the way Barry Buzan modifies classical unipolarity analysis in Barry Buzan, *The United States and Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

³⁴ See Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence*; Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society*; and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

³⁵ Ernst-Otto Czempiel, *Weltpolitik im Umbruch. Die Pax Americana, der Terrorismus und die Zukunft der internationalen Beziehungen*, München: Beck Verlag, 2002.

international system.³⁶ Going this road, however, conflates the aggregation of instances of influence with authority. Authority is linked to legitimate rule which can obviously not be reduced to material matter alone. Indeed, in one school of thought, power is the opposite to violence³⁷: the most powerful police is the one which does not need to shoot. In such an Arendtian understanding, it is connected to the capacity to create things in common.³⁸

Taking these two arguments together, one can conclude that the link from resource to control over outcomes is only applicable to a situation-specific analysis, and that the link from mere material resources, via influence to general authority is even weaker.

As a result, a more comprehensive understanding of power is needed. This applies both to the bases of power (abilities) and to the more social understanding of power applicable to present international affairs. Stressing the multidimensional character of power, Nye rejects the label of unipolarity for the present world.³⁹ Sticking to his power approach derived from Weberian sociology⁴⁰, Michael Mann includes economic power in which the US does not have clear lead⁴¹, as well as political and ideological power on which he finds the present US fundamentally wanting.⁴² Focusing directly on the concept of power, Christian Reus-Smit argues that to understand power correctly today, it needs to be conceived as relational not possessive, primarily ideational not material, intersubjective and social, not subjective and non-

³⁶ De facto, this applies Robert Dahl's strategy for assessing "Who governs?" to the international level. See Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Communicative Power", in Steven Lukes, ed., *Power*, New York: New York University Press, 1986 [1970], pp. 59-74.

³⁹ Joseph S. Nye, jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Vol. I: A history of power from the beginning to A. D. 1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

⁴¹ The assessment of the economic sector is widely debated. For some, the US economic and technological lead is obvious from (recent) growth rates, the health of high technology sectors, and so forth. Those scholars, like Mann, who argue that there exist roughly three poles, tend to focus on other items. First, they stress that in the economic sector, EU member states can no longer be counted individually: to the outside, there is one market of a comparable size to the US; in trade terms, and also to a lesser extent with regard to monetary policies, there is one single representation and one central bank. And then one can add that Japan leads in patents, Germany has just overtaken the US as the world leading manufactory exporter (despite the very high Euro), and so on. Since there is no common measure of economic power, one cannot really adjudicate between these positions.

⁴² Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, London, New York: Verso, 2003.

social.⁴³ And again, he finds the US wanting in most. In both cases, only the superiority of its military seems to be unquestioned.

Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" seems to belong to the same category insofar as it does not understand power simply in terms of resources but as actual influence, and includes non-material sources. And yet Nye's use is more ambivalent and at times differs in an important way.

Nye's concept of soft power is akin to attraction and consensus, and used for pointing to the legitimacy component of power. Just as Susan Strange's reconceptualisation of power as "structural power", which included a knowledge structure comprising technology and culture⁴⁴, Nye formulated "soft power" as a reaction against the US decline debate of the 1980s.⁴⁵ But even in his most recent statement of it, there is a tendency to analyse soft power in terms of objective resources ("objective measure of potential soft power"⁴⁶), based on the relative number of US movies, patents, high-level universities, etcetera. Now, stressing the difference between resources and influence, he does note that some (popular) cultural items, even if diffused, do not imply a political stance in favour of the US. Also, he gives three different sources of soft power in culture, national values and foreign policy. But, or so the argument can be read, since the US has strong resources in culture, and is allegedly leading the West in terms of values, better public diplomacy becomes the only crucial variable for actual US attractiveness - and Anti-Americanism the default residual variable, should it fail. The real value of the other resources is more or less taken for granted.

That means that the focus of the power analysis does not really engage with the social and intersubjective component of legitimacy, but slides into a classical *conversion failures* study so much criticised earlier by Baldwin in the wake of the Vietnam war. When allegedly overriding power seemed not to translate into influence, that was not because the US lacked sufficient power, but because of conversion failures (lacking political will, that liberal press backstabbing, etc.). Hence, we have again the curious finding that the same outcome can be

⁴³ Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power and World Order*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Susan Strange, *States and Markets: An Introduction to International Political Economy*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

⁴⁵ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power", *Foreign Policy* 8, 1990, pp. 153-71, and *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1990.

⁴⁶ Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 34.

explained by opposite causes (power or powerlessness). The problem here is not just indeterminacy. It is what Baldwin called the “paradox of unrealized power” which makes power analysis unfalsifiable and arbitrary. The value of resources is ultimately objectified and all misfits in terms of influence are explained away via incompetent agency: power resources never fail, only politicians do.

Soft power can be read to apply this logic to the issue of legitimacy: soft power resources never fail, only public diplomacy does. It then falls short of taking the social and intersubjective component of legitimacy into account, as Reus-Smit rightly notes.⁴⁷ Reminding the US administration that a clever lion knows when to be fox could miss the point. If one takes power seriously, then one would have to look at the problem not just in terms of the packaging (public diplomacy)⁴⁸, but more fundamentally of the content, i.e. the legitimacy of the US specific American vision and project of the international order (not to be confounded with the wider Western, let alone the liberal or the democratic project).

From the missing measure of power to power perception?

In view of the difficult measurement of power, some power analysis has moved from the actual distribution of aggregate power resources to their perception. Applied to our argument here, the causal link would then start from a perceived unipolarity to the decline of multilateralism. Moreover, such an explanation could perhaps answer the contradiction with which this chapter started: the perceived unipolarity in post-1945 is of a different kind than the one today. .

Although William Wohlforth developed this argument for another context, it could be reapplied for the present one. When discussing US primacy, Wohlforth does see similarities in the preponderance of Britain between 1860-70, post-1945 US and post-1989 US. Yet, according to him, what puts the present situation apart is the perception of power.⁴⁹ Whereas

⁴⁷ Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power*, pp. 64–5.

⁴⁸ David M. Edelstein and Ronald R. Krebs, “Washington’s Troubling Obsession with Public Diplomacy”, *Survival* 47(1), 2005, pp. 89-104.

⁴⁹ William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability ...”, pp. 18-22. Wohlforth also argues that the comprehensive power resources of the US are superior. That argument hinges however on an assumption that power is measurable, on which he himself is critical. Moreover, he uses a definition of power which is only material, and allows the know-how of private firms to be simply capitalised for states. Although this is justified so as to make historical comparisons with earlier periods more coherent, the very understanding of how power is historically contingent, a point Wohlforth does not deal with.

the rational expectation in the past was that the respective leadership position would be passing, now it is not. From this, one could derive the argument that the present situation has no historical comparison.

Unfortunately such an attempt seems to beg the question. If the material component of power has no causal force alone – if it does not “impress” itself unambiguously – then the significant part of the causal explanation moves towards perceptions. But why does the expectation of a leadership in decline ask for multilateralism in 1945, but for unilateral retrenchment in the 1970s and 1980s? In other words, a recourse to perceptions opens up an explanatory regress and risks being adjusted ad hoc to save a realist type of power analysis.

What all this shows is that the general argument, although presented in a forward causal link from unipolarity, is in fact running backwards. Changes in US foreign policy outlook and international multilateralism are read back into an assumed and ultimately unquestioned power link, which is then adjusted to serve the explanatory needs of the day.⁵⁰ The classical risk of circular power statements resurfaces.

UNILATERALISM AS A STRATEGY TO REDEFINE POWER

The fact that there is no measure of power has posed perhaps more problems to the (realist) observer than to the (realist) diplomat. Whereas the former still look out for a measure that would help to fix systemic analysis,⁵¹ the latter meet those observers who do not deduce power in any objective way, but understand it from the way practitioners understand it. Since we miss a measure of power, practitioners have to rely on secondary indicators and read power from events. Yet events do not determine a certain vision of power, as the above mentioned indeterminacy and hence circularity of such argument shows. Still, since power as a measurable fact is still crucial in the language and bargaining of international politics, measures

⁵⁰ For earlier statements of this line, see Susan Strange, “The persistent myth of lost hegemony”, *International Organization* 41(4), 1987, pp. 551-74.

⁵¹ See the ongoing quest from Daniel Frei, “Vom Mass der Macht”, *Schweizer Monatshefte* 49(7), 1969, pp. 642-54, to John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

of power are agreed to and constructed a social fact: diplomats try and need to agree first on what counts before they can start counting.⁵²

This moves the analysis of power away from the illusion of an objective measure to the political battle about defining the criteria of power, which, in turn, has political effects. Concepts of power are not merely external tools to understand international politics, but intervene into it. This moves the analysis onto constructivist ground since it is interested how knowledge reflexively interacts with the social world.⁵³

Based on such an analysis, I discuss a possible reversal in the relationship between unipolarity and unilateralism: whereas the earlier sections have shown that unipolarity does not cause the decline of US multilateralism, nor international multilateralism (although US power in certain issue areas can be used to such effect, if US administrations chose to do so), this section argues that US unilateralism can become a strategy to attain the diplomatic (social) equivalent of the alleged effect of unipolarity.

Performative and reflexive aspects of the concept of power

Some concepts, such as power, play a special role in our political discourse. They interact with the world they are supposed simply to describe. This means that besides understanding what they mean, their analysis has to assess what they *do*.⁵⁴ Two issues stand out for our present discussion. Power is firstly connected in our political discourse to the assignment of responsibility. Moreover, there exists a reflexive “looping effect”⁵⁵ of power definitions with the shared understandings and hence working of power in international affairs.

⁵² Stefano Guzzini, *Realism*, p. 231.

⁵³ For the most recent definitional statement on constructivism, see Emanuel Adler, “Constructivism and International Relations”, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, eds, *Handbook of International Relations*, London: Sage, 2002, pp. 95-118. Constructivists have also a wider understanding of power in international affairs, which goes beyond the Weberian one, but given the focus of the present chapter, this is not further elaborated. See Stefano Guzzini, “Structural power”, and now Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics”, *International Organization* 59(1), 2005, pp. 39-75.

⁵⁴ For the following and for a more detailed account of this turn in conceptual analysis as applied to power, see Stefano Guzzini, “The concept of power: a constructivist analysis”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33(3), 2005, pp. 495-521.

⁵⁵ Ian Hacking, *The social construction of what?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

In this tradition, conceptual analysis starts from its use, from the context in which a concept appears and functions. One central characteristic of power is its relationship to responsibility. “For to acknowledge power over others is to implicate oneself in responsibility for certain events and to put oneself in a position where *justification* for the limits placed on others is expected.”⁵⁶

This link to responsibility makes out of power a concept which is closely connected to the definition of political agency, or politics *tout court*. The traditional definition of power as getting someone else to do something he/she would not have otherwise done implies an idea of counterfactuals. The act of attributing power redefines the borders of what can be done. In the usual way we conceive of the term, this links power inextricably to “politics” in the sense of the “art of the possible/feasible”. Lukes⁵⁷ rightly noticed that Bacharach’s and Baratz’s conceptualisation of power⁵⁸ sought to redefine what counts as a political issue. To be “political” means to be potentially changeable; that is, not something natural, objectively given, but something which has the potential to be influenced by political action. In a similar vein, Daniel Frei argues that the concept of power is fundamentally identical to the concept of the “political”; i.e., to include something as a factor of power in one’s calculus, means to “politicise” it.⁵⁹ In other words, attributing power to an issue imports it into the public realm where action (or non-action) is required to justify itself. In return, “depoliticisation” happens when by common acceptance no power was involved. In such instances, political action is exempted from further justification and scrutiny.

Such a performative analysis of concepts is not new in IR, in particular with regard to the concept of security. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver have proposed a framework of security analysis around the concept of “securitization”. According to them, security is to be understood through the effects of it being voiced. It is part of a discourse (for example, “vital national interests”) which, when successfully mobilised, enables issues to be given a priority

⁵⁶ William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 2nd, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1974, p. 97, original emphasis.

⁵⁷ Steven Lukes, *Power*.

⁵⁸ Peter Bacharach and Morton S. Baratz, *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

⁵⁹ Daniel Frei, “Vom Mass der Macht”, p. 647.

for which the use of extraordinary means is justified. In its logical conclusion, “securitisation” ultimately tends to move decisions out of “politics” altogether.⁶⁰

US Power and special responsibility: justifying exemptionalism

Connolly’s original analysis relates to situations where power holders see none of their power involved. No power means no responsibility, thus discharging actors from justifying their actions. Critiques of their actions almost inevitably end up in challenging the understanding of power: there is no power only because the narrow definition of power precludes seeing it. Hence, a semantic shift includes a new understanding, which, if shared, will affect political discourse and action. A classical example of this usage in IR can be found in Susan Strange’s concept of structural power which she developed in the mid-1980s against the backdrop of alleged US hegemonic decline. She showed how “non-decisions”, as well as unintended consequences of actions are part of any power analysis.⁶¹ Indeed, making the US aware of such non-intentional effects is consequential: the next time, such effects need to be included into one’s justification of action.

But the present debate turns this relationship between power and responsibility onto its head: the power holder no longer downplays its power for keeping aloof of criticism, it heavily insists in its power-thus-responsibility so as to justify a worldwide interventionism. If it were true that the US enjoys a very large power and superiority, then it is only natural that it assumes a large responsibility for international affairs. Insisting on the special power of the US triggers and justifies a disposition for action. Here, the insistence on the special nature of unipolarity gives the responsibility-power link a special twist, not dissimilar to the classical realist view that international politics cannot be apprehended with the same norms as domestic politics.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ole Wæver, “Securitization and desecuritization”, in Ronnie Lipschutz, ed., *On Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 46-86, and Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998. See also Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier”, *European Journal of International Relations* 4(2), 1998, pp. 226-55.

⁶¹ On the effect of “non-decisions”, see Susan Strange, *Casino Capitalism*, London: Basil Blackwell, 1986; on the need to integrate ideas from dependency scholars into a concept of “structural power”, see Susan Strange, “What about International Relations?”, in Susan Strange, ed., *Paths to International Political Economy*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984, pp. 183-98 (191). For the full statement, see Susan Strange, *States and Markets*, chapter 2.

⁶² For a classical (and moderate) defense of this position, see George F. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs* 64(2), 1985-86, pp. 205-18.

There are two steps in this argument which can combine responsibility with a justification always already given. A first and direct one is the traditional defense of interventionism. With such preponderance of power, there is no safe way to retreat to one's own shores. A second step is more tenuous, but actually derives from Hegemonic Stability Theory: US unipolarity introduces a hierarchical element into world order. US primacy means that it has different functions and duties (responsibilities) than other states. From there, the final step to a right or even duty to unilateralism is not far. Its role as world policeman is no longer a choice, but actually a requirement of the system.⁶³ Being compelled to play the world leader means, in turn, that the rules which apply to all the others cannot always apply to the US. The US becomes an actor of a different sort: its special duties exempt it from the general norms. This is the basis of its tendency to exemptionalism, something which is difficult to accommodate within a multilateral framework.⁶⁴

The political implications are clear. The more observers stress the unprecedented power of the US, the more they mobilise the political discourse of agency and responsibility tying it to the US and the US alone and the more they can exempt US action from criticism, since it responds to the "objective" (power) circumstances of our time.⁶⁵ This does not necessarily mean that unilateralism is to follow; but it makes that argument much easier to swallow. Inversely, the more observers see this "special responsibility" or exceptionalism as part of the problem, not of the solution to US security concerns (and international order at large), the more they might be inclined to double-check the alleged unipolarity.⁶⁶

The power of unilateralism

Through the link of power to politics in our tradition of political discourse, definitions of power have a reflexive relationship with the world they are said simply to describe. The definition of power, if shared, has power effects in itself. As discussed above, it defines the realm of political justification and legitimacy. But it also provides practitioners with a socially constructed shorthand for their ranking and hence their leverage in any bargaining. The

⁶³ For example Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire", *Foreign Policy* No. 111(Summer), 1998, pp. 24-35.

⁶⁴ For a more general argument about US exemptionalism, see John Gerard Ruggie, "American Exceptionalism, Exemptionalism and Global Governance", in Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005 forthcoming.

⁶⁵ For example, Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited", *The National Interest* Winter, 2002-03, pp. 5-17.

⁶⁶ For example, Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

struggle for the right definition of power is not academic; by its potential effects, it is inherently political. Reaching and keeping definitional power over “power” is more widely consequential. For “the theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality... is a major dimension of political power.”⁶⁷

This leads to the last step in the analysis of the relationship between unipolarity and unilateralism, one in which the poles are reversed. Rather than seeing in the “logic” of unipolarity the cause for unilateralist US action (and the decline of multilateralism), US unilateralism, justified through non-relational and one-sidedly material definitions of power, can be part of a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to the alleged “logic” of unipolarity.

As the discussion of the first two sections tried to show, there is no logic of unipolarity, no inherent necessity in moving from the argument of unprecedented preponderance to the outspoken unilateralism in US foreign policy. Indeed, exactly because the US enjoys such preponderance, it could afford to be much more self-restrained.⁶⁸ Yet, if power is defined in mainly military terms, not only the US acquires a very special place, but it also means that the very functioning of the international system is understood as one which is “ultimately” one of military security.

In such a re-militarised environment, questions of legitimacy are redefined. For the sake of this argument, we can follow Fritz Scharpf’s understanding that legitimacy derives usually from both responsiveness (input) and efficiency (output). In an international order defined fundamentally by military competition, with no international society worth its name, legitimacy is provided, or so it seems, mainly from the output side. On Mars, force is the only source of a necessarily shallow legitimacy. The contract is purely Hobbesian: authority through security. Joseph Nye is aware and wary of this kind of argument, since it allows (the illusion of) an ex post legitimisation of an otherwise illegitimate unilateralism.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, transl. Richard Nice, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 165.

⁶⁸ Stephen M. Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off Balance’: Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy”, in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: the Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, pp. 121-54.

⁶⁹ Joseph S. Nye, jr, *Soft Power*, p. 63.

The crux of this somewhat paternalist legitimization through some future order, is that it can push the verification of the claim indefinitely. Having an interpretation of power that raised the US to the pinnacle as the only country able to do anything, even should it fail, it did the right thing responding to its special duty. There is no way to disconfirm this logic. If order has not yet been found, given the unprecedented (read: military) power position of the US, the only way forward is to do more of the same and let the US try to fix it again, being the only authority there is. The logic is a kind of Microsoft theory of security: the problem is not that there is too much Windows, the problem is that there is still not enough.

At some point in time, repeated US unilateralism would have contributed to reduce the international society to military order, and security to military strategy, and so eventually produce the very vision of unipolarity from which all is supposed to derive. The chain of the self-fulfilling prophecy is this: (1) a presumed but wrong causal link between power (unipolarity) and behaviour (primacy-plus-unilateralism) based on a wrong reduction of power to resources and moreover to material ones, allows (2) a justification for a special responsibility which exempts the sole superpower from the usual rules, hence (3) a re-militarised unilateralism which requires a retreat from the multilateral de-militarising regime network and (4) by these very actions, increasingly enforces a definition of power in purely military terms, which (5) becomes the accepted and intersubjectively shared meaning and understanding of power in international society, that (6) finally *leads to* a world of Mars in which legitimacy is reduced to efficient coercion. This chain is the effect of a neo-conservative understanding of the world which actively changes the world, not just responds to it. And the socially constructed character of the concept of power is crucial in every link of this chain.

Most of the critics of unipolarity mentioned so far are concerned and aware of this reflexivity, that is the very significant real world effect an erroneous definition of power ultimately can have. As Buzan puts it, "The salient point is ... which interpretation of unipolarity gets accepted within the US – and indeed the other great powers – as the prevailing social fact. It is the accepted social fact that shapes securitization."⁷⁰ And continuous securitization

⁷⁰ Barry Buzan, *The United States and Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, p. 171.

(“hypersecuritization”, as Buzan calls it) would indeed change the nature of international society.⁷¹

It is hard not to be reminded of the by now (in)famous quote in which a senior adviser to President George W. Bush, reported by Ron Suskind. The adviser insisted that people like Suskind were part of the “reality-based community” which thinks about solutions in terms of the existing reality. “That is not the way the world works anymore... We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality”.⁷² That sentence acquires an even more fundamental significance when put into the context of a reflexive analysis of power.

As mentioned by Buzan, such self-fulfilling effects are of course contingent on the acceptance of certain understandings. Power discourse in its link to responsibility is open to both its classical use as a critique of power holders, as to its new twist where it exempts the especially powerful from norms applicable to others.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has applied the recent conceptual analysis of power to the thesis that unipolarity predisposes for a US foreign policy of primacy and unilateralism and hence for a decline of multilateralism as an institution. It found this thesis wanting in both links. More specifically, it made three claims.

First, as a discussion of Hegemonic Stability Theory showed, the decline of multilateralism can as well be connected to an alleged decline in hegemony as to its opposite. This illustrated that there is no determinate link between the distribution of power, the foreign policy of the leading power and its effect.

Second, I argued that this indeterminacy of systemic power analysis is not fortuitous, but results from the very characteristics of the concept of power. Usually the analysis assumes a concept of power which is based on resources not relations, and on the one dimension of the military (including material factors supportive of it, such as economy and technology) not on

⁷¹ For a more detailed argument on these lines, see also Stefano Guzzini, “Foreign policy without diplomacy: the Bush administration at a crossroads”, *International Relations* 16(2), 2002, pp. 291-7.

⁷² Ron Suskind, “Without a Doubt”, *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.

its multidimensionality. Yet, once these conceptually untenable assumptions are loosened, power analysis becomes relation and situation dependent. This widens the assessment of significant resources which make appear US preponderance less clear cut, indeed any analysis in terms of a general unipolarity difficult to defend.

Third, precisely because we have no objective measure of power, it is crucial to analyse the relationship between knowledge about power and politics itself. Like the national interest, balance of power arguments are part of the common language of the international society.⁷³ It is important not just because theories are built upon it, but because practitioners understand and base actions on it. This shifts the analysis of polarity arguments further, from what they could mean and explain to what their use, if shared, *does* not just to the common understanding, but also to politics and the social fact of power itself. In this context, this chapter shows the special role power has in our political discourse by linking it to the definition of the political realm, to responsibility and hence the need to public justification. Here, the stress on unipolarity, far from requiring the US to justify its deeds as it had in the past, has been twisted to condone, if not require a US policy of primacy that undermines multilateralism. Moreover, the use of one-dimensional power concepts to support a claim to a special unipolarity mobilises a discourse which re-militarises the understanding of international politics. Repeated unilateralism which is informed by this militarised understanding, has the potential to affect the shared understandings of power which actually decide what power means and does. This might indeed end up creating the social fact of “unipolarity” which appears objective and no longer questionable to international actors.

⁷³ For this analysis of the national interest, see Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.