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Nuno Monteiro. "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is not Peaceful." *International Security* 36:3 (Winter 2011/12): 9-40. DOI: 10.1162/ISEC_a_00064.

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Unipolarity has attracted more scholarly attention than bipolarity ever did in its day. To offer one rough indicator, the online citation index Web of Science counts some thirty-eight articles in political science and international relations journals between 1990 and 2011 whose titles contain “unipolar” or “unipolarity.” A corresponding search for bipolarity yields only seventeen articles for the entire bipolar era from 1950-1989. That’s half the articles for twice the time. I am aware of some nine books devoted to the analysis of unipolarity but none wholly devoted to bipolarity. This attention is surprising, given widespread skepticism about the analytical utility of the very concept of polarity among political scientists. Indeed, Jeff Legro recently advised scholars to “sell unipolarity” as an “overused concept,” deploying arguments redolent of those levied against bipolarity a decade or two earlier.¹ And James Fearon lamented the fact that researchers bother to continue to debate unipolarity long after scholars such as Harrison Wagner developed such devastating criticisms of bipolarity.²

¹ Jeffrey W. Legro, “Sell Unipolarity? The Future of an Overvalued Concept,” in John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William Wohlforth, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² James Fearon, “Comments on R. Harrison Wagner’s *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics*” *International Theory* (2010), 2:2: 333–342. Reference is to R. Harrison Wagner, “What Was Bipolarity?” *International Organization* Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 1993).

So when Nuno Monteiro writes that “scholars do not have a theory of how unipolar systems work” (11) I take that to mean not that there are no theories but rather that there is no single generally accepted or dominant theory. For there exists a multitude of competing conjectures about unipolarity and alliance formation, bargaining, international institutions, U.S. domestic politics, the politics of international legitimacy, regional security dynamics, the global economy, and so on. And one reason all this work proliferates despite criticism of the earlier polarity scholarship is that it is a very different animal from its mid-twentieth century predecessor. Most of these scholars are not developing structural models like those pioneered by Morton Kaplan or Kenneth Waltz. Implicitly or explicitly, they recognize that social science has moved on, and that simple models of the old form (assumptions + anarchy + distribution of capabilities = deterministic prediction) are unlikely to provide much leverage. Most of these papers are developing more complex models of the interaction between unipolarity and other variables in search of explanations for puzzling contemporary phenomena. One simply cannot infer that arguments levied against the older scholarship on bipolarity necessarily impugn contemporary work on unipolarity.

Monteiro rightly notes that remarkably little of this work addresses the subject of his article: unipolar peacefulness. “Unrest Assured” is a brilliant effort to remedy this defect. Monteiro correctly takes earlier work on this issue (especially my own) to task for two key shortcomings. First, the argument linking unipolarity to reduced major-power conflict is incomplete. While there are valid reasons that unipolarity renders hegemonic rivalry and counter-hegemonic balancing exceedingly unlikely, they do not fully explain low levels of conflict among major powers. To do that, one must at the very least incorporate the unipole’s strategic choice to be engaged in providing security in core regions. Second, the pre-Monteiro theory covered only major power conflict, with no explicit arguments connecting major-power peace with interactions between major and minor powers and among the latter.

Monteiro is the first to think so carefully about the key links between the system’s structural incentives, the unipole’s grand strategic choices, and the potential for inter-state war throughout the system. Moreover, the article deftly covers the interaction between unipolarity and the nuclear revolution. I won’t rehearse the details of his arguments here but will just stress again that they are not vulnerable to many of the main criticisms theorists have levied against earlier work of this type.

It is hard for me to imagine how Monteiro could have done more within the confines of a journal article. My critical comments therefore take the form of two suggestions for future work, and a question about how the article is motivated. First, while Monteiro is surely right that theories about unipolarity can’t be tested to the satisfaction of the econometricians in our discipline (very little of interest to security scholars can be), qualitative studies might clarify arguments and unpack the connection between theoretical propositions and the real stuff of international politics. The first and second U.S. wars against Iraq seem at first glance to be consistent with Monteiro’s argument, but it would still add confidence in his conclusions to see more evidence about conflicts such as Kosovo and Afghanistan. It is hard to connect Monteiro’s logic to the actions of the Taliban regime in Kabul, Al Qaeda and the Bush White House in these years. And after the initial U.S. interventions, both Iraq and Afghanistan quickly morphed from inter-state to intra-state wars: both states quickly formed internationally recognized governments that agreed to U.S. military support against domestic insurgencies. It is those two extended counterinsurgency struggles that account for well over 90% of the casualties and costs of all U.S. wars since 1990. I’d like to see more evidence showing how a structural theory about systemic incentives facing states accounts for these prolonged struggles between states and non-state insurgents.

Second, as further work inspired by Monteiro’s article proceeds, it will be hard to avoid more explicit comparisons in both theory and empirical investigation. Any claim about unipolarity’s effects implies a

counterfactual about how things would work differently if capabilities were differently distributed across units. For example, the lack of alliance options for minor powers under unipolarity plays an important role in Monteiro's argument. The implication is that things are different in other kinds of systems. But reliable security guarantees are hard to come by in any international system, as Monteiro acknowledges (n. 72). And even if good alliance options are more likely under bi or multipolarity, it is not clear that they generate net gains in security. After all, alliances can spread or prolong conflict in some settings. Indeed, many scholars argue that balancing dynamics under bipolarity made regional conflicts far more deadly than they would otherwise have been.³ In sum, without more theoretical argument about the differences across polarities, it's hard to tell how significant the alliance-choice argument really is. And one way to get at the argument empirically would be by examining cases from different polar structures that are otherwise as similar as possible.

Third, setting up the article as a claim that unipolarity is not peaceful runs into a problem: Unipolarity *is* peaceful. The Most Peaceful. Ever. Period. No one expects any imaginable anarchic inter-state system to be perfectly peaceful, with no war at all. In my 1999 paper, I stressed that "unipolarity does not imply the end of all conflict... It simply means the absence of two big problems" —hegemonic rivalry and counter-hegemonic balancing—that were present in all earlier systems. As a result "unipolarity favors the absence of war among the great powers."⁴ Like any statement about the war-proneness of any international system, this is a relative claim. International relations scholarship does not have theories that make anything other than relative predictions about the war-proneness of systems. Monteiro tries but fails to escape this reality. He writes: "Rather than assess the relative peacefulness of unipolarity vis-à-vis bipolar or multipolar systems, I identify causal pathways to war that are characteristic of a unipolar system and that have not been developed in the extant literature (12). The latter portion of this sentence is exactly right, but the former bit is contradicted just a few pages later when Monteiro presents evidence that "Unipolarity is the most conflict prone of all systems . . ." (18).

While conflict researchers debate the causes, they are nearly united in agreeing that the post-1990 international system is the least afflicted by war.⁵ There are many ways to measure war: the overall number that occur, the number of people killed, the probability that any state will be at war in any year, the size or cost of military forces compared to economic output or population, or, perhaps best, the probability that any individual will die as a result of organized inter-group violence. By *all* those measures, we are living in the most peaceful period since the modern inter-state system took shape in the seventeenth century. Indeed, Stephen Pinker assembles masses of evidence to suggest that there has never been a less violent time in all of human history.⁶ It is hard to think of any way to measure war that does not show the unipolar period as remarkably peaceful—except for the ones Monteiro uses: "the percentage of years that great powers spend at war, and the incidence of war involving great powers," (18) with the United States defined as the only great power after 1990. That is a very convoluted way to say 'Iraq and

³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the potential implications for intra-state war see Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Barcellas "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict, *American Political Science Review* 104, No. 3 (August 2010): 415-29.

⁴ "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1999), 24; 26.

⁵ Bethany Lacina and Nils Peter Gleditsch, "Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths," *European Journal of Population* (2005) 21: 145–166; Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Dutton/Penguin, 2011).

⁶ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

Afghanistan.’ The fact that the United States ended up in two grinding counter-insurgency operations in no way contradicts the claim that unipolarity is unprecedentedly peaceful.

But that reaction concerns the framing rather than the substance of the article. One can dismiss as America-centric the claim that unipolarity is war-prone and still regard Monteiro’s carefully crafted arguments as promising advances. Further investment in refining and evaluating these arguments is warranted, for even if we agree that unipolarity has been pretty darned peaceful, it surely doesn’t seem that way to anyone in or around the U.S. military. Along with most security scholars, I’ve regarded the post-1991 military interventions as permitted but not dictated by unipolarity. That at least leaves open the possibility of strategic learning, as happened back in bipolarity. Even though the bipolar structure and U.S. grand strategy remained constant, bloody conflicts in Korea and Vietnam prompted Washington to get out of the direct military intervention business in favor of proxy wars and less costly covert operations. Similarly, the new “Iraq syndrome” might tame interventionist impulses even as unipolarity endures. But Monteiro’s message is gloomier. “The significant level of conflict the world has experienced over the last two decades,” he warns, “will continue as long as U.S. power remains preponderant.” (38). That’s a scary message even if that “significant level” is far lower than in any other known interstate system. So while I hope Monteiro is wrong, there is no doubt that his article has decisively altered the terms of the debate on this crucial issue.

William C. Wohlforth is the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth, where he teaches in the Department of Government. His most recent publications are “Assessing the Diffusion of Power: How Not to Evaluate Theories.” *International Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming, March 2012), “Gilpinian Realism and International Relations,” *International Relations* (forthcoming Spring 2012), “No One Loves a Realist Explanation: The Cold War’s End Revisited” *International Politics* Vol. 48: Nos. 4/5 (July/September 2011), and *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge, 2011), co-edited, with G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno).

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