

H-Diplo | ISSF

Article Review 77

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Benjamin Zala. "Polarity Analysis and Collective Perceptions of Power: The Need for a New Approach." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 2:1 (February 2017): 2-17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw025>.

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Published by ISSF on 23 May 2017

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<https://issforum.org/articlereviews/77-polarity>

<https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-AR77.pdf>

A refreshing look at re-conceptualizing the concept of polarity, Benjamin Zala's "Polarity Analysis and Collective Perceptions of Power: The Need for a New Approach" attempts to offer a new approach in bypassing the definitional, conceptual, and measurement confusions plaguing research on polarity. Seeking to methodologically distance itself from the traditional scholarship on polarity, which revolves around distribution of resources/material capabilities, positional analysis, and hegemonic behavior, Zala proposes an approach that concentrates on perception, agency, and performativity. The author's proposal, to a strong extent, contrasts the body of literature produced after the end of the Cold War, which brought about the expansive debate over unipolarity, with the debate ranging from modes of counterbalancing, to traditional

considerations,¹ to soft-balancing,² to scholarly disputes over durability/stability,³ to the peacefulness⁴ and structural coherence of the new unipolar system⁵. Zala's concern is to provide the theoretical justification for a shift in the operationalization of polarity from explanatory and positional considerations based on capabilities and resources to an ordering concept where status is privileged over capabilities. The author's attempt at such theory-development revolves around two general approaches: 1) utilizing the notion of perception to qualify status and polar ordering, and 2) offering a case study from the Cold War when the U.S. attempted to restructure the bipolar system into a tripolar configuration by elevating China to polar status.

The concerns with the author's proposition and the shortcomings of the article may be categorized into three broad areas: 1) theoretical limitations, methodological concerns, and conceptual underdevelopment; 2) an incomplete assessment of polarity; and 3) the counter-productive use of case study. While Zala's use of the concept of perception to gauge polarity and the power configurations of the global political system is not deemed, in of itself, problematic, the concern lies with the author's presupposition that the notion of perception is universal, consistent, and empirically more tenable than capabilities and material resources. The biggest theoretical and conceptual limitation that the article suffers from may simply be presented by the following question: perception based on what? If a certain state is perceived as being a pole or a superpower, what is such perception based on? Considering the fact that the author marginalizes the relevance of resources, performance, behavior, and capabilities of states, we remain constrained from understanding how perceptions are formed and upon what they are constituted. Simply put, what differentiates unsubstantiated perception from a substantiated perception? If, for example, one may claim that based on a certain set of observations

¹ See John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 15:1 (Summer 1990): 5-56; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise." *International Security* 17:4 (Spring 1993): 5-51; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: the Coming end of the United States' Unipolar Moment." *International Security* 31:2 (2006): 7-41; Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 24:1 (Summer, 2000): 5-41; and Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions and Research Design," In John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (eds). *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003): 128-153.

² See Roper Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States." *International Security* 30:1 (Summer 2005), 7-45; T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30:1 (Summer 2005): 46-71; and G. John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

³ See William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999): 5-41; Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18:2 (Fall 1993): 44-79; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ See Charles Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity," *International Security* 23:3 (Fall 1998): 40-79; G. John Ikenberry, *American Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Nuno Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is Not Peaceful," *International Security* 36:3 (Winter 2012): 9-40.

⁵ See Robert Jervis, "The Remaking of the Unipolar World," *The Washington Quarterly* 29:3 (2006): 7-19; Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective." *World Politics* 61:1 (2009): 188-213; and G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Consequence of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

(military size, sphere of influence, economic power, soft power, etc.) a state is perceived as being a pole, then this is perhaps tenable. However, note that the substantiation of the perception is contingent upon observing material realities. As such, polarity cannot simply be an ideational construct purely hinged upon the perception of another state or set of states. In this context, the author's theoretical model is underdeveloped, for it fails to account for how perception is formed and what substantiates it.

Let us consider, for example, the case of Fascist Italy under Benito Mussolini. Mussolini's Italy perceived itself as the heir to the Roman Empire, and as such, as a global power; furthermore, we may conceivably argue that a certain body of states in Africa, parts of Europe, and perhaps Asia also held this perception. Yet such a perception, however, has no substance; it is really irrelevant what Italy perceived itself as, or what other states viewed Italy as, if such perceptions were not grounded or substantiated. And this example brings to light a different set of questions. Are perceptions based on empirical observations, assessments of a state's capabilities (regardless of how they are measured)? Are interpretations of a state's capability or behavior a form or basis for perception? Does the author conflate analytical assessments by states with the notion of perception? Does perception take into account the behavior of the state, and what defines and explains such behavior, and if so, how can capabilities be deemed subordinate to status, when capabilities are the basis upon which status and perception are formed?

Reducing conceptualizations of polarity to perception (and to a lesser extent performativity) present three problems. First, whose perception defines what constitutes or qualifies status of polarity? Second, how are such perceptions qualified or measured; namely, is it the perception of powerful states, or a numerical consideration of a certain number of states that perceive a certain actor as having a certain polar status? Third, perception is neither defined nor measured; there is a serious methodological concern in the application or operationalization of this concept. How do we gauge what the perception of a country is, or what constitutes that country's collective perception? Should we concentrate on state policy, statements by policymakers, opinions of political leaders, etc.? The biggest methodological concern here is one of arbitrariness, where opinions are selected *ad hoc* to qualify a certain perception. Zala, for example, arbitrarily uses quotes from leaders of certain states, lawmakers from other countries, or even opinions of scholars as evidence of a prevailing perception.⁶ This inherently creates a set of concerns: *ad hoc* use of commentators or single diplomats hardly serves as evidence in demonstrating the perception of a state. There is perhaps an unintended conflation of the opinions of certain individuals and the perception of a state.

Furthermore, the first concern addressed above also gives way to the trap of being tautological. If the ordering or qualification of polarity and status is hinged upon the perception of other states (again, it is not clear which types of states), how are we to gauge that the perceptions of certain states are more important or relevant than the perception(s) of other states? Assuming that powerful states, for example, or mid-range powers, determine polar ordering based on their perception, does this not create the tautological problem of determining what a powerful state or a mid-range power is? Are such states also defined by perception? Clearly, this becomes

⁶ For example, an interview with Henry Kissinger in *Time* magazine is used as evidence to support claims of perceived multipolarity during the Cold War. In the same context, quotes from President Nixon are utilized, followed by quotes from two "influential analysts," Zbigniew Brzezinski and Alastair Buchan (9-10). The article does not provide a criteria of how sources are selected, what qualifies the position of a source to be deemed as representative of a country's perception, and why certain analysts are selected, while others are not. This problem with *ad hoc* sourcing and lack of methodological guidance or criteria for source-selection is rampant through the case study.

tautologically problematic: perception of the mid-range powers, whose qualification of being such is also based on the perception of other states, defines what qualifies as a pole. The concept of perception becomes both tautological and consistently requires transcendental justification: perception of one justifies the perception of the other which justifies the perception of the other, so on and so forth. Let us use the author's example of the Cold War. Why were the United States and Soviet Union deemed to be the two poles? Was it because, for example, the powerful European countries perceived them as such? What about the perception, for example, of Latin American countries? Would their perceptions qualify in determining polar ordering? Or must there be the underlying perception of a country as a sufficient power who has the perceived right to hold the perception of who the poles are?⁷

The second overarching concern revolves around Zala's incomplete treatment of polarity. If polar status is defined by external/social perception without substance, how relevant does the concept become, if it cannot allow for assessments of superpower behavior, shifts in polar structures, or the very concepts of polarization and counter-balancing? By denying substance, or failing to develop it as a precondition for perception, the conceptual, explanatory, and ordering relevance of polarity becomes negated. Unsubstantiated perception is neither a sufficient explanatory nor a qualifying criteria in gauging polar status. Examples of polarization and counter-balancing demonstrate this point. The article's treatment of polarity appears to confuse the distinction between a pole and polarization, which creates complications for the notion of perception, since polarization is hinged on actual state behavior, and not what other states 'think' or perceive is going on. The author's use of Great Britain as a case study of the post-World War II period as being multipolar is a case in point (7-9). Zala contends that Great Britain, for example, perceived itself as a pole, exemplified in its behavior during the Suez Crisis, and based on the historical interpretation, a multipolar post-WWII global structure may be perceived. This, however, fails to explain the process of polarization, as Western and European powers, such as Britain, joined NATO, which was led by the U.S., while the eastern bloc polarized into the Warsaw Pact under the leadership of the Soviet Union. The very act of accepting the dominance or superiority of another pole negates one's own polar status; furthermore, the very act of bandwagoning also undermines any considerations or perceptions of having polar status. Simply put, if Great Britain viewed itself, or was perceived by the international community as a pole, then why did it act like a second-tier power?

Similarly, perception of polar status or ordering does not suffice in explaining counter-balancing, or the behavior of revisionist states. Just because, for example, a state engages in revisionist behavior does not mean that that state is a pole; merely questioning the existing power configurations does not and cannot constitute a shift in polar ordering. As such, unless a state is capable of counter-balancing and actually challenging existing poles, the very notion of perception becomes secondary. Latin America, for example, can perceive Brazil as a pole as much as it wants: this social perception does not make Brazil a superpower. It can neither challenge nor counter-balance the reigning unipole. In this context, by denying the modality of state behavior in relation to other superpower(s), the article explains neither polarization nor the very process of challenging and counter-balancing other pole(s) in the system.

The third overarching limitation of the article deals with the use of a Cold-War case study as evidence in support of the proposed theory. The concern with this case study is that it actually works in the other

⁷ In the article the author notes the limitations of leaving such questions unanswered (13). My more specific concern, however, is that without answering such questions, we are left with an underdeveloped theory that creates more questions than answers, which limits our capacity for either cogent analysis or rigorous research.

direction, contradicting the article's proposed theory, as opposed to supporting it. The author presents the global political scene in the late 1960's as the "perception" of a declining United States giving way to a "potential" multipolar system, where China is interjected into the power configurations of the international system and perceived as a third pole (11-13). Primarily sourcing the speeches of President Johnson and President Nixon, along with the memoirs of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Zala holds that the U.S. perceived China as a potential third pole, and this "notion that China had risen to become a third pole of power, and even the wider Nixon/Kissinger arguments about the coming of a multipolar order in the 1970s all sit uneasily with the traditional definition of polarity as the distribution of capabilities" (12). The evidence presented in the case study, however, contradicts the article's proposed theory in three ways. First, treatments of perception as the basis of polar status are negated by the developments within the case study itself, as the Soviet Union, based on its assessment of Chinese capabilities, concluded that China could not be deemed a superpower. Similarly, the U.S. "Department of State and Defense concluded that Beijing's strength was 'simply inadequate for the international role' that it hoped to project (10)." Collectively, both superpowers/poles concluded that China lack the capabilities to function or have the status of a pole. Accordingly, this negates the author's contention that "China had risen to become a third pole of power," which, in turn, negates his interpretation of a perceived multipolar system. This is similar to Zala's interpretation of how the U.S. and Soviet Union treated French and British aspirations of polar status, as the superior capabilities of the two poles rejected Franco-British aspirations of being perceived as poles (9). Second, the strategic ambitions of the U.S. to counter-balance the Soviets by attempting to interject China does not mean that the system had *become* multipolar: the U.S. desire of elevating China to a pole is not the same as concluding that the U.S. perceived the existence of a multipolar system. Simply because the U.S. *wished* that China was a superpower power does not mean that China *became* a superpower; rather, it was the opposite. The inability of China to become a pole contradicts the logic of perception defining ordering and power constellations. Third, what a state desires and what a state achieves are two different outcomes, and to presuppose that desire or intent are sufficient to qualify the outcome is quite problematic. In this sense, the U.S. never *actually* perceived China as a pole: it only *desired* or *wanted* China to be a pole. And this demonstrates the point that if an actor is a pole, or is already perceived as one, then *it is* a pole; and if China was in fact perceived as a pole, then the U.S. would have had no reason to work so hard in wishing or desiring Chinese polarity. This simply shows that China was never a pole, and as such, a multipolar period never existed during the Cold War.

While I sympathize with the author's claim that reducing polar studies to material capabilities is conceptually, analytically, and methodologically myopic; similarly, I disagree with his proposal to reduce polar studies to a theoretically-underdeveloped consideration of perception. This also gives way to myopism. We can indeed agree that we "give different labels to the same structural phenomena because we lack a consensus on how the structural phenomena should be conceptualized."⁸ And we can also agree that the vast literature on polarity demonstrates not only a lack of consensus on how to define, measure, and operationalize polarity, but also contradictory findings,⁹ different research designs, conflicting attempts at measuring variables, and

⁸ See David Rapkin et al, "Bipolarity and Bipolarization in the Cold War Era: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Validation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 23 (1979): 261-295.

⁹ See David J. Singer, "Accounting for International War: The State of the Discipline," *Journal of Peace Research* 18:1 (1981): 1-18.

quantifying modes of polarity.¹⁰ As such, while these problems are noted and eclecticism is embraced as an approach, the concern is the article's prioritization of certain conceptual, analytical, and explanatory tools over others in gauging and qualifying polarity. Status cannot be privileged over capability, and perception cannot usurp substantiation of material resources. My preference would be for a more nuanced approach, where perception is neither prioritized nor marginalized, but complemented and substantiated through consideration of material resources, capabilities, and state behavior, along with an appreciation for such auxiliary concepts as revisionist actors and counter-balancing. In sum, for the concept of polarity to survive in our field of scholarship, it cannot simply be reduced to an ideational construct: it must have substance.

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¹⁰ See John A. Vasquez, "The Steps to War: Toward a Scientific Explanation of Correlates of War Findings," *World Politics* 40:1 (October 1987): 108-145; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Systemic Polarization and the Occurrence and Duration of War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 22 (June 1978): 241-267; and Frank W. Wayman, "Bipolarity, Multipolarity and the Threat of War," in Alan Ned Sabrosky, ed., *Polarity and War: The Changing Structure of International Conflict* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985): 115-144.