

**Rethinking Polarity for the Twenty-first Century:
Perceptions of Order in International Society**

by

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Abstract

It has long been assumed that the distribution of power internationally – and in particular whether the world is dominated by one, two or many major powers – is likely to play an important role in world politics. The structural effect of what is known in the International Relations (IR) literature as the ‘polarity’ of any given moment has been a central theme in mainstream theories and across the discipline more widely. The language of uni, bi and multipolarity has also been common in public discourse for at least half a century. Yet there are at present competing perceptions of polarity across popular and scholarly discourse. Is the United States still a unipolar power? Are we currently in or about to enter a multipolar era? Or will the US-Sino relationship dominate world politics in the coming decades creating a new bipolarity?

This thesis proposes a redefinition of the concept of polarity in order to be able to theoretically account for such competing visions of global order. It argues for the continued utility of the concept, particularly given its widespread use by practitioners and analysts alike, but that polarity analysis needs to be re-configured along more analytically eclectic lines than is the case in the existing literature. Using the English school of IR, the thesis builds a theoretical framework for redefining polarity, not as the distribution of material capabilities in the international system, but instead as the number of states that hold a particular *status in international society*. This allows for a theoretical discussion of the importance of perceptions of polarity and why this so-called ‘fact’ of world politics can be perceived differently by separate actors at the same time. This framework is then applied to the period of 1815-2012 in order to understand the difference this makes to a macro-historical analysis of changes in the inter-state order.

The historical analysis is used to demonstrate both the need for a new definition of polarity but also to draw a number of conclusions regarding the sources of perceptions of polarity. Ideas about the ability of agents to shape global structures and historical legacies relating to international status emerge as particularly important, reinforcing the need for ways of understanding structural power that capture its social and historical complexity.

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Part I: Polarity in International Society: Analysing the ‘Essential Skeleton’ of World Politics

Chapter One: Introduction

Thus it is possible...for the contemporary student or practitioner of international politics, contemplating the vast and amorphous world body politic, to distinguish the relations among the great powers as its essential skeleton.

Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (1977: 206)

The problem for anyone who wishes to dismiss the importance of power is that the evidence consistently indicates that statesmen attach immense importance to it. The problem for anyone who wishes to establish the importance of power is that the concept is ambiguous enough to support seemingly contradictory generalizations. Statesmen can perceive equilibrium and hegemony simultaneously.

William Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance* (1993: 138).

The politics of the major powers has, and continues to be, one of the abiding concerns for scholars of world politics. This thesis challenges one of the dominant ways of thinking about great power politics – the concept of polarity – in the International Relations (IR) literature, and proposes a redefinition in order to retain its theoretical utility. Using the English school of IR as a framework to re-think polarity, the thesis analyses almost two hundred years of diplomatic history with a view to highlighting the hitherto neglected issue of breakdowns in collective perceptions of world order.

The research starts from the premise, prevalent in much of the existing IR literature, that three different forms of polarity (the number of great/superpowers or ‘poles’ of power at any given time)¹ have existed in history and can exist theoretically: Unipolarity (one pole), bipolarity (two poles) and multipolarity (three or more poles). Whilst polarity can be used to describe the number of particularly powerful states in both global systems and regional sub-systems, of interest here is *global* polarity.²

¹ A full discussion of the issues around defining polarity and what is meant by a ‘pole of power’ is provided in Chapter Two. The term ‘great/superpowers’ is used throughout the thesis as it will depend on whether a multipolar order (which therefore includes great powers and no superpowers) or a bi or unipolar order (which includes superpowers) exists at any one time (see the discussion of ‘complex polarity theory’ in Chapter Two).

² The terms polarity and global polarity will be used interchangeably throughout. Unless otherwise stated, the term polarity should be understood as referring to global or international polarity.

The central task here is to outline and then apply a new definition of polarity that can take account of both the material and ideational aspects of power and that has a much closer resemblance to the way the concept is used in practice. The research uses the concept of polarity not so much as a material fact but as a socially transmuted and understood concept which effects the interactions of the members of international society.³

Specifically, this thesis analyses periods in history in which changes in perceptions of the number of great powers that exist on the part of decision makers and analysts, in order to demonstrate the need for a more nuanced approach to this issue. It uses the English school to redefine polarity, not as the distribution of material power in an international system but instead as the number of states that enjoy the special social status of great/superpower. In this sense, the research brings together the neorealist focus on changes in the number of major powers as a systemic variable with English school ideas about the role of the great powers as a social institution in international society.

Part I of the thesis engages with the theoretical tasks of outlining the inadequacies of the current approach to polarity and designing a redefinition under the auspices of analytical eclecticism. Chapter One outlines the rationale for returning to the issue of polarity at the end of the first decade of the Twenty-first Century, and over fifty years since the term was first introduced into the IR lexicon. It argues for the continued utility of the concept but also for the need to re-think exactly what its main unit of analysis is in order to be able to capture the complexity of structural power at the international level. It discusses the fact that polarity can be perceived differently by different actors at the same time as a fundamental empirical puzzle which the current literature on the subject is unable to account for. Chapter One traces a growing consensus amongst many in the Constructivist and English school

³ Throughout this chapter the concept of polarity will be discussed in relation to international *society* as opposed to an international *system*. This issues related to this are discussed at in Chapter Three. For the sake of consistency, the language of international society is therefore used throughout.

traditions about the need to establish ways of understanding polarity without abandoning their well-established critiques of neorealism (ie. the theoretical tradition with the greatest claim to the concept of polarity). It outlines what is at stake in redefining polarity as well as how this can be done using an analytically eclectic approach to theory with a particular focus on historical case studies. By doing so, the case is made for a more nuanced and less materially-dependent version of polarity which captures the way the concept is used by practitioners than that which is offered by mainstream IR theory.

Chapter Two explores in detail the existing polarity analysis literature in order to set out the starting point of any attempt to redefine this concept. It covers the questions of measuring polarity, the forms polarity can take and understanding changes in polarity. The discussion also outlines some of the central debates within the literature about stability, conflict and cooperation before interrogating the theoretical blind spot in relation to perception of the existing work in this area and discussing how the redefinition pursued in this thesis relates to this problem.

A full theoretical framework is outlined in Chapter Three. It outlines the ontological, epistemological and methodological openings created by recent developments in English school theorising about historical and contemporary international societies. It discusses the particular benefits of using an English school framework for this kind of study over other analytically eclectic (or at least theoretically pluralist) contenders such as neoclassical realism and Constructivism as well as situating the analysis' focus on diplomatic history and studies of perception in relation to the historical sociology and social psychology literatures.

Part II moves the discussion from the theoretical literature to the historical record. These chapters provide the empirical data for testing the new definition of polarity outlined in Part I in order to see whether applying this lens produces a different history of great power politics than that of the traditional polarity analysis literature. Treating the

great/superpowers as a social institution rather than the sum of the distribution of material capabilities allows for a focus on the fragility of perceptions of polarity and directs the analysis towards a balance between ideational and material factors in examining the historical record of changes in polarity.

Finally in Part III, we return to the theoretical discussion to draw out the major conclusions from the historical discussion of Part II for the ways in which we should expect polarity to shape world politics in the future. Using a more socially and historically contingent idea of what a pole of power actually is within polarity analysis, the thesis is able to provide an alternative historical survey of almost two hundred years of diplomatic history. This alternative reading of the rise and fall of the great/superpowers since 1815 produces a number of important findings about the sources of perceptions of polarity and what factors we can expect to shape ideas about the inter-state order in the future. These include ideas about human agency in being able to increase a state's fortunes or reverse misfortunes in the international hierarchy. The historical analysis presented in Part II offers a number of examples where perceptions of current or imminent polarity have been influenced by the prestige of influential statesmen or diplomats, self-perceptions of ideological and other forms of leadership and proposals for domestic reforms aimed at reversing trends of material decline. In all of these examples, the idea that the distribution of power amongst the world's 'leading states' is a structural condition which shapes the possible limits of state action is resisted in the face of perceptions about the ability of agents to shape their fate in the global order.

Equally as important to prevailing ideas about agents and structures are the effects of historical legacies. The analysis of which states were and which states were not thought of, and therefore treated as, poles of power in international society repeatedly demonstrates that whether a state has been conferred with great power status in the past matters. In some

cases, such a legacy can be used to overcome a lack of credible material capabilities and in other cases it cannot. Yet what emerges as centrally important is that the force of historical legacies of great power status can be such that states will act as if they are major powers rather than as the 'objective' polarity of the day would force them to. Added to this are ideas about the 'normal' state of the structure of international society (such as the centrality of multipolarity and the balance of power to much classical international political thought) and notions of the cyclical nature of international history.

Related to these ideas about the past is the importance of assessments of future order on how contemporary perceptions of polarity are formed. Collective narratives in global public discourse about the trajectory of certain 'rising' and 'declining' powers emerge from the discussion as being particularly influential.

All of these findings from the historical analysis serve to demonstrate the benefits of shifting polarity analysis away from its traditional rationally-determined and materially-reductionist roots. Using the established tradition within the English school for thinking about the great/superpowers as a social institution rather than a material 'fact' allows us to build a new way of applying the concept of polarity which is compatible with, and derived directly from, the historical record.

Rationale

The idea that the number of major powers that exist at any one time gives international society a particular structure is "one of those rare concepts used frequently in both the public policy and academic debates" (Buzan 2004a: 36). The language of multi, bi and unipolarity is frequently used to describe the distribution and effects of power, exercised at the global level, on state interactions on issues as varied as war and peace to economic cooperation to environmental stewardship. It provides a way of capturing one of the main currents running through not only the interactions of states but world politics broadly

conceived.⁴ The polarity of international society is widely accepted by scholars and practitioners alike to be central to “simplifying the patterns of international relations” (Bull 1977: 206) and making “socio-political interactions across state boundaries predictable and manageable” (Volgy *et al.* 2009 : 3). Polarity is used in scholarship and policy analysis to not only identify which states sit at the top the global hierarchy but also to describe whether the order provided by major powers is characterised by complexity (multipolarity), symmetry (bipolarity) or singularity (unipolarity).

While some scholars may take issue with the concept and the most ambitious aims for which it has been used (Wendt 1987: 338; Slaughter Burley 1993 217-18) nevertheless, the fact is that many of their colleagues continue to refer to polarity as not only a normal and unproblematic but also very important element of world politics.⁵ The importance of the continued use of the term is that it helps shape, often in a subtle and almost sub-conscious way, the conceptual framing of, at the very least, relations between states at the global level. One account goes so far as to say that “The central place of polarity in IR theory is such that it is commonly assumed that the appropriate way to study the world is to examine the impact of polarity first and then move on to other lesser factors to mop up any unexplained variance” (Legro 2011: 342). Some of the scholars using the idea of polarity in their analysis advise governments, inter-governmental organisations and multinational corporations directly. Others contribute to popular discourse through the media, influential blogs and books and journals aimed at a non-specialist audience.⁶ Even those scholars using

⁴ This thesis will use the term ‘world politics’ to refer to the entirety of interactions between states and non-state actors on a global scale. While the focus of the analysis is on the hierarchical order made up exclusively of sovereign states, this hierarchy interacts with, and influences, more than just the actions of states.

⁵ For three recent examples which take the concept of polarity as a normal part of everyday life at the global level in their analysis of three different areas published in leading IR or political science journals see Conway and Singh 2011, Desai and Vreeland 2011 and Dubash 2012.

⁶ For example, the website of one such journal, *The National Interest*, has a whole section devoted to issues of rising powers, hegemonic decline and great power politics which is titled *Polarity in International Relations*, see: <<http://nationalinterest.org/tag/polarity-in-international-relations>>.

the concept in their teaching (whether explicitly engaging in polarity analysis in IR theory courses or simply using, for example the phrase ‘bipolarity’ to describe the Cold War in a course covering the history of this period) can be said to perpetuate the strength of the concept in terms of global usage.⁷

Further to this, and perhaps most importantly, the concept is frequently used by practitioners in their public pronouncements. This applies equally to non-great powers as it does to those states which have the most to gain from depicting a hierarchical order of which they sit at the top. For example, Stephen Harper, who would go on to become Canadian Prime Minister wrote in 2003 that “The world is now unipolar and contains only one superpower. Canada shares a continent with that superpower” (Canadian Alliance 2003) and the then Russian President, Dimitri Medvedev was quoted in 2008 as saying that “the world must be multipolar. Single polarity is unacceptable” (*Russia Today* 2008). In 2012, *The Economist* quoted the British Foreign Secretary on a tour of India as saying that the world has “never looked more multipolar” (Economist 2012) which followed the concern expressed by the US Secretary of State three years earlier that the United States would need to shift the world “away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world” (Clinton 2009). Taking the use of the term by practitioners as their cue, scholars have argued that certain understandings of the polarity of international society help frame important policy choices (Buzan 2004a; Brooks and Wohlforth 2009). For example Stefano Guzzini has demonstrated that,

Insisting on the unipolarity of the present international system...mobilises a justification for leadership and responsibility which, in turn, can justify the ‘inescapable’ and hence excusable, nature of unilateralism (and a consensus on multipolarity does the opposite) (2007: 36).

⁷ It is worth noting that this is probably more true for polarity than many other concepts in IR theory given its close association with the single most dominant theory in the teaching of IR over the past half century or more – realism – (Smith 2000; Mearsheimer 2002) and in particular with the work of Kenneth Waltz who has been so influential as to have led Ken Booth to state that “the discipline defines itself in relation to the authority of his work” (2009: 179).

If our theories of world politics are to have any relation to practice, then the perceptions of policymakers and other practitioners in relation to the shape of the global order must be engaged with in some way. If practitioners continue to use the concept of polarity to help order the complexity of international life, then the concept will remain important to IR theory. Yet as the historical analysis in Part II demonstrates, practitioners have repeatedly expressed their views of the polarity of international society in ways which would appear to contradict one another. Therefore the central question that this presents, and which this thesis attempts to answer is whether polarity theory can be reconfigured in order to deal with such ambiguity, contradiction and complexity.

What is variously referred to as Waltzian (after its original architect and symbolic figurehead, Kenneth Waltz), structural or most commonly, neorealism is the body of theoretical literature with which we would normally associate the concept of polarity. It is the neorealist body of work that has not only done the most to explore the concept and hypothesise its effects but also has placed it at the heart of its conception of the international system. Yet the overly deterministic and materially-dependent nature of neorealism (Ruggie 1983; Cox 1981) results in a need to look further afield for a theoretical framework that allows for a more complete picture of the role of the great powers (and therefore the real impact of a change in their number) in world politics. The challenge for polarity analysis at the present time is that the world appears to be amidst a period of profound confusion over its current form. As is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, the statements and actions of key actors could be used to depict a multi, bi or unipolar world depending entirely on whose perceptions are treated as being most accurate. Unsurprisingly, this puzzle is reflected in current IR scholarship as well. To give one illustration, in 2012, two major pieces of scholarship were published on the issue of global leadership and the exercise of the special

rights and responsibilities of the great/superpowers. One chose to focus exclusively on the United States (Bukovansky *et al.* 2012) in order to “shed original light on the social nature of American power, and how it comes to be variably instantiated in attempts to address key global problems” (22). The other, spoke of leading commentators “proclaiming the onset of the post-American world” (Kupchan 2012: 47) and argued that “the West should recognize” that its geopolitical leverage has “peaked” (168). The former was not in any way alone in depicting a world in which the United States is “not just an important actor but is also at the core of the system” (Narlikar 2010: 7) or in other words, unipolar (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Hansen 2011; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2011). The latter book too is not unique in depicting a world in which the idea that “America’s best days are behind it” has become widespread (Friedman and Mandelbaum 2011: 5) and that we are entering, if not already within, a multipolar era (Layne 2012a; Hurrell and Sengupta 2012; Held 2013).

What this tells us is that the proposition that “one finds general agreement about who the great powers of a period are, with occasional doubt about marginal cases” (Waltz 1979: 131), simply does not ring true. The question then becomes: if polarity in the contemporary era can simultaneously be perceived differently by different actors, has this happened in the past and what are the implications of this for the way we theorise about polarity?

A great deal of scholarship has dealt with the shortcomings of neorealism as a full explanation of the dynamics of systemic politics (various contributors to Keohane 1986; Milner 1993; Hobson and Lawson 2008; various contributors to May, Rosecrance and Steiner 2010), including Kenneth Waltz’s argument about the need for a separate theory of foreign policy to explain why states still act in a sub-optimal way (Elman 1996). Writing years after the publication of *Theory of International Politics* (1979), which still stands as the ultimate statement of neo or ‘structural’ realist theory, Waltz wrote that “Just as market theory at times requires a theory of the firm, so international-political theory at times needs

a theory of the state” (1985: 331, emphasis added). However this was only ever a limited qualification. In the same piece he pointed out that while a state could act as it pleased under the constraints of a system’s structure, “It will, however fare badly if some of the other parties are making reasonably intelligent decisions” (331). However, unless the critics of neorealism are prepared to dismiss the central importance of the great/superpowers in world politics as well as the enduring use of the concept of polarity by practitioners, a way of theorising about polarity and power transitions that moves beyond the confines of neorealism is required.

This thesis uses historical case studies to illustrate the enduring utility of polarity analysis for explaining some elements of state interaction by conceptualising polarity in a way that is attuned to both the material and ideational elements of power. In taking a holistic approach to using IR theory to build a framework for the study, this research will add to the burgeoning literature in the discipline that makes the case for what is being increasingly referred to as ‘analytical eclecticism’ (often associated closely with ‘theoretical pluralism’, although the distinction between the two is discussed further in Chapter Three). This literature (Little 2000; Katzenstein and Okawara 2001/2; Bellamy 2005; Sørensen 2008; Katzenstein and Sil 2008; 2010; Jackson 2011; Drezner 2012) – closely associated with Wendtian or ‘thin’ constructivism and the resurgence of the English school of IR – represents something close to a ‘middle ground’ between what has been labelled the rationalist and reflectivist approaches to IR (Smith 2007: 5). By, amongst other things, treating both material and ideational factors as equally important and moving between the ‘levels of analysis’ of system, state and individual, analytical eclecticism explicitly preferences complexity and contingency over parsimony (Katzenstein and Sil 2010: 210).

One of the other hallmarks of the kind of “complex causal stories that are cast at the level of middle-range theory” (*Ibid*: 208) of the analytical eclecticism project is a willingness to take

insights from more critical approaches to IR and apply them to the traditional ‘high politics’ questions of realism and liberalism (Solingen 2007; Paul 2009; Katzenstein and Sil 2010: 82; Drezner 2012). Despite the many momentous changes in world politics that have occurred during the time period under consideration in this study (1815 – 2015) including the continued expansion of ‘European international society’ (Bull and Watson 1984), decolonisation, the intensification of processes of globalization and the rise to almost ubiquity of the ‘non-state actor’ (Josselin and Wallace 2001), this stratification between great powers and non-great powers has continued to be a central feature of the international system.

Two examples – both of which are often used to demonstrate the inadequacy of state-centric approaches – illustrate this point: Firstly while many characterise the current period of world politics as being dominated by a so-called ‘war on terror’ (Youngs 2006; Jarvis 2009; Wittes 2009) which has elevated non-state actors to a central role in global political developments, the ‘terrorist threat’ that this war is meant to address is almost exclusively directed towards the US (the unipole), and to a lesser extent, its allies (Cox 2002; Jarvis 2009; Rogers 2010). It is rare to find a current example of analysis of global terrorism which is not dominated by references to US foreign policy and counter-terrorism policy throughout. While the very nature of globalised terror networks may instinctively lead analysts away from the more conventional realms of great powers and polarity, the disproportionately dominant role of the United States in the debates around appropriate responses to terrorism (including political, legal and ethical issues), alerts us to the importance of the unipolar interpretation of post-Cold War world politics (Coletta 2007; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). In fact, some would argue that almost the entire post-9/11, ‘war on terror’ era has been dominated by a debate around the merits or otherwise of the way the United States has capitalised on its unipolar position (Walt 2005; Layne 2009).

The second example takes the other common way of framing contemporary world politics as being the “age of climate change” (UN 2009). Again, whilst the phenomenon of climate change might point to the increasing relevance of a ‘post-Westphalian’ analysis in that the politics of CO₂ emission reductions involves important non-state actors such as multinational corporations, NGOs and scientific and other epistemic communities. However the much scrutinised fifteenth conference of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2009 showed that whilst a multitude of actors now play important roles in climate politics, the actions of, and importantly the relations between, the great powers still play a disproportionately large role in shaping the outcomes in this area of international life (Lynas 2009; Dimitrov 2010).

What is important to note here is that a state-centric approach does not necessarily imply reductionism or determinism. Perhaps the clearest statement of the need for contemporary IR to move beyond old debates about state-centrism and instead to understand that both mainstream and critical theories can be state-centric without excluding either the sub-state or the non-state world has been recently made by David Lake:

State-centrism is not a statement about the empirical world. No one working in this tradition is so naïve as to mistake the billiard balls of state-centric theory as a description of states in the real world. Everyone recognises that states have rich and sometimes highly consequential internal or domestic political lives. Likewise, everyone accepts that transnational forces can affect international politics in important ways. To point out that domestic or transnational politics exists and is not captured in state-centric theory is not an especially useful criticism; most state-centric theorists would certainly agree (2008: 45-6).

The argument that states remain particularly important for analysing world politics should not be taken to mean that other actors are unimportant or even *as* important. Nor does it mean that a study of this kind, which takes as its level of analysis the systemic relations between states, must take the view that domestic factors do not significantly shape state actions (in fact the focus on perceptions of polarity discussed in the next chapter puts particular emphasis on this).

The simple point of departure for this thesis is that while the relations between states remains an important factor in world politics, then the study of their social relations will continue to be a useful endeavour. In particular, until we reach an age where relations between states can be said to be genuinely non-hierarchical (see the discussion of the concept of ‘nonpolarity’ in Chapter Two), the study of which states are treated as great powers and which are treated as non-great powers will remain a vital piece of the puzzle of systemic analysis.

While discussing polarity does mean privileging the major powers and their primary concerns in terms of the main focus of historical analysis, this does not mean that all world politics can be reduced to great power politics. Clark has described the way in which great power politics and hierarchy affects all states not just those in a privileged position in the global order: “Hierarchy...collectivises decision making within the rank of Great Powers while retaining the anarchical form of politics as between that rank and the others. From the viewpoint of the smaller states, power politics is in no way diminished” (1989: 3). Attempting to understand the way that the polarity of international society affects the interactions of states does not mean that which happens outside of the realm of the great powers – both in terms of states and non-state actors – is any less important to a full analysis of current world politics.

Understanding the polarity of international society provides a way of capturing the shape of the global power structure in its most simple form. The ontological assumption (discussed further in Chapter Three) is that while practitioners use the concept as a frame of reference for their worldviews, theorising about polarity will remain an important task. Barry Buzan has noted that the concept of polarity has maintained an enduring and fundamental importance to capturing the major dynamics of world politics,

Despite both the descriptive and ethical challenges that can be put to it, and its failure to fulfil the more extreme ambitions for it, polarity has still been extremely useful in academic thinking about world politics and international security...Because it rests on a plausible claim to capture a fundamental feature of international politics, polarity offers a theoretical starting point from which one can build more nuanced analyses by bringing in other variables (2004a: 42-43).

This quote points to the limitations of a standard materialist version of polarity. As Buzan argues, standard versions of polarity are “essentially a material view of the system, resting on relative accumulations of capability. Such an approach discounts the whole social side of life “(2004a: 42). Yet the standard version of polarity can “be combined with constructivist and/or English school insights into the social structure of international systems” (*Ibid*: 43) to give a larger picture. Such a conception of polarity becomes useful as a:

Theoretical starting point because of the immediate way it bears on the relational logic among the players in the game of international politics. As noted, polarity does not always determine outcomes. But it is a very useful guide to understanding the logic of pressures and imperatives that are inherent in many situations, not just in military security, but also in diplomacy, international institutions and economic management (*Ibid*).

Two main reasons can be presented for returning to the issue of polarity at present, one relating to contemporary world politics, the other, contemporary IR theory. In terms of contemporary world politics – or at least very recent world history – polarity seems to have found its way back on to the ‘international agenda’ whether we like it or not. This has happened in two ways. On the one hand, despite the predictions of IR theorists (Krauthammer 1990/91) US unipolarity has endured for twenty years and has had a decisive effect on international political life,⁸ on the other hand both the popular and academic press is awash with tales of new ‘rising’ powers bringing with them a return to multipolarity in the next few decades. The well documented troubles of the world’s only superpower (ie. the unipole) in terms of pursuing its interests and successfully remaking the world in ‘its own image’ have become apparent in many areas from security (Rogers 2008) to the global

⁸ For a dissenting view, see Schweller 2010. This argument will be addressed in Chapter Two.

economy (Guerrieri 2010), prompting a return to the language of multipolarity in the empirical literature (Bisley 2010). According to Alexander Lennon and Amanda Kozlowski,

How China and India rise, how Russia reemerges, how Europe consolidates its experiment in shared sovereignty, how Japan chooses to define its international identity – and how the United States reacts to these developments – will shape the international system and the nature of international relations in the coming years (Lennon and Kozlowski 2008: viii) .

John Ikenberry has described some of the central questions animating scholars and practitioners alike today in the following terms: “What is the shape of the coming system? There is a very strong sense that we are at a turning point, that the old order is giving way to something new” (2009) while Fareed Zakaria asserts that, “the fact that new powers are more strongly asserting their interests is the reality of the post-American world. It also raises the political conundrum of how to achieve international objectives in a world of many actors...” (Zakaria 2008: 37). Perhaps most forcefully, Stanley Hoffman has written, “Where are we going? We face two large question marks. First, is this global anomie temporary – and if so, what is it a transition toward: a renewed bipolarity? a global multipolarity? A fully asserted American hegemony?” (Hoffmann 1998:5).

The second reason why polarity remains important is theoretical. After American unipolarity has endured for so long in practice (at least from the perspective of some scholars), recently IR theorists have returned to the concept of polarity by working unipolarity back in to the working assumptions of the theory that has most to say about polarity – neorealism (Mowle and Sacko 2007; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009a; 2011; Hansen 2011; Monteiro 2011/12). This theoretical development can be added to the larger move described above to apply the developments of the ideational turn in IR theory to more ‘traditional’ issues such as polarity. Chapter Two contains a full discussion of the ways in which IR theorists have used (and misused) the concept of polarity to add clarity to the systemic level of analysis.

Returning to the well-trodden path of the rise and fall of great powers, even in the form of historical analysis, albeit using a novel theoretical lens, can provide important lessons for the future. Stewart Patrick has summed up the need for such research for current and future policy makers,

As tough as it is to create new institutions, it is even harder to overhaul governance structures of existing ones to accommodate rising powers, much less eliminate obsolete institutions, given resistance from beneficiaries of the status quo as well as the bureaucratic interests of the institutions themselves (Patrick 2009: 80).

What Patrick does not contemplate in this quote is the added complexity of the material power held by the status quo powers and their rising challengers only being meaningful in as much as it is interpreted in the social world. In this social world, which states are and which states are not great powers at any one time can be a matter of contention where perception and misperception are all important.

Therefore, perhaps the rationale for this study can be most succinctly summarised by David Calleo when he writes, “When powerful and interdependent nations hold visions of the world severely at odds with one another, the world grows dangerous” (Calleo 2008: 63). Recent research linking the sociological concepts of social mobility and social competition to polarity has pointed to the increased level of competition between rising and status quo powers in times of transition (Larson and Shevchenko 2010b). This is well illustrated by Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko:

Japan turned to imperialism in the 1930s after the failure of the Meiji-era social mobility strategy of emulating the values and institutions of Western powers. Despite its economic and military successes, Japan was not regarded as a true member of the great power club, an exclusion made clear to the Japanese by the Paris Peace Conference’s rejection of a resolution against racism that was proposed by China and Japan (72).

This line of thinking fits with the overall argument of power transition theorists (Chan 2008) yet is not captured in the bulk of this literature given that it solely analyses material change

(de Soysa, Oneal and Park 1997) rather than the way “visions of the world” are expressed through words and actions.

The assumptions and aims of this thesis can therefore be summarised as follows:

- That the number of great/superpowers that exist at any one time continues to be an important factor in world politics, not least because both decision makers and analysts continue to describe international society in terms of its polarity;
- That the existing literature on the concept of polarity provides a useful starting point for understanding the effects in changes between multi, bi and unipolarity but that it does not adequately capture the complexity of the social relations between states;
- That by widening the theoretical framework within which ‘poles of power’ are analysed, a redefinition of polarity may be arrived at which can be applied to historical analysis in order to be able to theoretically account for the existence of differing perceptions of polarity;
- That in doing so, it may be possible to bridge the gap between the way the concept of polarity is used by practitioners and the way it is treated in the relevant IR literature.

The Importance of Perception

The classical, materially-dependent view of polarity leaves no theoretical space for confusion or disagreement over polarity. In this view, polarity has nothing to do with status, recognition or perception but instead exists in a ‘real’ world defined by material power which is distributed amongst the states that make up the international system ‘out there’ for anyone to observe. Yet the picture appears to be more complex than this would suggest.

William Thompson describes periods of “macro-structural change” where “distributions of power seem to be in flux” such as the early twenty-first century which leads scholars to

“disagree about the nature of the current international distribution of power and its implications for world politics” (2006: 1). Adam Roberts also describes the post-Cold War era as a “confusing and paradoxical” time resulting in “Babel-like confusion about how to characterize the contemporary system of international relations” (2008: 343). A number of examples demonstrate the extent of the confusion.

Writing seven years after the demise of the Soviet Union and the labelling of the new era as unipolar (Krauthammer 1990/91), one account described two different schools of thought amongst Chinese policymakers. The first “still views global politics operating very much in the same way as in the Cold War era” whereas the other “considers that a certain type of multipolarity is emerging, marked notably by the growing competition among three economic blocs – North America, Western Europe, and a potential East Asia economic bloc” (Beylerian and Canivet 1997: 194). In other words depending on who you spoke to, one could get a description of the international system as either mutli, bi or unipolar all at the same time.

As we shall see in Part II (Chapters Four to Six), such confusion and disagreement over the polarity of international society is more common in the historical record than one would expect operating under the neorealist assumptions of the traditional polarity literature. Whether during a period treated as uniformly multipolar such as the Nineteenth Century up to the end of World War II (McGowan and Rood 1975; Duncan and Siverson 1982; Saperstein 1991; Ikenberry 2011), the archetypal bipolar period of the Cold War (Wright 1950; Wagner 1993; Thies 2012) or a unipolar period of “hegemonic dominance” such as the post-Cold War period (Ikenberry 2001b; Beeson 2007), the analysis points to perceptions of polarity being prone to significant fluctuations.

An analytically eclectic (or what others might design as a theoretically pluralist) approach to polarity opens up space for such disagreement because the things being counted are not the

simply the sum of the material capabilities of the most powerful states but in fact the number of states that can be said to hold a particular social status. This social status is dependent upon a reciprocal construction: a state's view of itself and the view of it held by others (Buzan 2004a: 61). Therefore polarity only exists in as much as it is perceived by the members of a social system and those members could, theoretically, perceive polarity differently at any one time and those perceptions can change over time.

Existing Literature

In essence, this research investigates the type of issue typically found in 'mainstream' IR scholarship. That is to say it is examining inter-state relations both in terms of the focus on great power politics generally and on polarity more specifically. As is outlined further in Chapter Two, neorealist theorists in particular have devoted a great deal of attention to theorising the effects of different forms of polarity on stability, war, trade and alliances. A standard neorealist hypothesis would predict either that:

- a) Following a Waltzian analysis (Waltz 1964; 1979; Levy 1985; Morton and Starr 2001), a bipolar order will produce greater levels of stability and therefore fewer instances of conflict. This sort of system still contains the "least amount of fear among the great powers" (Mearsheimer 2001: 45) because of the roughly asymmetrical division of power between the two poles. However due to the tightness of the power configuration, the chances of overreaction and miscalculation are high in bipolar systems are therefore prone to periodic crises.

Or

b) Following the work of Deutsch and Singer (1964; Mansfield 1988), a multipolar order is more stable and less war-prone. Largely due to the increase in dyadic relationships which in turn increases the range of possible interactions, multipolarity should discourage arms racing as well as slow down the rate of escalation in a crisis. A multipolar order would also be more likely to result in an increase in cooperative relations according to Grieco as “larger numbers would enhance the likelihood that the relative achievements of gains advantaging (what turn out to be) better-positioned partners could be offset by more favorable sharings arising from interactions with (as matters develop) weaker partners” (1988: 506).

What was once the under-theorised notion of unipolarity (Kapstein and Mastanduno 1999; Mowle and Sacko 2007; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009a; 2011) can now be added to this with the recent work of Wohlforth arguing instead for the stability of unipolar arrangements (1999; 2009). Stability in a unipolar system is said to derive from the difficulties faced by potential challengers which discourages balancing and hegemonic challenges while encouraging bandwagoning, flocking and free-riding (Hansen 2011).

Neorealists who have turned from their general preoccupation with war and conflict to cooperation have only added general and vague hypotheses on this question. According to Peter Haas, neorealists predict that regimes will only persist “so long as such a power concentration exists; regimes will decline with the diffusion of international power” (Haas 1993: 181). This is to be expected given that the rational calculations of decision makers would depend on their objective assessment of the inter-state order and whether they are likely to increase their relative gains under conditions of uni, bi or multipolarity.

For those neoliberal institutionalists who do examine issues of structural power, the standard line of argument, aligning with the neorealist approach, generally referred to as ‘hegemonic stability theory’ maintains that cooperative arrangements will largely succeed under the

guidance of a hegemonic power which invests time, energy and reputation in building institutions if this power can recognise the benefits of the absolute gains made in doing so. In this line of thinking, hegemons will tie and enmesh themselves within institutions for the sake of providing system-wide order and therefore reducing the possible threats to the status quo in which the hegemon enjoys a privileged position (Ikenberry 2001a). Robert Keohane's seminal work on cooperation "after hegemony" argued that even in a world without hegemonic leadership in which discord is ever present, a relatively high degree in some areas, principally in the economic realm, was still possible. This was not based on hegemonic dominance but inter-state cooperation based on regimes which reduce transaction costs and "create the conditions for orderly multilateral negotiations, legitimate and delegitimate different types of state action, and facilitate linkages among issues..." (1984: 244). Guzzini (2006) has argued forcefully for the inadequacy and indeterminism of much of the literature associated with hegemonic stability theory (largely due to the rationalist and materialist biases inherent in neoliberal and neorealist approaches) particularly as it is used to describe US multilateralism. Even in as much as these theories have confined themselves to power (at least in the economic realm in which the lion's share of the neoliberal institutionalist and regime theory literature is concerned) as understood as material preponderance (Keohane 1984: 32), contradictory arguments have emerged. Hegemony has been said to both facilitate multilateral cooperation (Kindleberger 1973; Gilpin 1975) and stifle it (Boniface 2001; Patrick 2002). This thesis joins Guzzini in questioning the usefulness of such parsimonious theories of power and cooperation that solely rely on a limited understanding of power and a "basic force model, in which outcomes reflect the tangible capabilities of actors" (Keohane 1984: 34). This undermines the "possibility of an overall concept of power necessary for polarity analysis" (Guzzini 2006: 120) that could capture the complexity of a multilateral order based, at least in part, in

different perceptions of the power structure of international society. Structural power therefore, must be thought of as contingent upon the perceptions of actors who produce it by conferring on others the status of great/superpower or not and the factors that influence those perceptions.

It is beyond the scope of this study to empirically test all the different theories found in the polarity analysis literature (balancing, stability, cooperation etc.) using the redefinition of polarity. What the thesis does, taking its cue from the English school, is provide a history of international society using one of its primary institutions as a lens in order to provide an alternative basis for conceptualising polarity. It applies an alternative understanding of polarity to the historical record in order to see whether we can understand history through the prism of a less parsimonious and quantifiable definition of structural power.

Despite challenging much of the standard literature on the subject, this study explicitly focuses on the systemic level of analysis (albeit by combining it with the English school notion of what could be thought of instead as a societal level of analysis). In this sense, the research adds to the growing literature that takes the theoretical advances made by the 'ideational turn' in IR of the 1990s and applies these insights to the traditional 'high politics' of mainstream IR (Buzan 2004a, Little 2007a; Booth and Wheeler 2008; Clark 2009a; 2009b). At the same time, the focus of the research also clearly resonates with the renewed interest in systems theorising in IR which according to Mathias Albert and Lars-Erik Cederman, has "fallen on hard times" as "the fashion today in IR is decidedly toward micro- or unit-level theorizing" (2010: 1). This despite the claim by Albert and Cederman that the need for systems theorising has "if anything grown...the world system is more a single 'system' than ever before, the structure and dynamics of which only a truly systemic perspective can fully grasp" (2010:1-2). The following chapters are an attempt to develop this perspective further by returning to the time-honoured arena for structural realist theories

– the poles of power in the international system – but in a way which does not search for regularities and invariant laws based on a limited understanding of power.

Therefore this study searches for a way of engaging much more closely with the way that polarity is used by practitioners rather than being confined by the logics of abstract and parsimonious theories. When the publisher George Brockway wrote in the *New Leader* in 1981 that “Our bipolar world is different from everything that has gone before” (Brockway 1981) or when Chinese President, Hu Jintao spoke of the global trend “toward multipolarity” at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 (Hu 2012), neither made reference to the relative distribution of material capabilities. While some implicit measurement of material capabilities is undoubtedly inferred, this does not follow that their perceptions of a current bipolarity (in 1979) or an imminent multipolarity (in 2012) can be reduced to this. What they are fundamentally depicting is a world order where the dominance of the major powers is either split symmetrically in the case of the former or spread relatively evenly between multiple poles of power in the case of the latter. Because practitioners (including policy *makers* such as politicians and civil servants and policy *influencers* such as analysts, journalists, scholars and others) are basing their actions on an idea of the number of states who hold a particular status in terms of ‘high politics’ diplomacy, rather than a description of the distribution of capabilities (which theoretically may or may not align with this number) polarity analysis must find some way of reflecting this.

While a full study that reconceptualises polarity along these lines and applies it to analysing the historical record has not thus far been attempted, a number of scholars in various sub-fields of IR have pointed to the need for this kind of analysis. While some recent advances have been made in examining the ideational elements of status recognition, prestige and honour and their relationship with conflict (Ringmar 2002; Wohlforth 2009; Linderman 2010), this has not been extended to the relationship to perceptions of power. Buzan’s book

on *The United States and the Great Powers* (2004) provides an important point of entry for this study by explicitly locating “polarity within a social context” (2004a: 3). Using Alexander Wendt’s typology of the potential relationships of states existing along a spectrum of friend-rival-enemy, Buzan combines a traditional materialist approach to polarity with a constructivist approach to identity. This is particularly important as he argues forcefully for the need to engage with the concept of polarity but in ways that capture the complexity of the social world inhabited by states. Yet this approach is still limited to arguing that “while polarity and social structure can and do interact in powerful ways, they are essentially independent variables” (183). Doing so allows Buzan to claim that within the structural constraints of the distribution of material capabilities, the identities of the major powers, and how they relate to each other (and the non-great powers) “is a key element in how one interprets the configurations of polarity” (28). However, this approach is ultimately inconsistent with a more powerful English school analysis (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) in which the original distinction put forward by Hedley Bull between the international system and international society is discarded.⁹ Only when this ontological move is made can we begin to get a handle on how to theorise about breakdowns in perceptions of polarity. Without doing so, Buzan’s approach, while opening up a considerable amount of theoretical space to discuss the social expression of polarity, still leaves the definition of what constitutes a great/superpower to realism.

Realism does offer a powerful way of grasping the implications of “the role power relationships play in reconciling clashing interests” (Wohlforth 2008: 134) under conditions of international anarchy. However, by being solely situated within a realist framework, decades of scholarship on the issue of polarity has consistently suffered from the fact that realism on its own is unable to account for the social world in which those power

⁹ Interestingly another work by Buzan (2004b) is one of the key texts used in Chapter Three to justify blurring this distinction.

relationships take place. In this sense, realist theories of power, including structural power, are fundamentally incomplete. Andrew Hurrell has noted that “It is one of the great paradoxes of academic International Relations that, because it so resolutely neglects the social dimensions of power, realism is unable to give a full or convincing account of its own proclaimed central category” (Hurrell 2007: 39; see also Schmidt 2007: 53 and Walt 2002: 222). Clark has made a similar point arguing that despite the fact that when the distribution of power is analysed in theory it is almost always conceptualised in material terms, “The much harder challenge for IR theory is to make sense of a concept of the distribution of power that includes the complexities of that social purpose” (2009b: 477). In its framing of polarity in the context of its expression in international society, this thesis, to some extent, answers Clark’s challenge. By adopting an analytically eclectic framework which takes the focus on polarity from neorealism and combines it with the English school understanding of great power status as a key element of international society, it is able to move beyond the limits of realism’s materialist explanation of power.

While for many years, the English school tradition was thought to accept the central assumptions of realism when it came to the dominance of the great powers (Dunne 2008: 279), in fact the idea that polarity is first and foremost perceived by social actors has long been implicit in much of this work. Bull claimed that “The idea of a great power...presupposes and implies the idea of an international society” (1977: 202) and international society is derived from “the development among states of a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life” (*Ibid*: 67). Therefore international society is produced by its members (*Ibid*: 71) who in order to confer the status of great/superpower must first recognise any claim to such status (*Ibid*: 202). Adam Watson’s work (1992; Suganami 2005: 32-3) on comparative international systems hints at the need for analysing the social dimensions of polarity including perceptions or understandings of different forms

of international order (albeit characterised in a different form to the discussion here of polarity). In discussing Watson's spectrum of order between multiple independencies at one end and empire at the other (with hegemony and dominion in between), Hidemi Suganami observes that Watson's analysis of the factors that determine where on the spectrum any given system will be placed includes "the understanding, on the part of all concerned, about the legitimate structure of the system along the spectrum" (Suganami 2005:33).

In a piece where he analyses the effect of what he calls the "social fact of unipolarity" Guzzini (2006: 133) has made a similar point arguing that,

...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. It is important not just because theories are built upon it, but 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 (Guzzini 2006: 133).

Implicit in Guzzini's argument is that despite the problems associated with neorealist polarity analysis, the concept cannot simply be abandoned. If practitioners "understand and base actions" upon an understanding of the world that includes some notion of the inter-state order taking a particular form of polarity, then polarity analysis must be reconfigured rather than discarded. Jack Donnelly (2006) has provided perhaps the most succinct expression of how the great powers can be conceptualised in a more contingent and less materially-reliant sense:

Not only the particular rights but the very existence of the Great Powers is constituted through the norms and institutions of the society of states. Unsurpassed power resources are a necessary but not sufficient condition for Great Power status – which is precisely that, a status, a rule-governed social relation involving functional differentiation, not just differences in capabilities. Great Powers are a socially constituted type of actor playing a particular (unequal) role in international society (2006: 153).

Such an analysis of polarity and its effect on the actions of states builds upon recent work that argues that "polarity can only be useful if interpreted through the social structure in

which it is embedded” (Buzan 2004a: 15; Guzzini 2006, 2007) as well as the established work within foreign policy analysis (FPA) that focuses on how agents interact with structures (Jervis 1976; Wohlforth 1993; Levy and Ripsman 2009; Kim 2009). The FPA literature on perception and misperception in strategic relations between states provides an important precedent for focusing specifically on perceptions of polarity. Jervis’ work on this issue (whilst building on earlier work such as Farrell and Smith 1967) was pioneering with his 1976 book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* still after more than thirty years being used as the major theoretical starting point for this area of scholarship (Fernández Sola and Smith 2009). In it he argued that “perceptions of the world and of other actors diverge from reality in patterns that we can detect and for reasons that we can understand” (3). The vast majority of the book focuses on unit-level variables and individual cognitive patterns but some of the ideas contained, for example on the ways in which “actors exaggerate the degree to which they play a central role in others’ policies” (343) have relevance for analysing differing perceptions of global polarity. This work made effective use of Kal Holsti’s earlier conception of “national role conception” (1970) which focused on elite perceptions of a nation’s role in the international arena (Hudson 2007: 24).

The most important work within this literature for this study is that of William Wohlforth (1987; 1993; 2009). In particular his book length study of perceptions of the balance of power between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War, *The Elusive Balance* (1993) and an earlier article on the perceptions of Russian power pre-1914 on the parts of Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia itself are relevant to the study of perceptions of polarity. Wohlforth argued that “perceived power is clearly an important medium – and short-term explanatory variable. In some ways, it links long-term changes in the distribution of power with short-term perceptual explanations of the onset of war” (1987: 381). His analysis of the lead up to World War I confirms Stephen Van Evera’s

earlier claim that misperceptions were the “taproot of the war” (1985: 116) and leads to the conclusion that it is “misleading to discuss the timing of the war solely by reference to systemic shifts in power as measured by numerical indicators” (Wohlforth 1987: 379).

In *The Elusive Balance* Wohlforth examines the way American and Soviet perceptions of both each other and themselves diverged at critical points during the roughly forty five year period of the Cold War. By using historical research of the way decision makers and advisors spoke and wrote about the balance of power between the two superpowers he shows how changes in perception helped create four crisis periods; the immediate post-war period of 1945-47, the intensification of 1949-51, the series of intense crises between 1959-62 and the final phase of “high tension” of 1979-85. From this analysis he concludes that

Rapid changes in perceptions, the ambiguity of feedback, and the rarity and inadequacy of tests all translate into the prevalence of differences in perceptions of power among the major actors in world politics. The fact that even world war may fail to clarify fully the distribution of power must be regarded as the rule rather than the exception (1993: 301).

If this is correct and war may not even clarify the polarity of a system then it follows that the peacemaking that follows war which could equally be looked to in terms of providing clarity to the question of who sits at the ‘top table’ or acting as a kind of polarity litmus test, will be similarly insufficient (Clark 2001).

While Wohlforth’s work on perception and power is about as close to an approach to power generally as is adopted in this study, it nevertheless is mainly focused on specific understandings of particular power relative dynamics in specific relationships – that is, he analyses shifts in the balance of power *within* a particular form of polarity. The focus here is to go wider and to analyse understandings of the polarity of the whole system (ie. the sum of all the power relationships in Wohlforth’s analysis) across a relatively large period of time and to focus on changes (perceived or otherwise) *of* polarity.

Redefining Polarity

This thesis advances a redefinition of the concept of polarity. The standard definition of polarity in the existing literature is “the distribution of capabilities among the major structure-producing states” (Grieco 2007: 65). Structural change therefore can be thought of in terms of “changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system’s units” (Waltz 1979: 99).

In contrast this thesis defines polarity as:

The number of states perceived as holding the social status of great/superpower at any one time.

This definition does not preclude material capabilities being important in determining polarity, in fact the analysis in Part II of this thesis demonstrates that they are centrally important. What the definition does is to abandon the notion that material capabilities singularly determine polarity. This is an important theoretical move as it opens up the theoretical space for ideational as well material factors to be important in constituting the polarity of an international system or society. It also creates the theoretical possibility for an empirical problem that is demonstrated to be historically important in the analysis in Part II – the breakdown of collective perceptions of polarity. If polarity is defined, as it is traditionally, as being the sum of the distribution of quantifiable attributes (military, economy, resources, population etc.), then there is little or no theoretical space for contradictory ideas of the shape of the international order being held by different actors at the same time (unless one assumes an informational problem in which different actors are unable to attain accurate data on those capabilities). The only way to be able to account of this phenomenon theoretically is by moving towards a position in which instead of using a “national accounting basis for polarity” one focuses on “the ability of a state to achieve and retain the status of being a consequential and independent actor in world politics even if others try to reduce that state’s importance or independence” (Grieco 2007: 70).

The working hypothesis of this research is that it is not changes in polarity per se that affect the form and function of international society but instead the degree of shared perception of the system's polarity in the first place. That is to say, the consensus amongst members of international society as to which states should be considered a pole of power at a given moment in time and therefore how many exist at that juncture (making the system unipolar, bipolar or multipolar). Such an approach focuses both on perceptions of polarity itself as well as changes of polarity. This hypothesis would predict that when the this new definition of polarity is applied to the historical record, it will be possible to identify times of 'cognitive dissonance' (discussed further in Chapter Three) in relation to the polarity of international society – when some members of international society view the world as being, for example multipolar while others view it as unipolar.

Birthe Hansen has argued for the importance of studying times of transition between forms of polarity as “States may take risks out of fear or because they *perceive* a window of opportunity to obtain long wished for gains while everything is in a mess or because they want to prevent others from doing the same” (2001: 14). Hansen argues that changes in polarity can take the form of a process which plays out over several years and during this period “some units may react to or anticipate the development according to *their particular perception* of the time and the consequences of the change” (2001: 17 emphasis added). Again, Calleo illustrates well the contemporary relevance of a sensitivity to the dynamic of changes in perception of polarity:

Periods of fundamental geopolitical change are particularly challenging, charged, as they usually are, with fanatical projects and frightening possibilities. Comprehending and mastering big shifts in historical forces requires creative leaps of national imagination. Today, with the world rapidly growing more plural in its distribution of power and wealth, a lingering unipolar world view isolates the United States from the reality to which it should be adapting (Calleo 2008: 63).

This hypothesis adds an additional layer of complexity to this empirical study as it requires a theoretical framework that allows for an analysis of the ways in which material and

ideational change (in this case changes in the perception of polarity on the part of different actors) affects the interaction of states. This requires an understanding of the social dynamic of inter-state relations or what the English school of IR refer to as ‘international society.’ This framework is set out in Chapter Three.

Case Studies

In general, the standard history of changes in the global polarity tends to posit change occurring over fairly long time periods (decades rather than years) making a reasonably long historical timeframe necessary for this study. While it is possible, under the theoretical framework outlined here, to study perceptions of power (broadly defined) further back into world history with a focus on status in a social hierarchy, 1815 marks an important ‘benchmark date’ (Buzan and Lawson 2012) for this study. As we are primarily concerned with the question of whether the concept of polarity can be re-defined by focusing more carefully on the social construction of the great/superpowers as the main unit of analysis, 1815 stands out as the point from which polarity analysis is at its most useful. This is because the whole concept of a social hierarchy based upon great and non-great powers as distinct categories of social actors becomes institutionalised from this point onwards. Before this time older dynastic, religious and other forms of social hierarchies still persisted in various forms. As Hurrell has noted, “The replacement of older formal hierarchies by a hierarchy of power only occurred with Napoleon’s abolition of the Holy Roman Empire in 1800 and with the new forms of diplomatic precedence introduced at Vienna in 1815” (1999: 251-2). It is from the diplomatic watershed of the Congress of Vienna that the case study chapters begin. From this point onwards, right up to the current time, the concept of polarity as defined as the number of great/superpowers in existence at any one time, becomes one of the defining images used by practitioners and scholars alike to make sense of world politics. The Congress marks the high point of the institutionalisation of the

concept of great power management, a concept that has remained central to diplomatic life ever since (*Ibid*: 254). While the concept is closely linked to the concept of the balance of power which has a much longer history (see Chapter Four and Little 2007a; Little *et al.* 2008), if the definition of polarity is linked to the notion of great power *status*, then 1815 onwards becomes a manageable time period in which to study its effect.

There are two reasons why this theoretical framework lends itself to more of an emphasis on historiography rather than deep empirical research. The first is one of practicality. To study perceptions of polarity requires long historical timeframes. While diplomatic history might be thought of as being dominated by the rise and fall of great powers, the fact is that ideas about order tend to fluctuate over years and even decades rather than weeks and months. Therefore the study of changes in polarity requires covering (sometimes many) decades of history and therefore makes narrative history which focuses on generalisations and large-scale trends rather than very specific actions and interactions a more appropriate methodology.

The second reason, related to the first, is that a theoretical argument if it is to be robust needs to be able to make sense in general and macro contexts rather than only geographically or chronologically specific ones. While this thesis argues for a more historically and socially contingent understanding of polarity, this does not mean that theorising about polarity must be reduced to the kind of specificity associated with FPA and area studies. To put it simply, while Part II will feature a good deal of analysis of the words and actions of politicians, officials and influential commentators, this data is still used to illustrate particular examples of perceptions of polarity within a wider historiography of the period in question. Rather than focusing on uncovering new sources and data somehow overlooked by historians, the empirical chapters of this study instead aim to tell an alternative history of the polarity of international society by applying a redefinition of the

concept of polarity itself. This new definition will be proved not only necessary but theoretically useful by the extent to which the standard account of the shifts between multi, bi and unipolar formations will be demonstrated to be at odds with international discourse and actions at the time.

Organisation

The following chapters will examine how analytical eclecticism offers a way forward for advancing polarity analysis in a less materially-dependent way before applying this framework to the case studies discussed above. Chapter Two discusses the concept of polarity in more detail in both theory and history. Chapter Three discusses in more detail the theoretical framework used for this discussion including the choice of English school language over neoclassical realism or Wendtian Constructivism as well as the ontological, epistemological and methodological implications of opting for an English school understanding of polarity. Part II (chapters Four-Six) provide the historical platform for this theoretical analysis to play out. Each chapter analyses the evolution of perceptions of which states could be thought of as holding the social status of great/superpower by using the public pronouncements of practitioners and analysts as well as state conduct (ie. which states are and are not treated as poles of power) as an index for this. It traces changes and fluctuations in perceptions of polarity through three periods of history. Each period, in the standard reading of the last almost two hundred years of history are normally associated with one of the types of polarity. Chapter Four analyses the (so-called) multipolar period of 1815-1945, Chapter Five, the bipolar period of 1946-1989 and Chapter Six, the unipolar period of 1990-2012. Chapter Seven returns back to the macro-historical/theoretical level to draw out the conclusions of this research and looks towards the future in terms of perceptions of power transitions and their effect on international society.

If the US National Intelligence Council (2012) is correct in its assertion that the world is “at a critical juncture in human history”, due in part to a “tectonic shift” in global power, then it would appear that the time is ripe for returning to the issue of polarity. As the world continues to exist in a period of perceptual flux in relation to global polarity, having at least some sense of how we can understand this phenomenon theoretically and how it relates to our existing theories of IR will be of central importance. The following chapters are an attempt to add some greater clarity to this area of international life.

Chapter Two: Polarity in Theory and History

*Indeed, it took policy makers and analysts quite some time to grasp the fact of bipolarity. Serious postwar planning by the United States began in 1942. William Fox's book, *The Super-Powers*, which introduced that term into the political lexicon, still assumed that there would be three of them. John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity* (1998: 125).*

This study starts from the position that changes in the number of the most powerful states in international society has been and will continue to be a centrally important feature of world politics for the foreseeable future. This is an almost intuitive proposition given the way history has largely been told, rightly or wrongly, through the lens of the politics of the great powers. Even in a contemporary context when political life has become more crowded with a much wider range of actors the 'big issues' of our times from climate change to terrorism to the spread of HIV Aids to the development of new weapons technologies, reportage, analysis and debate is nonetheless dominated by the way the most powerful states react to and shape policy agendas around these issues. Yet before we can really understand the ways that the great/superpowers influence a particular issue we must deal with the issue of exactly how we know which states are and which states are not the 'poles of power' of the day.

But to bring polarity 'back in' does not necessarily mean a return to old, and ultimately fruitless, debates of days gone by. Nor does it mean that a purely mechanistic or asocial view of the world must be adopted. This chapter deals with the ways in which the concept of polarity has been used in the past as well as particularly important issues around measuring power and defining 'poles' of power. This allows us to interrogate the traditional polarity literature in greater depth in terms of outlining the starting point in the IR literature from which we must depart. The chapter first discusses the place of polarity analysis in the literature, including the key debate over the issue of stability, as well as examining the ontological issue of the forms of polarity that have, or could, exist. This raises the issue of

measurement and the problems with analysing changes in and of polarity empirically. Using Buzan's formulation of 'complex polarity theory' to disaggregate regional from global polarity and focusing on the importance of perception the chapter outlines the need for a version of polarity that is able to transcend the pitfalls of neorealism.

Polarity in Theory

Thinking about the structures or system-level features of world politics inevitably means engaging, at least in some degree, with the notion of polarity. Political and social analysts throughout history have agreed on the fact that the number of actors in a social system makes a difference to the dynamics of that system (Russett and Starr 1996: 93). To go a step further is to claim that the distribution of power (in whatever forms it takes) amongst those actors will make a significant difference to their relations with each other. A different way to frame this is to make the case that the degree of social hierarchy that exists between these actors (regardless of what that hierarchy is based upon) will also affect the way they relate to and interact with each other.

Clark has described the inherently hierarchical nature of world politics as:

a social arrangement characterised by stratification in which, like the angels, there are orders of power and glory and the society is classified in successively subordinate grades. This hierarchy is commonly assigned in terms of politico-military power, yielding the traditional groupings of Great Powers, medium powers, and small powers (1989: 2).

For scholars of IR, of particular interest is the number of great powers or 'poles of power' that exist at any one time. The concept of a differentiation between great and non-great powers in the international system has therefore played a central role in the development of nearly all theoretical approaches to IR (Buzan and Albert 2010), with Carr describing the "dictatorship of the Great Powers" as being "a fact which constitutes something like a 'law of nature' in international politics" (1939a: 105). As Kenneth Waltz has so elegantly put it,

“for more than three hundred years, the drama of modern history has turned on the rise and fall of great powers” (Waltz 1993: 44).

It has been observed that while the notion of polarity may have many critics it has no serious rival (Buzan 1995: 207). Exact definitions of the term vary slightly but it is generally taken to refer to the number of ‘particularly powerful’ states relative to the remaining states in the international system (Mansfield 1993: 106). While this definition could potentially be reconciled with the definition put forward in this thesis, the reality is that the vast majority of the work on polarity by IR scholars uses a highly restrictive definition of power (discussed further below). For example, for Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, the “degree of inequality in the distribution of power” that creates polarity is reducible to “the potential ability to wage war” (1975: 189). In the existing literature, polarity therefore is, in its simplest form, a characterisation of the distribution of power (however it is defined) amongst the ‘great powers.’ It is said to structure “the horizon of states’ probable actions and reactions, narrowing the range of choice and providing subtle incentives and disincentives for certain types of behaviour” (Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009b: 5). Such a description of the importance of polarity instantly alerts us to the fact that the concept is unable to provide an all-encompassing grand explanation for the complexities of world politics. This means that its utility must be judged against more modest goals. While it may not be able to be used to answer every question relating to the great powers in world politics, it is a very useful basis on which to add other factors to build an answer (Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009).

Identifying the polarity of an international system provides an avenue for clarifying the systemic ‘level of analysis’ in IR and what its structural effect might be on world politics, not least the foreign policies of states. The appeal of polarity as an organising concept when

analysing great power politics is captured by its adoption in discourse outside of the academic discipline of IR.¹⁰ As one account puts it,

Whatever problems academics might have with it, polarity has been hugely influential in public debates about international relations. This success is not just confined to the Cold War, when bipolarity framed the bulk of the discourse, but extends right down to the present day. The unipolar interpretation of world politics has steadily gained strength in the public discourse, and has been much reinforced by the surge in US unilateralism following September 11 (Buzan 2004a: 45).

Patrick James and Michael Brecher (1998) point out that academic debates around different polarity systems have been going on since the 1960's citing Kenneth Waltz's case for the stability of bipolarity (Waltz 1964), Karl Deutsch and David Singer's criticism of this and their preference, following Kaplan (1957), for multipolarity instead (Deutsch and Singer 1964) and Richard Rosecrance's synthesising assertion about the stability of what he called 'bi-multipolarity' (Rosecrance 1966). One of the reasons for the ongoing success of polarity theory in the academic literature from this time onwards was that it "tapped into older traditions of diplomatic analysis, international history and realism that also centred themselves on great powers, power politics and the balance of power" (Buzan 2004a: 36). Debates continued throughout the 1970s and 80s – particularly nurtured by the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and the *Correlates of War* project which had been started in 1963 at the University of Michigan under the leadership of J. David Singer and Melvin Small. The goal of the project (which still continues today) was to contribute to "systematic accumulation of scientific knowledge about war" (Correlates of War 2012). This led a number of scholars associated with it to develop data sets relating to what they called "state-system membership" and the distribution of material capabilities amongst them. Particularly

¹⁰ For example see Chirac (2000); John (2003); United States Department of State (2003); Keating (2008); Benner (2008); Hongmei (2009). The term has even been used in the popular press to describe Australian and Indian dominance in international cricket! See, Sinha (2008).

influential was the creation of the Composite Index of National Capability data set¹¹ which measured states against six indicators: military expenditure, military personnel, energy consumption, iron and steel production, urban population, and total population. Uncovering and analysing such historical data was prioritised over qualitative historical research in the project's outputs as power was understood as a state's capacity to "exercise influence and to resist influence attempts" (Singer 1987: 115) and therefore was treated as something a state possesses rather than something that is afforded them by others.¹² It is interesting to note that whilst the importance of the relative distribution of power amongst states had been well understood by diplomatic historians before the onset of the Cold War, it is only since then that polarity has come to be explicitly studied in academic writing and used in public discourse. Two factors may be identified as being particularly significant in this. Firstly, the early Cold War period saw an upsurge in positivist theories of IR which attempted to emulate the precision and rigour of the natural sciences, a process that naturally encouraged quantitative analysis (such as measuring power and counting the number of great powers). Secondly, this period was characterised by a particular form of polarity, bipolarity, which by virtue of its more concentrated nature brought the issue to the forefront of public discourse via features such as arms racing, alliance politics and nuclear deterrence.

Polarity and Stability

One of the major arguments of those who have chosen to examine the issue of polarity is that there is a clear causal relationship between the polarity of the international system and the level of stability that can be observed at that time. As already mentioned, Waltz famously gave polarity a normative assessment as early as the 1960s when he argued for the stability of bipolarity (Waltz 1964). The essence of his argument rested on the particular

¹¹ This data is now included in the larger National Material Capabilities (v3.02) data set covering the period 1816-2001 and now including more than just the major powers.

¹² It is worth noting however that the project has produced data sets on issues which can be used for such research including membership of intergovernmental organisations diplomatic representations.

way in which he thought states would balance each other in a bipolar world. Under conditions of multipolarity he argued, states will attempt to balance against each other using external means, primarily using alliances. This of course drew on the logic of the ‘balance of power’ often associated with the international politics of 19th Century Europe.¹³ In contrast, Waltz claimed that bipolarity forced the two poles to try and balance each other through internal mechanisms such as domestic economic growth and technical innovation (particularly military technology). The difference in the two types of balancing for Waltz is that external balancing is much more complex and therefore uncertain and for Waltz (or any realist for that matter), uncertainty breeds instability and war (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 21-41). Waltz also claimed that bipolar systems are also characterised by lower levels of economic interdependence (which he thought of primarily in terms of vulnerability) than multipolar systems which has a further stabilising effect on world politics as states will be less conflict-prone (Waltz 1979: Grieco 1997: 172).

The vision of bipolarity being more stable than multipolarity in theory survived the collapse of bipolarity in practice at the end of the Cold War. According to John Mearsheimer, the events leading up to the two world wars of the Twentieth Century “amply illustrate the risks that arise in a multipolar world. Deterrence was undermined in both cases by phenomena that are more common under a multipolar rather than a bipolar distribution of power” (Mearsheimer 1990: 24).

Mearsheimer’s thesis (building on the theoretical work of Waltz) was that given the likelihood of returning to a multipolar system, the world was in for a more violent and unstable future. Yet Vasquez argues that Mearsheimer’s work is fatally flawed in its failure to even acknowledge the existence of, let alone engage with, the large body of empirical work found in the peace studies literature which deals with the stability (or lack thereof) in

¹³ For a comprehensive analysis of Waltz’s treatment of the concept of the balance of power in his classic book *Theory of International Politics*, see Little (2007: 167-212).

both bipolar and multipolar systems. According to Vasquez, even a cursory review of the historical evidence would at the very least raise serious questions about the validity of Mearsheimer's predictions. He argues that while viewing the occurrence of conflict throughout the 1990s – the first Gulf War, the civil wars in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda – as indicators of the instability of multipolarity might be psychologically persuasive, “it ignores the violent disturbances of the Cold War – the Czech coup, China, Korea, Hungary, Suez, the Congo, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Middle East, Afghanistan” (Vasquez 1998: 294).

The vast majority of the literature on polarity and stability is unashamedly deterministic and reductionist. Relatively simple correlations are made between one form of polarity or another and stability on the one hand and instability on the other (Bueno de Mesquita 1978; Scarborough 1988; Copeland 2000; Mearsheimer 2001). Almost all decisions about war and peace can be reduced to shifts in polarity and this is the major determining factor in the outbreak of major conflict between states. However more recent approaches have tried to move away from this determinism and instead attempt to characterise their causal elements as “probabilistic” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002; 2008) rather than universally deterministic. Under the theoretical framework outlined here, whether a strict determinism or a probabilistic approach is taken, the key element in terms of causality is not an ‘objective’ analysis of polarity but an historically informed understanding of *perceptions* of polarity.

Forms of Polarity

In contrast to many other conceptual tools used by IR theorists, there are relatively few ontological debates within polarity analysis.¹⁴ It is generally accepted that the polarity of an international system can take one of three possible forms. A Unipolar system has only one

¹⁴ As is discussed below, a small number of works in the post-Cold War period have attempted to problematise the strict formulation of three categories of polarity described here. See Huntington (1999); Buzan, (2004a).

pole of power, a bipolar system is somewhat symmetrically divided between two poles and a multipolar system contains three or more (with there being, in theory, no maximum number of poles of power in a multipolar system).

The fourth form that some scholars claim polarity can take is tripolarity. This is a more specific form of multipolarity made up of three poles. Whilst this configuration has been used in some empirical analysis it appears to have little theoretical utility as a form of polarity distinct from multipolarity.¹⁵ Not only does tripolarity simply refer to a particular form of multipolarity (ie. the smallest and therefore most concentrated form), it has rarely been used to describe the polarity of an entire system. Instead some have used the term to describe the distribution of power in a particular region – most commonly the Asia-Pacific region from the late 1960s until the end of the Cold War.¹⁶ One of the key features of polarity, perhaps that which makes it a useful for analysing world politics generally, is that it measures the systemic distribution of power and not simply the distribution in a given region.¹⁷

Finally, a small literature has recently begun to discuss the idea of what is referred to as nonpolarity (Haass 2008; Schweller 2010). According to Richard Haass, a nonpolar world is one which is characterized by “numerous centers with meaningful power” (2008: 44). Of particular interest is the spread of material power to non-state actors such as multinational corporations and international organisations. Both Haass and Randall Schweller have highlighted the way in which such a system tends to be less associated with order and more

¹⁵ Randall Schweller uses the concept of tripolarity to provide a structural analysis of the origins of the Second World War (1993).

¹⁶ Michael Yahuda describes the period of 1971-89 in the international relations of the Asia-Pacific region as being tripolar with the three poles being the United States, the Soviet Union and China (1996). Yet Yahuda himself writes, “There is some merit in this view, but it should not be exaggerated. China did not carry the same strategic weight as the other two and its impact on global configurations of power was still quite limited” (77; also Segal 1982). Perceptions of China’s status in the 1970s and 80s are discussed further in Chapter Five.

¹⁷ This has not prevented some in applying the concept to regional settings (Ross 1999).

with randomness and entropy (Schweller 2010; Haass 2008: 52). While neither Haass or Schweller's arguments for describing the current international system as nonpolar are convincing (both are in fact describing what would normally be categorised as unipolarity and a gradual shift towards multipolarity combined with the rise of importance of non-state actors which is conflated with the hierarchical ordering between states), there could, in theory, be something to this formulation. However a nonpolar world – where power is so diffuse that no set of states can claim a privileged status – could only be theoretically possible in a simple neorealist formulation where power is thought of solely in material terms and as something a state simply possesses rather than holds in relation to others. In the analytically eclectic version of polarity outlined in the next chapter, it is much harder to imagine a nonpolar world ever being possible because this way of thinking about polarity takes seriously the role of prestige, identity and status as well as the relational nature of power. To put it simply, until it can be said that in terms of social hierarchy the United States occupies an identical position to Vanuatu and China likewise to Estonia, nonpolarity is a highly unlikely empirical phenomenon which adds little theoretical clarity to analysing world politics. Even with the rise in importance of non-state actors from Microsoft to the World Trade Organisation to Al-Qaeda, the likelihood that states will continue to hierarchically organise themselves into great and non-great powers in their social relations with each other demonstrates the unlikelihood of a nonpolar world. Just because other actors rise in importance relative to states does not mean that the relations between states will not continue to be characterised by hierarchy and therefore (until the social institution of the great powers declines in practice) polarity.

However there are further grounds for scepticism about the extent of the relative decline of states in relation to non-state actors for as Brooks and Wohlforth point out, "Most nonstate actors' behaviours, moreover still revolves around influencing the decisions of states"

(2009: 56). The degree of novelty of the phenomenon of influential non-state actors, what Haas describes as a “tectonic shift from the past” (2008: 44) is also less than convincing, given that:

...Nonstate actors are nothing new – compare the scale and scope of today’s pirates off the Somali coast with those of their eighteenth-century predecessors or the political power of today’s multinational corporations with that of such behemoths as the British East India Company – and projections of their rise may well be as much hype as reflections of reality (2008: 56).

While arguments about the independent effects of, for example, inter-governmental organisations have been convincingly established (Boehmer, Gartzke and Nordstrom 2004; Barnett and Finnemore 2005), rarely is this used to demonstrate the end of the hierarchical inter-state order. The diffusion of power to actors other than states does not necessarily make the relations between states themselves any less dominated by a small number of major players. Nor are the power relations between states, including their relative status, insignificant in shaping the influence of such organisations (Hurrell 2005).

Interestingly, Schweller’s argument about unipolarity leading to entropy and therefore to polarity becoming “less meaningful” was anticipated five years before in William Thompson’s 2005 International Studies Association Presidential Address when he remarked that,

Although a unipolar outcome, should one emerge, must be the product of structural change, it seems to encourage many onlookers to think that structural change has slowed to a halt or at least become suspended for a period of time (2006: 2).

In other words unipolarity being taken to be a lack of polarity is simply misplaced analysis due to a flawed logic. For exactly the same reasons that Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) argue that the unipole has a unique opportunity to shape the structure and character of the international system – due to a fundamental lack of effective constraints – Schweller argues that a system process of entropy rather than the structure of unipolarity has come to define

the post-Cold War period. This is based on the idea that “boundless freedom breeds randomness” and that under unipolarity, “regional subsystems follow their own logic and that is where the action is” (2010: 150). Yet neither trait is reason enough to discard global polarity analysis. The degree of randomness exhibited by the United States in the post-Cold War period and other unipoles in other periods of history (Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth 2007) can be disputed, particularly by the large literature analysing the greater degree of consistent unilateralism in US foreign policy in what Schweller is describing as a unipolar period (Dumbrell 2002; Walt 2005; Monten 2007). And whether regional subsystems can simply be said to follow their own logics with no significant interaction with either the incumbent unipole or its potential challengers as the system shifts towards either bi or multipolarity (the existence of which are still a bi-product of the unipolar structure) at the global level is clearly disputed by a number of analysts (Cederman 1994; Buzan and Wæver 2003). Even the proposition that regional sub-systems are “where the action is” (as opposed to where some particularly important but far from where all the action is) is highly dubious (Buzan 2004a; Walt 2005; Hurrell 2006; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009a).

Measuring Polarity

Assessing and measuring power has proved a formidable task for the social sciences, perhaps none more so than for IR given that as one account puts it, “the majority of the field would support the assertion that power is the most central concept in world politics” (Stoll and Ward 1989: 1; see also Berenskoetter and Williams 2007). It is perhaps not surprising then that discussions about the distribution of power amongst the major players in the international system have been plagued by the issue of reaching agreement on the set of criteria used to decide whether a state is counted as constituting a pole of power or not.

Much of the literature on polarity, unsurprisingly given its positivist assumptions, attempts to provide a rigorous set of criteria for making judgements on membership of a given

polarity structure. Yet in seeking to answer the question of exactly who is being counted as a pole and who is not, many theorists overlook the simple notion that a great power is precisely that because it is treated as such by its peers. That is to say, the criteria for great power or 'pole' status are not set by theorists but instead by states (discussed further in Chapter Three). Waltz expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote that the question of which states constitute polar powers is "an empirical one, and common sense can answer it" (1979: 131; for an example of the adoption of this approach following Waltz see Young 2010: 5).

This appeal to common sense has not however prevented significant debates in academic circles on how to characterise the polarity of a number of periods including both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Therefore a sizeable literature exists with aim of settling this question of measurement. Scholars (including Waltz) have provided lists of different sets of material indicators that a state can be judged against to determine its systemic status. Such lists usually include factors such as a state's economic strength and the size of its economy, its military strength, the size of its population and geography, its natural resources and the level of internal political coherence and stability demonstrated by the state in question (Mowle and Sacko 2007: 19). Waltz quite clearly placed a higher emphasis on military and economic capabilities (with the former to some extent being reliant on the latter), but included in his own list population size, resources, political stability and competence (1977: 131). Others who have recognised the limits of this list have simply attempted to modify it by adding extra material capabilities (for example, Hopf 1991: 478). Jeffrey Hart identifies three main power indicators which can be measured to assess a state's claim as a 'pole' of any given system: "resources or capabilities; control over other actors; or structural power (the ability to establish the rules of the system)" (Hart 1985: 25). In discussing the three categories, Hart raises the issue that capabilities may not always

correlate with what he calls actualised power (27). He cites the three conflicts of 1948, 1956 and 1967 between Israel and the Arab states as calling into question “the idea of an automatic or direct conversion process for generalized capabilities, since the victors scored lower on indicators of generalized capabilities than the defeated” (27). Interestingly for this study, Hart notes that capabilities don’t always translate into diplomatic leverage – even over close allies.¹⁸

Michael Ward and Lewis House developed a somewhat more amorphous notion of “behavioural power” (1988). This is an attempt to indicate the ability of states to influence (either directly or indirectly) the behaviours of other states or as Ward put it more simply, “the ability to start trouble” (1988: 122). In this sense, states whose actions “preceded a great burst of activity on the part of other nations were by inference said to be behaviorally powerful” (*Ibid*: 122). The measurement of this behavioural power involves examining the flow of ‘influence attempts’ from one state to another through both multilateral and bilateral avenues. According to Ward, such attempts could include the use of legal instruments, diplomatic manoeuvring and personal “walks in the woods” (123). Interestingly, Ward and House also assume that behavioural power is essentially a zero-sum game. A gain in behavioural power for one state is always made at the expense of another. Such an approach resonates with the idea put forward in this study that the poles of power are the states which are conferred a particular status by others. Yet Ward and Lewis still conceive of power in an acquisitive sense – it is still something a state has to use when and how it chooses.

The question of how power is measured is also raised by scholars who have defined polarity in terms of coalitions of states as opposed to strictly defining a ‘pole’ as an individual state (Singer and Small 1968; Stoll and Champion 1985). Bruce Russett and Harvey Starr

¹⁸ Amongst others, Hart cites the example of Germany being unable to restrain its weaker alliance partner, Austria-Hungary immediately prior to World War I, assuming that it was in fact Germany’s intention to do so.

advocate such an approach, arguing that “to ignore alliance patterns or the formation of cohesive blocs, however, would be to characterize the international system as multipolar throughout the period from 1700 to 1945 and to ignore, for instance, the way the two opposing alliance systems became solidified and hostile before World War I” (1996: 94). Such a statement illustrates the degree to which *polarity* is often mistakenly conflated with the (somewhat confusingly titled) notion of *polarisation* (Buzan, Jones and Little 1993 49; Hart 1985: 31; Buzan 2004a: 4). In this distinction, the former refers to the number of poles in the system at any one time whereas the latter is concerned with the number of opposed coalitions in the system. Describing and analysing the degree of polarisation of world politics could of course involve both great and non-great powers and therefore take us further away from even the starting point of measuring the relative distribution of material capabilities amongst the major powers, let alone the definition of polarity outlined here. While it may add an interesting dimension to our understanding of the polarity of the international system (Morton and Starr 2001: 52), it is important that it not be confused with and therefore substituted for polarity. Waltz addressed the issue directly when he wrote, “an international political system in which three or more great powers have split into two alliances remains a multipolar system – structurally distinct from a bipolar system, a system in which no third power is able to challenge the top two” (1979: 98).

Similarly to those interested in the degree of polarisation in the international system, analysts such as Edward Mansfield have pointed to the importance of understanding the role of concentration in discussions of polarity (1993). For Mansfield, simply measuring the number of poles in a system at any given time is inconsistent with the microeconomic roots of polarity theory (where unipolarity is akin to a monopoly, bipolarity a duopoly and multipolarity an oligopoly). Examining how concentrated power is in an international

system can therefore shed light on the issue of power inequalities amongst major powers (or poles).

Mansfield cites other neorealist works such as Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, Robert Gilpin, and John Mearsheimer which stress the need to not only count the number of poles in the system but to also measure the distribution of power among them in order to arrive at a more complete picture of the dynamics of the international system (Mansfield 1993: 112). Others opt for a less complex formulation, such as Wayman (1984) who argues simply that the two largest states control at least 50% of the capabilities possessed by all the major powers then the system is bipolar, when that possessed by the two poles of power slips below the 50% mark, the system has become multipolar (Mansfield 1993:109). Whether polarisation or concentration are added to polarity analysis or not, the entirety of the literature on the subject remains focused on the capabilities (both hard and soft) possessed by states.

The important point is that for the standard literature, “Political observers assess polarity objectively, just as they would count the major firms that constitute an oligopoly” (Mowle and Sacko 2007: 16). Material capabilities are viewed as an easily quantifiable standard of membership in the great power club. In addition to this, “there is a general tendency among realists to associate power with military might” (Schmidt 2007: 61). John Mearsheimer, for example claims that “To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world” (2001: 5). Leaving aside the fact that this runs in direct opposition to all the literature that discusses the links between the possession of nuclear weapons and great power status (Sagan 1996-7: 78-79; Ganguly 1999; Gartzke and Jo 2009)¹⁹, this should provide the

¹⁹ To some extent even Mearsheimer himself (2001: 224-32) links the possession of nuclear weapons to the behaviour of great powers (as expected by offensive realism) which makes this criteria for great power status somewhat problematic after 1945. If an existing great power possess a

analyst with a clear set of data to work with from which one can understand the polarity of the day – ie. the number of states that can be said to be able to meet this standard will tell us whether the world is uni, bi or multipolar.

Yet the problem is, history repeatedly gets in the way. As Douglas Lemke points out,

Surely China “put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war” against the United States in Korea in the early 1950s. Yet China was not a great power, according to Mearsheimer, until 1991. Similarly, France’s fight against Nazi Germany in 1940 was no more serious than was Poland’s in 1939. If France was a great power in 1940, why not list Poland as a great power in 1939? (2004: 58-9).

There must be something else at play that can account for this disconnect between theory and history when applying Mearsheimer’s criteria. Lemke even goes so far as to ask whether, in following the work of Jervis and particularly Wohlforth, it could be perceptions of military power that could be the appropriate unit of analysis. But again, this fails to provide a sufficient guide. Lemke notes that “in 1990 many estimated that the Iraqi army would be able to put up a significant resistance against a U.S.-led coalition. Based on ex ante perceptions of combat capability, Iraq qualifies as a great power in the early 1990s” (59). Beyond military might, there would appear to be some other criteria that state leaders and influential analysts and commentators use as their criteria for judging which states are and which are not great/superpowers.

In his seminal *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin argued that as well as the distribution of power (by which he meant military, economic, and technological capabilities) (1981: 13), there exists a “hierarchy of prestige” amongst states (30-34). Gilpin claimed that prestige is distinct from power in that it, “like authority, has a moral and functional basis” (30), which is conferred by others and is therefore hostage to their perceptions (31-3). He even went so far as to describe prestige as the “the everyday

medium-large nuclear arsenal, the ability to mount a serious fight in an all-out conventional war becomes an almost unobtainable and therefore meaningless objective for a would-be great power.

currency of international relations” (31). Yet ultimately, for Gilpin, prestige can be boiled down to material capabilities as, it’s its heart, it is “the reputation for power, and military power in particular” and is therefore “achieved primarily through successful use of power, and especially through victory in war” (31-2). Even when states such as Germany and Japan in the post-War era have managed to obtain a large degree of prestige based on economic power, Gilpin claims that this is at least in part due to an ability to be able to translate their economic capabilities into military power (33-4).

Such a limited understanding of prestige leads us back to Mearsheimer’s problem of having a theoretical criteria for great power status that does not match-up to the historical record. If the prestige that a state is afforded as a great power (which can be traced to, for example, the states which are given special rights and responsibilities in international institutions) is based on military might and is known only when it is “tested, especially on the field of battle” (Gilpin 1981: 33), we would certainly not expect France or China to gain permanent seats on the UN Security Council in the aftermath of World War II during which they were militarily defeated and occupied. In fact we might hardly expect Britain to necessarily be afforded the same ‘prestige’ given its victory over Germany was by a slim margin only made possible by its combined efforts with the Soviet Union and the United States. Yet, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, both states were in fact treated as great powers in the immediate aftermath of the war by some actors and certainly viewed themselves as great powers for some time after. As we shall see in Chapter Four, a number of states were conferred with great power status of without holding much of a reputation for military strength (let alone meet Mearsheimer’s ask of a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world) during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The way that polarity is defined in this study relates most closely to the ‘counting of poles’ method as opposed to attempting to measure the relative distribution of capabilities. As has already been discussed, this study defines polarity as *the number of states that are perceived at any one time as holding the historically defined social status of great/superpower*.

This leads us towards a preference for analysing polarity on the basis of which states were afforded great/superpower status in history over which states should be expected to be a pole of power based on the objective criteria discussed above. It also leads us naturally towards a focus on perceptions at the time as expressed in the words and actions of practitioners and commentators.

Polarity in History

While this thesis has purposely restricted its focus to the modern era, the concept of polarity has been used to describe power structures over a much wider period. One of the problems with analysing structures in world history is that the units of analysis have undergone massive changes. Are we to treat nation states, city states, empires and monarchies as like units across space and time?

An initial step in answering this question is to examine the way that the theory as outlined above has dealt with this issue. As polarity is a concept almost entirely monopolised by neorealist theorists (in terms of both development and application), neorealism would seem the obvious starting point here. However this instantly presents a fundamental problem. As critics have consistently argued, neorealism is poorly equipped to deal with change (Ruggie 1983; Ashley 1984; Kratochwil 1993) due to its emphasis on the continuities of world politics in an attempt to create a parsimonious grand theory. Both the international system and the most important units within it, states, are essentially taken as given. This allows neorealists to build a relatively parsimonious theory about the structure of the international system and how it affects the behaviour of states. Yet as Daniel Deudney has noted,

The failure of neorealism with regard to fundamental change is one of omission rather than of commission; it's not that neorealists have sought to understand fundamental change and failed but rather that they have not tried (Deudney 1997: 92).

This however has not stopped some writers applying neorealism's insights to historical analysis of periods that pre-date the nation state (Wilkinson 2004). Arthur Eckstein's work on the Hellenistic Mediterranean has attempted to follow "Polybius in offering a theoretically informed narrative of world-historical events" (2008: 27) by using neorealism's emphasis on anarchy as an ordering concept to highlight the structural elements of Rome's imperial expansion to the east. Similarly recent studies of the concept of the balance of power have used elements of neorealist theory to analyse the structural dynamics of political relations in pre-modern times (Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth 2007).

Whilst there may be problems with using a theory that relies so heavily on static political forms across time to analyse world history there are certain elements such as the 'logic' of anarchy (Buzan, Jones and Little 1993) or the concept of polarity which may lend themselves to just such an endeavour. The reason that polarity may be usefully applied to analysing world politics in pre-Westphalian time periods is that there is nothing in the concept that restricts its use to nation states. In fact, there is nothing in the concept that prevents polarity from providing a lens to analyse interaction between unlike units in a system (a task made necessary by the non-linear development of political units in world history) (Little 2005). As Barry Buzan and Richard Little have written, "international systems can be constituted in terms of the interaction among unlike units, and the second tier can be opened up without moving away from Waltz's idea that structure should be described in terms of the placement of units" (1996: 411) We can therefore describe a given period in world history where unit interaction (whether the units be empires, city states, kingdoms, nation states or combinations of these) is sufficient to be described as

constituting a system (or even a society) and falling into one of the three categories of polarity outlined above.

The following examples illustrate the standard view of the occurrence of the three forms of polarity in history using the neorealist understanding of polarity as the distribution of material capabilities:

Multipolarity

A multipolar configuration is thought to be the most common in history and is closely associated with the idea of a global balance of power (Little 2007a). This particular distribution of power has included iconic formulations like the ‘Concert of Europe’ of the 19th Century (McGowan and Rood 1975) and the interwar years of the 20th Century (Gowa 1989). Stuart Kaufman and William Wohlforth describe the ancient Middle Eastern system at the beginning of the 9th Century BCE as being multipolar as multiple powers operated within it including Assyria, Babylonia, and Elam. As Assyria’s relative position increased the authors track a rise to unipolar status from 883-824 (Kaufman and Wohlforth 2007).

Bipolarity

The relative symmetry of bipolar orders makes them a particularly interesting phenomenon in world history. If order in world politics can be described as relating closely to the level of hierarchy on the one hand (in its most pure form centring around the power of a single political unit whether state, empire, world government or something else) and anarchy on the other (represented in its most pure form by the most even distribution of power and authority amongst the largest plurality of actors), then bipolarity would seem to be a somewhat quaint amalgamation of the two. The lion’s share of the literature on bipolarity takes the period of dominance of the United States and the Soviet Union of 1945-1989 as its empirical starting point (Goldmann 1972; Thies 2012) but other cases in history have

existed including the period of intense competition between Rome and Carthage in the ancient Mediterranean region (Deudney 2007: 153-155).

Unipolarity

Because of the single actor at the heart of a unipolar order, images from such times in world history are particularly potent. The idea of the seemingly unstoppable spread of the Roman model of political and social organisation (Eckstein 2008), the raw power of China in East Asia under dynasties such as the Qin (Hui 2005) and the image of so-called American ‘coca-colonisation’ of popular culture in almost every corner of the globe in the late Twentieth Century are particularly evocative (Nye 200s).

These different polarity formulations are said to have had important effects on alliance formation, war, trade, arms racing and other trends due to the theoretical expectations associated with each type. The important point to keep in mind here is that these formulations of polarity have been superimposed on history with the benefit of hindsight. For the way that this study re-introduces the concept of polarity (as the number of states who hold a particular social status) such retrospective categorisations of one period or another corresponding with a particular type of polarity holds little causal explanation. All that matters for the way polarity impacts upon political life in this study is how polarity was perceived at the time, not how scholars view it after the fact.

Applying the Concept of Polarity across Time

According to one account, the term ‘great power’ has been commonly used in diplomatic language since at least the mid-eighteenth century (Buzan 2004a: 58). Yet while the concept and the notions of ‘great power responsibility’ that go with it may be a feature of the modern Westphalian international order, it is clear from recorded history that varying degrees of hierarchy amongst large political groupings (including kingdoms, city states,

empires and nation states) have existed throughout different time periods and across geographic regions (Watson 2007; Kaufman *et al.* 2007). Whilst identifying the polarity of a political system at any one time provides a useful reference point for analysing the structural characteristics of the system there are many potential pitfalls in comparing forms of polarity across time.²⁰

To begin with, as international society has expanded geographically, the role of the great powers (or ‘poles’) has not surprisingly evolved in tandem (Bull and Watson 1984; Reus-Smit 1999). One reason for this is the simple factor of an increasing number of actors interacting on an international level. It would seem most unlikely that a multipolar system of five great powers in an international society made up of ten states would function identically to one made up of 150. The sheer difference in the complexity of inter-state relations – even if what has been termed the “interaction capacity” of these states was minimal – between the 150 as compared to the system of ten would make a difference to the nature of the multipolar structure of the system. A simple illustration of this would be to think of the relationship between polarity and balancing discussed above (in particular the claim that balancing in multipolar systems is largely done externally and therefore requires alliances with other states). It is very likely that alliance making in a system of 150 states as compared with a system of 10 would be quite different.

An ahistorical approach (in the sense that it ignores the historical contingencies of a given era) to applying the concept of polarity would also be blind to the relationship between dramatic ideational changes and the distribution of power (whether it is solely defined in material terms or not). This would include things like the changing role of war or diplomacy

²⁰ For a useful discussion of this issue in the context of the study of international security that makes the claim that applying an almost ahistorical approach to applying the concept of polarity is particularly problematic see Buzan (1991a: 163-4). Importantly though, Buzan does maintain that the concept can still be very usefully applied to specific areas in strategic studies such as deterrence theory, alliance politics and arms control (166).

in international society across time. An English school understanding of polarity allows us to ask questions about the evolution of the primary institutions of international society and how the structural effects of polarity might be shaped by these larger societal changes. In the case of the institution of the great powers and the special rights and responsibilities conferred on them by the members of an international society, changes to this institution could almost be said to constitute changes to the very nature of polarity itself, although this of course would be denied by those who make the claim for a purely material measuring of polarity.

Another crucial factor that may inhibit the simple application of the concept of polarity across time would be changes in technology. Given the crucial role of technology in material calculations of the distribution of power (including its role in both wealth creation and military superiority) dramatic changes in both innovation and production can be said to be a factor that would change the nature of polarity over time. The most obvious and perhaps dramatic example of this would be the invention of nuclear weapons in 1945 (discussed further in Chapter Five). This change in the destructive capacity of military hardware had profound effects for the nature of the bipolar system of 1945-1989, not least in terms of military competition (ie. the nuclear arms race) and the balance of power (ie. the so called 'balance of terror') which have no precedent in earlier bipolar periods. Similarly the changes in technology associated with the industrial revolution of the Nineteenth Century had profound effects on modes of production and therefore economic growth with direct consequences for which states rose to pole status (Buzan and Lawson 2012).

Whilst placing limits on the type of questions one can ask about the nature of world politics by using the concept of polarity as a defining variable, these historically contingent factors do not however preclude polarity from being a useful point of departure for analysing particular trends in world history. That is to say, polarity may be useful starting point or

minimum condition of an international system at a given time that can be used to shed light on the relationship between the structure of the system and the actions and interaction of the units within it. A correlation drawn between the polarity of a system and a particular trend in international society does not mean that other factors (both structural and non-structural) have not played a part in shaping the agent-structure relationship but this does not change the correlation. An example from the existing polarity literature illustrates this proposition. The changing role of war in international society may have made war between the great powers more unlikely in general, but this does not change the proposition that if it is to occur it is more likely in a multipolar order than a bipolar one as is argued by Waltz, Mearsheimer and others.²¹ Re-thinking polarity requires a greater focus on historical contingency and therefore when applying such an approach to empirical analysis, we should expect self-understandings and ideas about others in terms of historical status (whether a state has historically been treated as a great/superpower or not) as being important in shaping perceptions of polarity.

Complex Polarity Theory

One of the main empirical problems that scholars who have used the concept of polarity have come up against is the fact that definitions of great power status cannot be neatly applied at both the global and regional levels. That is to say, bipolarity as it was used to describe the Cold War era told us very little about the kind of role China played from the 1970s onwards in East Asia (China's global role at this time is discussed in Chapter Five). Unipolarity tells us little about the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran as the dominant powers in

²¹ As Bull wrote in his discussion of the 'institution' of war in international society, "From the vantage-point of the individual state, war remains an instrument of policy, but one that can be used only at greater cost and in relation to a narrower range of purposes than before 1945...From the point of view of the international system, war remains a basic determinant of the shape of the system. But among the great nuclear powers it is the threat of war rather than war itself that determines the relationships" (1977: 194-6). It is argued by those who apply the concept of polarity that changes in polarity produce changes in the *threat* not the *nature* of war amongst the great powers.

the Middle East or Brazil and Argentina in Latin America today. Similarly, throughout the bipolar era of roughly 1945-1989 and the unipolar era of 1990 – to the current day it is rather difficult to effectively characterise the roles played by Britain, France, Germany and Japan under the simple concepts of bipolarity and unipolarity.

As an answer to this problem, Buzan has outlined what he calls ‘complex polarity theory’ which, whilst keeping polarity analysis firmly focused on the global level, still takes account of two other forms of power (2004a). He does this by breaking the simple terms of great powers and superpowers into three categories: Superpowers, great powers and regional powers.

Superpowers are entities which can project military, economic and political power across an entire system all the time. According to Buzan, compared to the other two categories superpowers must fulfil a much more demanding criteria not only about power projection but also relating to their legitimate status as global leaders as conferred by others. The existence of superpowers usually means that international society is either unipolar or bipolar, although it should theoretically be possible for a multipolar order to exist with three or more superpowers.

Great powers by contrast need not live up to such demanding criteria. A great power need not have large capabilities across all sectors (eg. an economically powerful but militarily weak Japan or a militarily powerful but economically weak Russia) and also do not need to project power and wield influence across the entire world all the time. Yet they must project power and influence outside of their own region and act as an important global player. According to Buzan, “what distinguishes great powers from merely regional ones is that they are responded to by others on the basis of system-level calculations, as well as regional ones, about the present and near future distributions of power. Usually, this implies that a great power is treated in the calculations of other major powers as if it has the clear

economic, military and political potential to bid for superpower status in the short or medium term” (2004: 69-70). This approach is easily compatible with the definition of polarity used in this thesis as Buzan is careful to note that it is how these states are “responded to by others” which qualifies them for great power status. While material capabilities are important in influencing these assessments, they are not ultimately what determine status.

And finally regional powers are those whose capabilities and unequal social role “loom large in their regions, but do not register much in a broad spectrum at the global level” (Buzan 2004: 72). Buzan writes that “regional powers may not matter much at the global level, but within their regions they usually determine both the local patterns of security relations and the way in which those patterns interact with the global powers” (2004: 72). Like the step from great power to superpower, the clear implication is that a great power must first be treated as a regional power (Hurrell 2006: 8).

This approach allows us to deal with the complexity of inter-state relations (to say nothing of relations with non-state actors) by acknowledging that sovereign inequality and varying degrees of hierarchy in world politics exist at both regional and global levels. Yet acknowledging the role of regional powers does not mean that polarity analysis has to say a great deal about the power configurations of diverse regions around the world. The polarity of international society refers to the first two categories – superpowers and great powers – that which make up the top strata of the global inter-state hierarchy.

It also raises the possibility of these classifications being applied in a less than uniform and objective manner. While complex polarity theory on the one hand adds greater analytical clarity to our understanding of exactly what the poles of power in polarity analysis are, it also increases decreases the simplicity of the category. By raising the possibility that what one actor may perceive as a superpower could, in theory, be perceived only as a great power

by another, complex polarity theory, taken to its logical conclusion, suggests the likelihood of the kind of confusion and contradiction over the global polarity that was discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, by forcing the analyst to think more carefully about exactly how a state's status matches up to its potential or actual peer competitors in a relational sense, complex polarity theory suggests that polarity is not simply an objective phenomenon but is first and foremost a perceptual one.

Changes in Polarity

A particular problem that emerges from the standard literature on this subject is the inability of analysts to agree on how to identify changes in polarity. The studies of bipolarity of the 1960s and 1970s soon gave rise to a debate about whether the system could continue to be characterised simply as bipolar (as in public discourse) or whether the US in fact played a hegemonic role in world politics (usually associated with unipolar systems) or even whether an emerging multipolar order (usually involving the economic powerhouses of West Germany, Japan and the almost great power-like China) (Knorr 1966: 163-4) was taking form. A similar debate played out throughout discussions about the polarity of the international system following the end of the Cold War with some quickly predicting the return of multipolarity (Layne 1993; Waltz 1993; Bykov 1994; Kegly Jr. and Raymond 1994) and others finding more analytical purchase in looking through the lens of unipolarity (if even with the parenthesis of some kind of time limit) (Krauthammer 1990/1; Wohlforth 1999; Mowle and Sacko 2007; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009a; 2011; both time periods are analysed in more detail in chapters Five and Six respectively). At least part of this problem would appear to be a degree of confusion on the part of many about the difference between the notions of polarity on the one hand and hegemony on the other. In particular the term unipolarity is often used interchangeably with

the term hegemony. Thomas Mowle and David Sacko have captured the problematic nature of this confusion,

While preponderant power concentration is a constituent element of hegemony, the concept of hegemony also assigns a particular role for the lead state...This is in contrast to unipolarity, which is simply a structural statement describing a specific power alignment. Whereas a hegemonic system requires the direct acquiescence of important domestic and international actors, a unipolar system does not (2007: 7).

Using this distinction adds a qualitative dimension to what is essentially a quantitative description of the international system. This qualitative aspect, amongst other things, includes the issue of leadership and, importantly, acceptance of the legitimacy of this leadership by the members of international society (Clark 2011). A hegemon is generally seen as at least attempting to exert some degree of systemic leadership, a unipole does not necessarily need to take up the mantle of global leadership (even if it is most likely that it will do so).²² The English school approach to the units within polarity analysis – the poles of power – discussed in Chapter Three stands in contrast to Mowle and Sacko’s distinction given that the idea of a polar power being based purely on material factors is rejected. Instead the framework adopts Clark’s more expansive and theoretically coherent notion of hegemony (despite the fact that Clark still distinguishes between primacy and hegemony, 2011: 34-50), which follows Gerry Simpson (2004) in associating hegemony directly with great power status. This means that hegemony can exist in multipolar forms as well (what Clark refers to as ‘collective hegemony’; see also Watson 2007: 74). What Simpson refers to as ‘legalised hegemony’ derives from “the existence within an international society of a powerful elite of states whose superior status is recognised by minor powers as a political fact giving rise to the existence of certain constitutional privileges, rights and duties (2004:

²² However Robert Jervis claims that unipolarity still exerts a structural pressure that would seem to blur this more defined line between unipolarity and hegemony arguing that, “A dominant state acquires interests throughout the globe. Most countries are primarily concerned with what happens in their neighbourhoods, but the world is the unipole’s neighbourhood, and it is not only hubris that leads it to be concerned with everything that happens anywhere” (2009: 200).

68). Therefore, if polarity is the number of states who hold the special status of great/superpower at any one time, the existence of some form of hegemony is implied.

The relationship between changes in polarity (both within the same configuration and from one configuration to another)²³ and the occurrence of war is the main area of analysis of what has become known as the ‘power transition’ literature in IR.²⁴ This literature is particularly interesting amongst the structural accounts of world politics because it re-introduces (to a limited degree) what Waltz called the ‘second image’ of his three levels of analysis, that of the state. Not going as far as liberal democratic peace theorists in discussing the impact of regime-type in the causes of war, power transition theorists add the distinction between status quo and revisionist powers to polarity analysis. The dichotomy between these two types of great powers, sometimes referred to as ‘satisfied’ and ‘dissatisfied’ powers allows for a more nuanced analysis of how the relative distribution of power in the international system relates to war. In essence the theory states that when relative power shifts in favour of a rising power or ‘challenger’ with revisionist intentions (ie. a desire to change the current international order in some regard) then war is likely.²⁵ When in contrast the rising power poised to overtake the leader in the system is content with the status quo order this threat can be avoided (Chan 2008: 26). Others focused more on the role of declining powers rather than rising challengers in questions of stability and great power war (Copeland 2000).

²³ Changes within a polarity configuration tend to be most common in multipolar systems as great powers decline and other states rise to great power status.

²⁴ It is perhaps not surprising that the power transition literature shares a somewhat similar history with polarity analysis. Both ideas emerged at about the same time with the idea being first introduced in 1958 by A.F.K. Organski, both were primarily developed and used by American IR theorists and both were particularly fostered by journals such as *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and *International Security* (Kugler and Lemke 2000; DiCicco & Levy 1999).

²⁵ It should be noted that a revisionist state is said to be one that is not dissatisfied with its relative position in the international system vis-à-vis other states as this dissatisfaction would of course be alleviated by the power transition itself and therefore not be any more or less likely to cause a great power war. Instead revisionist states are driven by a “a fundamental objection to and challenge of the rules of the game, and not just how these rules can produce a different distribution of benefits” (Chan 2008: 30).

Early Twentieth Century European politics, including the origins of the First and Second World Wars, have been prime subject matter for analysts applying power transition theory to historical instances of great power wars (Stevenson 1997). This analysis would find that Great Britain could accommodate a rising status quo power in the United States but was not so sanguine about the rise of Germany either under the Kaiser or Hitler.²⁶

The power transition thesis has been similarly applied to cases as varied as war in the ancient Mediterranean in 201 BCE, the Napoleonic era, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, and the rise of China today (Eckstein 2007: 75; Kim 1992; Organski and Kugler 1980: 46; and Douglas Lemke and Tammen 2003).²⁷ This has subsequently led to the development of ‘hegemonic stability’, ‘hegemonic transition’, and ‘power cycle’ theories which build on this idea that “change in the relative power levels of states is an important factor in issues of war and peace” (Morton and Starr 2001: 51).

Polarity, Perception and International Society

Neorealist approaches have been described as being “strong on structures but weak on politics” (Deighton 1996). This stems from an overreliance on the material sources of power to build a parsimonious theory of world politics (see Schmidt 2007) which ignores crucial questions of how that power is perceived as well as how material preponderance is translated socially in a relational sense as opposed to simple formulation of material power possession (Berenskoetter 2007: 4-5).

While some power transition theorists have touched on issues of perception and misperception, largely due to the overwhelming focus on instability and war, this literature

²⁶ Steve Chan points out that “the U.S. and the U.K. were involved not only in disputes over Venezuela’s border but also in other contentious issues such as the demarcation of the Alaskan territory from Northwest Canada and the construction of the Panama Canal. These acrimonies, however, were all eventually settled in favor of the U.S., with the U.K. making unilateral concessions without any expectation of U.S. reciprocity” (2008: 30).

²⁷ For a critique of traditional power transition theory in the case of Chinese growth in the late Twentieth Century and early Twenty First Century, see Chan (2008).

has confined itself to perceptions of material capabilities (discussed further in Chapter Two). For example, in outlining a dyadic approach to changes in material capabilities and the onset of war, James Schampel writes that states “perceive changes in both their own and their potential adversaries' population, technological growth, military growth, and alliance formation which, in turn, researchers can measure as share of system power” (1993: 399). The way polarity is used in this study brings together the basic quantitative insight of neorealism (in the sense that the number of great/superpowers makes a difference to system-level inter-state relations) with the qualitative insights of the English school about the role of the great powers as a social institution. This social institution which exists at the structural level of world politics can be studied in history as can the ways in which quantitative change (shifts in polarity) have been perceived by different actors.

The focus on perceptions of polarity on the part of the members of international society (as represented by state representatives and analysts who help shape public discourse on conceptions of world order), opens up space for the distribution of capabilities to be a necessary but insufficient basis for polarity. That is to say, states may be conferred with great power status without necessarily having the aggregate capabilities to match for the entire period in which they are treated as a pole of power. Larson and Shevchenko have observed that “Over time, changes in relative power can lead to a disjuncture between a state’s capabilities and its recognised position in the international system. In addition, a state’s self-image of its position and entitlements can diverge from other’s perceptions” (2010a: 268). This lack of certitude about the status of a contender great power status (whether rising or falling) is heightened by the fact that polarity is expressed in a social context where ideational factors such as identity, status and legitimacy play as important a role as material capabilities. This leads students of polarity towards interpretive methods and historical research, as Wohlforth has noted,

Perceptions of power are more dynamic than measurements of material relationships. Rapid shifts in behaviour may be related to perceived shifts in the distribution of power which are not captured by typical measures of capabilities. The relationship of perceptions to measurable resources can be capricious and unfortunately discovered only through historical research (1993: 294).

Analysis using the theoretical insights of the English school to bring polarity firmly into a social setting and world historical perspective allows for the study of the rise and fall of the great powers in all its complexity and richness. At a time of debate over the current and future shape of the international system as well as the durability or otherwise of modern international society, learning the lessons from history of what changes in the perception of polarity have meant for the way polarity 'shapes and shoves' international society offers many insights. In the next chapter we shall examine more closely how bringing polarity analysis into the English school of IR's body of work might offer a way forward in this task.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

As discussed in Chapter One, the questions asked in this study are motivated by the theoretical concerns of analytical eclecticism in IR. In contrast to much of mainstream IR theory which sets up abstract philosophical divisions between competing ‘isms’, analytical eclecticism/theoretical pluralism prioritises “pragmatic engagement” with the real world contexts in which “prevailing ideas about world politics have emerged” (Katzenstein and Sil 2010: 22; Haas and Haas 2009: 101). The approach to theorising polarity, unlike the microeconomic foundations of neorealism, takes international practice as its starting point from which IR theory must engage.

Broadly speaking, the theoretical framework developed here can be described as falling under the umbrella of social constructivist theory.²⁸ This general theoretical approach, which includes both mainstream and critical varieties of Constructivism (with a capital C), the English school, a large part of Neoclassical realism and some elements of foreign policy analysis, shares what has been described as a “common philosophy” (Hoffmann 2005: 111) that “the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world” (Adler 1997: 322). That is to say, any attempt to analyse how the polarity of international society causes different outcomes in terms of the interaction of states, must use a theoretical framework which is holistic enough to treat both ideational and material factors as equally important. It also needs to be able to be flexible enough (even at the expense of parsimony) to move between analysing one or more of the levels of analysis in IR theory.

²⁸ It is now widely accepted that there is no one single theory of social constructivism but instead what Nikola Hynek and Andrea Teti refer to as a “multiplicity of ontological and epistemological constructivisms” in the *Philosophy of Social Science* (2010: 173).

More specifically, the thesis uses the English school tradition of IR and its idea of the social institution of the great powers to analyse the structural factor of polarity – defined as the number of great power that exist at any one time – and how we can understand periods of history when collective perceptions of its form appear to diverge. It uses the notion of fundamental or ‘primary’ institutions as the main expression of the international system’s social structure. Couching the analysis in English school terms, allows us to tap into the methodological pluralism which is associated with a “historically sensitive and comprehensive” approach to IR theory (Little 2009: 79). The framework developed here uses this to go even further and suggest an analytically eclectic approach to polarity which takes account of the material factors that play out in the social world and vice versa.

This chapter examines the growing consensus around the need to apply a theoretically plural approach to IR theory to be able to truly capture the complexity of world politics. It then takes one particular variant of this form of international theory, the English school and teases out the ways in this tradition can be used to re-think the nature of polarity as well as discussing how this relates to other similar approaches such as neoclassical realism and Wendtian Constructivism. We will then turn to the methodological space opened up by the English school concept of ‘international society’ and the ontological and epistemological assumptions that follow before finishing with an outline of the exact method employed for the historical analysis in Part II.

The Case for an Analytically Eclectic Approach to Polarity

Waltz has argued that international structures “shape and shove” the ways that states interact with each other in an international system (1986: 343). This observation has been the main driver behind ‘structural’ or ‘neo’ realism. This thesis takes Waltz’s observation as a starting point but combines it with the view put forward by proponents of the English school of IR that state interactions occur not only at the systemic level but also at that of a society.

This move introduces another level of structure not utilised in neorealist theory – the social structure of international society. As state interaction occurs simultaneously in both (Little 2000) it is ‘shaped and shoved’ by both systemic structure (polarity) and societal structure (the primary institutions of international society).

The central theoretical insight of the approach used here is that analysing the interplay between material and ideational change - which according to Georg Sørensen, “is sorely needed” in order to think seriously about international structures (2008: 26) – can allow us to analyse the importance of changes in polarity without falling into the traps of the rationalist-materialist biases inherent in neorealism. A theoretically plural approach would take account of both the material factors that create ‘great’ and ‘super’ powers (military might, economic strength, technological and innovative prowess etc.) as well as the material factors that influence the foreign policies of states (hegemonic stability, the military and strategic benefits of balancing, bandwagoning and buckpassing, relative and absolute gains etc.). Yet at the same time, such an approach would also deal with the ideational factors that play a role in establishing both which states become ‘poles’ of power but also the role that they play in world politics (identity, status, willingness or otherwise to lead, shared concepts of ‘great power responsibility’ etc.). Such an approach would necessarily involve a sensitivity to the role of perception in its analysis of the roles of poles of power and their affect on the effects of changes in polarity. The approach here is used not to study perception and misperception as they relate to intentions or capability as in most of the relevant literature (Jervis 1976; Stein 1982; Schimmelfennig 2005) but instead in relation to status – in particular, great power status. It is the fact that this status, which is intimately bound-up with (but is not reducible to) the possession or control over material capabilities, only exists in a social world that the framework goes beyond theoretical pluralism and instead opts for the wider move of analytical eclecticism. This requires the theorist to be

able to account for both the material and the social worlds at once rather than switching between methodologies that focus on one at the expense of the other.

This analytically eclectic framework outlined here allows us to deal with both the common criticism of neorealism that the distribution of material capabilities “does not explain anything in itself” (Sørensen: 11) without engaging with the social meaning that such a distribution is given by actors or as Andreas Osiander has put it, “what sets a great power apart is really the shared assumptions in the system concerning that power’s status” (1994: 323). It simultaneously allows for the ability to deal with the neorealist reply to Constructivists that ideas, norms, values and identities never exist in a material vacuum.

Polarity in International Society

It is in the English school of IR that one finds an analytically eclectic approach that is well suited to studying the relationship between changes in the number of great powers (one of Hedley Bull’s five ‘institutions of international society’) and periods of history in which the consensus as to the number of poles of power appears to breakdown. English school writers have made much of the institutions of international society, one of which is the role of the great powers (Bull 1977; Buzan 2004b; Wilson 2007). Buzan has made an important move in closing the gap between English school theorising about international society and both neorealist and neoliberal accounts of how states interact in a purely systemic sense by drawing a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ institutions in international society (Buzan, 2004b). In this configuration, Bull’s five essentially ideational elements become the primary institutions which exist at the societal level while regimes, international and regional organisations and other similar cooperative arrangements that exist in the material world are the secondary institutions which exist at both the systemic and societal level.

Using the concept of polarity requires careful consideration of exactly what the term ‘pole’ of power (or ‘great’/‘super’ power) actually means. Despite neorealism’s reliance on the

concept to build a 'rigorous' and parsimonious theory of world politics it is in fact English school writers (including the very recent wave of English school work which borrows considerably from 'thin' or Wendtian Constructivism) who have provided the most nuanced analysis of the concept of what Hedley Bull called the "great responsables" (1980). What is particularly interesting for this analysis is the way in which English school writers have defined great power status. According to Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler,

A great power, for the English school, is not defined solely in terms of a state's material capabilities as in structural realist accounts. Instead, a great power is one that recognizes – and is recognized by others as having – 'special rights and duties' by virtue of its military and economic strength...Moreover they claim that the idea of the great powers becomes meaningful in the context of society..." (2008: 102-3).

What is important here is that being a great power means having a particular status and like honour or legitimacy, status is not something that an actor simply gains through its own doing but instead is conferred on them by others (Lebow 2004: 347; Clark 2009a: 214).

The role of the great powers in providing some degree of order to world politics is socially understood and at least tacitly agreed upon by the members of international society. When agreement as to which states can be said to be exercising this role (and therefore what form the polarity of the international system exists) breaks down, then the role of the great powers in ordering international society should in theory become fragile.

This view takes polarity not so much as a material fact but as a socially transmuted and understood concept which effects the interactions of members of international society. Clark has illustrated the unique role of English school theorists in treating great power status as a specifically social attribute. He argues that work of Hedley Bull, Martin Wight and others on the great powers as an institution of international society raises two specific and novel theoretical issues,

This is not the universe normally depicted in neorealist accounts...a particular emphasis upon the kind of power by which great powers are constituted: it results from a status

recognised and bestowed by others, not a set of attributes and capabilities possessed by the claimant. To be a great power is to be located in a social relationship, not to have a certain portfolio of material assets (Clark 2009b: 473).

If the whole concept of a great power is a social construct used by sovereign states in an international society then the impact of changes in the number of great powers can only properly be studied in a socially and historically contingent context. As Donnelly has noted, understanding “contemporary international political changes... requires attention to the concepts and historical practices of sovereign inequality and hierarchy in anarchy” (Donnelly 2006: 162).

The redefinition of polarity outlined and applied in this study relates directly to one of the central challenges found in the English school literature. The classical English school writers such as Bull, Wight and Watson were careful to distinguish – at least at a conceptual – between international systems and international societies. The now almost standard definition used by English school scholars was outlined by Bull when he wrote,

A system of states (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave - at least in some measure – as parts of a whole...where states are in regular contact with one another and where in addition there is interaction between them sufficient to make the behaviour of each a necessary element in the calculations of the other, then we may speak of their forming a system (1977: 9-10).

By contrast,

A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions (*Ibid*: 13).

This built on Wight’s insistence that an international society is fundamentally reliant on the mutual recognition of total sovereign equality (1977: 135) which raises the bar for the existence of international society beyond that which can be reconciled with the historical record. This serves to create more of a conceptual chasm than a distinction between system

and society and has been criticised by those attempting a structuralist account of the history of international society (Buzan and Little 2000: 105).

Others working as part of the later wave of the English school including Dunne (2005a), Jackson (2000) and Little (2009; 2011) have reinforced the distinction between system and society. Yet this has not gone without considerable debate both within the English school (Buzan 1993) and critics and interlocutors sitting outside of it (Finnemore 2001; Copeland 2003). The argument goes to the core of where the English school fits in the continuum of IR theory, with pure rationalism at one end and radical reflectivism at the other.

This study joins Buzan (2004Bb), Alan James (1993) and others (see for example Shaw 1994) in adopting a sceptical approach to the theoretical usefulness of a purely systemic approach to world politics when that theory is *applied*. It may be a useful first-step conceptual distinction but it does not stand up to scrutiny as a theoretical idea when applied to the historical record. Rather than adopt the highly questionable notion that any inter-state relations (particularly within the timeframe of 1815-2012 under discussion here) of any real importance can be sensibly thought of as being asocial, we give ontological priority to the concept of international society as that which captures *both* the material/physical and social worlds. Once this move is made, international society can be thought of as existing along a spectrum from thin more Hobbesian-like (yet still fundamentally social) forms to thick more Kantian-like forms (or that which is perhaps better described as a community than a society). At any one time any one of the elements of international system-international society-world society (or in intellectual terms what Wight and Bull referred to as realist, rationalist or universalist understandings of world politics) might be more dominant than the other two. However, as one account puts it, “at no time do any of them cease to exert at least some influence, however minimal it may be, in the ‘real-world’ of international politics” (Wheeler 1992: 463-4).

This approach builds directly on Buzan's understanding of "all human interaction" being "in some sense social and rule-bound" (2004b: 100; see also Linklater and Suganami 2006: 53) and also Watson's argument that when one actually looks at the historical record, "no international system as defined by Bull has operated without some regulatory rules and institutions" (1987: 151-2). This is particularly important for the way this thesis builds an alternative to the neorealist conception of polarity. It is the way the perceptions of the interstate order on the part of important actors is expressed in history that provides the basis of our understanding of the concept. The English school notion of international society as an ever present aspect of international practice, provides the appropriate framework for this. As Wheeler and Dunne have noted, "Part of the promise of international society theory is that it offers a more 'realistic' representation of state practice than realism itself" (1996: 91).

A failing of neorealism is that it focuses solely on the distribution of material capabilities (Clark 2009b: 465) and ignores the social arena in which great power politics plays out (including the whole notion of great power 'status', the role of the great powers in creating 'societal' relations at the international level, the 'rights and responsibilities' of the great powers etc.). Much of this failing is addressed by the existing writings of English school scholars. Abandoning the distinction between system and society allows us to engage in polarity analysis from an English school standpoint rather than abandoning the concept to the purely systemic realm of neorealism.

The English School and its Theoretical Relatives

It is important to note here why the thesis is framing the discussion in terms of the English school and not Constructivism or neoclassical realism. Given the focus on the interplay between material and ideational forces, the approach here could appear to fit within what has been termed 'thin' or 'Wendtian' Constructivism. This brand of Constructivism, typified by the writings of Alexander Wendt, should be thought of as, at the very least, normatively

and methodologically distinct from the more critical forms of Constructivism such as that of Richard Price, Karin Fierke and Cynthia Weber.

Christian Reus-Smit has written that

Constructivism and the English School are often said to bear striking family resemblances, a view encouraged by their mutual concern for the social dimensions of international life...though, the discourse of convergence has, in large measure, been based on a series of partial or distorted representations (2009: 58).

Reus-Smit characterises the encounter between the English school and Constructivism as one where both parties are guilty of selectivity. Constructivists, he argues, while borrowing heavily from the early English school writings of Wight, Bull and others²⁹, have focused narrowly on the “core ontological propositions” of this writing obscuring the role of normative enquiry within the English school “into the relationship between order and justice” – usually described as the debate between the pluralist and solidarist strands of the school (2009: 59). At the same time, Reus-Smit also argues that when English school scholars write about Constructivism and its natural affinities with their work they almost always refer to Wendtian Constructivism and homogenize “what is actually a very heterogeneous body of constructivist scholarship” (60). Summarising this restrictive view of Constructivism Reus-Smit writes, “A newly arrived Martian, busily surveying English School writings, could easily be excused for thinking that Wendt’s articles and major book constitute the bulk and essence of constructivist scholarship” (59). This alerts us to the fact that there is enough differentiating Constructivism as a broad theoretical approach from the English school to warrant treating the two as analytically separate approaches. Yet this equally means that the particular discussion here could conceivably be termed Wendtian or

²⁹ Interestingly Reus-Smit – and others who have written on the relationship between constructivism and the English school such as Adler (2005) and Finnemore (2001) – make no mention of Charles Manning’s 1962 *The Nature of International Society* despite its strong links with what would later become constructivism (Suganami 2001:92; Wilson 2004; Long 2005). This is most likely due to the relative obscurity of what Peter Wilson has called Manning’s “Quasi-masterpiece” within academic IR (Wilson 2004).

'thin' Constructivism, as Reus-Smit's criticism is not that thin Constructivism and the English school are divided by an insurmountable theoretical gap but that there is more to Constructivism than its more mainstream proponents. The close proximity of thin Constructivism to Bull's English school writings in particular have been emphasised by Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell (2000). They point out that "if constructivism means that international politics is structured along social as well as material lines...and...international social structures are produced and reproduced in the concrete practices of state actors (and hence are subject to change), then Hedley Bull was indeed a constructivist" (2000: 44). To re-word this in relation to this specific study we could say, if polarity is taken to be the social expression of the distribution of material capabilities as perceived by state actors, then this study is indeed a constructivist one. However the analytically eclectic approach which gives both ideational and material factors equal weighting keeps us at the 'thin' end of the spectrum, in line with Sørensen's argument that "the ideas and shared knowledge which are in focus in constructivist analysis never operate outside a specific material context" (2008: 21).

Alternatively, precisely due to the very realist-esq focus on the great powers but in the context of both the material and ideational factors that constitute great power status, this thesis could conceivably fall within the growing literature termed 'neoclassical realism.' This approach (Rose 1998; Dueck 2006; Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro 2009; Toje and Kunz 2012) is sometimes discussed as being an attempt to reinvigorate the neorealist project so maligned since the end of the Cold War (Rathbun 2008; Kitchen 2010) by re-introducing unit-level variables into the structural focus of Waltzian realist analysis. This allows for what Stephen Walt has called "a more open minded eclecticism" (2002: 211) at the expense of parsimony, which in turn and in a similar vein to the English school, moves closer towards a materialist-ideational synthesis. By its very nature, this is a strand of realism with

a more analytically eclectic approach to ontology, epistemology and even methodology than either classical or neorealism and is therefore well suited to thinking about power without, for example, limiting itself to one level of analysis only (Quinn 2011).³⁰

The previously mentioned work of William Wohlforth as well as some of the work of Gideon Rose on the role of perceptions in translating material power into actual political outcomes that this study builds upon is usually labelled neoclassical realism. For Wohlforth and Rose, power is still the overriding factor that shapes world politics. Even structural power in the Waltzian sense can be said to be perhaps the most important factor in guiding the way states interact with each other and other actors. The difference for them is, as Rose has put it “foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being” (1998: 147). This approach also broadly fits into what Shiping Tang calls a ‘social evolutionary’ approach to realism which, whilst granting material forces ontological priority, stresses that such forces can never operate totally independently from ideational factors (2010: 34). This approach, Tang argues, allows the analyst of the international system to introduce social development into the picture in a way that is left out by neorealism and can therefore help to progress stagnated debates such as those around defensive versus offensive realism.

It is therefore clear that the theoretical framework for the current study has much in common with both thin Constructivism and neoclassical realism. The choice to couch the discussion in English school terms is more one of terminology and language than anything else. It is not so much that the analysis here is not compatible with either thin

³⁰ It is interesting to note for the discussion here about the overlapping concerns and approaches of the English school, thin Constructivism and neoclassical realism that in an article on American decline using arguments about both the system/structure and units/agents, Adam Quinn chooses the language of neoclassical realism but admits that “it might be something of a theoretical land-grab to suggest that only that theoretical perspective can accommodate their substance” (2011: 803-804).

Constructivism or neoclassical realism but that an English school approach offers much in terms of a central framework for analysing the social expression of polarity. Neoclassical realism opens up space for analysing the perception of material capabilities but does not hold the same theoretical promise of providing an answer as to what those perceptions translate into – an understanding of the social phenomenon of the great powers. It is the concept of international society and the terminology of primary and secondary institutions that most easily allows one to treat polarity as a serious independent variable without falling victim to the ideational blind spot inherent in neorealism by highlighting the historical and social development of the institution of the great powers. Richard Little has described this as an approach that allows an analyst to “capture the essential features of a more complex whole” (2009: 84) by using the concepts of international system and society as interrelated phenomenon that can be observed and studied only in as much that one presupposes the existence of the other: “In other words, although the international system only focuses on the material distributions of power, it presupposes the existence of an international society that defines the existence of states in the first place” (Little 2009: 84).

However there are a number of elements that make the choice between Constructivism and the English school in particular, an important one. While Constructivism is particularly useful for analysing the role of norms and ideas in shifting the domestic interests and identities of states (which therefore effects their external relations) (see Kirchner and Sperling 2010; Wendt 2010; Katzenstein 1996), this does not necessarily explain the ways in which the macro-social relations of states (such as their existence in an international society) affects these interests and identities before states even begin to interact in mutually constitutive relationships.

For example Wendt’s analysis of the social structure of the Cold War identifies the ways in which the United States and Soviet Union both held an understanding of the ‘other’ as an

enemy which in turn constituted their own identities and interests (Wendt 2010: 314). Yet this analysis does not go the next step offered by English school analysis by explaining how the relations of the two superpowers were shaped by the other shared identity that both actors had in common – holders of ‘superpower’ status in international society. This requires a more holistic approach which, while acknowledging the historically contingent relationships between the great powers at any one point in time and the ways in which these mutually constitutive relationships shape their identities, also understands the ways in which state identities are shaped by their role in societal relations as a whole (which cannot be captured in Wendt’s spectrum of enemy-rival-friend). Booth and Wheeler have summarised this well,

States can evolve from ‘enemies’ to different identities characterized by motives and intentions that are predictably peaceful...Yet constructivism...presupposes that which it seeks to explain. The proposition that interactions can transform state identities does not explain what causes the interaction to take the form it does: where do the changed moves come from that constitute new identities and interests? (2008: 105)

An English school analysis can point to what causes the interaction to take the form it does, in that it takes place in a social setting defined by the workings of the institutions of international society such as the special role of the great powers. To put it differently, as Tanja Aalberts has pointed out, while Constructivists hold that norms and rules can change the identities of states, “Ordinary state conduct hence presupposes norms and rules” (2010: 259) because, in Bull’s words, “the identity of being a member of international society generates an obligation to follow the rules” (in Aalberts 2010: 259). What is particularly important for the English school is that the complex mix of social relations which we refer to as ‘international society’ does not have its roots in the particular logic of anything other than the operation of primary institutions. That is to say that the English school provides an explicitly reductionist approach to *praxis*. While international society has been described as being an ‘ideal type’ (Suganami 1983; Finnemore 2001; Keene 2009), it is rarely, if ever,

used as a construct that could exist outside of the interaction of actors and their shared understandings of these interactions. This is precisely why an English school approach pays such close attention to “the language of actors and to the way they explain and justify their actions” (Navari 2009: 42). Navari explains the way international society derives directly from international practices even in its ideal-type form,

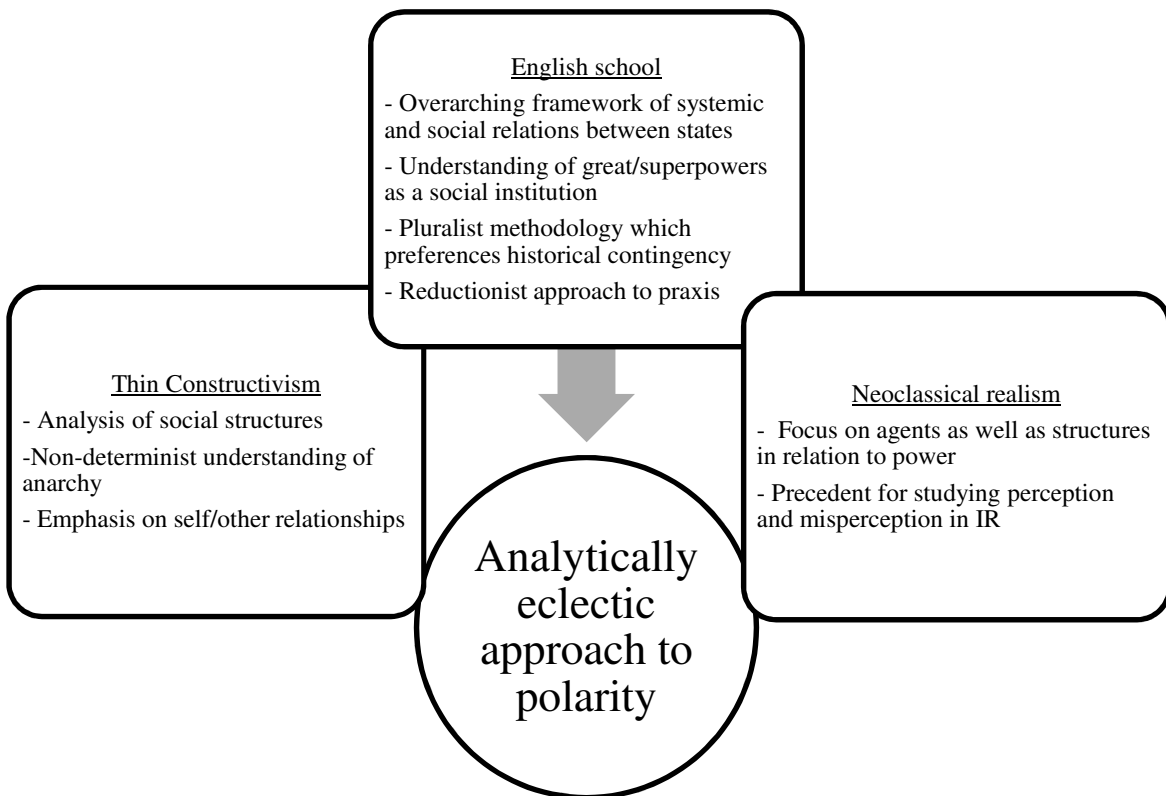
When traditional English school theorists set out to explain the norms of any state-system, they did not restrict themselves to categories identical to the categories of the participants. Rather, they used terms that would have been recognised by the participants...It means that the analyst may (and indeed should) abstract from the categories employed by the analysand, but not so far that the analysand would not recognize his own actions, or the meanings behind them (2009: 42-3).

The English school also provides a fuller explanation not just of social interaction but of discernable patterns of world politics at the macro-level (as a very precise and historically contingent social space) (Hoffmann 2005 p. 112). While Wendt’s Constructivism does make the case for the importance of macro (or systemic)-level analysis as “some causal mechanisms exist only on a macro-level, even though they depend on instantiations at the micro-level for the operation” (Wendt 2010: 154), it still maintains that until the structure of the system shifts along the friend-rival-enemy spectrum it is to the micro-foundations of bilateral relationships we must turn to analyse the ‘self/other’ relationships which shape identity. This approach therefore loses the focus on the continuity over time of social institutions such as great power status or the balance of power in shaping the systemic interactions of states, regardless of whether the system is operating in a Kantian, Lockean or Hobbesian way. Gil Friedman and Harvey Starr have captured this in their critique of Wendt, Dessler (1989) and others arguing that they “inadequately attend to the social structural context within which this social construction occurs” (Friedman and Starr 1997: 55). They go on to argue that Constructivism’s “tendency to treat intersubjective structure as enabling and positional structure as constraining is misguided...the positional model of

structure should also be acknowledged as enabling agency social action” (sic) and even that “the enabling quality of capabilities must also be acknowledged” (57-58). This is precisely what the concept of the great powers being an institution of international society does by emphasising not only the special rights but also the associated responsibilities (Bukovansky *et al.* 2012) of the great powers.

Therefore ultimately, the framework used here can be thought of as theoretically compatible with neoclassical realism, Wendtian constructivism and the English school. This is summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. *The theoretical inputs to an analytically eclectic approach to polarity*



The choice of the latter as the main body of theoretical literature of which to adopt language, concepts and assumptions from is largely based on what the English school most easily offers that the other two don't in an 'off-the-shelf' sense. Neoclassical realism is certainly helpful in highlighting the material biases inherent in the simple neorealist model

whilst ensuring the emphasis on the importance of great power politics, even in an interdependent and globalised world. This move opens up the theoretical space to focus on the importance of perceptions of power as well as analysing the relative distribution of material capabilities. Yet this literature is stronger on highlighting the need to move beyond a purely material description of the international system but is less helpful in pointing to what should replace this methodology. Constructivism would, initially, appear to fill this void. Yet whilst providing a methodological and epistemological path to studying the social world an ontological gap still exists in terms of the exact form this has taken history. For this research a firmer sense of what we should be looking for is required in terms of what the 'poles of power' that are traditionally found in materialist understandings of the international system exist as in a social sense. This can be found in the English school and especially in the work of Bull in its concept of the social institution of the great powers. This concept is offered by the English school not as a parsimonious theoretical model but instead as an analytical construct born directly from historical experience. The great powers exist not necessarily because the international system, as defined by Waltz, naturally creates such units through socialisation and competition (although an English school approach with its system/society distinction would not preclude this hypothesis in theory) but instead are constructed through the actions, words and ideas of social actors. The United States is a pole of power not because its material capabilities mean that it so but instead because those material capabilities have been historically interpreted as being the basis of a particular social status that is conferred by the other actors in a social setting. The meaning given to material capabilities (and other factors such as leadership, prestige and legitimacy) has historically evolved into a social institution known as 'great power status' that exists in what can be thought of and analysed as international society.

Contribution to the Theoretical Literature

The contribution that this thesis makes to the theoretical literature is to develop a way of analysing the element of international order known as polarity (that which is defined by the number of major poles of power) in a way which can take account of breakdowns in collective perceptions of which states are and which are not great/superpowers. In doing so, the discussion takes from neorealism the quantitative emphasis on the importance of changes in the number of great powers and adds it to the qualitative focus in English school writing on the role of the great powers in international society. As Buzan has written, “Both emphasise the leading role of the major powers in defining the character of the international system: Waltz’s poles of power taken up by neorealists, and Bull’s ‘great responsibilities’” (2004b: 252). Adam Watson also pointed to the integral role of systemic power in providing part of the make-up of international society as a whole when he argued that “For an international society to function effectively, the dialogue between its major powers must be *system-wide*” (1982: 218 emphasis in original). Yet if one were to remain in the systemic realm of neorealism and not make the English school move of analysing the great powers at the level of society, there is little theoretical space left for there to be different perceptions of polarity. In neorealist analysis, polarity is not perceived, it simply is. In principle, it could be inaccurately assessed but there is very little expectation that this will ever happen. This position has been characterised by Jeffrey Legro as polarity being,

like an invisible fence that shapes states as if they were dogs with electronic collars or a Skinner box that conditions national “rats.” States can choose to ignore the fence or box, but if they do, they must pay the consequences (2011: 342).

Re-defining polarity not only contributes, in an obvious sense, to the polarity analysis literature itself, but by using the conceptual lens of ‘international society’ it adds to the body of work which aims to build links between the English school and other areas of IR theory (Buzan 1993; Wheeler 1996; Williams 2005; True 2005; Ralph 2007). By returning to the ‘mainstream IR’ realm of great power politics and inter-state orders, the theoretical

framework of this study makes the most of the English school as a *via media* and analytically eclectic approach to theory. While English school writers have considered at length questions of order (Hurrell 2007) and power (Dunne 2003), none so far have attempted to treat the concept of polarity not as a component of neorealist theorising but as a key concept used by practitioners to understand the structure of international society. The English school's theorising of international society not only provides a set of ideas and terms for understanding the interplay of the material and ideational elements of power, it also resonates with one of the key aims of this thesis: to draw polarity theory closer to historical practice. The concept of international society (whether referred to as such or as 'the international community' or something similar) is used by practitioners for much of the period under review here. This is as true of the British liberal international thinkers of the Victorian era (Bell and Sylvest 2006) who spoke of creating a 'universal society' as it is of post-Cold War diplomats discussing the responsibilities of the 'international community' to prevent genocide (United Nations General Assembly 2005).

The concept of 'bringing polarity back in' within an English school approach also resonates with Buzan's nascent "vanguard theory of social structures" (2004b: 222-7). For Buzan, it is by analysing the distribution of power in history that one can see that "at least in terms of the historical record, a vanguard model is a prominent feature of how interstate and international societies develop" (252). A vanguard model takes the idea "common to both military strategy and Leninist thinking that a leading element plays a crucial role in how a social movement unfolds" (222). As Buzan notes, there are interesting parallels with Waltz's thinking on the way that anarchy works to socialise the units of a system, via competition, into becoming "like units." Yet what differentiates a vanguard model within the English school from Waltzian neorealism is the way in which agency is combined with structure to give an historically contingent picture of the role of the vanguard (the great

powers) in shaping international society. As Emanuel Adler has asked, “what, for example, turns a regional ‘vanguard’ into a global social structure, if not agents?” (2005a: 178). This agential element highlights the importance of polarity analysis at the current time. If, as many are predicting, the distribution of power is spreading (broadly speaking) from West to East as part of a shift from the current unipolar order to a new multipolar one, then issues of the domestic character of the poles/great powers/vanguard and even questions around their cultural or civilizational dispositions become particularly important (O’Hagan 2005; Camilleri 2008; Buzan 2010). An a-historical and a-social neorealist reading of this change in polarity would be entirely blind to this element.

Methodology

A potential downside of the use of an English school approach to frame the analysis is that the question of methodology is made particularly difficult. Cornelia Navari has illustrated the problematic nature of trying to find method in the ‘classical’ (ie. early) English school literature³¹: “The classical English School theorists generally disdained discussion of methodology. As for method, it is treated somewhat in the nature of underclothing – assumed to be there but scarcely discussed in polite society” (2009:1).

Yet this reluctance to explicitly deal with methodological issues by the early writers of the school does not mean that the English school offers no methodological preferences. Hedley Bull famously made the case for what he called a “classical” approach to IR (1966) in an article which criticised the preference for scientific positivism in the increasingly dominant North American approach to IR in the 1960s. This has led many writers to associate the English school with a broadly reflectivist approach (Reus-Smit 2009: 6).

³¹ Whilst there are debates around exactly which literature and writers should be characterised by being inside ‘the school’ and which should not (see Little 2003: 444; Linklater and Suganami 2006: 259-260), this project treats the classical English school literature as essentially the output of the British Committee of International Theory and the canonical texts as the 1966 volume *Diplomatic Investigations* edited by Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, Wight’s 1977 *System of States* and Hedley Bull’s 1977 *The Anarchical Society*.

Due to the role of perception in this thesis, the English school preference for analysing the self-understandings of actors is highly relevant for investigating the social ‘fact’ of polarity.

Again Navari is instructive,

English School theorists spend little time engaging in power calculus’s or theorizing the objective qualities of power, since it is the *perception* of power that they deem to have explanatory efficacy, and perceptions are revealed by quizzing the actor, not the environment (2009: 9).

This is consistent with the idea of international society being reducible to the shared values and ideas, as expressed in discourse and action, of its members. If polarity exists in as much as it exists in the minds of policy makers and policy influencers, then ‘measuring’ polarity can only be done by interrogating perceptions through historical analysis. It has been noted that in the work of Charles Manning in particular, the English school provides a useful avenue for focusing on perception in studying the construction of social institutions at the international level (Buzan 1993: 329). While Manning’s approach to the ways in which the so-called ‘realities’ of world politics are often socially constructed was perhaps “too convoluted and eccentric in expression to attract a following” (*ibid*) its insights have infused both Constructivism and subsequent English school work. It also builds on the earlier work of E.H. Carr who argued that “There is a world community for the reason (and no other) that people talk, and within certain limits behave, as if there were a world community” (1939a: 162). In other words, if an international society (and all its component parts including the institution of the great powers) exists, it is so because it is perceived.

Yet the importance of Carr’s formulation of a “world community” (which he used interchangeably with the term “international community” and can be thought of in English school parlance as international society not world society) is that he was totally convinced that this fell short of “the unity and coherence of communities of more limited size up to and including the state” (*ibid*) in which social relations are defined by equality rather than

hierarchy. Carr's view that the relations between states in which a "widespread assumption" (*ibid*) of something more than a system is at play still held that inequalities of power would define the structure of international society. To illustrate that on the question of equality, "In the international order, the role of power is greater and that of morality less (1939a: 168), Carr highlighted that when Hitler claimed that "all peoples ought to have an equal share of the goods of the world" he "hardly intended to convey that Lithuania ought to enjoy as much of 'the goods of the world' as Germany" (*Ibid*: 165). It was the fact that states make claims to their being the need for equality *between the great powers* that demonstrated for Carr the existence of an international society with certain accepted norms and characteristics. It follows from Carr's idea of an observable society demonstrated by the actions and discourse of decision makers that a methodology that goes beyond a quantitative analysis of power and can be used to map perceptions of power in history is necessary.

As outlined above one of the reasons why it is argued here that a return to polarity is timely and useful is that it would appear that the international system may be at a point of change in the number of major powers – either currently or in the coming decades. Whilst a methodology that preferences historical contingencies rather than theoretically parsimonious models is not without problem when it comes to discussing the prospects for the future, Albert and Cederman have noted that:

From studies of complex systems, it is well known that positive feedback effects makes history fork in radically different directions as a consequence of small variations in the initial conditions. Such conditions conspire to make prediction extremely hard, but by no means excludes systematic search for the historically specific mechanisms that generated the outcome in question (2010: 12).

Such an approach should, at least in principle, allow for some historically informed discussion of the prospects for different forms of polarity to be perceived by different actors into the future. Colin and Miriam Elman have made a similar case for the utility of a methodology which biases historical comparative analysis noting that a number of

approaches in IR (including the English school, Constructivism and neoclassical realism) have turned back to historicist and qualitative techniques to analyse concepts such as sovereignty, the balance of power, democracy, non-intervention and hegemony arguing that such analysis “cannot be done outside of history – there are no timeless, universal facts of international relations” (2008:360).

Epistemology and Ontology

John Hobson and George Lawson also emphasise that despite the dominance of the ‘scientific turn’ in IR throughout the second half of the Cold War period, “in recent years the (re)turn of history has been one of the most striking features of the various openings in IR theory ushered in by the end of the Cold War” (2008: 415). This methodology draws on the approaches that characterise (and broadly sit within) what Hobson and Lawson refer to as the second-wave of historical sociology in IR. Second-wave historical sociology represents “not so much a reversion to extreme particularity (as in traditional history) but an historicist approach which is able to construct a narrative while simultaneously being open to issues of contingency, unintended consequences, particularity and contextuality” (2008: 431). Such an approach, according to Lawson, requires the analyst to adopt a position of ontological realism (Hollis 1994; Bhaskar 1997) and epistemological relationism,

It understands there to be an underlying social reality, but equally clearly understands that all social relations exist in constitutive inter-relation with others, hence the need to problematize difference, multiplicity and interactions, to go beyond immediate context and to transcend narrow viewpoints (2007: 358).

This strong emphasis here on historical empirical research rather than complex modelling to capture the way that changes in polarity have been perceived during periods which have been labelled as constant in post-hoc analysis (by focusing closely on historical perceptions rather than quantifying capabilities and ordering states accordingly) is driven by an acceptance of Wohlforth’s claim that “we can capture the ways power influences history

only by studying perceptions and ideas. The elusiveness of power becomes clear only when the clarity of hindsight is removed by careful historical research” (1993: 306). In this sense perceptions of polarity exist before any analyst can ‘crunch the numbers’ and decide what the polarity of any given time was in hindsight therefore it is only through historically biased methodology that such an ontological position can be brought out.

The importance of historical contingency for the ontological question of when a form of polarity can be said to exist (in the minds of decisions makers and analysts at the time or in the post-hoc analysis of an historian years later) and therefore the epistemological question of how we can study its effect (through historical perceptions or contemporary quantitative studies) is summed up by Ole Holsti:

If, with the advantage of a century or more of hindsight and meticulous research, scholars are unable to agree whether specific events represented major turning points in the structure of the international system, is it any surprise that even sophisticated and well informed leaders and their advisers may disagree sharply about the fundamental features of the system within which they are trying to make policy... In short, perceptions of the international system may be as important as the system itself in shaping actual policies (1991: 87).

As is discussed in Chapter Five, this is particularly important when studying the effect of changes in polarity over long periods of time as perceptions of polarity, based on the number of great powers that are treated as such, are not necessarily tied to what in hindsight we now think of as momentous changes in diplomatic history. As Holsti notes, “Because no one rings a bell to announce that one type of international system has replaced another, competent and informed leaders can disagree as to the main features of the contemporary system and their implications for policy choices” (1991: 87).

Perception and Social Cognition

While firmly grounded in IR theory, this study does draw upon a number of ontological and epistemological elements from other areas, most particularly, social psychology. The central argument running through each of the chapters here is that it is perceptions of polarity,

rather the experience of an objective polarity that exists in the ‘real world’, which affects the interactions of states. Social psychologists have long held that “the most basic beliefs about the spatial world have their contents only in virtue of their standing in certain relations with perceptual experiences” (Brewer 1999: xiv). Much research has been carried out into why and how perceptual experiences shape empirical beliefs, much of which starts from debates between rationalists and anti-rationalists in philosophy (Brewer 1999: 3-17; Snowdon 1992).

This literature focuses on the importance of concepts and reasoning for social cognition in terms of making sense of incoming information. This aligns well with the way in which the English school framework, within the broader family of broader social constructivism, employed here pushes the theorists to examine the concept rather than the ‘fact’ of polarity. The concept itself is entirely reliant on a particular social category – great/superpower status – and therefore, in a sense, doubly indebted to cognitive processes. Firstly great/superpowers are perceived and then following this, depending on how many are perceived as existing at a single moment in time, the polarity of international society is perceived as either uni, bi or multipolar. This perception of the power structure of world politics uses the ‘concept’ of polarity as an “interpretive function” to help order complex information. As one account from the social cognition literature puts it, “When we observe our social world, we do not merely watch an objective reality unfold before our eyes. Rather, we take part in shaping our own reality; the concepts we impose on events determine the meaning we extract from them” (Kunda 1999: 19).

What is important to note here is that the way the theoretical framework employed here draws upon the social psychology literature situates it more in the ‘middle ground’ constructivist (or perhaps more accurately the analytically eclectic) sphere of the IR theory literature than other accounts that draw similarly on psychological studies (see Neumann

1996; Doty 1997; Checkel 1999). An English school version of polarity allows for both the systemic and the societal (or material and ideational) elements to exist simultaneously, thereby allowing for the possibility of what psychologists refer to as “inconsistency between cognitions” (Brehm and Cohen 1962) or cognitive dissonance. Leon Festinger first outlined the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957 in which pairs of cognitions (knowledge) are consonant if one follows from the other, and are dissonant if the opposite of one follows from the other (1957; Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999: 3). For example knowledge about the material capabilities of a state lagging behind other major poles of power (in a material, systemic sense) and continuing to treat that state as a great/superpower (in a societal setting) would produce cognitive dissonance. Such a situation leads to other sets of expected behaviours to reduce dissonance including self-persuasion (Aronson 1999), self-affirmation (Steele, Spencer and Lynch 1993), and attitude change (Zuwerink and Devine 1996).

Drawing on the social psychology literature in this way in terms of raising the expectation of finding differing perceptions of polarity on the part of different actors when analysing the historical record, makes the English school a useful framework to use within the IR literature. The English school is analytically eclectic and therefore flexible enough to incorporate such elements while offering up a set of usefully clarified concepts/reference points (such as primary institutions) and an overarching framework (international society) within which to use them.

An International Society Framework: Both ‘Analytical’ and ‘Eclectic’

The approach employed here follows Buzan’s positivist framing of the analytical (as opposed to normative) wing of the English school (2004). This conception of positivism is one that still allows for a high degree interpretivist method as the analyst searches for patterns in history. According to Buzan, this approach is positivist in that it involves “finding sets of analytical constructs with which to describe and theorise about what goes on

in the world, and in this sense it is a positivist approach and not a materialist approach” (2004b: 14). To put it more simply, whilst any analysis framed in terms of ‘international society’ requires a broadly interpretivist approach (particularly if the focus is to be not only on the social role of the poles of power but also the *perception* of that role), this should not be seen as preventing the analysis from investigating the ways in which the trends identified have causal effect ‘out there’ in international society – even if that society only exists in the minds of practitioners and scholars.

Buzan, Little and Linklater have all pointed to the need for such a methodologically pluralist approach if the concepts of international system and society (and, whilst it does not apply to this thesis, their writing also includes world society as well) are to be studied together. That is because they argue; different approaches require a slightly different method: international system requiring positivist methods and international society requiring hermeneutics and interpretivism (Buzan 2004b, Little 2000). As it relates to this study, this distinction could be thought of in the following terms, while a purely positivist approach may be able to answer questions about changes in the number of poles of power in history (in the international system that exists in a material sense), the meaning of these changes can only be analysed using an interpretive approach as they expressed through the societal relations of states (that only exist in an ideational sense). However, the approach adopted here is a more eclectic (Katzenstein and Sil 2010) than pluralist (Jackson 2011) reading of the English school which gives international society ontological precedence over a purely systemic understanding of the role of the great powers. Given the blurring of the distinction between international system and international society discussed previously, this moves the framework out of the realm of pluralism and into the “complexity and multidimensionality” (Katzenstein and Sil 2010: 19) of analytical eclecticism. While Patrick Jackson and others opt for the “dialogical encounters between arguments inhabiting different parts of the

logical space formed by the combination of basic wagers of philosophical ontology” (2011: 210) of theoretical pluralism, the framework outlined here requires greater holism. If the great/superpowers are a product of both system *and* society but never only one of these realms, then switching between different ontological assumptions becomes problematic. Instead analytical eclecticism, while being attuned to pluralist position offers a “combinational logic” which “depends not on the multiplicity of methods but on the multiplicity of connections between different mechanisms and logics normally analyzed in isolation in separate research traditions” (Katzenstein and Sil 2010: 18). This is particularly so given the argument developed in this thesis that it is possible to bring polarity analysis ‘in’ to the English school rather than simply investigate how neorealist ideas about polarity might interact with English school ideas about international society.

The relevant English school literature also holds that an international society exists ontologically prior to the sorts of interactions analysed here.³² This is a distinction between the social structure (what Buzan calls “primary institutions”, Holsti calls “foundational institutions” and Reus-Smit calls “fundamental institutions”) and the multilateral arrangements designed by its constituent units (Buzan’s “secondary institutions”, Holsti and Reus-Smit’s “procedural rules” and Ruggie’s “regulative rules”) (Buzan 2004b). Such a distinction allows for the kind of analysis that still deals with cause and effect – for example, the effect of changes in polarity on particular forms of multilateral cooperation – but that does so in an historically contingent and social context.

The approach to the agent-structure problem used here highlights the need to move beyond a narrow neorealist reading of polarity that presents an overly deterministic picture of the

³² One needs to be careful to distinguish analytically between the everyday practices of states which can be said to be what constitutes, defines and redefines international society or what Dunne claims “are only given meaning by their conscious participation in common institutions” (1995: 384)and the more complex forms of multilateral arrangements which can institutionalise particular forms of polarity such as the United Nations Security Council.

(material) structure of an international system. Inherent in much English school writing is the idea that international society is constructed by its members as part of a mutually constitutive relationship between agent and structure (a relationship explored in detail by much of the Constructivist literature).³³ In particular, the predominantly influential and (therefore) powerful members play a distinct role in shaping this social construct. This role plays out as what English school writers refer to as ‘the institution of the great powers.’ Yet whilst the great powers play a major role in shaping international society, this social structure equally “shapes and shoves” (to use Waltzian language) the behaviour of its members (states), including the great powers. The key to understanding the structural dynamics of international society for the English school is the actions and words (ie. the physical and discursive expression of their perceptions) of the members of international society. Amongst English school scholars, there is a “shared rejection of the notion that an international society can be produced by forces that exist outside of individual human agents...evidencing the ‘fact’ of international society requires evidencing human engagement in, and human understanding of, such a society” (Navari 2009: 44).

Method for This Study

The specific method used here follows Alexander George and Andrew Bennett’s concept of “structured, focused comparison” (2004). George and Bennett described this approach in the following terms:

The method is “structured” in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case study under study to guide and standardize data collection, thereby making a systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible. The method is “focused” in that it deals only in certain aspects of the historical cases examined (2004: 67).

³³ Dunne characterises the ‘agent-structure problem’ in relation to international society in the following terms: “international society should be thought of in ontological terms (as a social structure) and agential terms (a capacity for action)” (2005: 68).

The question asked of each case study is: can perceptions of polarity on the part of decision makers and analysts that are outside of what would be expected by the standard history of the period be identified? This specific question focuses the discussion solely on the role of the great powers in playing the role envisaged by English school analysis.

Whilst the genuine perceptions of polarity that significantly affect foreign policy decisions may lie in the minds of decision-makers, public intellectuals and individual citizens, the modern age with its *penchant* for recorded communication gives the historian a wide variety of discourses to analyse. Clues to understanding the perception of power lie in understandings of self-consciousness and also consciousness of others (Navari 2009: 41).

The main data for this thesis are primary historical documents such as memoirs, diaries and newspapers as well as secondary sources of historical analysis. Navari describes the use of such data as wearing grand theory lightly but being anchored in the ‘practice’ of world politics. She writes that:

The sources for such an approach would include foreign office documentation, memoirs of the major political actors of the time, interviews and historical archives. What they are looking for in this material is the self-conceptions of the actors who are participating in the processes that constitute international life (2009: 12).

This methodological choice is driven directly by the idea of international society (even as ideal type) as derived from international practice rather than from a particular theoretical logic (eg. the logic of competition that drives the microeconomic foundations of neorealism). It is historical practice which dictates the main features of the framework of international society (or what is referred to as its primary institutions). As Buzan has put it “the concept of society fits with the observed data and offers a way of understanding that is not available using alternative concepts” (1993: 329-330). Little has pointed to the ways in which, even if polarity was used in the traditional sense of the distribution of material power, such a method would also add to the larger English school project:

...for the ES to progress, it is also essential to enter the diplomatic archives, particularly when it comes to assessing whether decision makers are being influenced by systemic changes in the international distribution of power or by the intersubjective norms that help to define and maintain international society (2009: 98).

Given the redefinition of polarity used here, these two factors no longer need to be in competition with each other – it is no longer an either/or question between material factors and ideational ones. Building knowledge of historical perceptions of polarity, through analysing which states were treated as poles of power (both through actions and discourse) pushes the English school agenda even further than that envisaged by Little in this quote. The interpretations of who is and who is not given the social status of great/superpower at any one time by diplomats, politicians and analysts sheds light on how decision makers are influenced both by power (as they interpret it) and norms (as they are accepted and internalised consciously or unconsciously). In this case it is the norm of great power management.

Of course such sources are not epistemologically unproblematic, as Lene Hansen has written in regards to memoirs: “It would however be impossible for any memoirist...to give as complete account of everything that has ever happened in one’s life...and literary non-fiction is therefore dependent not only on the author’s truthfulness and memory but also on the author’s selection of what is most important” (2006: 69). Again it is an English framework that allows one to overcome such a hurdle for if international society and its constituent parts (institutions such as the great powers) only exist in as much as its members produce and reproduce it through their language and actions, then the historical record should act as a corrective to any disjunction between, for example, the perception of the polarity as expressed in a memoir years later and as it was internalised at the time. For example, if a decision maker claimed in a memoir that she was acting at the time as if the world was multipolar when her actions seem to suggest she believed the world was instead unipolar then the latter should be given epistemological priority in the analysis of how this

perception affected the role of the great powers. Put another way, it is the actions of the decision makers inside the members of international society (states) not their recollections afterwards that constitute an international society.

However, such a problem is rarely likely to be encountered in a study of this kind given that what is being looked for in the data are clues to the perception of something relatively uncontroversial. Unlike the perceptions of the diarist, for example, of fellow political leaders or the level of public support for a foreign war, polarity is unlikely to be consciously articulated by the writer let alone done so in an attempt at revisionism.³⁴ What is more likely to be challenging to this method is making judgements as to when a perception of polarity can or cannot be discerned in a given speech, memo or diary entry. Yet given the popular use of the concept this is unlikely to pose insurmountable hurdles for this kind of analysis. As Buzan has noted, “The terms bipolarity and unipolarity, and to a lesser extent multipolarity, act as a common currency across academic journals, government statements, diplomatic discourse and media reporting and commentary” (2004a 33).

In terms of secondary material, this data serves two purposes. The first is in the normal sense favoured by qualitative social science research, and that is to supplement the primary sources with historiography. Therefore and particularly given the large time period under review here, the method follows the historical sociologist, Theda Skocpol’s argument that:

If a topic is too big for purely primary research – and if excellent studies by specialists are already available in some profusion – secondary sources are appropriate as the basic source of evidence for a given study. Using them is not different from survey analysts reworking the results of previous surveys rather than asking all questions anew (1984: 382).

While there are pitfalls associated with relying entirely on secondary documents (see Goldthorpe 1991), the combination of secondary sources with selected primary sources can

³⁴ It is unsurprising that most of the postmodern or poststructural literature that raises serious epistemological issues with analysing historical narratives (such as Campbell 1998) deal with highly contentious issues around identity and conflict.

be used for “a more intimate dialogue with historical evidence” (Skocpol 1984: 385) in order to challenge orthodoxies and conventional wisdoms. The second purpose that the secondary data serves in this theoretical framework is slightly more complex in that it somewhat blurs the distinction between primary and secondary data. Given that both popular commentary (that which the author intends for a wide public, rather than specialist, audience) and scholarly work is normally treated as secondary data (as opposed to interviews, surveys, official documents, speeches, memoirs etc.), the distinction is blurred in that the commentary and scholarship about the great/superpowers published *at the time*, is actually treated here as a source of primary data. The standpoint adopted in this thesis is that the way that scholars and analysts describe the world – in this case the polarity of international society – can influence the perceptions of practitioners and therefore can provide a kind of litmus test for how the members of international society perceive themselves and each other. For example, one of the pieces of contemporary commentary/analysis used in Chapter Four is a book on British foreign policy published in 1939 by E.H. Carr. The book includes an introduction from the Foreign Secretary at the time, Viscount Halifax (Carr 1939: v-vi). Given that the serving Foreign Secretary was confident enough in the analysis to put his name to it (literally in the case of the original 1939 edition in large print on the front cover), it is likely that he had at least some idea of Carr’s assessment of the world order and Britain’s place in it. Not only that, in the introduction, Halifax describes Carr in the following terms:

Mr Carr was for some years a member of the Foreign Office, where he distinguished himself not only by sound learning and political understanding, but also in administrative ability. Now the Wilson Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth, he is an eminently suitable person to survey the history of British foreign policy in recent years, and I think it will be found that he has performed this task admirably (*Ibid*: v).

Therefore the quotations from Carr in the following chapters can be thought of as not simply as a representation of perceptions of world order within the academic community but

outside of it as well. The argument could be made of course that in this example, Carr is an atypical scholar given his previous civil service career. However a further example from the same time (which of course pre-dates the myriad of ways in which social commentators of all types are able to influence public debates via the electronic media, blogs, social networking websites etc.) illustrates the impact of scholarship on decision makers. In a book in which he recounts a trip to Germany in 1936 to give a lecture where he was unexpectedly invited to have an audience with the then Chancellor, Adolph Hitler, the historian and Director of Studies at Chatham House, Arnold Toynbee states that he spoke directly to Hitler on the issue of Germany's status in terms of global power,

In then said that what made us, in the countries to the west of Germany, anxious was the possibility that Hitler might be going to go to war with Russia. In a duel between Germany and Russia, I went on, we expected that Germany would be the winner...In that event, Germany would shoot up to the stature of a super-power on the scale of the United States; and then we, Germany's western neighbours, would be overshadowed and dwarfed by this vastly expanded Third German Reich (1967: 282).

Toynbee goes on to describe how he found out why he had been invited to discuss such matters with Hitler. The Director of an important state-controlled research institute and speech writer for the German Foreign Minister, who had organised the visit had read Toynbee's criticisms of the Nazi regime in the yearly *Survey of International Affairs* published by Chatham House of which Toynbee was the editor. When he brought these criticisms to the attention of Hitler, the Chancellor had requested the meeting in order to influence Toynbee's future writing. As Toynbee himself speculated,

‘This Englishman,’ I think Hitler had rapidly reflected, ‘this Englishman produces a *Survey of International Affairs* every year. Before I am in a position to stop him by putting pressure on his Government, he may have produced half a dozen more of these volumes, and it is possible that they may have some effect on public opinion in the English-speaking countries (*Ibid*: 285).

Again, therefore, we can think of Toynbee's analysis of world politics at the time not simply as secondary data but as a primary source of how polarity was perceived. This is as true for the likes of Carr and Toynbee in the 1930s as it is of scholars today, particularly those who go out of their way to influence public opinion and/or policymakers. As one such scholar (whose work is used similarly in the post-Cold War analysis in Chapter Six to Carr and Toynbee's is in Chapters Four and Five), Stephen Walt has put it,

When citizens and leaders seek to grasp the dizzying complexity of modern world politics, therefore, they must inevitably rely upon the knowledge and insights of specialists in military affairs, global trade and finance, diplomatic/international historians, area experts, and many others. And that means relying at least in part on academic scholars who have devoted their careers to mastering various aspects of world affairs and whose professional stature has been established through the usual procedures of academic evaluation (e.g., peer review, confidential assessments by senior scholars, the give-and-take of scholarly debate, etc.) (2011: 3).

Not only then do reports from think tanks and articles in journals with a readership outside of academia such as *Foreign Affairs*, *The National Interest* or *Survival* become important sources of data, but so too does more specialist literature which helps to influence perceptions of the academics that advise governments and help shape public opinion.

Using this method and data, understandings of the polarity of the international system will be analysed throughout part II. The next three chapters will trace the history of great power politics between 1815 and 2012 applying the redefinition of polarity outlined over the previous chapters with a view to identifying shifts in perceptions of world order. These chapters serve not only as a kind of testing ground for seeing whether this new definition of polarity can be applied in history to shed lights on particular empirical puzzles but also to provide a series of conclusions discussed in Chapter Seven for theorising polarity into the future.

Before beginning the historical analysis in Part II, it may be useful to briefly summarise the main tenets of the theoretical framework described throughout Part I. This framework allows for an understanding of polarity which:

- Accepts neorealism's claim that states are still centrally important actors in world politics and that the number of major 'poles of power' will be a significant factor in shaping the inter-state order which can be studied in history. But does so in a way which builds on Buzan's formulation of complex polarity theory which distinguishes between superpowers, great powers and regional powers and highlights the often subjective nature of these classifications;
- Rejects the neorealist assumption that polarity can ultimately be reduced to the distribution of material capabilities in the international system at any one point in time. Instead adopts the English school understanding of the existence of the great/superpowers as constituting a primary institution of international society and therefore redefines polarity as *the number of states perceived as holding the social status of great/superpower at any one time*;
- Uses the framework of polarity in *international society* to bring the insights of historical sociology, social psychology, thin Constructivism and neoclassical realism to bear on the central importance of *perceptions* of polarity;
- Opens up the theoretical space for a historiography of polarity in which breakdowns in collective perceptions of world order are possible and to therefore ask questions about the sources of such perceptions, both material and ideational.

This framework is based around the key ontological position of blurring the traditional English school distinction between international system and international society and an epistemological assumption that perceptions of polarity can be studied in the words and actions of analysts and practitioners. This leads to a methodology of comparative historical analysis informed by both primary and secondary materials.

The historical analysis of the next three chapters will be used to demonstrate not only the need for a redefinition of polarity but also the specific utility of the analytically

eclectic version built up over the last three chapters. It will also allow us to set up a number of conclusions to be discussed in chapter seven about the sources of perceptions of world order and what this might mean for taking polarity analysis forward in the future.

Part II: Historical Case Studies

Chapter Four: From the Concert of Europe to the World Wars (1815-1945)

On the eve of the War of 1914...the existing Great Powers were assumed to be permanent features in the landscape.

Arnold J. Toynbee, *The World after the Peace Conference* (1925: 7).

Previous chapters explored the ways in which a re-envisioning of great power status should affect our expectations of how changes in polarity influence inter-state interactions. Part I outlined a framework for understanding the poles of power in polarity analysis as the members of international society that hold a particular social status in the hierarchical inter-state order. This chapter applies this framework to the period of 1815-1945. This period is generally thought of as being clearly multipolar and is closely associated with theorising about multipolar systems. With a focus on the central role of perception, the discussion examines the ambiguity that arises when a more analytically eclectic approach to polarity is used, and considers the implications for polarity analysis and what is described in this study as an English school treatment of polarity. It illustrates the key arguments of this thesis that our expectations about the effects of polarity in world politics cannot be based on an assumption that polarity is an objective phenomenon based on which states possess military, economic and other quantifiable resources and that polarity analysis must be able to take account of the element of perceptions of power.

The Great Powers in International Society

The argument put forward here is that polarity is not simply ‘known’ by all actors uniformly at a given time but is instead perceived and therefore open to interpretation. As Alexander Wendt puts it: “It is actor’s beliefs that make up shared knowledge, and their practices which confirm or falsify that knowledge over time” (2010: 188). If we think of knowledge and particularly shared knowledge as reliant on beliefs, perceptions and experience this

opens up the theoretical space for different opinions on which states are, and which are not, poles of power as well as particular periods of transition when the exact form of polarity that exists (uni, bi or multi) is unclear. So far we have discussed the continuing utility of polarity analysis as well as the shortcomings of the standard materially-determined view of polarity that fundamentally misses the constructed nature of international order (Hoffmann 1998: 203; Clark 2001: 20) due to its neglect of the central role of perception. This chapter will discuss the role of the great powers over the period of 1815-1945 including perceptions of power across Europe, East Asia and the Americas. The approach to polarity taken here, discussed in Part I – in which polarity is redefined not as the distribution of material capabilities but instead the number of states holding a particular social status – is tested by examining the extent to which perceptions differed over space and time. Using the indicators of how states are treated in diplomatic practice, how they are discussed in official statements and how they are evaluated by analysts, the study of the post-1815 order up to the end of the Second World War will provide the empirical basis for the re-envisioning of polarity analysis previously outlined. This approach is deemed necessary for as William Wohlforth has argued, “changes in perceptions, as troublesome as they are for building and testing theory, do expand the explanatory utility of the distribution of power by accounting for a greater variation in behaviour and outcomes” (1993: 294). This, it is argued here, helps to bridge the gap between the ultimately inconclusive attempts discussed in Chapter Two to create a parsimonious theory of polarity based on power as quantified possessions and the everyday use of the concept of polarity by practitioners (Buzan 2004a: 33).

Hamish Scott has argued that while the relative distribution of power amongst political units had been long regarded crucial to political relations, it is not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the term ‘great power’ and the idea of a state with special rights and duties in the international system emerged (2006: 117-21; Black 2008). This is at odds with

Hedley Bull's account which traces at least some of the attributes of great power status (such as the recognition of special spheres of influence, interest or responsibility) to the fifteenth century (1977: 219; Little 2006: 111). Andreas Osiander adds a third dimension by stressing the novelty of this "two-tier setup" of managerial great powers and managed non-great powers that was set in place at the Congress of Vienna in 1815³⁵,

Frequently, the expression 'great power' is used regardless of the period being dealt with, but this leads to nineteenth-century assumptions about what a great power is and does being read into historical processes in which such assumptions were not present ... There have always been big powers, of course. But both at Münster and Osnabrück and at Utrecht, the big powers had little sense of special rights and responsibilities (Osiander 1994:323).

By the early nineteenth century the concept was well established and it is almost universally accepted that 1815 marks a high point (if not the starting point) in the development of social norm of great power management.³⁶ According to English school theorists such as Bull, Martin Wight and others, this is a bi-product of the larger development and expansion of 'international society.' Depending on whose account is accepted, such an international social development can either be traced back to seventeenth century European diplomacy or much further back (and not necessarily geographically confined to Europe) (Little 2005; Onuma 2000; Watson 1984). Using the English school idea of international society should lead us to examine the way in which polarity (or which and therefore how many states held great power status) was perceived at the time. Richard Little alerts us to the fact that this was implied in Bull's original research into the development of societal relations that extended beyond the systemic interactions of states. This is evident in that "Accurate assessments of the distribution of power...require the kind of stable environment that Bull associates with the existence of an international society" (2006: 111). As the post-1815

³⁵ Hans Morgenthau seemed to echo a similar sentiment when he wrote that the great powers as an "institution of international politics and organization...sprang from the brains of Castlereagh" (1973: 459).

³⁶ While some such as Steiner (1997: 536) argue that it was not until 1815 that the distinction really took hold, it is very rare for scholars to refer to a later date in discussing the origins of the concept.

order became consolidated and modern international society found its form in the primary institutions studied by Bull and others, how actors viewed the shape of the diplomatic world, dominated as it was by the great powers, became increasingly important, and therefore central to understanding power in world politics.

The Pre-1815 Order

The period in which we pick up our historical analysis here comes in the immediate aftermath of a succession of conflicts in Europe including the Napoleonic wars from 1803–15 which had followed the French Revolutionary wars of 1792–1802. Paul Schroeder has characterised the period from 1815–1854 as more stable and peaceful than any comparable period during the preceding century (1986: 1). This point is important for our analysis as major war and in particular the peacemaking that generally follows such systemic upheaval has often been used, in practice, as an indicator of the polarity of the day in that the major victors are generally taken to be the main poles of power (ie. those granted great/superpower status) (Gilpin 1981: 203; Clark 2001: 56-78). One account goes so far as to state that “The postwar years constitute a unique period in which states know where they stand in the scales of world power” (Wohlforth 1993: 59).

While there are differences in the lists of major powers drawn up by different scholars who have conducted systemic analysis for the years prior to 1815 (which implies that the revisionist approach to polarity employed here is at least theoretically possible for periods before that which is analysed in this study), most depict a firmly multipolar system in the decades immediately preceding 1815 (Levy 1983; Modelski and Thompson 1988). However David Wilkinson has argued for attributing unipolar status to France under Louis XIV and again under Napoleon Bonaparte (1999: 149-50) and George Liska appears to elude to a bipolar rivalry when he writes that, “In reality, the eighteenth-century conflicts between Britain and France were precipitated and extended in Europe by the competition between

the two powers for the same overseas territories; this competition was far from minimized by the availability of unlimited open space” (1963: 123).³⁷ While in theory both Britain and France should have been competing with at least one more power in a multipolar (or ‘3 +’) system, in this account, the peer competitor focus in London was Paris and vice versa.

Even when scholars have characterised the immediate period to 1815 as multipolar, change within this configuration is commonly referred to in the recent decline of a number of empires. Relying primarily on Modelski and Thompson’s use of data relating to global naval capabilities, Woosang Kim considers Spain a great power until 1808 and the Netherlands until 1810 (Kim 1992: 160; Modelski and Thompson 1988). It is important to note that in a large multipolar system (with say five or six poles of power), change within this order such as one power dropping out or another coming in should make little difference to the perception of the form of the overall systemic polarity (as opposed to changes within the same form of polarity). Yet when a multipolar order is at small numbers (three or four) this changes. However, mapping changes in perceptions of which states are considered to be great powers, and therefore be included in the polarity of the day, in large multipolar systems should still generate important insights for the re-envisioning of polarity that is undertaken in this study as it still calls into question the whole basis for treating great powers as simply those states with the greatest number of material capabilities.

The Post-1815 Concert System

The conventional wisdom on the century following the establishment of the Concert of Europe in 1815 is that it was distinguished from the preceding three centuries by the relative stability in the polarity of the European system. According to this account, two major changes occurred, the rise of a unified but relatively weak Italy and the disintegration of Prussia (subsumed by Germany) within the multipolar order neither of which had the

³⁷ In the same article Liska also refers to an earlier period of “bipolar struggle between the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons in the pre-revolutionary system” (1963: 130).

dramatic effect of the rise and fall of great powers (involving Spain, the Netherlands, France, Britain, Russia and Prussia) during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Scott 2006: 362).

At the heart of the Concert of Europe or the ‘Congress system’ established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was the formalisation of the social differentiation between the great and non-great powers in Europe. F.H. Hinsley has captured the importance of the diplomatic practice at Vienna in signifying the collective understanding of the polarity of the society of states in the aftermath of the defeat of France. He notes that the ideas about order of those present “found expression at Vienna in the spirit in which the assembled victor states agreed among themselves about the detailed resettlement of Europe” (1967: 194). The Concert system was to underpin international order not only by providing an avenue for the management of relations between the great powers, but also as a means of highlighting their unequal power over the rest of international society (Hurrell 1999: 254). This understanding of the Concert’s purpose is highlighted by the approach to the great powers outlined in Part I in which these states are those that enjoy a very specific social status rather than simply control a certain share of the system’s resources. Status, unlike brute force, requires public displays of power in order to be affirmed and therefore the high-profile meetings of the Concert system provided an avenue for this.

The Congress of Vienna was aimed at settling the geopolitical issues arising from the French defeat at the end of the Napoleonic wars. This included redrawing the boundaries of France, the Netherlands, parts of Italy, and a number of Duchies and provinces such as Warsaw and Saxony. The Final Act of the Congress established the right of the signatories to uphold its provisions which in one way or another essentially redrew the political map of Europe (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 108).

The Concert was based around a number of principles such as great power management and balance of power politics and took the form of regular meetings and summits aimed at establishing negotiated solutions to Europe's greatest security threats. Yet ongoing disputes about the principles underlying the Concert's operation (eg. how Concert powers should react to the revolutionary movements that threatened the old monarchical orders at various times throughout the nineteenth century) as well as questions of form, particularly around membership (eg. whether or not to admit actors such as France and the Ottoman Empire) remained throughout the period.

Table 1. below lists the consultations, meetings and conferences which are associated with the Concert of Europe. While this summary gives an impression of a line of unbroken action, in fact many characterise a number of points where the Congress system effectively broke down. Some date the Concert's demise from 1823 (Jervis 1982: 130) and the French intervention in Spain, others in the revolutionary era from 1848 (Sked 1979). Others again point to the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 (Miller 1994) as the point of collapse while a final school of thought argues that the Concert remained in one form or another until the eve of World War I in 1914 (Holbraad 1970).

Table 1. *Main conferences associated with the Concert of Europe 1815-1913*

Date	Location	Main issue addressed
1814-15	Vienna and Paris	Peace Treaty, Quadruple Alliance
1818	Aix-la-Chapelle	France, Quadruple Alliance
1820	Troppau	Naples revolution
1821	Laibach	Naples revolution
1822	Verona	Italy, Spain, Eastern question
1830-2	London	Belgian independence
1831-2	Rome	Government of the Papal States
1838-9	London	Belgium (implementation of Treaty of London)
1839	Vienna	Egyptian revolution
1840-1	London	Egyptian independence

1850-2	London	Schleswig-Holstein conflict
1853	Vienna	Eastern question
1855	Vienna	Eastern question
1856	Paris	Peace Treaty
1858	Paris	The Principalities (implementation of Paris Treaty)
1860-1	Paris	Syrian revolution
1864	London	Schleswig-Holstein, the Ionian islands
1866	Paris	Navigation on the Danube
1867	London	Luxembourg
1869	Paris	Cretan revolution
1871	London	Black Sea
1876-7	Constantinople	Eastern question
1878	Berlin	Peace Treaty
1880	Madrid	Morocco
1884-5	Berlin	Africa
1906	Algeciras	Morocco
1912-13	London	Settlement of Balkan Wars

Adapted from Luard (1986: 301) and Hinsley (1967: 214).

What is abundantly clear is that in 1815 there was a very widespread consensus on the existence of four undisputed great powers, Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia. France, reeling from its defeat to the Fourth Coalition (also referred to as the Quadruple Alliance) was not treated as a peer with equal claim to great power rights and responsibilities in the settlement of the Napoleonic wars. This despite the fact that even after the military losses endured in the final years of this conflict, France remained militarily stronger than Britain, Austria and Prussia (Bridge 1979: 34). It was not until 1818, and after much diplomatic manoeuvring and negotiation that France was included as a Concert power. The United States was “well established” but its role “marginal to power relationships elsewhere” (Black 2008: 101) and Japan had yet to be considered by the European powers – those both claiming and developing the notion of great power status – as one of their number. This reinforces the notion that “status attribution is a perceptual phenomenon, but one that ought

to have behavioural consequences” (Volgy *et al.* 2011: 13) such as states with considerable material capabilities or even ‘rising powers’ experience economic and military growth should not always be expected to be automatically included into pre-existing great power clubs. The ‘Concert powers’ were a kind of social clique in which notions of an historical claim to great power status, ideas about civilisation and geography were centrally important.

Robert Jervis has emphasised the central importance of a shared expectation about the future of the Concert for its survival (Jervis 1982: 366). The participants expected it to survive and therefore risked a higher degree of cooperation, compromise and trust in order to achieve their (individual and collective) aspirations of order in Europe (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 109). Clearly, a key aspect of the Concert’s survival was understood to be its membership. The issue of membership of the Concert related directly to which states were and which were not conferred great power status. This is captured in the statement of French Prime Minister Richelieu who at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle insisted that France would:

...no longer consent to receive notes signed collectively by the ministers of the four Powers. This Areopagus sitting in Paris and discussing the affairs of Europe and of France herself can no longer exist unless France forms part of it. If this surveillance is to be tolerable, it must be reciprocal: France may be called on to suppress a revolution in Prussia just as much as Prussia to suppress trouble in France (quoted in Bridge 1979: 37).

Exclusivity was the order of the day given the privileged position of the initial four and eventual five great powers that were setting the peace and security agenda for the European continent. Therefore, ideas about the Concert’s future (and their subsequent effect on the success or otherwise of the whole arrangement) were intimately linked to perceptions of the polarity on the part of these powers.

While the polarity of the system, in its limited geographical configuration as used in practice by the Concert powers, at least at the outset, was perceived as being stable at the time of the Congress of Vienna and the period immediately after, this was to be short-lived. Many of the crises that assailed the Concert system throughout the nineteenth century were greatly

influenced, if not directly caused, by changing perceptions of how power was distributed amongst this group of peers.

Problematic Powers in the Concert System

Two of the ‘undisputed’ powers of the nineteenth century raise interesting questions about great power status and therefore about the role of perception in defining the causal power of polarity. As was discussed in Chapter Two, the role of non-material factors in the determinants of great power status has been empirically downplayed and theoretically ignored in the literature on polarity. Yet Austria’s status as a great power alerts us to the importance of non-material considerations. As Scott has noted,

Austria retained the status of a great power until the First World War, more due to her geographical extent and European role than her own intrinsic strength ... Austria thus remained, as she had been ever since her seventeenth-century political emergence, a state with the responsibilities of a great power but with an exposed and precarious strategic situation which she lacked the means to defend (2006: 360-1).

For Herbert Butterfield, it was Klemens von Metternich’s brilliant and effective use of diplomacy that secured for Austria a “commanding influence in European politics totally out of proportion to that state’s actual power” (Schweizer and Black 2006: 624). This is important for the theoretical argument advanced here about the way that polarity actually affects inter-state relations (ie. through actor’s perceptions) as, if Butterfield was right and structural power can come through agency, then there is no theoretical reason why this should be a quirk of history associated with a particular Austrian statesmen. Of course, Metternich’s actions were based on a perception of Austria’s material capabilities, albeit one which may have been outdated or inaccurate. To put it differently, this does not mean that we should presume that in theory that if a diplomat as skilled as Metternich was to have emerged, for example, in Denmark at the time, then it too should be expected to be perceived as a great power. For as was outlined in Chapter Three, an analytically eclectic approach to polarity does not simply mean neatly substituting hard power for soft power.

Instead this way of analysing polarity takes material capabilities as a necessary but not sufficient basis for a claim to great power status. Just as important as how a contender does in quantitative terms is how the power is perceived and therefore treated by its peers.

Even the agency of particular individuals or groups of diplomatic elites may not be enough to explain the success of Austria in ensuring its treatment as a great power for so long as this trend continued well past the era of Metternich. Samuel Williamson has written of Austria, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a so-called great power without the “latent material and economic resources to allow for a competitive military build-up; it could not keep up with the Joneses, so to speak” (2010: 104). Yet Austria’s historical legacy, largely thanks to the hugely dominant role Metternich had played in European politics right up to his resignation as Foreign Minister in 1848, clearly carried Vienna’s status well past its material capabilities allowed.

Similarly, Prussia was without doubt treated as a great power throughout the Napoleonic era and immediately after yet was in reality, as was even noted by the French minister Talleyrand at the time, a great power in name only (Scott 2006:4). Prussia had suffered greatly during the Napoleonic wars – so much so that one account talks of it being “nearly eclipsed as a great power” after its military defeat in 1806 (Rosecrance 2010: 21). Yet at the Congress of Vienna, Prussia was treated as a full partner and acted accordingly demanding recognition of its claim to Saxony. This claim was disputed by Austria but the British Foreign Secretary, Viscount Castlereagh persuaded Vienna to accept a deal giving far greater concessions to Prussia than was expected (Bridge and Bullen 2005: 28). Scott has written that these cases demonstrate the important but not sufficient role of material resources in the emerging great power system at the time, “international leadership rested not merely on resources and administrative, military, and where appropriate, naval power, but on the willingness of the established elite to treat a newcomer as one of their number”

(2006: 4). Again the balance between material capabilities and ideational factors in the way scholars think about power relationships appears to affect the role of Prussia as a pole of power throughout the period. Mathew Rendall goes a step further to argue that the use of hard power (as well as its actual or potential possession in terms of capabilities) greatly affects the way states such as Prussia are viewed with hindsight by offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer. Rendall states that most scholars regard Prussia as one of the great powers for the entire nineteenth century, yet is only considered so by Mearsheimer from 1862 onwards with the coming to power of Otto von Bismark (Rendall: 525). From his defensive realist position, Rendall argues that this is partly because “making potential and actual military power criteria for being a great power means excluding some states that exercise restraint” (525).

The Ottoman Empire is often discussed on the margins of the story of the great powers of the nineteenth century and it only makes it onto some of the list of contenders in the standard polarity literature (see for example Levy 1981). If we consider the way in which it was treated at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it is interesting to note that Castlereagh went to some effort to try and include a mention of the Ottoman Empire in the Vienna Final Act. Yet this was far from providing Constantinople a “seat at the table” out of a recognition of the empire’s prestige as great power (Larson and Schevchenko 2010: 192; Schweller 1999). Instead Castlereagh’s plan was to include a guarantee of the integrity of the Ottoman Empire that “the Powers” would sign up to and even agree to enforce in a kind of collective security arrangement (Hinsley 1967: 200). This demonstrates that it was treated as a state which the great powers would need to protect from the designs of one another and not as a peer.

What historians now, in hindsight, refer to as the decline of the Ottoman Empire (known at the time as the ‘Eastern Question’) not only raised questions about the role of this former

major player but also encouraged rivalry and competition between certain members of the Concert order. The period of 1821-41 presented the Concert powers with a number of challenges as to precisely how the holders of great power status were to manage the gradual decline of Ottoman influence in the Balkans and what is today referred to as the Middle East. In particular, the Greek war of independence of 1821-33 and the two Egyptian revolts of 1831-33 and 1839-41 became, according to Schroeder “the most complicated, persistent, and dangerous question in European politics” (1986: 6) at the time.

In the latter half of the century, Britain and Russia viewed the growing power vacuum in the East as an opportunity to increase their respective power in Europe. It is reasonably clear now in hindsight that Russian leaders overestimated the extent to which the other European powers would allow it to dictate the terms by which the decline of the Ottoman power would be managed. As Paul Schroeder has highlighted, the Crimean War “began with a clearly superior allied coalition (Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire) facing a Russia diplomatically isolated, politically and militarily threatened, aware of its peril, and looking for an honorable retreat” (1994: 122).

Yet, towards the middle of the nineteenth century we see an increase in diplomatic efforts with Constantinople appointing an ambassador to London in 1836 and re-establishing permanent embassies in Vienna, Paris and London in 1835-6. Such moves were part of a gradual move towards greater status recognition throughout the nineteenth century. By 1853, British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston was discussing the indispensable role of the Ottoman Empire for the European continent. Writing to the Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Clarendon he observed that “the activity, spirit & the Energy, moral & Physical, military & political which the Turks have displayed in dealing with their present Crisis, must surely convince any impartial & unprejudiced Person that Turkey is not a dead or dying Body, but that on the Contrary it possesses Powers of Life & national Resources which render it worth

maintaining as a useful Element in the European Balance” (quoted in Brown 2002: 161-2). Ian Clark notes that by 1856, the Ottoman Empire was being “coopted by the European powers” (1989: 95). This relates directly to the fact that it was treated as great power at the Congress of Paris that year following the Crimean war and not simply as a victim of great power aggression. It was not until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1856 that the Ottoman Empire was formally admitted into the Concert of Europe.³⁸

Late Nineteenth Century Rising Powers

Further to the east, the final two contenders for major power status throughout the period, and particularly in the latter part, were the rising Pacific powers of the United States and Japan. Clark suggests that the United States was being treated as a great power “towards the closure of the century if not earlier” and that Japan’s status during this time is best symbolised by the 1902 treaty signed with Britain (1989: 95). This treaty established an alliance between London and Tokyo and explicitly recognised each party’s special interests in Northeast Asia.

While it was Britain who had fought the revolutionaries in the previous century during the War of Independence, many of the European great powers had been directly involved on the North American continent (including Spain, France, and Russia). Yet the days of the United States being a newly emerging independent state still providing a setting for European ‘offshore balancing’ had passed by the middle of the nineteenth century (Little 2007b: 72). By 1857, Palmerston was observing that “We have given way Step by Step to the North Americans on almost every disputed matter, and I fear that we shall have more or less to do so upon every other Question except the maintenance of our own Provinces and of our West Indian Islands” (quoted in Little 2007b: 75). One account notes that by the 1870s the United

³⁸ It should also be noted that this recognition by the Concert powers did not necessarily ensure the Ottoman Empire’s territorial integrity (Adanir 2005).

States had already overtaken Britain as the world's largest and most advanced economy (Cox, Dunne and Booth 2001: 11).

However, the history of the rise of the United States into the league of great power status in a perceived multipolar order also provides evidence of the inability of traditional definitions of polarity as the distribution of material capabilities to capture the reality of how power operates in world politics. By taking a purely materialist approach to polarity, which assumes that polarity is uniformly understood across space and time due to the objective quantitative foundations of great power status, the United States should not only be well established as a pole of power by this time. In fact, by the turn of the century, according to John Mearsheimer, the United States was far ahead of Britain in the two principal indicators of military might; population and industrial strength (2001: 246). The Correlates of War project data shows that by 1920 the United States was producing 33.1 millions of tons of iron and steel than its nearest competitor (Britain) and consuming 482 millions of metric tons of coal equivalent more than Britain (again the second highest consumer at the time) (quoted in May 2010: 229). This would appear to place Washington in something more of a unipolar position – in purely quantitative terms – yet the way great power status was granted by its peers does not bear this out at all. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a period in which the rising Pacific powers of the United States and Japan slowly learned to translate their growing material capabilities into diplomatic attempts to gain this much sought after social status and the gradual reciprocation by the established European powers by conferring at least 'rising power' status.

In particular it was the 'Far Eastern crisis' of 1895-1905 that, according to Clark, demonstrated the arrival of Washington and Tokyo as centres of global power:

It offered a stage for the United States to convert its growing economic and technological muscle into a degree of diplomatic leverage: its stake in the Philippines in 1898, the 'Hay Open Door' notes in relation to China and the hosting of the Portsmouth peace settlement

between Russia and Japan in 1905 all bore witness to America's coming of international age. At the same time, Japan's war against China in 1894-5, her alignment with Britain and her symbolic victory over Russia in 1905 testified to an Asiatic presence in the world power structure (1989: 95).

Writing of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894, Seung-Young Kim notes that following the Japanese victory, the British government asked the United States to join her alongside Russia, Germany and France in an intervention with a view to achieving Korean independence. The invitation was declined as according to Kim, "In the view of American leaders, a strong Japan would counterbalance the European intrusion in East Asia and could promote a favourable balance of power for the United States in the region" (2009: 18). Two years later, Japan lost the Korean peninsula to a coalition intervention by Russia, France and Germany.

By the turn of the century, Japan clearly saw itself as a great power (modelled on the great powers of Europe and North America) and was clearly treated as such at the peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1905 following the Russo-Japanese war. The war had effectively reversed the outcome of the previous Triple Intervention (Mearsheimer 2001: 178) and by 1907, Japan and Russia were negotiating with each other over Korea, Manchuria and Outer Mongolia as states of roughly equal status within a multipolar system. The earlier Anglo-Japanese alliance formalised in the signing of the 1902 treaty mentioned above (subsequently renewed and extended in scope in 1905 and then again in 1907) marked "a major effort to incorporate Japan into equations of international strength and the algebra of great power calculations" (Black 2010: 164). However the fact that Britain's allies, particularly France, did not feel equally compelled to do the same suggests that the geographic, historical and cultural barriers to accepting Japan as a great power may have been surmountable for Britain with its eastern interests and recent rivalry with Russia, but were perhaps not yet for Paris.

Mearsheimer paints China's role throughout these years of unrest in Northeast Asia as very much a minor power (particularly after its military defeat to Japan in 1895) and following the intervention of the three European powers in Korea, Russia replaced China as Japan's main rival in the region (2001: 177). Symbolically, China lost Korea as the vassal state that it had once been to great power competition of which it was not seen to be involved as a major player. Mearsheimer, focusing solely on material capabilities, writes that "Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States played key roles in checking Japan between 1895 and 1945" while China "remained economically backward until well after 1945" (176). Interestingly, writing in the *North American Review* in 1898, Archibald Colquhoun argued that "The two generative factors in the Far Eastern development...are, of course, Russia and China, which possess between them, in an altogether peculiar degree, the procreative properties which evolve great events" (513). Yet Colquhoun is not referring to the two states as equal powers but Russia as "comparatively poor" but "confident in her own power to dominate and appropriate the resources of her gigantic but inorganic neighbour" and China as lying "like a vast terrestrial depression with a body of water pent up alongside of it" (514). He goes on to describe Britain, Germany, and importantly, Japan as "world powers" competing for the spoils of China. This reinforces the significance (but not sole importance) of material strength in shaping perceptions of great power status. During the period in question, China clearly was neither treated as, nor had the material basis for a claim to being treated as, a pole of power. It may also lead to the conclusion that as international society expanded the criteria for great power status was not equally applied. While history and culture seemed to work in favour of states such as Austria and Prussia it counted against potential powers outside of Europe. Equally material capabilities seem to count for more outside of the traditional realms of European great power politics allowing entry into the club for the United States and Japan but not for China.

Some such as Schweller (1999) have included Italy, in the list of late nineteenth century rising powers alongside the United States and Japan. Yet there is little evidence that Italy was thought of in this way at the time, regardless of military and economic developments which have been analysed since. This not to say that Italian decision makers did not think of Italy as a great power after unification in the 1860s (Bridge and Bullen 2005: 1). Paying particular attention to the importance of self-perception in understandings of polarity alerts one to the difference between aspiration and peer recognition for rising powers. The Triple Alliance of 1882 between Austria-Hungary, Germany and Italy was for the two ‘central powers’ simply a “makeshift measure to cope with an emergency” (the Russian response to Vienna’s attempts to put down the October 1881 Bosnian rebellion and the possibility of a Franco-Russian alliance) (*ibid*: 221). However, for Italy, the Triple Alliance “represented the fulfilment of a long-cherished aspiration” (*ibid*) – status recognition as a peer by other European powers. Yet this was still a limited recognition. It was recognition as a useful ally by two of the six European powers and only in as much as it might provide an extra disincentive to Russia, and particular its somewhat belligerent General Skobelev, to ally with France and make war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Interestingly, the Triple Alliance, while officially replacing the previous Double Alliance between Germany and Austria, did not prevent only these two countries (and not Italy) in making joint military plans in the event of hostilities in the east (*ibid*: 224). Italy continued to attach itself to other powers for the rest of the century to guarantee its security (including first Britain and then France) further signifying its inability to convincingly act like a great power and therefore be treated as such in turn (Taylor 1974: 382-3).

What the Triple Alliance also signifies is the relative decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The fact that Italy was included at all tells us something of the diminished status of Vienna in terms of the balance of power in the late nineteenth century. Richard Little has

pointed out that alongside the influence of Eurocentrism, a purely materialist methodology accounts for why, for example, Kenneth Waltz (1979; see also Corbetta *et al.* 2011: 223) regards Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire as poles of power during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries well after others such as Buzan (2004a: 49-50) have relegated them to the role of regional powers (Little 2007a: 187). The Austro-Hungarian Empire struggled to keep up with the other powers in the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth and at least in military terms by 1914 was really viewed as a regional power in the limited sense (ie. a central European power) than a Europe-wide, let alone a global one (Strachan 2006: 12).

Perceptions of Bipolarity

Once a sole focus on the distribution of capabilities is substituted for a more social and historically contingent version of polarity a slightly more complex picture of the polarity emerges. Not only does the revisionist approach to polarity developed in this study help to explain the discrepancies in the way that post-hoc analysis has treated certain great power contenders, but it also points to a weakness in the blanket characterisation of the whole period under review in this chapter as multipolar. In other words, not only does it point to changes *within* polarity that are not captured in the standard approach but also highlights potential changes *of* polarity as well due to the central role of perception. In the latter half of the century, and particularly throughout the 1870s, perceptions of a Russo-British bipolar order can be detected amongst policymakers and analysts. One of the pitfalls of relying on historical analysis that focuses on material capabilities, and often (particularly during the period under review in this chapter) a disproportionate focus on military capabilities, is that gradual systemic change is overlooked. Instead systemic change is treated as points of major upheaval in diplomatic history – as discerned in post-hoc analysis. Yet if the structure of the international system provides sets of incentives and disincentives (Pelz 1991: 49) for

decision makers and analysts *at the time*, then a more historically contingent approach is necessary to discern the degree of interaction between system structure and decision making. As Ole Holsti has written, “although some dramatic events are widely perceived as marking the beginning of new eras in international affairs – these are often the start or termination of major wars such as the years 1648, 1815, 1914, or 1945 – systemic changes may occur far less dramatically and over a more protracted period” (1991: 87). Again such a starting point opens up the theoretical space for perceptions, and particularly differing perceptions, to become all important.

While some in other European capitals were still clearly thinking in multipolar terms (see for example John Westlake’s influential *Chapters on the Principles of International Law* of 1894), William Langer has noted Bismark’s concern over the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Britain in 1877 during the Russian-Turkish war which “might well end in a cataclysm” (1931: 123). Langer’s own assessment of the crisis is that Britain “together with Russia, had come to play the leading role in the whole Near Eastern problem, so that the history of the crisis began to centre more and more on the relations between these two countries” (122). By March of the following year the idea that the main centres of power in Europe were Britain and Russia appeared to have been accepted in London when Prime Minister Disraeli spoke to his cabinet of “the overshadowing interference of Russia” in the East (Langer 1931: 137).

The bipolar image of the late nineteenth century is evident in military terms when one considers the limits to British naval dominance posed by Russia. While Russia posed a very serious threat on land, it had no equivalent to the Royal Navy whose might was unmatched. Yet Russia relied on a relatively small amount of seaborne trade (most of which could in fact be diverted overland anyway) and therefore could not be effectively threatened by naval blockade (Papastratigaki 2010: 643). Added to this, continental Russia presented Britain

with few strategic targets which could be targeted by sea (Papastratigaki 2010: 643) making Russia much less vulnerable to direct attack by Britain's most potent military capability than other powers in Europe, North America or East Asia. The bipolar image is also strongly hinted at by William Thompson when reflecting on the parallels with the later US-Soviet bipolar struggle of the Cold War in the latter half of the twentieth century. In demonstrating the clearly multipolar order in which particular regional bilateral rivalries took place within in the lead up to World War II, Thompson writes that "Indeed, the U.S.-USSR rivalry more closely resembled the older Anglo-Russian rivalry than it did the Anglo-French or Anglo-German rivalries" of the inter-war years (1997: 63).

While this bipolar rivalry was at its most potent in the late nineteenth century, it had its roots in a much earlier period. The perception of a bipolar order based around the two poles of Britain and Russia is important for thinking about the success or otherwise of the Concert of Europe. The decline of the Concert would mark a major change in the form of multilateral security cooperation in Europe. Castlereagh was clearly concerned about the endurance of a multipolar system given that the whole notion of the balance of power was entirely thought of solely in multipolar terms. Therefore his view of the conservative Holy Alliance (of Russia, Austria and Prussia) was coloured by the fact that he thought it would increase Russian influence in Europe which equated to an end to a multipolar balance (Davis 2004: 36).

Palmerstone's enthusiasm for the 1834 British-French-Spanish-Portuguese alliance (known as the Quadruple Alliance despite the same term being used to describe the original anti-Napoleonic alliance of 1813) had as much to do with Russia as it did the monarchical struggles in Spain and Portugal. Palmerston was convinced of the need of a strong counter to Russian ambitions and was at pains to convince the Cabinet of Viscount Melbourne of the need for a proactive approach to thwarting Russian influence (Davis 2004: 38). Palmerston

was unequivocal when he stated that there was “the same principle of repulsion between Russia and us that there was between us and Bonaparte” (quoted in Bridge and Bullen 2005: 96).

Schroeder has gone even further than to argue that the late nineteenth century was bipolar but in fact that the entire Concert system from 1815 onwards was not based on a multipolar balance of power but in fact what he has referred to as a “factual condition of leadership or primacy” enjoyed by Britain and Russia (1992: 705-6). This evidenced, according to Schroeder, by the fact that “nothing prevented Britain and Russia, whenever they chose, from combining to impose their will on the rest of Europe” (1992: 692). Similarly, but with a greater attention to the post-hoc nature of the description, William Wohlforth paints a picture of the period under review here as being mostly bipolar (with a multipolar interlude in the middle). Yet, for Wohlforth it is not just a matter of a simple Russo-British rivalry. Instead he writes that “From 1815 to 1853, it was a Pax Britannica et Russica; from 1853 to 1871, it was not a pax of any kind; and from 1871 to 1914, it was a Pax Britannica et Germanica” (1999: 39).

This certainly gives the impression of an order in which two major states dominate the entire system (at least in terms of potential) for large parts of the period. Yet this claim to a much longer bipolar period does not stand up to the test applied in this study – that of perception on the part of a pole’s fellow states (both major and minor powers). As Clark points out, Schroeder’s overly materialist view (which is partly echoed by Wohlforth in the quote above) is contradicted by the contemporary account of one of the Concert’s officials and most famous figures, Friedrich von Gentz who talked of the Concert “uniting all the states collectively with a federative bond, under the guidance of the five principal Powers” (quoted in Clark 2011b: 79). Despite the “factual conditions” that Schroeder points to from the vantage point of the historian, what is important for thinking about how the polarity of

the day actually affected the foreign policies of states is what Clark describes as “the perception” that a new order based around multiple poles of power having special rights and responsibilities “was also being conferred a quasi-legal basis” (2011b: 79). It is quite clear that there was a generally widespread perception of a clearly multipolar order (with four, if not five) major poles of power in the period immediately following 1815, even if this gave way to a bipolar perception in some quarters at a much later stage.

The sense of a changed perception on the part of Russian leaders of the polarity is evident in the Anglo-Russian *rapprochement* that culminated in the convention of 1907. Pressure from not only British diplomats but also their French counterparts combined with the shock of the defeat to the Japanese in 1905 as well as the Franco-German crisis over Morocco (March 1905–March 1906). All of this, according to Marina Soroka “reconciled Russia’s rulers to the idea of a shift in its political orientation that necessitated a settlement with Britain, its traditional rival” (2010: 1). A more multilateralist approach to security in Europe appeared to be an imperative for Nicholas II’s Russia once the perception was of a more complex multipolar order rather than a more evenly based bipolar competition with Britain. The Russian ambassador in London, Count Aleksandr Konstantinovich Benckendorff repeatedly warned colleagues after 1905 of the dangers of a rising Germany and was only convinced of Russia’s safety from German attack after the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention was signed (Soroka 2010: 5).

Perceptions of Unipolarity

The standard view of an unchanged multipolar order from 1815-1945 in the polarity literature is also challenged by the idea of a potentially unipolar image centred on what is often referred to as Britain’s hegemonic role. A great deal of the attention given to Britain’s potential unipolar role at this time relates specifically to its economic strength and the changes to its military power brought about by innovation in its world-class navy. In

relation to the former Keohane goes so far as to say that “Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth met the material prerequisites for hegemony better than any other states since the industrial revolution” (1984:36). Yet others have summarised this position as stemming not only from London’s economic primacy and naval supremacy but also as embodying the “successful state that others might emulate” (Clark 2011b: 117). This is echoed by David Calleo who claims Britain became a world power “out of scale with traditional European states” which “inevitably promoted imitation” (1987: 138). This idea that a polar power has a certain attractiveness in terms of imitation is a common theme in the polarity literature, particularly throughout the Cold War.

In terms of diplomatic practice, the unipolar perception is also underscored by the persistent recourse to isolationism, mainly under conservative governments in Britain. This tendency in British foreign policy towards Europe was rarely, if ever, based on a sense of being an equal partner in the great power manoeuvrings of the day but wishing to play a minor role in this. Instead the idea was of Britain enjoying a sense of primacy that meant that it was less reliant on traditional strategies of balancing, alliances and intervention. While it is the late nineteenth century era of British foreign policy, under the leadership of Prime Ministers Disraeli and Salisbury, that is usually associated with Britain’s so-called ‘splendid isolationism’ (and aligns with the unipolar image of the same period), such sentiments can be traced back as far as the 1820s when Foreign Secretary (and later conservative Prime Minister) George Canning decried getting “deeply in all the politics of the Continent, whereas our true policy has always been not to interfere except in great emergencies, and then with commanding force” (quoted in Chamberlaine 1988: 63). The tendency amongst liberals to eschew this mix of isolationism and unilateralism (associated closely with unipolarity –Buzan 2004a) seems to have added to a more multipolar perception. For example in 1853, in discussing the importance of the Eastern question, Palmerston was

concerned with maintaining a balancing coalition to counter Russian power, arguing that “unless England & France are prepared to sink down into the Condition of second Rate Powers they must prevail” (quoted in Brown 2002: 162). Russia is certainly being discussed in polar terms as are both Britain and France in this quote.

The unipolar perception is reflected in E.H. Carr’s view of Britain’s dominant role not only in Europe but in the Pacific as well. During a period (discussed above) in which the purely European dominance of the very top of the social hierarchy of international society was being challenged by the rising powers of the United States and Japan, Carr depicts a world in which Britain calls the shots, playing lesser powers off against each other. Carr sees an all-powerful Britain enjoying economic supremacy based on leadership of world markets as a manufacturing and exporting country and political supremacy based on matchless naval power in the Pacific. He notes that when “towards the end of the nineteenth century Russia began seriously to encroach on China’s land frontier and, supported by France, to challenge British predominance, Britain called in the rising, but still modest, power of Japan to redress the balance” (1939b: 55). Duncan Bell has noted that while not the only motivating factor, the rise of competitor powers (such as Germany, Russia and even eventually the United States), was one of the reasons that a debate formed within Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century about the need to form ‘Greater Britain’ (2007: 26). Greater Britain revolved around the idea of consolidating British global power in the face of relative decline through a closer union with the settler colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of South Africa. Bell argues that this push for colonial unity under the banner of a Greater Britain “was driven in part by the perceived need to theorize and construct a bulwark against the encroachment of a powerful set of global challengers” (2007: 2).

However the actions and statements of diplomats and statesmen in the early twentieth century appear to significantly challenge the idea of Britain holding unipolar status and even

cast doubt (at least from the vantage point of a decade or so later) that this status had ever been held in the final decade of the previous century. As tensions increased between Russia and Japan in Northeast Asia, the British tried to intervene by sending Sir Charles Hardinge to negotiate with his Russian counterpart Count Benckendorff in 1903. Instead of acting as a unipolar power able to organise “major politico-military action anywhere in the system” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008: 13), Hardinge complained of Russia encroaching on British interests and provoking hostility in the years prior by “pursuing an aggressive policy in China, Persia, and Afghanistan” (quoted in White 1995: 37). This sentiment was echoed by the British diplomat Cecil Spring Rice who remarked later that year that “England is warned that the defence of India will become a far more serious matter if Russia is opposed in the development of her Far Eastern possessions” (quoted in *Ibid*: 40) and Hardinge later recollected of the negotiations over Tibet and Manchuria that London was “losing ground all the time” (Hardinge 1947: 1947: 84). Even the fact that Russo-Japanese rivalry had risen to the extent that Britain felt compelled to attempt to intervene (and interestingly France also attempted to play a role) in the early years of the twentieth century, points to the fact that in the minds of decision makers even in London, international society was no longer perceived as unipolar. Yet the apparent shock with which British policymakers appeared to view London’s fortunes on the international stage at this time strongly suggests that a unipolar perception, at least in some quarters, had not disappeared overnight and was only gradually receding. The rapid push towards signing a series of international treaties in the first decade of the twentieth century (including the Hay-Pauncefote treaties with the United States in 1900 and 1902, the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, and the *ententes* with first France in 1904 and then Russia in 1907) were a sign of Britain “becoming more like other European powers” (Salmon 1997: 142). In a speech in 1905, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, described the “spirit” of the *entente* agreement with France as being “more

important than the letter of the agreement” (quoted in Otte 2003: 80). Even if the perception of polarity had changed sooner in other capitals than it had in London, this alerts us to the fact that understandings of power structures are far less pervasive and robust than the standard literature claims. It also reinforces the point that these understandings of power should be “accorded a major explanatory role in the framing of national policy” (Rosecrance and Steiner 2010: 351).

The World Wars, the Inter-War Years and the Consolidation of Multipolarity

By the era of World War I and the inter-war years, the perception of a potentially unipolar Britain had subsided and a multipolar order was once again the dominant image of the international structure. Perhaps the clearest indicator of the multipolar perception is the provision in the original text of the Covenant of the League of Nations for the Council having a permanent membership of five powers (Britain, France, Italy, the United States and Japan). There was even provision for an eventual enlargement to include Germany and Russia as permanent members as two states with what were perceived to be legitimate claims to great power status.

Yet by 1939, Carr – an influential British analyst who had only a few years earlier worked for the Foreign Office – appeared to be characterising this period leading to World War II in bipolar terms when he wrote that “Not only can Britain never contemplate war with the United States, but she could never contemplate any war with a first-class Power in which she could not count on the benevolent neutrality of the United States (1939b: 44). Carr goes on to describe the United States as “assuming the position of one of the two great world Powers” and of acquiring “responsibilities which they can scarcely evade and interests which they feel impelled to defence” (46). The tendency towards a perception of bipolarity seems to have reappeared in the analysis of the time but this time with a more global focus rather than a European one.

The years of World War II of 1939-45 are again generally thought of as firmly multipolar given the central role that this period has played in the literature on the effect of multipolar systems on instability and war. This period which Schweller (1993) characterises as tripolar can only be truly said to be so on narrow material terms (Little 2007a: 187 Fn26) and therefore cannot be expected to be a large factor in perceptions of polarity which, as we have seen, are based as much on non-material dynamics as they are on military, economic and other material considerations. The post-war settlement and the creation of the United Nations, with its Security Council dominated by five permanent members with veto power, institutionalised the multipolar perception. Yet, as the next chapter discusses, this institutionalisation disguised a shift towards what would become a deeply entrenched bipolarity for decades to come.

Conclusion

The period of 1815-1945, whilst often being depicted in hindsight as an unending multipolar era (Wilkinson 1999) was in fact a far more complex one in which the systemic picture is somewhat confusing and at times contradictory. Using the theoretical framework developed in Part I to guide the historical analysis we have identified a number of points of friction in the conventional understanding of polarity as being uniformly 'known' and accepted by the members of international society throughout the period. Holsti points out that even post-hoc analysis is not always aligned here and it is therefore to be expected that contemporary ideas about the polarity which gave international society its hierarchical form at any one point in time were similarly inconsistent. He notes that while Richard Rosecrance identifies four distinct systems between 1815 and 1890, Stephen Pelz sees only one (a multipolar order based on a classical balance of power) (Holsti 1991: 87). For Holsti, the point is "not to take sides between Pelz and Rosecrance, but to illustrate that even long after the fact rigorous scholars can disagree about whether systemic change took place" (87).

What the analysis in this chapter has shown is that the standard treatment of polarity in mainstream theories of IR simply don't capture the complexity of how systemic or structural power actually operates in practice. Through an analysis of the words and actions of key players in history, we have seen that some states are granted the special social station of great power status based not only on material capabilities. We have also seen that changes both within and of polarity can be perceived differently and therefore should not be expected to structure "the horizon of states' probable actions and reactions" uniformly and in totally predictable ways (Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2009b: 5).

In particular, the evidence presented here suggests that geography, culture and history have mattered in the construction of polarity in the past. This is important not only for the way in which we tell the story of the expansion of international society but also for how we use history when discussing the effect of different forms of polarity, power transitions and historical world orders. The discussion has also suggested that, in line with the expectations of the theoretical approach outlined in the previous chapters, both material and non-material aspects are important in the granting of great power status. However it has also suggested that this is not necessarily equally so in different time periods and across different regions in the world, particularly as European international society expanded. This also raises the key issue of legitimacy and its role in the attribution of great power status. The discussion of the Concert of Europe in particular highlights that that principles of legitimacy have been central to the historical construction of the social institution of the great powers (Clark 2011b: 73-97) and therefore which states end up constituting part of the systemic polarity. This reinforces the notion that the English school is the appropriate theoretical home for this kind of revisionist treatment of polarity. As a school of thought that starts with diplomatic practice in history and then uses this as the basis of theorising order is well suited to the task of analysing issues around which states have been treated as great powers

as well as which states were discussed in these terms in official statements and influential analysis in order to understand perceptions of polarity.

Finally, the analysis of the perceptions of polarity throughout the period of 1815-1945 has highlighted that contradictory views can be held, even within one state, regarding the polarity of international society at any one time. This strongly suggests that current approaches to understanding the way different forms of polarity affect inter-state interaction in key areas of war, stability, trade, cooperation and governance must take into account the ambiguities inherent in the functioning of the social construction of world order. If Adam Watson is correct and for international society to “function effectively, the dialogue between its major powers must be system-wide” then the way we theorise great power management and international society as a whole must be able to theoretically handle the kinds of breakdowns in collective perceptions discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Five: The Cold War (1946-1989)

This chapter investigates the importance of perceptions of global polarity in what is generally thought of as the clearest example of bipolarity in history, from the end of the Second World War up to the late 1980s. Yet the period involves a more gradual transition into this new order than is often portrayed in post-hoc accounts that fail to distinguish between knowledge imposed on the analysis in hindsight and perceptions at the time. The period also includes the rise of three challenges to a uniform and unbroken perception of bipolarity.

The chapter takes the discussion from a supposedly long period of multipolarity (Mearsheimer 1990: 11) which was questioned in the previous chapter to a period in which traditional ways of looking at polarity – as the global distribution of material capabilities – should, at first glance, be able to explain much of the diplomatic history being analysed. If this was the case, the redefinition of polarity put forward here might be said to be of use only in certain circumstances, for example only in the case of power transitions occurring without the incidence of major war or something similar. However this chapter demonstrates that even in the case of the supposedly unambiguous bipolarity of the Cold War years, an analytically eclectic approach to polarity helps to explain a number of contradictions in this story that have often been marginalised. Such challenges to the picture of a clear and unbroken bipolar structure raise a number of theoretical issues for the standard approach to polarity analysis. For example, expectations about what Glenn Snyder calls “alliance security dilemmas” being weak in bipolar systems (1984) or our certainty that “In a bipolar world, a 10 per cent increase in the arms spending of power A must be answered by an equal increment in the arms of B” (Deutsch and Singer 1964: 402) become increasingly unreliable when perceptions of polarity diverge amongst actors. Even if Robert

Jervis is right and despite the debate between realists who view bipolarity as more dangerous and unstable than multipolarity and those who argue the opposite, there is in fact uniform agreement that “bipolarity significantly changed world politics” (1998: 984), this position still assumes clear agreement at all times of this period that the global structure was actually bipolar.

After examining the nature of the transition from multipolarity to bipolarity, the analysis will cover perceptions of US decline and the rise of China and India and their effect on ideas of order and disorder in international society as well as the final decline of bipolarity with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From Big Four, to Big Three, to Big Two

With hindsight, we know now that in the final years of World War II, the world was moving from a multipolar to a bipolar order. Yet the approach to polarity taken in this study points to the importance of shared perceptions of polarity breaking down particularly during times of major transition. If the contention of a recent critique of power transition theory is correct and “for purposes of status and balancing, perceptions of power appear more important than actual power or capabilities” (Lebow and Valentino 2011: 234), then such pivotal moments in diplomatic history require a more holistic approach to power itself. Despite the relative clarity normally associated with the shift to a bipolar order in the wake of the allied defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the redefinition of polarity developed in this study encourages the analyst to probe a little deeper into how the ordering of the top tier of international society was actually perceived at the time. The emphasis on historical contingency coupled with the dual focus on the material and ideational aspects of power operating in a social hierarchy alert us to the fact that the coming US-Soviet power balance, couched in a larger East-West ideological confrontation, grew organically and unevenly. As

discussed in Chapter Three, perceptions of global polarity, as with perceptions of anything, are often hostage to historical experience and contemporary world views.

George Kennan, the American diplomat and author of the February 1946 ‘long telegram’ that laid the grounds for the American policy of Soviet containment throughout the early stages of the Cold War, argued that even in the years before the outbreak of World War II, the United States was a power that could “have affected perceptibly the course of world affairs” (Kennan 1952: vi). Yet an American perception of its own central role in an emerging bipolar order as the European theatre of war gradually diminished the material basis of French, British and German power does not necessarily correlate with an understanding of the growing bipolar rivalry between Washington and Moscow. Reflecting some eight years on, Kennan pointed out that as late as 1944, the US was administering “lavish and almost unconditional aid” to the Soviet Union (1952: 86). This would suggest that the older ideas about a multipolar order based on the need to balance multiple great powers against each other still held sway in the minds of decision makers. In terms of rivalry and potential flashpoints, according to C.J. Bartlett, American military planners gave little thought to a Russo-American rivalry and were more concerned about a British rivalry with the Soviet Union. This they thought might drag the United States into Europe as a mediator between these two states. Bartlett notes that this was a “theme in American policymaking which persisted well into 1945” (1984: 248). It is also reflected in the fact that at the earlier conference held between Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union in 1943, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt had “horrified Churchill with the suggestion that Britain and Russia alone” would be left to determine Europe’s post-war fate (Haslam 2011: 33). Given the history of US isolationism, it is perhaps not surprising that decision makers and analysts in Europe at the time would be slow to grasp the coming order in which the United States, who as was discussed in the previous chapter had only been admitted to the

great power club towards the end of the nineteenth century as a new 'Pacific power', would play one of the two leading roles.

Antonio Varsori has argued that "during the late stages of the Second World War very few decision makers thought that partition of Europe and the outbreak of a 'cold war' would characterize the postwar period" (2002: 10). Certainly leaders in London, Paris and Moscow were still thinking in terms of "Big Three" or "Big Four" with the latter, at least for European leaders, including France with a restored status as a great power. This was particularly important for Britain which looked to France to assist with a post-war setting in which Soviet power would need to be balanced and the government of Winston Churchill assumed that it would be Britain that would be primarily taking on this task. Jonathan Haslam has noted that for Moscow after the end of the war, "working out who in the West would predominate after hostilities had not been as easy as it would appear in hindsight" (2011: 33).

It was only in the very final stages of World War II that France had been able to "restore, albeit in theory, the status of a great power" and this still did not stop Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States from excluding French official participation in the Yalta and Potsdam post-war planning conferences (Varsori 2002: 4). Not only this, but Roosevelt began talking of a 'Four Policemen' proposal that would include the United States, Soviet Union, Britain and not France but China (Gaddis 1972: 24-5).

In the years immediately after the war, France was increasingly discussed in, for example, US government foreign policy documents in terms of a regional power at best. One such document included France in a list of states that included Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands that needed to be brought to "an enlightened understanding of the necessities of the German situation" (referring to the post-war administration of the country) and even raised the idea of France descending into civil war (US Department of State 1947: 775-7).

This was at odds with France's self-perception given that history appeared to give Paris a claim to great power status. As Bertrand Badie has noted, "In Locarno (1925), Stresa (1935), Munich (1938), as well the Council of the League of Nations, France became used to being part of the oligarchy that had the charge of ruling the European Continent and even the world" (2011: 98).

Following the demotion of France in terms of global status through the post-war planning activities, the idea of a 'Big Three' became more widely accepted. This maintained a multipolar vision of international society even if it was at the lowest possible number of great powers (Wight 1966:167). Britain joined the United States and the Soviet Union in being one of the so-called architects of the new order following the war. The importance of the Big Three was reinforced by the repeated meetings and conferences of the leaders of each state which of course forged some degree of personal bond between them as a specific collective. One account of the psychological effect of this on Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin notes that "the Big Three behaved as a group with specific relations between the members, with common memories, even with jokes that only they could understand" (Zubok and Pleshakov 1994: 59). In fact, despite the fact that the concept of superpowers would come to be associated exclusively with the two main protagonists in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union, the earliest uses of the term were actually applied to Britain as well. Nicholas J. Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* (1944) argued for the importance of two superpowers, Britain and the United States and W.T.R. Fox's *Superpowers: the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—Their Responsibility for Peace* (1944) held a multipolar interpretation of the coming order.

Yet Britain's role in this was far from being as certain as the other two poles of power. As multipolarity gave way to bipolarity, London slowly lost its claim to superpower status. What is particularly important to note for this study is that there is a great deal of variation

in terms of when different scholars have placed the decline of Britain as a pole of power. Tim Dunne has written that “By 1948, the country was a policy-taker on the world stage and not a policy-maker, despite the fact that its diplomatic network remained global, its language remained dominant, and its values ascendant” (2008: 278). This according to Dunne was not enough to “configure the system in multipolar terms” (*Ibid*). Dunne’s characterisation is symbolically illustrated by the British diplomat Harold Nicolson’s account of Prime Minister Clement Attlee’s arrival at the Paris Peace Conference in July 1946,

The minor delegates and experts enter first, meeting all their friends from San Francisco, making polite handshakes and bows. Then at 4 pm. precisely the main delegates emerge from the back of the stage and walk across it, down the steps to the proscenium and then up among the stalls. Molotov and Vyshinsky stride across the stage with all the consciousness of power; Byrnes and his delegation walk slowly and sedately with all the consciousness of great virtue; and then in trips little Attlee, hesitates on finding himself on the stage, tries to dart back again into the door through which he has come, and is then rescued by an official who leads him across the stage with a hand upon his elbow (1968: 69).

This observation (and the account of a number of discussions on the margins of the conference) recorded in his diary at the time, give a strong impression of Britain having joined the ranks of the ‘lesser powers’. This would of course create a bipolar structure at the global level. Yet four years later, the American minister in London, Julius Holmes reported to Washington only then that British leaders “feel they are now fighting a last-stand battle for survival as a world power” (US Department of State 1950: 1601). In many quarters this was seen as a fight that could still be won and upon the return to power of Winston Churchill in 1951, one of his advisors remarked “And England will start on her long journey back to greatness” (Holland 1991: 240). This is perhaps not surprising given that only years earlier, at the London Foreign Ministers Conference in September 1945, Britain had been treated as an unambiguous global power expected to endure. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov had publicly complained of Britain’s “monopoly in the

Mediterranean” which left no room for the other powers such as the Soviet Union (Reynolds 1994: 93). In fact the perception that Britain maintained an independent role in global politics had not entirely subsided under Churchill’s predecessor in the immediate aftermath of the war, Clement Atlee (Kent 2005: 163). His Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin had been at pains to stress that “we must free ourselves of financial dependence on the United States as soon as possible” in order to be able to “pull our weight in foreign affairs” (quoted in *Ibid*). As a leader of Western Europe and the Commonwealth, Bevin thought Britain could achieve its “own power and influence to equal that of the United States” (quoted in *Ibid*).

One of the key findings of the previous chapter’s discussion of the period of 1815-1945 was that ideas about agency played an important role in perceptions of polarity. Britain’s role in the early Cold War years also relates to this notion of claiming, or in this case reclaiming, status in international society playing a part in shaping perceptions of global order. As late as 1953, Churchill was projecting his aspiration, if not genuine perception, of British great power status when he called for “a conference at the highest level” (quoted in *Portsmouth Times* 1953) which would include Britain as a “leading power” (*Ibid*). The conference took place in Geneva in July 1955 (and included France). Yet a year before, in 1954, the influential American analyst and former presidential advisor, James Warburg had published an article claiming that the Second World War had “left the nations of Western Europe with the habit of exercising a world power which they no longer possessed” and that “With power polarized in only two surviving superpowers, the traditional European method of preserving peace by balance-of-power maneuvers had finally become totally obsolete” (1954: 327). This followed an earlier article in a leading American academic journal which claimed in 1950 that “The United States and the U.S.S.R. are two poles acting like magnets around which cluster most of the other nations of the world...Hence unlike in the past, power relations today are bipolar” (de Huszar 1950: 157). Jeremy Black has highlighted that

the post-war transition and decline of Britain and France was most notable in the shift from the four power summit in Paris in 1960 to the US-Soviet summit of 1962 (2010: 209). However even those within the US government who were quick to perceive the shifting from a multipolar to a bipolar order like Kennan, still did not necessarily view this new configuration as lasting over the long-term. In a November 1947 Policy Planning Staff note titled *Resumé of World Situation*, in which he talked about world politics being “dominated by the effort undertaken by the Russians” to “extend their virtual domination over all, or as much as possible of the Eurasian land mass” he also argued that:

Our best answer to this is to strengthen in every way local forces of resistance, and persuade others to bear a greater part of the burden of opposing communism. The present “bipolarity” will, in the long run, be beyond our resources (US Department of State 1947: 773).

By 1948 a top secret US National Security Council report contained the clear expression of the perceived shift towards bipolarity stating that the war had “left the world with only two great centers of power, the United States and the USSR” (US National Security Council 1948: 546). This perception of a bipolar international society was closely bound up with the growing perception of a global ideological confrontation. The underpinnings of what we would in hindsight refer to as ‘Cold War thinking’ is reflected in the assertion that “The United States is the only source of power capable of mobilizing successful opposition to the communist goal of world conquest” (*Ibid*). This shift to a bipolar perception was evident in Moscow as well. Sergey Radchenko has noted that despite how little he travelled abroad, Stalin was obsessed with geographical maps. This helped him create a mental map which “was a point of reference for Stalin as he planned his post-war policies” (2011: 27). The way Stalin viewed the world, “witnessed a readjustment of Stalin’s mental map, a transition from a multipolar to a bipolar frame of reference” (*Ibid*).

Waltz has highlighted that “Britain and France continued to act as though they were great powers, and struggled to bear the expense of doing so, well into the 1950s” and that *The*

Economist “apparently believes that Britain and France were great powers well into the 1950s, claiming that the Suez Crisis of 1956 ‘helped destroy Britain and France as great powers’” (Waltz 1993: 49). Despite the so-called reality of power politics that Realism posits that states must adhere to, two states were acting to the contrary. This sits uneasily within the Waltzian idea of “The range of expected outcomes” in world politics being “inferred from the assumed motivation of the units and the structure of the system in which they act” (1988: 618). The structure of the system only changes “with variations in the number of great powers” (*Ibid.*) yet by Waltz’s own admission, this variation can be perceived differently by multiple actors at the same time.

The actions of Britain and France in what became known as the Suez Crisis, in which both states colluded with Israel in order to orchestrate an invasion of Egypt to restore Western control of the canal that links the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, strongly suggests that London and Paris thought they could resist the bipolar interpretation of the world. Both London and Paris saw the Middle East as falling within its traditional ‘sphere of influence’: an area in which a great power “exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it” (Keal 1983: 15). The idea that the great powers have their own spheres of influence has long been considered an “operational rule” of international society (Bull 1977: 71) that prescribes the behaviour of its members. This is perhaps the most obvious product of the whole notion of the special rights and responsibilities of the great powers that, as was discussed in Chapter Three, is expressed through the social institution of great power management. While the great powers (or what are treated in this study as ‘poles of power’) are given the legitimate right to exert such influence in their “positions of local preponderance” (*Ibid.*: 219), they are also expected to respect the spheres of influence of other great powers as a way of creating global order.

Therefore, the establishment and recognition of spheres of influence is one of the clearest ways that a state can claim membership of the 'club' of the great powers (Clark 2011b: 37).

Using the framework of the English school to analyse polarity in a social context helps to explain the reaction of the United States, Soviet Union and others to the actions of Britain and France. Both countries clearly had the material (military) capabilities to carry out the operation in Egypt. Yet as Christian Reus-Smit has argued "Stable, effective political power is never the product of material resources alone; it is also the product of legitimacy, of the perception, on the part of other social actors, that the exercise of power is rightful" (2005: 88).

For the United States though, the inaccurate assessment of the polarity of international society by the French and British (and perhaps the Israelis as well) was obvious. As Waltz describes it, "Enjoying a position of predominance, the United States could continue to focus its attention on the major adversary while disciplining its two allies" (1988: 621). The fact that the United States and the Soviet Union both exerted pressure on Britain and France not only helped to destroy the perception of London and Paris as centres of world power but also helped entrench the perception that it was Moscow and Washington that would exert the 'special rights' of what was traditionally thought of as the great powers but was increasingly being described as the 'superpowers' (see for example Warburg 1954: 327; Morgenthau 1954: 83). It is worth noting in that the year of Suez Crisis, Soviet President, Nikita Khrushchev is reported to have told a dinner of foreign air force chiefs that "the only two countries that matter are Russia and the United States" (cited in Wight 1991: 33). That this assessment of the polarity of international society was not shared by Khrushchev's British and French counterparts adds weight to Van Evera's claim that the kind of socialisation that a neorealist would expect to take place can be thwarted by a

“failure to self-evaluate” which “impedes national learning and allows misperceptions to flourish” (2003: 163).

By the early 1960s, the notion of Britain being able to change its relative position in the global power hierarchy had faded and the perception of a ‘Big Three’ world gone. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 in particular, served to reinforce the perception of bipolarity when the two superpowers came to the brink of nuclear war in a thirteen day crisis of brinkmanship. In this sense, military capabilities (or more precisely nuclear weapons capabilities) became the decisive factor during this time in shaping perceptions of the structure of international society. The crisis, had firmly established an image of “a single planet shared by superpowers who shared the means of wiping each other out” (Gaddis 2005: 83) in the minds of both policy elites and publics around the world. In this sense, the Cuban Missile Crisis might be thought of as the point in which the distinction between the East-West ideological struggle and the geopolitical confrontation between the two sides of the bipolar order became solidified via the threat of use of the massive military capabilities built up by both sides.

But as we shall see in the discussion below, these capabilities also had other effects as well giving rise to ideas of great power disorder, non-alignment and the importance of economic rather than military power in an age where war between the superpowers was considered un-thinkable. The immensely destructive nature of nuclear weapons meant that war between the poles of power in the system – one of the central factors in their rise and fall in all previous periods – had fundamentally changed. What Hedley Bull identified as one of, if not the, oldest institution of international society acted as a “basic determinant of the shape the system assumes at any one time” (1977: 187) became almost substituted (at least in the sense of overt military conflict between the superpowers) for the concept of mutual deterrence. Instead of war as an instrument of state policy (to, for example preserve the

balance of power [*Ibid*: 189]), mutual deterrence “requires the reciprocal cancellation of options for war at any level between advanced powers” (Quinlan 2009: 59). The effect of this on perceptions of polarity would play out over the period and beyond (discussed in the next chapter) and has led one analyst to claim that “The Cold War may well be remembered, then, as the point at which military strength, a defining characteristic of ‘power’ itself for the past five centuries, ceased to be that” (Gaddis 2005: 263).

US Decline and the Perception of Multipolarity

One of the most important challenges to a collective perception of bipolarity was the notion of US decline in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a discussion of relative rather than absolute decline and was not always thought of only in relation to the Soviet Union – which in theory could have eventually led to a unipolar order if the decline had been complete. It is perhaps not surprising that multipolarity was seen as the natural replacement of bipolarity given the neglect of the concept of unipolarity in the academic literature on the subject (Mowle and Sacko 2007; Hansen 2011; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2011). This neglect by scholars would come to influence perceptions of polarity again after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the associated post-Cold War period (discussed in the next chapter).

The basis of perceptions of US decline often had more to do with ideas about the future (based on a trajectory towards a shift in polarity) rather than a sense of international society being in the midst of a power shift. This is an important theme in thinking about the ideational factors involved in changes in perceptions of polarity and will be discussed in the next chapter in relation to the nature of narratives of structural change.

The perception of US decline was particularly emphasised by President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger in their advocacy of the creation of a multipolar order. Again, the issue of agency becomes all important in explaining shifts in perceptions

of polarity in a way which is missed in the existing literature. Before joining government, Kissinger had been a member of the Department of Government and at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University where he had written his PhD thesis on the Concert of Europe entitled "Peace, Legitimacy, and the Equilibrium (A Study of the Statesmanship of Castlereagh and Metternich)" later published as *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* in 1954. He was a keen student of the concept of the balance of power (Little 2007: 274) and believed that "the only practical solution to Cold War stalemate and Soviet risk-taking was to transform the structure of the international system, encouraging a diffusion of power on terms favourable to the United States" (Suri 2007: 180). For Kissinger, this was "fully compatible with our interests as well as our ideals" (Kissinger 1979: 69). The Nixon-Kissinger approach to polarity blurred distinctions between analysis and prescription or in other words, the distinction between the way the world was and the way they wanted it to be.

In an important interview in the January 1972 edition of *Time* magazine, President Richard Nixon stated that "I think it will be a safer world and a better world if we have a strong, healthy United States, Europe, Soviet Union, China, Japan, each balancing the other, not playing one against the other, an even balance" (quoted in Brzezinski 1972: 54). This had followed a public statement the previous year in which he had admitted that "When we see the world in which we are about to move, the United States no longer is in the position of complete pre-eminence or predominance" (Nixon 1971c). While he was clear to point out that he saw the United States as exercising a role of "preeminent leadership" (*Ibid*), neither a unipolar or bipolar configuration was accurate according to Nixon – especially if one looked a decade or so towards the future. What is important to note here is that this perception of a changing world order was being expressed by a US President in public statements. This can be expected to have a much more powerful and long-lasting effect on

collective perceptions of polarity around the world than the same ideas being expressed by an academic analyst or even rumours of such a perception being held by a head of state but not expressed in public. Such statements from President Nixon and his close advisors became the subject of much discussion triggering a process in which narratives of rising powers (to be discussed further, in a different historical context, in the next chapter), can become an important dimension in collective perceptions of polarity.

Yet this perception of either current or imminent multipolarity did not go unchallenged. In the two leading US foreign policy journals, *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, influential analysts such as Zbigniew Brzezinski (who would later become National Security Advisor to President Carter) and Alastair Buchan (an influential British journalist and first Director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies) criticised Nixon's characterisation of the global power structure (Brzezinski 1972; Buchan 1972a). Buchan argued that the President's statement in the *Time* interview "assumes that, as in the eighteenth century, the five powers concerned have broadly the same range of resources at their disposal. This simply is not true today. The Soviet Union and the United States possess a degree of strategic, military and economic resources which the other three partners do not" (1972a: 644). Waltz himself criticised the way Nixon "slipped easily from talking of China's becoming a superpower to conferring superpower status on her" (1979: 130). Yet Waltz's materially-dependent approach to polarity prevented him from engaging with the theoretical implications of Nixon doing so (given that Neorealism has no way of theorising about the conferring of social status based on anything other than material capabilities) and was instead confined to making the argument that Nixon was empirically 'wrong.'

The response of Nixon's critics demonstrates clearly the inadequacy of materially-dependent theories of power in IR theory as Buchan's approach (broadly that of the standard polarity literature) cannot explain the shift in Nixon's perception nor take into account its

impact on global perceptions regardless of whether they are well-founded or not. While the onset of what became known as the ‘second Cold War’ after the breakdown of the détente era at the end of the 1970s seemed to many to reconfirm a bipolar structure in international society, the strength of the perception of a change in polarity was such that as late as 1984, one leading IR scholar felt compelled to state that “I believe the present system should still be classified as bipolar, even though there has been some movement toward multipolarity” (Snyder 1984: 484 fn23).

Yet this was not simply a question of a perception of US decline within the United States. Soviet perceptions of US decline had been strongly influenced by the notion of a relative shift in their favour in the late 1950s and early 1960s. William Wohlforth has pointed out that while the numerical figures point to an even bipolarity, “what the numbers fail to capture is the dramatic rise in Soviet power which captivated the political world after 1955” (1993: 139). What is particularly important to the way polarity is re-defined in this study is Wohlforth’s observation that,

Coupled with hindsight, the figures tempt us to dismiss the importance of Krushchev-era perceptions. Since we now know that Soviet-style socialism posed no real challenge to the American-led liberal camp...And it is true that both the Soviet and American political systems seemed to induce exaggeration of Soviet power gains. But that should not obscure what Cold War veterans on both sides of the old iron curtain affirm: that the rise in Soviet power seemed every bit as real in the late 1950s and early 1960s as its decline did thirty years later (1993: 140).

In Soviet decision making circles, the perception of a declining United States was encouraged by the notion of American power being constrained by domestic pressures. One Soviet writer noted in 1971 of US domestic politics that “the popular masses are demanding increasingly, decisively, and loudly, the renunciation of military adventures abroad and the Administration’s turning to face the internal socio-economic problems” (Trofimenko quoted in Aspaturian 1980: 705).

Yet while notions of a relative rise in Soviet power vis-à-vis the United States may have been one outcome of a perception of US decline, another, perhaps more important in that it signalled the potential for a multipolar order, was the rise of a new Eastern power.

The New ‘Triangle’: Perceptions of China

If, as was argued in Chapter Three, scholarly analysis of global power structures can be thought of as being both influential upon and also therefore a kind of litmus test of perceptions of polarity, the early-mid 1970s again appears to show a shift towards a multipolar perception. The rise of China as a potential third pole of power in international society was discussed at length in a number of influential journals (Gittings 1969; Buchan 1972b; Dittmer 1981) and the concept of triangular diplomacy became popular in the literature. In some cases, the traditional US-USSR-China triangle even became substituted for a Japan-China-USSR configuration (Simon 1974). Carsten Holbraad even went so far as to suggest in 1979 that the triangular structure made up of the United States, Soviet Union and China,

Though possibly representing only a stage in a transition from the duel of the Soviet Union and the United States to a complex system of more than three powers, may be the dominant relationship of the late seventies and early eighties. Perhaps it will survive long enough for us to gain a better understanding of the nature of great-power triangles (1979: 118).

Importantly for this study, Holbraad also noted that:

However different their subjective notions of foreign policy and great-power diplomacy may be, objectively the three actors form a system in the more limited sense of maintaining an observable pattern of interrelation, a pattern which stands out from the rest of the international relations of the world (*Ibid*: 120).

Again this statement highlights the inadequacy of the ‘common sense empirical’ approach of Waltzian Neorealism in simply quantifying the relative distribution of capabilities in a given system rather than analysing the number of states relating to each other in a social sense as peers in a great/superpower club. The ambiguous and often contradictory nature of the way great power status is conferred and perceived in practice, is captured by Doak

Barnett's characterisation of China's global role in the post-war period: "In a formal sense, China achieved recognition as a major power when it was accepted as one of the so-called Big Four during World War II. But the Chinese Nationalist regime then ruling China was never able to assert its rights, exert a significant influence beyond its borders, or assume an active role as a major power" (1977: 3). This quote again raises the issue of multiple and contradictory perceptions of polarity being held simultaneously by different actors. As the discussion above pointed out, the fourth power in the potential 'Big Four' was for some people France but for others it was China.

In terms of US perceptions of China's importance in the global structure, the 1960s in particular, appears to be a period of confusion and even contradiction. For example, in a 1965 speech in which he made a series of arguments to justify the US military operation in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson spoke of the "the deepening shadow of Communist China" over all of Asia (Johnson 1965). In the speech he couched the need to counter Chinese power in Southeast Asia in terms of an attempt to "strengthen world order" and argued that there were "great stakes in the balance" (*Ibid*). This would seem to suggest that Johnson was including China in system-level considerations in terms of relative power and questions of global (rather than just regional) order. In specifically addressing China's role in the region, Johnson stated that "There are those who say that all our effort there will be futile – that China's power is such that it is bound to dominate all southeast Asia. But there is no end to that argument until all of the nations of Asia are swallowed up" (*Ibid*). As was discussed in Chapter Two, the theoretical boundaries between what Buzan refers to as regional, great and superpowers (2004a: 63-76) are often blurred in practice. This is evident in Johnson's speech as a threat to Asia becomes subsumed with a threat to world order making China's role appear to be one of either an existing or potential pole of power.

Yet contradictions within policymaking and intelligence circles in the US are evident in the fact that the following year in 1966, a special long-range study on China conducted by the State and Defense departments concluded that Beijing's strength was "simply inadequate for the international role" that it hoped to project (NSF Country File 1966). In fact the report went on to predict that it would be Japan and not China that would take on the role of "the great power in Asia" (*Ibid*). Yet six months later in Johnson's 1967 State of the Union Address to the US Congress, after discussing the importance of working with the Soviet Union on key arms control and confidence building initiatives, China was again singled out for particular mention. Johnson talked of the importance of "working together in all the tasks of arms control, security, and progress on which the fate of the Chinese people, like their fellow men elsewhere, depends" (1967). Despite the analysis of civil servants and advisors, Johnson appears to have been convinced of China's role as a major player in world politics. This assessment was carried forward and even enhanced by the coming to power of President Richard Nixon. As was discussed above, Nixon and Kissinger were at the forefront of a public discussion about a changing world order characterised by a shift towards multipolarity. Most important in this was the role of China.

In his 1971 Foreign Policy Report, President Nixon noted that,

"It is a truism that an international order cannot be secure if one of the major powers remains largely outside it and hostile toward it. In this decade, therefore, there will be no more important challenge than that of drawing the People's Republic of China into a constructive relationship with the world community, and particularly with the rest of Asia" (Nixon 1971a).

The day of the report's release, Nixon gave a radio address in which we again see the way in which perceptions of regional power structures interact with ideas about the trajectory towards a future global order. In his address, Nixon hinted strongly at a multipolar conception when he claimed that:

In Asia, we can see tomorrow's world in microcosm. An economically powerful democratic free nation, Japan, is seeking new markets; a potentially powerful Communist nation, China, will one day seek new outlets and new relations; a Communist competitor, the Soviet Union, has interests there as well; and the independent non-Communist nations of Southeast Asia are already working together in regional association. These great forces are bound to interact in the not too distant future (Nixon 1971b).

In a public address later in the same year, Nixon argued for the indispensable nature of China in the global order stating that “there can be no stable and enduring peace without the participation of the People's Republic of China and its 750 million people” (Nixon 1971d). This quote demonstrates the extent to which China was being “responded to by others on the basis of system-level calculations, as well as regional ones, about the present and near future distribution of power” (Buzan 2004a: 70) – or in other words, being judged against the criteria of a ‘pole’ of global power status. Without the introduction of complex polarity theory into the theoretical framework in Chapter Two, these contradictions in the Nixon administration’s analysis simply could not be theoretically accounted for. What emerges here is the blurring of the distinctions between regional, great and even superpower by different actors within one state (let alone the potential for the same thing to happen across multiple states).

In the two years following the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the United States and China, the countries signed no less than thirty-five agreements, treaties and protocols with each other (Foot 1995: 225). According to Rosemary Foot, for President Jimmy Carter, the whole question of US-Sino relations went well beyond containment of the Soviet Union (*Ibid*: 229). Given their assessment of the importance of China for global stability, deepening bilateral ties “almost appeared as a duty” for the Carter Administration (*Ibid*).

Yet perceptions of the power of potential peers does not have to be shared across the major powers. In contrast to their American counterparts, Soviet decision makers and analysts

appeared, at least publicly, to be less persuaded by the idea of the arrival of China as a third major pole of power in the global structure in the 1970s. For example, an analysis of China's diplomatic manoeuvrings and grand strategy in the leading Soviet IR journal in 1972 chastised Chinese leaders for "ignoring the existence of the two opposing socio-political systems" and trying to "present the world as a conglomerate of countries and to depict the principal conflict of our day not as a struggle between these two systems..." (Pavlov 1972: 17; see also Agranov 1974; Horn 1976). Such a statement directly contradicts the position of Waltz that "counting great powers of an era is about as difficult, or as easy, as saying how many major firms populate an oligopolistic sector of an economy" (1979: 131). The power of a firm can be objectively measured in terms of turnover and market share, attributes that can be divorced from a social and historical context, the same cannot be said of states.

Central to understanding Soviet perceptions of China throughout the period under review in this chapter is the issue of ideological leadership. Buzan has argued that "the interplay between the identity of the major powers on the one hand, and how they relate to each other and lesser powers through the society of states on the other, is a key element of how one interprets the configurations of polarity" (2004a: 28). For Soviet leaders and analysts, a greater global role for China would not only signal a change in the system's structure from bipolarity to multipolarity but also a challenge to the USSR's role as the unambiguous leader of global communism.

Following the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, Beijing's attempts to portray China's role in the world as the champion of Third World emancipation in the face of US imperialism on the one hand and Soviet revisionism on the other was driven by psychological and historical memories as much as it was by strategic considerations (Camilleri 1980: 10). As Joseph Camilleri has noted, "When confronted with the formidable obstacles facing the enterprise

of undermining the dominance of the two superpowers, Mao and his associates tended to point to China's own experience and to the overwhelming odds that had to be overcome before the final victory of October 1949" (1980: 10). Like the case of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the diplomatic style of Metternich discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that agency has a central role in determining structural power appeared to be unproblematic for Chinese strategists. If Andreas Bieler and Adam Morton are correct and "agency is located in structure but not determined by it" (2001: 27), then it is perhaps not surprising that polarity should be viewed through this lens – as something that can, over time and with the right mix of material capabilities and social interaction, be manipulated. Even if this is not the case, the perception that it might be is enough to affect the way that the polarity of the day is perceived by some actors.

Important for understanding Chinese perceptions of the structure of international society in the 1970s is the notion not of order but instead of disorder. Premier, Zhou Enlai spoke of the "great disorder on earth" created by the "power politics of the superpowers" in his report to the Tenth National Party Congress against which the world was witnessing the "awakening and growth of the Third World" (*Peking Review*, January 1972 quoted in Camilleri p. 140). This concept was echoed later in Hedley Bull's writing on the evolution of the great powers during the ascendancy of the United States and the Soviet Union from the "great responsables" to the "great irresponsibles." (Bull 1980). This Bull thought was a fundamental shift in the social institution of the great powers from being a pillar of world social order to something else. In an a-social (or purely systemic) situation, the shape and character of the order comes from the number of materially preponderant states. However, as was discussed in chapters two and three, the history of the great powers if looked at from the perspective of actual diplomatic *practice* is a very different one. An English school perspective highlights the role of great power management in providing a degree of *social*

order. In the absence of effective management between the poles of power, the order itself changes and can even break down entirely.

This idea of disorder and upheaval (interestingly, for the argument put forward in this study, the word in Mandarin Chinese, *luan*, perhaps best translates as confusion [Camilleri 1980: 139]) led Chinese strategists and policymakers to create what became known as a Three Worlds theory (for a discussion of this idea in Chinese public discourse see *People's Daily*, Beijing, 1 November 1977). The then Vice Premier, Deng Xiaoping, in an address at the United Nations in April 1974 outlined the idea arguing that “The socialist camp which existed for a time after World War II is no longer in existence” while the “the Western imperialist bloc, too, is disintegrating” (Deng 1974). Instead of a simple bipolar split, in which the two superpowers led competing blocs of states, he announced that “the world today actually consists of three parts, or three worlds, that are both interconnected and in contradiction to one another” (*Ibid*). The First World was inhabited by the two superpowers, the Second by their major allies (eg. the Western bloc countries of Japan, Australia, Britain etc.) and the Third by the rest of the underdeveloped and often newly independent states. The idea of a ‘Third World’ in the structure of international society gave rise to the notion of non-alignment from the two major power blocs (discussed below). This was a different conception of the ‘three worlds’ used in Western analysis in which the United States and its close allies made up the First world whereas the Second World constituted the Soviet Union and its allies.

It is interesting to note that in the Chinese view, both superpowers operated in a ‘world’ of their own. This would appear to suggest a perception in Beijing of a clear bipolar order which did not include China (in contrast to the US perception discussed earlier). The First world, in this sense could be thought of as the structure of global polarity. Yet this characterisation of the world by Chinese policymakers is not simply an analytical one. The

‘three worlds theory’ was part of strategic attempt to influence the world view of others, in particular about China’s role and status in the world.

A closer reading of the purpose to which this analysis of world politics at the time was meant to serve in Chinese strategy and diplomacy highlights a perception in Beijing of China being able to play a much larger role in the international system. Kissinger’s memoirs document the extensive discussions that he held with Chinese policymakers and in particular Mao Tse-tung, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping during the rapprochement between the United States and China in the early 1970s. Whilst ostensibly focused on the Sino-US relationship, much of the dialogue centred on the global balance of power, and in particular Chinese concerns over the Sino-Soviet relationship. An initial concern about a potential Soviet invasion – perhaps even with the implicit or explicit support of the West – led Mao and Zhou to urge the United States into a more aggressive confrontation with the Soviet Union in the name of containment and global stability (Kissinger 1982: 46-55). This was to take the form of an anti-Soviet alliance “stretching from Japan, through China, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey to Western Europe” (*ibid.*: 55) – what the Chinese called the ‘horizontal line’ – with the United States in the lead. What Kissinger’s account of the Sino-US discussions demonstrates is the extent to which the Chinese viewed a confrontation between Moscow and Beijing as inevitable. This was so not simply due to geopolitical circumstances. But, like the Soviet perception of China’s global role discussed above, according to Kissinger, policymakers in Beijing saw the ideological competition between the two Communist giants as over “who controlled the liturgy that would inspire the political orientation of Communist and radical parties around the world” (*Ibid.*: 47). The role of ideological leadership is particularly important to consider at this time given the larger context of the period of détente in the US-Soviet relationship. It has been observed that “Except in extremely conflictual international systems, superpowers will also be

fountainheads of ‘universal’ values of the type necessary to underpin international society” (Buzan 2004a: 69). Not only does Kissinger’s account of the Chinese perception of its own self-importance in terms of global ideological leadership (which if one thinks of the Cold War as fundamentally a geo-ideological struggle [Tuathail and Dalby 1998] makes a bipolar interpretation of the global structure therefore much more open to interpretation) suggest that bipolarity was not the only way of viewing the world from Beijing but also telling is Kissinger’s recollections of the United States’ own strategy. It was Washington’s view that “Should the Soviet Union succeed in reducing China to impotence, the impact on the world balance of power would be scarcely less catastrophic than a Soviet conquest of Europe” (1982: 53). While this quote highlights the fact that the Nixon Administration viewed China as being militarily inferior to the Soviet Union, it did view its survival against possible Soviet aggression as being a matter of global stability, or in other words, central to the maintenance of international society. This means that the United States was at the time clearly dealing with China on the basis of system-level considerations. It was for this reason that while there was concern within policy circles in Washington about how domestic opinion would view the improvements in the Sino-US relationship (particularly given the scale and divisive nature of the domestic debate over the Vietnam war), “We in the Nixon Administration felt that our challenge was to educate the American people in the requirements of the balance of power” (*Ibid.*: 50).

Even later when the ‘horizontal line’ concept was superseded by the Three Worlds view by Chinese policymakers and diplomats, which would appear to present China as holding a lower status, Kissinger has described the way in which this was more of a strategy than an objective analysis of the world. Being a major power with a need therefore for the freedom to operate globally in ways of its own choosing, the Three Worlds theory “permitted differentiation between the two superpowers for temporary convenience. It provided a

vehicle for an active, independent role for China through its role in the developing world, and it gave China tactical flexibility” (Kissinger 2011: 304).

During the period of rapprochement when the establishment of full diplomatic relations were prefaced first by liaison offices, the United States sent David K. E. Bruce, someone both Nixon and Kissinger felt was “one of our ablest ambassadors and most distinguished public figures” in order to “symbolize the importance we attached to the assignment” (Kissinger 1982: 62). The importance of official diplomatic relations appears to be a key indicator of the status accorded to China during this period. Despite major tensions over the issue of Taiwan, full diplomatic relations were established by the beginning of 1979 as “our common concerns with the balance of power required regular and intimate political contact” (*Ibid* 63).

Yet as the period moves on, as with the notion of US decline, the perception of China as a third pole of power in a multipolar order gradually waned. In the United States, the Reagan Administration in the early 1980s conceptualised the world in starkly bipolar terms. In 1983, Secretary of State, George Shultz gave speeches in which he avoided using the term ‘strategic’ when discussing the US-Sino relationship (Foot 1995: 230). Beijing was viewed by the Administration as being “less than vital” (Pollack 1984: 162) in terms of the global power balance. By 1987, even in analysis by Chinese scholars keen to stress the importance of the Third World in Chinese perceptions of the global power structure, accounts stressed that while the Third World “is clearly the main component of the international system in terms of population”, nevertheless “None of them is as powerful as the United States and the Soviet Union, and none of them was involved in the decision taken in Yalta that still dominates the international system” (Shuzhong 1987: 22-3). Writing in 1990, one influential China watcher gave the clear impression of Beijing having lost ground in terms of perceptions of its international status noting that in the wake of the Tiananmen Square

massacre, “China’s leaders have not been able to play off Moscow against Washington in ways that were possible during the heyday of tri-polarity” (Yahuda 1990: 183).

The Non-aligned Challenger: India

In the mid-1950s, once the perception of a clear bipolar order was wide-spread and the dangers of its escalation were vividly demonstrated in the Korean War, India emerged as a leading advocate of non-alignment. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and diplomat and later Defence Minister V. K. Krishna Menon started using the phrase to describe a post-colonial inspired rejection of the inevitability of being drawn into the East-West confrontation. Yet non-alignment was not simply a strategy or foreign policy option in response to the deepening of the Cold War divide. The movement had a considerable normative dimension in its rejection of the militarisation and *realpolitik*-driven nature of the superpower confrontation which left little room for issues of development, self-determination and sustainability in global ‘high politics’ (Kumar 1981). Non-alignment also provided India with an opportunity to project itself as being a major power in world politics in terms of its leadership role for this ‘third force’ in the world, representing the majority of the world’s population. According to Rajesh Basrur, “Historically, Indian leaders, conscious of their country’s rich culture and long civilizational history, have tended to take for granted its status as a major global power” (2011: 191). Nehru had long talked of an almost inevitable rise to great power status for post-independence India (Nehru 1946: 547). Just as Britain and France held on to the self-perception of their own great power status informed by a sense of historical destiny, so too did a non-Western state such as India, despite the fact that leaders needed to reach further back into history to back up this claim.

By the 1950s, Nehru perceived that India’s time had come and that it would lead the non-aligned states as the rigid bipolar structure ‘loosened’ and opportunities arose to moderate the nuclear-armed competition between Moscow and Washington (Nehru 1964: 361-2). In

this sense, again we see the role of agency – or more specifically *perceptions* of agency – in shaping perceptions of polarity. In this case India’s self-perception of its role as an indispensable mediator and leader of the Third World (Vertzberger 1984: 76) fuelled a sense of status higher than that which was granted by seeing the world in bipolar terms. A purely materialist version of power is blind to this shift in perception of polarity as the shift is based at least as much, if not more, on the purpose of Indian foreign policy as it is on India’s material capabilities and resources.

At times throughout the period under review here, the actions of the two superpowers and other potential contenders appeared to give weight to this assessment. For example, in late 1952-early 1953, the United States, Soviet Union and China all came to accept India’s proposal for an armistice to end the war on the Korean peninsula. Later in the wake of the 1958 Lebanon crisis, the Soviet Union suggested that a five-power conference should be called that, while not including China, did include India (Vertzberger 1984: 77). Interestingly a number of analysts have pointed to the fact that throughout the 1980s, the United States appeared to treat India at least as a regional power and even according to one as a “great power on the world stage” (Copley 1988: 6). Basrur has highlighted the way in which Washington acknowledged India’s self-assumed role as a “regional security manager” well before the end of the Cold War (2011: 189).

However, in time, and as before, the Indian challenge to the global perception of bipolarity receded. The concept of non-alignment endured but this served to reinforce the perception of bipolarity rather than to undermine it. This in turn, undermined the perception of India as a potential pole of power as this perception had been so closely tied to India’s leadership of the non-aligned countries.

The Decline of the Cold War and the Collapse of Bipolarity

A recurring theme in this historical analysis is the role of major war between great powers, and in particular the outcome of major war, in influencing perceptions of order and therefore of polarity (Gilpin 1981: 203; Clark 2001: 56-78). Therefore the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union should be expected to play some role in the final breakdown in perceptions of polarity of the period under review in this chapter. Nick Bisley has argued that “part of the reason why the Soviet state was made fatally vulnerable to its economic, social and ethnic problems at this time was the removal of the international conflict from its structures of power” (2004: 3). This is confirmed by the later reflection by Gorbachev’s foreign policy advisor, Anatoly Chernyaev, that the Soviet President was convinced “that we had lost the ideological war which we had been conducting for so many decades in the international arena” (quoted in Wohlforth 2003: 20-21). The role of perceptions here is particularly important. A changed perception of Moscow’s global role (and therefore of the existence of bipolarity) based on the ending of the Cold War can help to explain the arguments of scholars such as Robert English that the narrative of inevitable Soviet collapse due to material ‘realities’ are “empirically and analytically flawed” (2003: 245). English has gone so far as to argue that “For all its now well-documented weaknesses...the Soviet economy was nevertheless strong enough to sustain the country on a largely status quo course well into the next century” (*ibid*; also Ellman and Kontorovitch 1998).

Regardless of where one now pinpoints the precise causes of the collapse of the Soviet state, the fact that there has been such disagreement about this issue in the years since (Clark 2001: 115) alerts us to the fact that at the time, this shift from bipolarity to unipolarity was to some degree ambiguous, drawn-out over a number of years and therefore at different times open to interpretation. This, like the other examples discussed in this chapter of different perceptions of world order, is important given the way the end of bipolarity is

generally taken in the IR literature to simply be a ‘fact’ that states reacted to (Paul 2005; Nexon 2009), and not something that was perceived first and foremost. If the relatively uncontroversial end of bipolarity provided openings in the global agreement about the shape of the world structure then polarity and its impact on the foreign policies of states becomes much more complex than is the case in the existing literature. The approach to polarity put forward in this study takes account of the fact that even if one adopts an overly-materialist view of Soviet decline, “there is always likely to be some lag between perceptions of a material shift and a major behavioral response” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2000: 29). If one also accounts for the ideational aspects of power and perceptions of world order, then this lag between material decline and behavioural response should be expected to be even larger and more complicated.

While we might think of the end of the bipolar era that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s as being one of the most clear-cut cases of a change of global polarity (something that will be discussed in the next chapter), in fact depending on whose account one focuses on, a roughly four year period of transition emerges. Somewhere between 1988 and 1991 different actors perceived that bipolarity was coming to an end. Given the way in which the Cold War confrontation and the structural condition of bipolarity was so often conflated in public discourse, it is perhaps not surprising that the end of bipolarity is difficult to pin point. In 1988 British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher announced that “we are not in a Cold War now” (AP 1988). While in the same year a leading Sovietologist (who at the time actually departed from conventional wisdom by describing the Soviet Union as an ‘incomplete superpower’) proclaimed that the Soviet Union “is not now (nor will it be during the next decade) in the throes of a true systemic crisis, for it boasts unused reserves of political and social stability that are sufficient to endure the most severe foreseeable difficulties” (Dibb 1988: 260). The US National Security Advisor at the time, Brent

Scowcroft has recalled how throughout 1989, the advisors to the new Administration of George H. W. Bush were still thinking in clearly bipolar terms under the framework of the Cold War confrontation. He has written that, in thinking about Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to revive the previous US-Soviet détente, "My fear was that Gorbachev could talk us into disarming without the Soviet Union having to do anything fundamental to its own military structure and that, in a decade or so, we could face a more serious threat than before" (Bush and Scowcroft 1998: 13-14). The US Secretary of State, James Baker has stated that for him it was not until August 1990 when the United States and the Soviet Union jointly protested against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait that the Cold War ended (quoted in Dockrill 2005: 12). If for Baker the Cold War did not end until mid-1990, it is difficult to see how bipolarity could have ended any earlier. Even for those who had a clear view at the time that the Cold War era was coming to an end, its larger meaning was far from certain. As one piece of analysis put it "what will the winding down of the Cold War mean for the international system? There can be no unambiguous answer to the question" (Cox 1990: 35).

Amidst the analysis of governments, journalists and academics trying to make sense of the change in the Cold War relationship and what this might mean for global polarity, some were even thinking in terms of the decline of not one but both superpowers. 1987 saw the release of Paul Kennedy's best selling *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* which set off a renewed debate about US decline (Kennedy 1987; Giddens, Mann and Wallerstein 1989; Nye 1990b) and by 1990 Michael Cox was arguing that despite the United States' ability to devolve some global responsibilities to allies such as Germany and Japan, this:

... will not prevent the United States from declining - no more than will its new deal with the USSR. And when great powers decline this inevitably weakens their ability to organize their imperial affairs. So far, nobody has convincingly demonstrated why the United States should be an exception to this obvious but undeniable historic rule (1990: 36).

Scowcroft has described the surprise in Beijing in the late 1980s when the Soviet Union was forced to ask China for loans recounting that the Chinese admitted being “quite taken aback when they first raised this” (*Ibid*: 177). The importance of putting changes in polarity in particular historical context is underscored by the shock with which the decline of bipolarity was greeted in the IR literature and popular analysis at the time. The sudden shift in the structure of international society “astonished almost everyone, whether in government, the academy, the media, or the think tanks” (Gaddis 1992-3: 5). It is not the argument of this study that an analytically eclectic or even a specifically English school approach to polarity will allow scholars to predict the rise and fall of great powers in such a way that this kind of surprise would be avoided. However, the approach to polarity constructed here in which the central units of analysis are the holders of a particular social status in international society, changes the way one treats the impact of changes in polarity such as the end of the bipolar era. In particular, the immediate effect of this change becomes not one of a simple shift in the balance of power to which all other states in the international system adjust accordingly, but instead a more ambiguous shift in the shape of international society. Theoretically, we can expect this change to be less clear-cut and its effects non-linear and more diffuse as an historically-contingent conception of polarity highlights often over-looked factors such as the role of perceptions of continuity. While in hindsight analysts can attempt to identify precisely when the polarity shifted away from a bipolar structure, a sensitivity to perceptions at the time means that any discussion of the reactions of other states to the end of bipolarity must include the idea that in the absence of the specific actions of Gorbachev and others, the Soviet Union could have endured for years if not decades (Dibb 1987; Odom 1998). As the former Director of the US National Security Agency later recounted, Gorbachev’s particular actions were the “critical precipitating factor” in, for example, the collapse of the Soviet military (Odom 1998: 393). This is particularly so given the

perception of the degree to which Soviet power had less than a decade before been in a relatively strong global position was prevalent in much of the Western analysis at the time (Sakwa 1989). Historical contingency therefore is central to understanding the actual, as opposed to theoretically possible, effects of power transitions.

The lag-between material changes and perceptions of polarity changing in the minds of practitioners and the almost traumatic shock to the IR discipline after being caught out by the collapse of bipolarity reinforces the notion found in the psychology literature that varying degrees of ‘perceptual readiness’ are possible. A reluctance to look for change, categorise and process this change and confirm these categorisations, will likely result in major changes such as the end of bipolarity coming as a major surprise (Pohl 2004: 373). As one of the seminal studies on this topic concluded, “the ready perceiver who can proceed with fairly minimal inputs is also in a position to use his cognitive readiness not only for perceiving what is before him about in foreseeing what is likely to be before him” (Bruner 1957: 148).

Conclusion

The analysis of what is normally referred to as an unchanging bipolar period in this chapter has lent further support for the theoretical argument pursued in this study that polarity is a far more complex structural factor than traditional theorising allows for. When a more eclectic approach to polarity is adopted, firmly located in the historical and social context in which power is “expressed diffusely through the discourses that create social meaning and make society possible” (Bially Mattern 2008: 693), a number of important issues arise.

This chapter has added three conclusions in particular that inform the reformulation of polarity theory. These relate to the indeterminacy of power transitions in the short-medium term, the changing nature of power itself and the potential for ideas about the future to influence perceptions even under what is later recognised as a stable form of polarity. It has

also reinforced a number of conclusions already discussed in the previous chapter examining the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including the importance of perceptions of agency, the importance of perceptions of regional powers in shaping ideas of global polarity and the likelihood of contradictory views about polarity being held at a given time.

Even when one focuses on the continued utility of military capabilities in world politics, a change in the criteria for great power or even superpower status may be observed. One of the key questions, and particularly pertinent to the discussion of the post-Cold War period in the next chapter, is whether the role of military capabilities in the power calculus of decision makers and analysts underwent at least some degree of change post-1945. With the invention of nuclear weapons and the development of strategies of nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction, particularly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, power itself may be said to have changed (Nye 1990a). Like the Cold War and the rise of its two main protagonists and the associated onset of bipolarity, the history of bipolarity and nuclear weapons are intimately linked (Wagner 1993: 79). Adam Watson observed that,

Since the 'equilibrium of terror' of the two super-powers, successive statesmen and the diplomatic dialogue itself have been imbued with the idea that nuclear war between them must be ruled out...This exclusion of force at the centre of the system has transformed ideas about the place and utility of force in the system itself and diplomacy (1982: 220).

It is perhaps then unsurprising that around the same time that we see ideas around nuclear deterrence rather than warfighting becoming dominant in policy circles in the two established superpowers, that perceptions of polarity begin to change in some quarters. Discussion about the rise of China, and to a much lesser degree, India in the global system can be partly related to changing ideas about the use of force and by implication the relative importance of military capabilities. This is not to say that nuclear weapons made military capabilities obsolete as signifiers of great/superpower status – far from it. Yet it is likely to

have played some role, even if not explicitly articulated at the time, in shaping conceptions of the potential shift to a multipolar order and the loosening of the bipolar rivalry. This gradual change in the relationship between material capabilities and perceptions of power, appears to support Guzzini's claim that "no single power base...is decisive" in determining influence in world politics (1993: 454). Interestingly, even when in the early 1960s the Soviet Union reached a rough parity with the United States in terms of nuclear weapons, Khrushchev wrote to US President, John F. Kennedy complaining of the discrepancy between US assessments of Soviet military strength and the way Moscow was treated diplomatically by Washington (Wohlforth 1993: 177-8; Larson and Shevchenko 2010a: 289). Khrushchev asked Kennedy, "How then does the admission of our equal military capabilities tally with such unequal relations between our great states? They cannot be made to tally in any way" (quoted in Wohlforth 1993: 177-8). Khrushchev took care to refer to both the Soviet Union and the United States using the term "great states" demonstrates a need to project a particular status – a status which under conventional treatments of the relationship between polarity and material capabilities should be entirely self evident. This grouping of the two states together in terms of the international hierarchy is particularly revealing of socially constructed nature of polarity given the fierce ideological competition between the two states. Hurrell has pointed to the importance of status anxiety on the part of the Soviet Union, and therefore the fragility of perceptions of polarity, in the conduct of both potential poles of power throughout the period:

Indeed, central to so many of the tensions of the Cold War lay Soviet demands for equality of status and for acknowledgement by the US of its equal rights as a super-power – demands that the United States was reluctant to grant even at the high point of *détente* (1999: 253).

If anything, as the vanguard of revolutionary states, the Soviet Union should have been expected to be projecting an even higher social status in the global order than its Cold War competitor. As Kissinger pointed out in a note to Nixon, "it has always been one of the

paradoxes of Bolshevik behaviour that their leaders have yearned to be treated as equals by the people they consider doomed” (US Department of State 2006: 603). If a degree of ambiguity still characterises the relationship between global power and the possession of nuclear weapons (even at a time when there was fewer nuclear armed states in the world than exist today and the symbolism of nuclear weapons was at its most potent), then this ambiguity should logically be expected to affect military capabilities *per se*.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, different perceptions of polarity (based on whatever criteria different actors use to come to some sort of measurement of power) can be held simultaneously. What Robert Cox called “collective images of social order” (1981) include differing views as to the nature of “prevailing power relations” and therefore can be “several and opposed” (1981: 136). This means that gradual changes in things like the nature of the use of force or patterns of consumption in world politics and their effect on material capabilities like military assets or economic potential are likely to shape perceptions of power in diffuse and varied ways. It also means that decision makers can entertain images of changes in the polarity of international society while continuing to act based on a previous, un-changed assessment. As we shall see in the next chapter in relation to the collapse of the bipolar order, ideas about the past, and particularly the ‘natural’ tendency towards multipolarity in history, can be highly influential in shaping perceptions of the future of global order. Added to this is the notion of ‘trading on future capabilities’ – both material and ideational – and what this does to contemporary perceptions of global polarity.

Chapter Six: From the ‘Unipolar Moment’ to the ‘Rise of the Rest’ (1990-2012)

The events of the year just ended, the Revolution of 1989, marks the beginning of a new era in world affairs.

President George H. W. Bush, State of the Union Address (1990: 130).

We knew better where we had been than where we were going.

Condoleezza Rice (2008: 2).

This chapter brings the historical discussion of the previous two chapters up to the present time in analysing trends in perceptions of polarity as demonstrated by the discourse and actions of states, scholars and the global media. The chapter covers the period from the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In keeping with the previous chapters of Part II, it uses the theoretical arguments of Part I as a lens to trace the fragile nature of perceptions of polarity in international society throughout the period. The chapter discusses the expectation, and its influence on analyses of world order, of a return to multipolarity at the beginning of the 1990s before moving on to the rise of the, previously under-theorised, concept of unipolarity and its association with US primacy at the global level. The discussion will then turn to the emergence of a second narrative of imminent or event nascent multipolarity and its adoption by both adherents and critics of a more diffuse power structure. Finally, the chapter will also engage with perceptions not of multiple rising powers in a multipolar order but instead of the specific rise of China and the emergence of an implicit perception of bipolarity before taking note of a final trend towards depicting a leaderless and structureless international society.

This discussion again reaffirms both the need for a way of understanding the concept of polarity outside of the narrow materialism and rationalism of mainstream IR and the utility

of applying an English school approach. Such an approach is particularly attuned to the historical and social contingencies which help determine perceptions of polarity. It is then these perceptions that are used as the main indicator as to what the polarity of this period actually 'was' in the sense that international society will 'be' (for example) multipolar, when its members act as if it is so based on their perceptions.

The chapter highlights the importance of the notion of a balanced, multipolar system as being 'normal' in international history and therefore likely to prevail. It also discovers that the experience of the Cold War, as closely associated with structural bipolarity as it was, would work against the use of the term 'bipolar' to describe the nascent dyad perceived to be taking shape between the United States and China, despite this being the most appropriate term to use. These as well ideas about agency, both in terms of Washington's ability to preserve a state of unipolarity and the prospects of a set of rising powers being able to revise the global order, are used to illustrate the need for an analytically eclectic approach to polarity analysis to capture its effects and operation in all its complexity.

The Return to Multipolar Normality

Some of the periods of perceptual transition discussed in the previous two chapters suggested that the ontological question of whether a structural shift in the distribution of power (however it is defined) had taken place was an open one. In contrast, the early 1990s displayed no such ambiguity. Following the final collapse of the Soviet Union, few commentators or decision makers were left in any doubt about whether the structure of international society had fundamentally shifted. Bipolarity was no longer, but what exactly would come to replace this structure was not necessarily immediately clear. As in previous periods, the role of history was important in shaping perceptions of polarity in the immediate post-Cold War period, particularly on the part of academic analysis. Just as in the nineteenth century, when Austria and Prussia's historical role as great powers affected their

self-perceptions and the perception of others of their role in international society discussed in Chapter Four, and in the early Cold War years when the historical memory of a multipolar order and the leading roles played by states such as France and Britain discussed in Chapter Five, historical experience led most scholars to expect the imminent return of multipolarity.

For realists, and in particular, neorealists, our knowledge of the structure of the international system stood out as the guiding light in what should shape expectations of things to come. John Mearsheimer was the first to gain widespread attention in proclaiming an inevitable return to historical certainties in an article published in *International Security* in 1990 that stated that “the bipolar structure that has characterized Europe since the end of World War II is replaced by a multipolar structure” (5-6) in which “Germany, France, Britain, and perhaps Italy would assume major power status; the Soviet Union would decline from superpower status but would remain a major European power, giving rise to a system of five major powers and a number of lesser powers” (7) . Mearsheimer’s main concern was that this shift in the shape of world order would create a far greater degree of insecurity than had existed under the relatively stable (if tense) relationship built between the two poles during the Cold War years. In this analysis, deterrence was more difficult under multipolar conditions and balancing – the automatic response of sovereign states in a self-help system defined by international anarchy and power inequalities – would face “difficult coordination problems” that could result in miscalculation, escalation and war (15).

A year later Charles and Clifford Kupchan were discussing a major global debate on the prospects for peace in Europe. This debate, it was said, could be characterised by two schools of thought with “The pessimists, pointing to the waning of the Cold War and the end of bipolarity, fear a return to a more fractious multipolar Europe. The optimists, on the other hand, welcome the end of the East-West struggle and do not fear a return to

multipolarity” (1991: 114). What was clearly not at stake in the debate was the whether the bipolar order had in fact given way to multipolarity be it existent or imminent. This was echoed in the same year by Buzan who wrote that “There can be no doubt that the bipolar structure is evolving towards a multipolar one” (1991b: 52).

Three years on from Mearsheimer’s initial intervention, Kenneth Waltz argued in 1993 that world had ceased to be bipolar and that the “emerging structure of international politics” was multipolar: “In the fairly near future, say ten to twenty years, three political units may rise to great-power rank: Germany or a West European state, Japan, and China” (1993: 50). Even Russia’s prospects, thanks almost entirely to its nuclear arsenal – a gift from the Cold War arms racing with the United States in the previous bipolar structure – were such that it may still count as one of the central poles of power in this more balanced and diffuse power system (50-51). For Waltz the effect on the structure of world politics and in particular the way the major players would organise themselves was simple: “Germany, Japan, and Russia will have to relearn their old great-power roles, and the United States will have to learn a role it has never played before: namely, to coexist and interact with other great powers” (72).

Central to the expectation that the “essential skeleton” (Bull 1977: 206) of international society would take the form of multipolarity, was the dominance within the discipline of IR – both in terms of scholarship and the undergraduate courses taken by this stage by a generation of policymakers – of realism and its ideas about the automatic, or even natural, nature of balancing in world politics. The tendency towards equilibrium and balance of power politics inherent in the international system, defined as it is by realists by anarchy rather than hierarchy, would push international society away from the dominance of the sole remaining superpower and toward the ‘normality’ of a multipolar order. As Benjamin Miller has put it “According to this theory, long-term hegemony is not feasible because of the

effective functioning of the equilibrium mechanism which results in the recurrent formation of balances of power” (2000: 167). Despite the fact that the immediate circumstance in which the members of international society found themselves in, in which one pole of a bipolar order had ceased to exist, leaving a unipolar structure in its place, this line of thinking held that this would be a temporary phase characterised by a rapid rise in new great power contenders.

By 1996 Zara Steiner, in her Martin Wight Memorial Lecture (published in *International Affairs* the following year), was totally unambiguous in discussing the “current multipolar system under which we now live” (1997: 534). This kind of certitude of the multipolar structure of international society was evident across journalism (Bowring 1998), academia (Kegley and Raymond 1994) and the language of state leaders (People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation 1997). History had righted itself and the old ways of balancing and alliances amidst a multipolar structure were back.

The Creation of Unipolarity

Yet despite the strength of the perception of the return to the natural order of things in the guise of a post-Cold War multipolar balance of power, an opposing idea of a unipolar order had become established in some quarters and grew in attraction towards the end of the 1990s. Charles Krauthammer famously introduced the term unipolarity to a popular audience in an important piece in *Foreign Affairs* when he argued that “The immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies” (1990/91: 23). Krauthammer’s piece is symptomatic of the ways contemporary understandings of the shape of international society and ideas about its future direction interconnect and overlap. While he was introducing the language of unipolarity to a global political elite in a popular publication with worldwide circulation, he was also doing so in a way that emphasised

temporality and eventual transition when he spoke of the “unipolar moment.”³⁹ While others such as Christopher Layne would argue that the perception of a unipolar world was in fact an illusion given the “structurally driven phenomenon” of the emergence of other great powers resulting from the interaction of two characteristics of the modern states system, differential growth rates and anarchy (1993: 9).

Yet Krauthammer’s sense of the shape given to international society by the events which had left the United States as the sole superpower was persuasive to many and was reflected in some of the language of officials in Washington at the time. As the quote from the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, President Bush himself was convinced that the world stood at a “singular moment in history” of the sort that “divide all that goes before from all that comes after” (1990: 130). The crisis over the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 presented an opportunity for the United States to act as the ‘world’s policeman’ when it brought together a coalition of states backed by the UN Security Council to intervene. On the eve of the war, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft described the crisis as “the first test of our ability to maintain global or regional security in the post-Cold War era” (quoted in Allphin Moore Jr. and Pubantz 1999: 300). In 1992 the *New York Times* reported that an early (leaked) draft of the *Defense Planning Guidance for Fiscal Years 1994-99* expressed a concern about the need to discourage other states “from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order” (Tyler 1992). The choice of language is important in detecting the perception of a unipolar world as potential rivals wouldn’t be challenging the global leadership of a collective multipolar order but that of the United States – what the *New York Times* would refer to as a “superpower whose position can be perpetuated by constructive behavior and sufficient military might” (*Ibid*). However, it is worth noting that those in the US

³⁹ Although it should be noted that despite Krauthammer’s language of a unipolar ‘moment’, he was at pains to point out that this structural condition would last for decades (1990/91: 24).

Department of Defence who had drafted the report felt the need to remind their political leaders that the Washington “must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role” (*Ibid*). While the structure of international society was for now unipolar, it would require investment in the capabilities needed to keep it that way. Despite the fact that after public criticism of the document and its depiction of a US-led global order (Gelb 1992) the language was toned down, Layne has discussed the fact that the available evidence suggests that the language “accurately reflected official views about unipolarity” and was supported by other official horizon scanning and planning documents released at the time (1993: 6).

Later in the decade statements such as that of US President Bill Clinton that Washington’s “leadership in the world is unrivalled” (Clinton 1998) were common. At the turn of the century William Wohlforth, a scholar who stands out in the IR literature for his attention to the role of perceptions of power, wrote that “the system is unambiguously unipolar... To describe this unprecedented quantitative and qualitative concentration of power as an evanescent ‘moment’ is profoundly mistaken” (1999: 7). By 2002, even Kenneth Waltz was downplaying the talk of a return to multipolarity and a return to a global balance of power when he stated that “Never since Rome has one country so nearly dominated the world” (2002: 350).

The English school framework applied to polarity here focuses as much on how potential poles of power are treated by others as on how they act themselves. It is therefore important to note that a perception of unipolarity appears evident in the way those seeking influence on the world stage were sought this above all in Washington, particularly towards the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. In 2001 John Ikenberry noted that the US capital appeared to him to be “inundated by foreign diplomats and revolving-door lobbyists” (2001: 22). Yet in the same piece, Ikenberry hinted at the fragility of unipolarity when he called for

US officials to “consult with other governments. If not, Washington risks an ultimate shift toward some other form of global order” (2001: 25). The kind of order that Ikenberry was concerned that the United States might not be able to underpin and maintain on its own was a multilateral one. However, if unipolarity was determined by overwhelming US material power, then such concerns should be unfounded – a unipole can shape the order of which it sits at the top by virtue of its favourable share of the “indicators of national power” (Schmidt 2007: 47). Ikenberry’s somewhat paradoxical concern was that actually acting as if the world was unipolar (ie. being unrestrained by the wants and needs of other states) was what could threaten the continued existence of unipolarity itself. If other states opted for “some other form of global order”, multilateral or otherwise, the world could surely not be thought of as properly unipolar any longer.

The turn of the century and the coming to power of the George W. Bush Administration brought the discussion of unipolarity together with a fierce debate about the merits of unilateralism in foreign policy. In other words, structure and agency became equally important in the public discourse about the role of the United States in the world. The so-called neo-conservative ideology that came to dominate Washington’s outlook during Bush Jnr’s first term was based on a “vision of world order...based on unrivalled American military might and a cultivated belief in American exceptionalism” (Ikenberry 2006: 230). This perception of world order called for the United States to “use its unipolar power” (*ibid*) rather than rely on multilateralism and cooperation. Charles Krauthammer, the originator of the ‘unipolar moment’ idea noted the connection between acting like a unipole and the widespread perception of the existence of unipolarity when he said “Rather than contain power within a vast web of constraining international agreements, the new unilateralism seeks to strengthen American power...” (2001: A29).

Central to the consolidation of the unipolar perception was the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and in particular the response by the Bush Jnr Administration. Writing only one year after the attacks Michael Cox stated that:

Thus, whereas before September 11 the United States appeared to be floundering without purpose, within a blink of an eye it was playing a most active leadership role directing a loose but surprisingly obedient alliance of states of various repute in an ill-defined but very real 'war' against something called international terrorism (2002: 155).

The effect, according to Cox, on debates about systemic pressures at the international level was that,

From this perspective the problem is not that the US has too little power – an argument frequently used in the past to explain why the international system might be under stress – but that it now has too much. The Process may have begun before September 11, but it took September 11 to make things clear and reveal the truth (*Ibid*: 154).

Two years after the September 11 attacks and in the year that the US-led coalition invaded Iraq, a leading British think tank declared that even the term superpower was no longer fit to describe the United States. Instead Washington had now become a 'megapower.' In explaining the choice of terminology, the Chatham House report explained that,

During the Cold War, it had been customary to refer to the United States and the Soviet Union as 'superpowers'. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not at first lead to any semantic change, as both the United States and other countries took time to adapt to the new reality. However, the dominant military power of the United States, demonstrated in the 1990s in the first Gulf war, in Bosnia and in Kosovo, suggested that 'superpower' did not do justice to US hegemony. A new word was needed and we chose 'megapower' (in France, the word 'hyperpuissance' was already circulating, but 'hyperpower' did not seem to be the most appropriate term in English) (Royal Institute of International Affairs 2003: 1).

This quote demonstrates the extent to which the unipolar perception of world politics had been entrenched by the response to the September 11 attacks and the unilateralism of the Bush Jnr years. The examples of US military might cited all took place in the 1990s, yet it was not until 2003 that their significance was such that it was deemed necessary to invent a new word to capture Washington's global dominance. There is no mention of levels of

military spending, GDP, resources, population or even levels of innovation or the number of world class universities on US soil. Instead, three wars, all undertaken in coalition with others, against adversaries which could hardly be considered serious military powers are given as evidence that the United States had moved into a realm of relational power beyond that of even the Cold War. The question becomes, if the previous US Administrations of George Bush Snr and Bill Clinton had opted for a more unilateralist foreign policy, would such a perception have arisen earlier – for example at the time of these conflicts in the 1990s.

This point again raises the issue of agency in influencing perceptions of polarity and the need to theorise about polarity in a way that takes into account the mutually constitutive nature of agency and structure. Just as in the cases of Metternich's diplomacy discussed in Chapter Four and the Kissinger-Nixon notion of a multipolar balance and Nehru's idea of an Indian-led non-aligned bloc of power discussed in Chapter Five, the policies of the Bush Jnr Administration helped create a perception of unipolarity based on action. In purely material terms US-power had changed little from the earlier Clinton Administration. While defence spending eventually rose under Bush Jnr (Korb, Conley and Rothman 2011) the United States had been economically and militarily in a class of its own for some time (Wohlforth 1999). Yet with the coming to power of Bush Jnr and his close circle of Neoconservative advisors, with their ideas of a New American Century, we see the effect of *acting* like a unipole on perceptions of polarity.

The language of the Bush Jnr Administration gave a clear indication of where it perceived the United States' position in international society. The 2002 National Security Strategy talked of Washington enjoying "a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence", a strength which had been used to "maintained the peace in some of the world's most strategically vital regions". (Bush Jnr 2002). The duty placed

on US foreign policy by this structural condition was described by President Bush Jnr in his 2003 State of the Union speech when he said, “As our Nation moves troops and builds alliances to make our world safer, we must also remember our calling as a blessed country is to make the world better” (Bush Jnr 2003). Importantly, while not always sharing the view of the United States as a benign power, public statements of other states around this time also confirm a unipolar perception (Vedrine quoted in *BusinessWeek* 2001; Rice *et al.* 2005). This is important given that, as discussed in Chapter Three, a central component of an approach to polarity using the framework of the English school as this study does, is the notion that the social status of a great/superpower is not only claimed by a pole of power but is also conferred on them by others (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 102-3; Buzan 2008 Clark 2011b).

The post-September 11 years saw the notion of international society being firmly unipolar become dominant in much of the popular and scholarly analysis, particularly in the West. The position in which the United States found itself made “a mockery of earlier claims that America’s relative power was on the wane” (O’Neil 2006: 140) and meant that “US leaders were called upon to strategize in an international environment defined by their own nation’s primacy” (Quinn 2010: 140). Largely, the argument that the global order at the turn of the century was defined by the dominance of one power rested on assessments of material capabilities and what had by then become known as the United States’ ‘soft power’ – the ability to “set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others” by being able to “entice and attract” (Nye 2002: 9). As one account put it,

The striking indices of American global power are familiar to all students of contemporary international relations: America accounts for almost one quarter of total world economic output; it outlays more on military spending than the next eight countries combined; and it enjoys widespread international influence flowing from the ubiquity of American culture and its leading role in the global information technology revolution (O’Neil 2006: 140).

The level of acceptance of the unipolar position of the United States by analysts even led to a debate in the academic literature about whether the term ‘empire’ was a more appropriate characterisation of Washington’s global role (Cox 2003; 2004; 2005; Nexon and Wright 2007; Sterling-Folker 2008). The language of empire was not confined to the academic discourse with much of the post-September 11 analysis offered in the press and in books written for a popular, rather than scholarly, audience adopting the terminology (Bacevich 2002; Johnson 2004; Merry 2005). While much of even the scholarly literature used the term to describe nothing more than that which would normally be associated with being a superpower or even simply one of the great powers⁴⁰, there were others who argued that the US role in the world was qualitatively different to the powers that had come before (at least during the time period covered by this study).

Yet the unipolar perception amongst policymakers and analysts was never totally dominant, even during the ‘war on terror’ years of the early-mid 2000s. A growing focus on China, and in particular the Sino-US relationship as well as a more general focus on new ‘rising powers’ (both discussed below) persisted throughout. By the end of that decade, and the beginning of the next, competing visions of the polarity of international society were being expressed at exactly the same time by scholars and practitioners – even by those working from the geopolitical perspective of the same country.⁴¹ This again, raises the difficult ontological question of how polarity analysis can capture the phenomenon of which form of polarity actually exists when perceptions differ to such an extent. Such a challenge represents a far greater theoretical puzzle for IR scholars at the current time than

⁴⁰ For example, Martin Griffiths described the “American empire” as being based on the “maintenance of a particular international strategic and economic order” and felt that the term was appropriate given that the United States had “a unique capacity to project power internationally” (2006: 105). Neither of these criteria denotes anything other than the definition of superpower status given in Chapter Two (which Chapter Four demonstrated had been associated with the United States for decades before the beginning of the twenty-first century).

⁴¹ For a Canadian scholar’s view of the challenges of a multipolar world see Murray 2012 which can be juxtaposed with a Canadian-government funded project published in a policy-focused journal in the same year discussing Canadian foreign policy in a unipolar world (Hawes and Kirkey 2012).

understanding the purely mechanistic elements of a unipolar world which Waltz and other neorealists originally neglected. Using a traditional theoretical framework for polarity analysis, there is no room for the emergence of a competing narrative about the power structure of the world having any serious consequences on state interaction.

The Re-emergence of a Multipolar Narrative

By around halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century, US-objectives in both Afghanistan and Iraq appeared to be beyond Washington's ability to realise. Despite the apparent shift in the criteria for pole status by this stage in which economic prowess was given similar weighting to military might, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were clear demonstrations not only of US military power but also of a superpower's confidence in its special rights in international society. Both military operations had been couched in terms of being part of an on-going 'war on terror' that would span the globe if it needed to. But after early military successes (which relatively few commentators put in their proper context given the debilitated state of both the Taliban and Ba'ath Party regimes' respective militaries making an initial US victory entirely predictable) it soon became apparent that both theatres of war were becoming militarily, financially and morally taxing on the United States. The effect of this on perceptions of polarity again demonstrates the need for a theoretical framework which is attuned to *both* ideational and material aspects of power (as well as the ways the two interact). While the global leadership aspirations and confident unilateralism of the Bush Administration neoconservatives shaped initial perceptions of US power, the inability to turn capabilities and intent into desired outcomes became increasingly apparent (Rogers 2008). English school, Constructivist and other approaches have highlighted the combination of both will and capacity for the maintenance of power balances (Navari 2009: 51-2) which hints at the need for pluralism in this regard when it comes to analysing the bases of perceptions of polarity. The approach outlined in this study

is able to make sense of the notion that a self-perception of the US' role as a unipole led Washington to act as if it existed in a unipolar world even while the material realities of the decreasing utility of armed force raised questions about Washington's power elsewhere (Bacevich 2005; Edmunds 2006).

The timing of the shift in collective perceptions away from unipolarity and towards multipolarity is difficult to pin down exactly as totally contradictory views by different actors (even from a roughly similar vantage point such as from mainstream 'policy circles' in leading Western states) can be observed at exactly the same time. For example a year before the release of the report discussed above which proposed the title of 'megapower' for the United States, Charles Kupchan had published a book-length study on "The End of the American Era" (2002). Christopher Layne identifies the autumn of 2007 as the point at which the tide began to turn amongst the members of the American foreign policy establishment who had until that point taken for granted "that U.S. primacy would last far into the future" (2009: 151). By now the like of Immanuel Wallerstein, who had been writing about the 'American eagle' having "crash landed" for some years (2002; 2003) were no longer lone voices.

Again the issue of agency is central to perceptions of polarity. The idea that multipolarity could be actively sought and created was discussed by many (Turner 2009; Roberts 2010) with one of China's most influential analysts asserting that the Chinese people "believe China's decline to be a historical mistake which they should correct" (Xuetong 2001: 33). This is captured in the statement by the Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2002 that "Russia and China have always stood for the establishment of a multi-polar world" (quoted in Turner 2009: 166). Peter van Ham has discussed China's increasing "discursive power", most evident in the success of the 'peaceful rise' (a phrase coined by Zheng Bijian which became popular in Chinese public statements and speeches from late 2003 onwards that

described a pathway for China's rise in the global hierarchy without hegemonic ambition or revisionist strategies) image being all pervasive in debates about China's growing economic, military and political clout (2010: 40). According to van Ham, for China, "uploading the norm of multipolarity is a vital geopolitical goal" (*Ibid*) and it is largely via the successful use of "social power" – the ability to establish the norms and rules around which other actor's actions converge – that this was achieved (8). This is echoed by Hurrell who despite noting the realist critique of the "empty pretensions of those states whose ambitions run ahead of their material capabilities", argues that the discourse and actions of rising powers demonstrates that "power in international relations requires a purpose and project, and the cultivation of such a purpose can both galvanize national support and cohesion at home and serve as a power resource in its own right" (2006: 2).

According to this line of thinking joining China and Russia at the 'top table' of the global order would be other 'rising powers' such as Brazil, India and in time, potentially others who were more clearly regional powers for the moment (See Chapter Two) such as South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia.

Both Brazil and India with their impressive growth rates, large populations and relatively stable regimes, came under increasing global scrutiny in one what began to seem almost like a hunt for the 'next great powers.' One commentator even went so far as to describe Indian and Brazilian permanent seats on the UN Security Council as being among the "most realistic plans on the table" (Kupchan 2012: 196).

The rise of India as a pole of power appeared to be somewhat palatable to Western powers. As early as 2005, the United States was expressing its desire to "to help India become a major world power in the 21st century" (US Department of State 2005). In 2008, the British Foreign Secretary, singled out India when discussing the idea of a power shift from West to East saying that the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office would need to "transfer its

resources away from Europe and towards India, Asia and the Middle East” (*The Times of India* 2008). India’s growing status appeared to be confirmed by the other leading ‘challenger’ state in 2010 when Chinese President Wen Jiabao described the relationship between the two countries as being one of “partners not competitors” (quoted in Mehdudia 2010). This followed the upgrading of the status of the Chinese ambassador to New Delhi to Vice-Minister earlier that year despite the fact that “It is often said that India worries far more about China than China does about India” (Basrur 2011: 197).

Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made speeches where he spoke of “a world each time more and more diverse and multipolar” (2010) while expanding its diplomatic representations around the world (Kupchan 2012: 183). Brazilian foreign policy elites cultivated an image of Brazil as an important ‘third party mediator’ and broker in difficult negotiations from trade to climate change to nuclear proliferation. This attempt at carving a great power role based on a negotiating strategy characterised by restraint, accommodation and bridge-building helped to cast Brazil as a rising ‘status quo’ power rather than a revisionist one. This according to Amrita Narlikar “assisted in securing a place for Brazil at several of the negotiating tables. But...failed to produce the sort of attention and engagement that China and India inspire...” (2010: 135). This may go some way to explaining the outlook from Brazil itself, described by one analyst as a situation where “The Brazilian government and in particular the diplomats of the foreign ministry *Itamaraty* are aware that Brazil still cannot compete with the established great powers” (Flemes 2009).

Perhaps the most stark illustration of the power of the growing narrative of a shift towards multipolarity was the way in which Fareed Zakaria’s phrase the “rise of the rest” from his 2008 book *The Post-American World*, was picked up and repeated in both policy circles (Trenin 2012) and academic discourse (Nederveen Pieterse 2009). The phrase captured the growing perception that the trend towards multipolarity was fast becoming a defining

feature of world politics. In some quarters, the use of this narrative of the inevitable shift towards multipolarity even began to downplay or completely ignore the idea that there had ever been a unipolar period after the Cold War. This was the clear impression given by the President of the European Parliament when he said, “We no longer live in the bipolar world of the two super-powers. New powers have emerged both on the political and the economic stage. The enlargement of the G-8 to the G-20 setting was a long over-due recognition of this new reality” (Schulz 2012).

In 2012 Michael Cox even went so far as describing,

...the new truth of the early twenty-first century that the Western world we have known is fast losing its pre-eminence to be replaced by a new international system shaped either by the so-called BRICs comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China, the ‘rest’, or more popularly by that very broadly defined geographical entity known as Asia (Cox 2012: 369).

This ‘new truth’ raises important questions for the way we use the concept of polarity in IR theory. According to Cox, firstly it was fundamentally inaccurate – “an irresistible ‘power shift’ in the making” was for him, at least questionable – which again challenges the notion that polarity is simply observed and ‘known’ by the members of international society. Further to this, even if one still maintains a fundamentally materialist version of power (and therefore that the poles of power are those states with a large share of the world’s capabilities), he argued that this narrative of a coming multipolarity was essentially based on economic capabilities only. Not only this, but it was in fact based on the future trajectories of the ‘rising powers’ of China, India, Brazil etc. rather than their actual realisable capabilities today. What is important about the growth of a ‘narrative’ about multipolarity based on expectations about the future is that once it has become as all pervasive as Cox argues, the narrative can be in itself singularly influential in shaping perceptions of the current power structure. Such a possibility is captured theoretically by Buzan’s complex polarity theory formulation discussed in Chapter Two in which the

existence of great powers alongside superpowers makes for a more complex world. Buzan points out that great powers (including China which he claims has successfully done so for nearly a century) can trade on its “potential as well as its ability” (2004a: 70). While the ability to credibly back up their military and economic potential at some point in time is important, it is “not strictly speaking necessary so long as other powers treat them as potential superpowers” (*ibid*). The blurring of lines between the exact point a regional power becomes a great power or when a great power becomes a superpower should be expected once the poles of power are understood as being the holders of a social status rather than those in possession of quantifiable capabilities.

The notion of a narrative of an imminent or event contemporary change in polarity demonstrate the inadequacy of traditional ways of theorising about polarity which, if anything, prioritise military capabilities over economic ones. But more fundamentally it demonstrates the need for a different way of thinking about polarity, as theoretically, given the objective nature of the distribution of material capabilities, this phenomenon is so unlikely as to not be unimportant. Our current theories predict particular effects of different forms of polarity (in terms of stability, conflict, alliance patterns etc.) based on the assumption of complete agreement as to the polarity of the day. As Cox himself points out, “more subtle” theories of IR (*Ibid*: 381) are needed to be able understand this phenomenon as being more than just an anomaly.

The same tendency to emphasise agency in the debate about the rise of multipolarity and the related relative decline of the United States is evident in a number of books and articles arguing for the possibility of reversing Washington’s fortunes (Lieber 2012; Kagan 2012a). These interventions are clearly aimed at countering the narrative of multipolarity by exposing the “myth of decline” (Kagan 2012b). Such ideas appeared to have gained some traction by 2011/2012 within the United States as both candidates in the presidential

election were at pains to portray themselves as rejecting “the philosophy of decline in all of its variants” (Romney 2011: 11; see also Layne 2012b). This line of thinking posits that ideas about US decline can be viewed “as a cyclical cultural trope, indicative more of the United States’ domestic and intellectual frailties than of genuine material or comparative trends” (Quinn 2011: 804-5). Such an approach therefore allows for the opportunity to reverse what is essentially an ideational rather than material phenomenon. The policy advice of those wanting to persuade policymakers in Washington that it is not too late to reverse the narrative towards US decline and the creation of a multipolar order points to the relevance for polarity analysis of the argument of Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil that “Any given international system does not exist because of immutable structures, but rather the very structures are dependent for their reproduction on the practices of the actors” (1994: 216). The practices of these actors must be understood as being singularly driven by their perceptions of power, not simply the objective fact of power (however it is defined). Therefore an English school approach to polarity encourages us to ask questions about where things like a multipolar narrative come from. It is only by applying this approach that we can uncover elements such as a perception on the part of some decision makers that a particular form of polarity can be created, encouraged or resisted. While international society, including which states and which states are not conferred with great/superpower status, “is not reducible to the question of agency” (Dunne 2005b: 69) it is fundamentally derived from the ideas and actions of practitioners (and to some extent, those who influence them). As one account puts it, “nothing happens in international society without something being done by those who act in the name of governments...” (*Ibid*).

The Case of the Missing Bipolarity

Amidst the narrative of an almost certain return of a multipolar structure to international society, rarely expressed in terms of polarity, another strand of thinking emerged during the

mid-late 2000s. For some, while power at the global level may have been becoming more diffuse generally, as the unipolar era appeared to be ending, it was one relationship in particular that would come to characterise the first quarter of the twenty-first century – the US-China dyad.

By 2009, Richard Rosecrance and Wang Jisi argued that, not only were the United States and China “destined to be the largest and strongest powers in the international system” (Allison 2009: xi) but their relationship “is one of the most important in world history” (2009: 207). Such statements were not rare with analysts (Shambaugh 2011), diplomats (Huntsman 2010) and politicians (Hu cited in Washington Post 2011) alike proclaiming that “no bilateral relationship between major powers today would be more crucial in shaping global order and agenda than the one between China and the United States” (Tung 2009: xii-xiii) and that “There is a strong perception in both Beijing and Washington that they are each other’s most important interlocutor on a range of crucial issues, arising as much from their interdependence as from the competitive nature of their relationship” (Foot and Walter 2011:1). In this view, while international society may be going to witness the ‘rise of the rest’ in time, at least in the short-medium term it was the rise of one that would dictate the shape of global polarity.

The perceived importance of the US-Sino relationship was reflected in public surveys with one showing that in 2012, 66% of the American public and 80% in the US Government think of China as a competitor (Pew 2012) with 52% of the public viewing China’s “emergence as a world power as a major threat to the U.S.” (*Ibid*). This perception was not limited to the United States. A ‘long-term vision’ study commissioned by the European Defence Agency in 2006 found that “There is no doubt that the evolution of US-China relations will be of major importance for the future of global order. No other power challenges America’s global prominence...” (Gnesotto and Grevi 2006: 149). And much of

the commentary from Beijing was by late in the first and early in the second decade of the twenty-first century talking about China having assets such as a modernised military which could “provide ‘public products’ to the rest of the world” which would require an understanding in Washington that “The world...is large enough for both Chinese and US forces” (Yi 2011). This is confirmed by the findings of one scholar who has noted that Chinese IR journals are “are primarily concerned with Sino-US relations and US politics” (Noesselt 2012: 15).

The sub-set of the polarity literature discussed in Chapter Two, power transition theory, made a comeback in the academic literature around this time almost entirely based around the United States and China. This was discussed in both traditional materialist terms (Chan 2008; May and Hong 2009; Lebow and Valentino 2009) as well as in a more Constructivist account of a potential hegemonic transition (Beeson 2009; Clark 2011a). The standard approach to power transition theory and the majority of writing on the subject in the mid-late 2000s, presupposes a dyadic relationship between a rising and a declining power. Particularly when it comes to the prospects for conflict arising from a power transition, “the crucial moment” is in which “one hegemonic nation is surpassed by another” (Bueno de Mesquita 1989: 152) which led one leading power transition theorist to argue that “The issue at hand, therefore, is under what conditions we would expect a deterioration in U.S.-Chinese relations over the next two decades” (Copeland 2000: 243).

It is very important to note that the language of bipolarity was very rarely invoked despite the fact that the image of the two states being portrayed was that “One is at the top of the international hierarchy, and the other is rising to it” (Rosecrance and Jisi 2009: 207). Booth and Wheeler even go so far as to use the language of a ‘cold war’ arguing that “the chief danger is a new cold war between the United States and China, which might attain

superpower status within a decade or so” (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 270). Again, this quote implies the creation of a bipolar order but avoids using the phrase.

This tells us something else about the role of history in perceptions of polarity. It would appear that the close association with the historically contingent US-Soviet cold war of the late 1940s to the late 1980s with the idea of bipolarity has contributed to a reluctance to perceive the world in strictly bipolar terms despite predictions of a two superpower world. Just as some appeared eager to envision a return to multipolarity after the fall of the Soviet Union as this was the ‘normal’ state of history, it would seem that others were reluctant to think in terms of bipolarity in the early twenty-first century due to the image of the anomaly of the bipolar structure of the Cold War years. Such a trend points towards a need for an understanding of polarity which is theoretically eclectic enough to be able to allow for questions of “how and why, in certain contexts, some agents maintain or redefine, and others accept or resist, existing material and ideational structures” (Katzenstein and Sil 2010: 47). The re-definition of polarity put forward in this study allows for just this kind of potential given that the distribution of economic and military power is taken to be part of what makes up global polarity but not what determines it. If instead it is perceptions of power as expressed as a particular status in the society of states, then a resistance to a particular perception of polarity due to its historical association becomes theoretically possible.

For Henry Kissinger, the decisive trend is the rise of China as an “economic superpower and a major factor in shaping the global political order” since the mid-1970s more than a general ‘rise of the rest’ (2011: xiv). It is this that led him to conclude by 2011 that “The relationship between China and the United States has become a central element in the quest for world peace and global well-being” (*ibid*). For this reason, without using the explicit language of bipolarity, Kissinger too argued that the priority for leaders in Washington and

Beijing (but with no mention of New Delhi, Brasília, Moscow or Brussels) must be avoiding confrontation and building trust. Kissinger's prescription for the maintenance of global security is reminiscent of Hedley Bull's idea of great power responsibility:

Both sides should be open to conceiving of each other's activities as a normal part of international life, and not in itself as a cause for alarm. The inevitable tendency to impinge on each other should not be equated with a conscious drive to contain or dominate, so long as both sides can maintain the distinction and calibrate their actions accordingly. (Kissinger 2011: 547).

This quote demonstrates three important things for this study. First, that one of the most influential analysts of world politics and former decision maker (particularly one whose time in office was spent constructing the foreign policy of a 'pole of power') chooses to stress the importance of state's conceptions of each other's activities tells us something about polarity. Rather than simply needing to accurately assess and understand the structural limits imposed on them by the distribution of capabilities, Kissinger allows for a degree of agency in that international order will derive from the way Beijing and Washington conceive of each other's roles in international society. Such a position jars with the structural determinism of the traditional polarity literature and only makes sense if a broader definition of polarity is used in which status is as important as the weapons of war and means of production. Secondly, and building on the theoretical assumption about the balance between material and ideational elements of power underlying the quote, it also in line with an English school approach to the notion of the great powers as a social institution with responsibilities as well as special rights. As Bull wrote, the great powers are those states which are "recognised by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties" (1977: 202) which include avoiding or at least containing crises and respecting each other's spheres of influence. And finally, the idea that Washington and Beijing would each conceive of the other's actions as a normal part of *international* life confirms the image of bipolarity if, as Chapter Two argued, Buzan's

notion of superpowers exercising “global military and political reach” and of having a status of constant global importance which is “accepted by others in rhetoric and behaviour” (2004a: 69).

Both the idea of China and the United States managing their strategic relations at the level of great/superpower peers and interacting with each other on a systemic level was treated as inevitable and entirely natural by those proposing an institutional ‘Group of Two’ (Brzezinski 2009; Economy and Segal 2009; Garrett 2010). This would not take the place of the existing G8 or G20 multilateral groupings but would instead sit above these at the top of the global hierarchy. In this sense, it would provide a structured platform for the kind of summits held by the United States and the Soviet Union at various times throughout the bipolar period of the Cold War.

Yet despite all the pronouncements on the central importance to world order of the US-Sino relationship the clear articulation of a perception of bipolarity is difficult to find (for a rare, but qualified case, see Ikenberry 2011). This is an important point for the theoretical argument advanced in this thesis – that redefinition of polarity is needed which has a sensitivity to historical and social contingency – as the traditional polarity literature has no way of predicting this occurrence nor understanding its importance. It also relates directly to the discussion in Chapter Three of the choice of the English school as the framework for this study (over both thin Constructivism and neoclassical realism). This kind of factor, as determined by historical contingency as it is, is brought out only when one searches for a way of theorising about polarity, and in particular, perceptions of polarity, as determined by historical experience.

The Perception of a Structureless World

Despite the certitude of some about either the coming of multipolarity, the self-evidently unipolar structure, or the centrality of the US-Sino relationship for global order, a fourth

narrative arose in the 1990s and endured well into the new century (Roberts 2008). This was the idea that no clear polarity had emerged in the wake of the bipolarity of the Cold War. The sense of confusion was captured by William Zartman when he wrote, as late as 2009, that,

The successor system is not yet evident, and attempts to order interstate relations through such diverse and conflicting concepts as international organization, uni- or multipolarity, transnational regimes, competing culture blocs, or a North-South divide remain inconclusive (2009: 2).

While Zartman is making a larger point about order that goes beyond polarity (relating to geopolitics, multilateralism and the concept of polarization discussed in Chapter Two), nevertheless he is clear that in even in the inter-state hierarchy, both unipolar *and* multipolar perceptions had prevailed. This runs in direct contradiction to Waltz's point about the number of poles being an "empirical question" for which one only needs to use "common sense" to answer (1979: 131).

Eventually this narrative would spawn a narrative of the decline of polarity (discussed in Chapter Two) captured by Richard Haas' phrase of the "age of nonpolarity" (2008). This sentiment was built upon by Randall Schweller (2010) who talked of moving from polarity to entropy, to some extent by Buzan's notion of the United States being a "leader without followers" (2008) and Charles Kupchan (2012) who contended that the post-unipolar world "will have no center of gravity. It will be no one's world" (5).

However despite the seemingly novel nature of this perception of a world without the central direction provided by the managerial function of the great powers, the vast majority of this analysis actually stayed very closely to the general narrative of the 'rise of the rest' and reinforced a growing perception of imminent multipolarity (*Ibid*). The theoretical problems associated with the 'nonpolarity' thesis discussed in Chapter Two meant that, in

practice, this school of thought became simply another way of describing the onset of a multipolar world.

Conclusion

This chapter has built on the analysis of the previous two historical chapters by adding the differing perceptions of world order that characterised the post-Cold War era. Like both chapters five and six, history and agency emerged as key elements in shaping perceptions of global polarity.

The theoretical framework outlined in Part I was employed to focus specifically on the ways in which polarity was perceived by actors and how those perceptions were shaped by social and historical contingency. The role of history shaped the assumption that the world would soon return to the 'normality' of multipolarity in the early 1990s as well as a reluctance to associate a growing dyadic relationship between Washington and Beijing with the emergence of bipolarity in the mid-late 2000s due to its close association with the Cold War era.

Ideas about the role of agency in shaping a new world order were central to perceptions of China, Russia and others 'creating' a new multipolar world rather than simply benefiting from this natural structural evolution. Equally, towards the beginning of the 2010s a narrative of US agency being able to reverse the trend towards decline and the end of unipolarity became an important strand in the global discourse about power and order.

Finally, this chapter has again demonstrated the need for dealing with complexity and contradiction in studying perceptions of order in international society. The period demonstrates, perhaps most vividly of the three periods under review in this study, that the way we theorise polarity and its effect on the foreign policies of states must be able to take

into account actors holding multiple and contradictory views of the shape of world order simultaneously.

As early as 2007, the then US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates was telling reporters that “we are in a multipolar world now” (quoted in Hoagland 2007) and in 2010, the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague spoke of “increasing multipolarity” meaning that “we have more governments to influence and that we must become more active” (2010).

Two years after and only a year before the Gates and Hague quotes respectively on the current multipolar order, one of the leading IR journals, *World Politics*, published a special issue on the importance of theorising unipolarity (Ikenberry *et al.* 2009). This followed a widely cited book by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth that argued that “adverse trends for the United States will not cause a polarity shift in the near future” (2008: 34) and “the United States does, in fact, have an opportunity to revise the system – and, moreover...this opportunity will long endure” (217). In the same year Fareed Zakaria proclaimed that “while unipolarity continues to be a defining reality of the international system for now, every year it becomes weaker and other nations...grow in strength” (2008: 218).

And by 2011, despite the general tendency to talk, in terms of polarity, about either the endurance of unipolarity or the coming of multipolarity, Clark captured the way in which much of the popular analysis of world politics was actually focusing – without necessarily articulating it explicitly – on a bipolar world made up of the US and China (Rosecrance and Guoliang 2009) when he wrote that “In terms of power transition, the key question is whether China is inevitably destined to challenge America’s position” (2011a: 22).

In other words, within a very small space of time, all three forms of polarity, uni, bi and multi, were being put forward as the most accurate descriptions of the structure of the global

hierarchy. Yet the entire literature on polarity and its effect on world politics had no way of accounting for such diversity of perception let alone the ways in which this might affect the foreign policies of states. If power was understood as the distribution of capabilities across the system, and polarity was an expression of which states were the best endowed in this regard, then disagreement should be settled by quantitative analysis. At worst, such disagreement should be expected to be short-lived as the behaviour of states, “shaped and shoved” (Waltz 1979) as it is by the structure of the international system would soon demonstrate which states truly had the resources at their disposal to order and manage international society. The introduction to the above mentioned special issue of *World Politics* summed up this issue perfectly when it argued that “To determine polarity, one has to examine the distribution of capabilities and identify the states whose shares of overall resources obviously place them into their own class...There will doubtless be times in which polarity cannot be determined, but now does not appear to be one of them” (Ikenberry *et al* 2009: 5-6). Yet the discussion above demonstrates anything but certainty and clarity when it comes to the question of which states could be said to give international society its ‘essential skeleton’ by virtue of their strength or their status.

The post-Cold War period under review in this chapter has demonstrated the need to move away from analysing polarity as understood as the sum of the material capabilities of the most powerful states. Instead, a new definition of polarity – as the number of states that can be said to hold the particular social status of great/superpower – is required to make sense of the differing perceptions of world order discussed above. This social status is dependent upon a reciprocal construction: a state’s view of itself and the view of it held by others (Buzan 2004a: 61). Therefore polarity only exists in as much as it is perceived by the members of a social system and those members could, theoretically, perceive polarity differently at any one time and those perceptions can change over time.

The English school provides an avenue for investigating the interplay of material and ideational forces at the structural level (of both system and society) whilst keeping a focus on the role of the great powers in playing a uniquely influencing role in this (Buzan: 2004a:10). As will be discussed further in the next and final chapter, using this approach to re-define polarity will not only open up the theoretical space for a more nuanced analysis of the evolution of the social institution of the great powers but will also re-orient polarity analysis away from abstract theorising and towards a closer association with the way the term is actually used by practitioners in world politics.

Part III: Conclusions

Chapter Seven: Rethinking Polarity for the Twenty-first Century

So long as humankind remains divided up into political entities claiming the ultimate right of self-government (states)...the distribution of power among them is going to matter.

Barry Buzan, The United States and the Great Powers (2004a: 42)

Ever since Carr delivered his devastating rhetorical blow against the "utopians" and claimed power for "realism" the discipline of international relations has tended to treat power as the exclusive province of realism.

Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics" (2005: 40).

When we set power over opinion side by side with military and economic power, we have none the less to remember that we are dealing no longer with purely material factors, but with the thoughts and feelings of human beings.

E.H. Carr, The Twenty Years' Crisis (1939a: 144)

This study has argued for the continuing utility of the concept of polarity but in a way that requires a redefinition, not of the way the concept is used in practice, but how it is defined in the existing theoretical literature. In particular, this has focused on the way power is treated in the specific polarity analysis literature (situated within the larger body of neorealist work). However the argument for a redefinition outlined and tested here, has important consequences for the broader IR field as a whole given the all-pervasive nature of 'great power politics' to almost every area within the discipline.

This chapter returns to the theoretical question posed at the outset about whether a new definition of polarity could be used to redirect this area of IR theory towards a closer association to the way the concept is actually used in world politics. It draws together the ontological and epistemological conclusions from parts I and II and singles out a number of factors which emerge as central to understanding the factors that influence perceptions of power and therefore the operation of polarity in international society. This includes the role of historical knowledge and experience, ideas of agency and evolving conceptions of the utility of different forms of material power.

In Part I we explored the ways in which the concept of polarity is treated in IR theory and argued the need for a redefinition as well as outlining what this might look like using the theoretical framework of the English school. Chapter One made the case for returning to the issue of polarity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite the size of the existing literature on the subject. This was based not only on an assumption about the utility of state-centric theories but also on the importance of practice for informing theory. It argued that while the concept of polarity continues to be invoked by practitioners and the analysts who influence them, polarity analysis will remain an important part of contemporary IR theory. It then situated this within not only neorealist theories of IR – the theoretical home ground of polarity analysis – but also the recent move to apply the insights from the critical and ideational ‘turns’ to the traditional ‘high politics’ subject matter of mainstream IR. In particular, the discussion demonstrated the need to find a way of theorising about polarity in a way which captures the phenomenon of breakdowns of perceptions of order. Finally Chapter One presented the redefinition of polarity pursued in the thesis not as the distribution of capabilities in the international system but instead as: *The number of states perceived as holding the social status of great/superpower at any one time.*

Chapter Two explored the existing literature on the concept of polarity and the major debates about its effects on world politics. This served to highlight the inadequacies of the current literature in terms of capturing the complexity of the ways that states have interacted in history in contexts other than the mechanistic and rationalist world depicted by neorealists. The chapter also expanded on the previous discussion of the theoretical importance of perceptions of power as a key conduit for the effects of polarity in practice.

Chapter Three took this further by outlining a theoretical framework for situating this redefinition within the broad project of analytical eclecticism in general and the English school of IR in particular. While the discussion found much to engage with from both the

thin Constructivist and neoclassical realist literatures, it found that it is ultimately the English school which offers an understanding of the great/superpowers as a social institution that is therefore perceived in a social and historical context by the members of international society. This is not the way in which the concept is normally depicted by neorealism which posits that polarity is simply the sum of the distribution of material capabilities in the international system. Therefore, in this position, polarity is not perceived it simply exists in an objective sense and is merely assessed and understood by the units within the system. Chapter Three argued that the English school offers a less parsimonious but far richer account of the hierarchy of power that has existed between states in history. It was argued that this body of literature offers an analytically eclectic approach to polarity a set of theoretical concepts (international society, primary institutions etc.) and a language for thinking about the units of analysis in polarity theory in a way that goes beyond the reductionism of realist notions of power. The discussion of what an English school version of polarity would look like involved clarifying the ontological position in relation to the traditional distinction found in English school writing between an international system and an international society as well as the methods by which perceptions of polarity can be analysed.

Part II moved the discussion from the theoretical to the historical in order to illustrate the need for a new definition of polarity as well as the utility of the particular definition advanced here. Each of the chapters covered a period of history between 1815-2012 which is generally thought of as being uniformly either multi, bi or unipolar. Instead, by applying the lens of an English school understanding of polarity, the analysis showed how perceptions of both decision makers and analysts have often diverged from the narrative given in post-hoc analysis. Periods which are said to be clearly multi, bi or unipolar emerged instead as being far more fragile in terms of the collective perceptions of the

members of international society, than the standard accounts depict. This is important, as Part I argued for the need to take the perceptions of the members of international society *at the time* as the ontological and epistemological starting point of any understanding of polarity and its effects.

The remainder of this chapter will reflect further on the major findings from the historical analysis in the previous three chapters and their lessons for polarity analysis into the future. This includes the ontological and epistemological implications of redefining polarity in this way as well as a number of specific conclusions about the role of historical legacies in shaping perceptions of power and the agent-structure problem in IR.

Ontological Conclusions

The analysis presented in this study leads us towards the conclusion that polarity, as defined as the number of great/superpowers that exist at any one time, only exists in as much as it exists in the minds of actors. The analysis in chapters four to six show that perceptions of power have been instrumental to the way polarity has structured interstate relations and therefore a purely materialist account of the global power structure is unable to capture the ontological foundations of polarity.

This is not to say that ‘actual’ polarity that exists ‘out there in the real world’ (as philosophical realists would have it), measured in purely material terms, does not dramatically affect inter-state relations. For example, if the majority of actors in a system treat one particular state as a unipole, looking to it to hold special responsibilities, when its material capabilities do not easily facilitate such a role, then the impact of this disjuncture between expectation based on social status and the reality based on material capabilities is likely to be extremely important. What is important to note here is that without adopting the theoretical approach to polarity analysis outlined in this thesis, this distinction would not even register as a possibility. If polarity is to be simply the top layer of the sum of material

capabilities possessed by states as it is in traditional polarity analysis, then not only would there be no way of dealing theoretically with such a mismatch between perception and reality, there would in fact be no room for perception as a factor at all. To put it simply, polarity would not be *perceived*, polarity would just *be*.

Instead the approach taken here focuses specifically on the poles of power which make up any polarity system as being the holders of a particular historically defined social status. Therefore this opens up much more theoretical ground for transitions in polarity to be more complex and perhaps more important than even the existing power transition literature would posit.

The main ontological conclusion from this study, that polarity as defined as the number of great/superpowers that exist at any one time, exists in as much as it exists in the minds of decision makers presents somewhat of a challenge to the classical English school literature. As Steve Smith has noted, “there is a real tension in Bull’s...work between order as observable and order as construction” (1999: 103). As Part I discussed, the traditional distinction between an international system and an international society, while being a useful conceptual device, allows neorealism to monopolise polarity analysis within its purely systemic and physical ontology. This is also reflected in a number of English school-inspired attempts within the thin Constructivist literature to plot an alternative to realist understandings of structural power. Guzzini (1993) for example, has argued that power analysis can be divided into the ‘dyads’ of either agent capacity or structural ‘governance.’ This, according to Berenskoetter, still abandons the relational aspect of power in a “poles first and relations after” approach (2007: 15). In contrast, the conclusion reached in this study is that structural power and therefore the different forms of polarity that exist at any one time, must be thought of as a product of (and a key element in producing) international society. In this sense, polarity, rather than being an objective phenomenon with

characteristics than transcend history, “only exists in interaction” (*Ibid*; Blau 1964), and therefore must be studied in historical and social context.

Epistemological Conclusions

One of the central conclusions of this study is that the complexity of the social realm must be part of any understanding of the concept of polarity. Therefore simple and parsimonious approaches to power that reduce international structure to control over resources and the possession of capabilities simply cannot provide a sufficient basis. Ted Hopf reminds us that, like power, “identities are always relational” (2002: 7) which means that the only method for analysing great power politics in all its complexity is to interrogate diplomatic history. Only then can our theoretical approach to polarity be deduced directly from the socially and historically contingent examples of great power status being claimed and conferred.

This approach should not necessarily replace quantitative studies of the distribution of material capabilities over space and time but would complement such scholarship by adding the missing dimension of social interaction between the members of international society. The need for this has perhaps been taken more seriously by practitioners than it has been by scholars. Yet some scholars have factored this into their analysis of foreign policy analysis without going further to take this insight ‘all the way up’ to structural analysis. This does not mean that one must go as far as Felix Gilbert who observed,

Diplomats are not schooled to base their opinions and recommendations on an intensive study and expert knowledge of economic developments and military budgets; they gauge the trend of future policy from an analysis of public opinion as it is expressed in newspapers, in political meetings, and in conversations with the various political personalities with whom they must keep in contact (quoted in Jervis 1970: 42).

Quantitative analysis of the relative distribution of material capabilities is still an important element in polarity analysis, but only in as much as it can be shown to directly influence perceptions of polarity. Polarity itself cannot simply be reduced to these material factors.

The preceding analysis has shown that to understand the way that polarity actually shapes the behavioural patterns (Ikenberry *et al* 2009) of states, an approach must be taken in which contemporary perceptions are privileged over post-hoc analysis. An approach which looks back at shifts in polarity in history and tries to deduce the effect on state interactions will miss the full effects of polarity as discussed in the previous three chapters. What might be thought of as an epistemological ‘hindsight bias’ (which derives directly from a materialist conception of power) is evident throughout the existing literature. For example, a recent article discussing the benchmark dates used by the discipline to order the way world politics is conceived, studied and taught has noted that “Research on balancing is supported by benchmark dates such as 1945 and 1989, with the system undergoing a shift from multipolarity to bipolarity after 1945, and from bipolarity to unipolarity after 1989” (Buzan and Lawson 2012: 7). The use of benchmark dates based around shifts in polarity not only helps shape the way we think about international history but it also reinforces a particular view of polarity – that it fundamentally affects world politics when major power transitions occur which we can observe after the fact whether or not they were perceived at the time.

The epistemological and methodological conclusions that arise from this study go beyond the body of literature in which it is situated (outlined in Chapters One and Two). A clear implication from the effectiveness of an eclectic theoretical approach to polarity demonstrated in the previous pages is that other schools of thought outside of the traditional realist domain of polarity analysis can and should engage with the concept of polarity. The opening up of the theoretical space around the question of the number of great/superpowers in existence that this study has argued for may even invite more radical epistemological

approaches in this area such as the growing literature on the logic of practicality in IR (Neumann 2002; Adler 2005b; Pouliot 2010; Adler and Pouliot 2011). The work that Vincent Pouliot describes as focusing more on practical knowledge (the inarticulate, experientially learned kind) rather than representational knowledge (the conscious, reflexive and observational kind) discussed in this study, could potentially push the analysis of an essentially socially constructed concept of polarity even further (Pouliot 2010: 14-31). Although this would involve the significant downside of diverging even further from rationalist approaches to power most closely associated with polarity analysis and power transition theory and therefore likely detract from rather than add to the larger project of analytic eclecticism in which this study is purposely couched.

It also suggests that, beyond the traditional area of engagement between the psychology and FPA literatures, a further engagement between structural approaches to IR and social psychology is needed. This will open up the space for trying to understand the complexity of questions around, for example why “beliefs tend to persevere even when the initial evidence on which they were based has been discredited (Kunda 1999: 99). The way in which IR has essentially left theorising about polarity and its effects to one section of the scholarly community (with the ontological and epistemological biases that any one camp of theorists tend to hold) has effectively shut-off this engagement. At a time of perceptual transition and cognitive dissonance in relation to the polarity of international society, questions of judgement under conditions of uncertainty (Tversky and Kahneman 1974), biases in social perception (Ross, Amabile and Steinmetz 1977) and perceptual readiness (Bruner 1957) can all help understand the dynamics of how power transitions work. A deeper engagement between IR theorists and social psychologists promises to push the kind of analysis presented in the previous chapters even further. Given the period of cognitive

dissonance in relation to the polarity of intentional society in which Chapter Six demonstrated we are still in the midst of, such an engagement could not be more timely.

History

The role of history, experience and memory in shaping perceptions of polarity is consistent with cognitive explanations of causality found in social psychology that argue that “both formative experiences and recent, vivid experiences shape individual’s causal beliefs and their view of other actors” (Bennett 2003: 191; and Nisbett and Ross 1980). They not only shape the ideas about the world but these ideas about the world in turn influence their actions. Of course, these ideas need not be totally explicit and conscious, as one account puts it, “Decision-making in systems as complex as the international system inevitably requires the operation of the unconscious as well as the conscious mind” (Boulding 1967: 14). The repeated examples from the previous three chapters that point to the importance of ideas about which states have and have not been thought of as great powers historically in shaping perceptions of power reinforces the notion that simply analysing the distribution of capabilities is insufficient for understanding polarity. An ahistorical approach to polarity analysis is not only theoretically questionable but the empirical evidence suggests that it is clearly only capturing part of the story.

This provides a direct challenge to the existing literature on polarity which due to its largely rationalist and behaviouralist underpinnings, has sought to “identify laws that are immune to historical variation” (Buzan and Little 2000: 19). In the way in which polarity is redefined here, not only does history become important to the basis of the theory (ie. our predictions about the effect of different forms of polarity or power transitions become less reliant on logics of economic competition), but should also be expected to play an important role in shaping perceptions of power. Perceptions of anything are always, at least to some extent, products of experience. Therefore there is no theoretical reason why we should expect this

to be any different when it comes to perceptions of polarity and this has been borne-out in the preceding chapters. Ideas about which states have an historical claim to the special rights and responsibilities of the great powers (Bukovansy *et al.* 24-34) has been of fundamental importance to how polarity is perceived and this should be expected to continue to be the case into the future. Also the historical association of certain periods with particular forms of polarity (the Nineteenth Century Concert of Europe with multipolarity, the US-Soviet Cold War with bipolarity etc.) should also be expected to shape perceptions of current or future order. In the final analysis, history becomes not simply hostage to fluctuations of polarity over the years but an important factor in shaping those fluctuations in the form of perceptions of polarity. Such a conclusion does not simply arise from applying the insights of polarity analysis to a wider time period than is the case in the standard literature. Instead it requires a redefinition of polarity itself with a greater focus on what exactly its main unit of analysis – the poles of power – have actually been in history, the possessors of military and economic might or something more than this? Without re-thinking the definition of polarity itself, not only is such a question difficult to answer but more importantly, it is unlikely to be asked.

Structure and Agency

If structure is conceived as both social and material forces, the cognitive structures used by actors trying to navigate the complexity of world politics should be expected to be evident in the words and actions of important actors in history. Chapters Four to Six have demonstrated that, perceptions of order have often been expressed in terms of polarity (even if not always explicitly using the language of multi, bi and unipolarity) in which a clear assumption is made that the number of major powers in existence will affect world politics. As Hopf has argued, “A social cognitive structure establishes the boundaries of discourse

within a society, including how individuals commonly think about themselves and others” (2002:6).

Yet not only do perceptions of the inter-state order shape the way actors perceive the limits of their potential action, but ideas about agency also shape perceptions of the power structure itself. The idea that Churchill’s return to leadership in post war Britain or Nehru’s conception of India as a major power based on its leadership of the NAM or the arguments put forward about reversing US decline through domestic innovation and renewed confidence could affect the respective state’s position in the global order all point to the strength of notions of agency as being able to shape structure. This reminds us that while focusing on structural power remains theoretically valid, we must be constantly vigilant against this descending into determinism.

Of course, the neorealist reply to this finding about the importance of agency in shaping perceptions of polarity would be that Waltz himself admitted that “With skill and determination structural constraints can sometimes be countered. Virtuosos transcend the limits of their instruments and break the constraints of systems that bind lesser performers” (1985: 344). However, such an argument still only captures part of that which is advanced in this thesis. By ignoring the social components of a global power structure, this line of thinking still conceives of the structure as being purely material and its impact on state interactions as being purely mechanistic. Therefore there is still a ‘real’ polarity (defined as the distribution on material capabilities) in existence ‘out there’ which is being resisted by a state. In this sense, while agency can be defined by both material and ideational attributes, structures are still fundamentally material. What is more, these material structures can be expected to override any short-term gains made by agents in the final analysis (Waltz 1985: 331; see Chapter One, note 3 in this study). It is still from the “dynamics of the system” that we can “infer general properties of behavior” (Waltz 1985: 344). The standard treatment of

polarity within its traditional home of neorealism would still hold that while “specific outcomes” may be difficult to predict (such as agents resisting the constraints of material structure by perceiving a polarity that is different to that which a quantitative analysis would point to), “if our theory is good, we will see the kind of behavior and record the range of outcomes the theory leads us to expect” (*ibid*). In other words, on the whole, the polarity of the system will still induce the kind of balancing, bandwagoning, chain-ganging and buck-passing behaviour that neorealism would predict despite minor deviations from time to time. This defence of the neorealist position, of which even English school and other constructivist theorists risk deferring to if the system/society divide is rigidly adhered to in practice (see Chapter Three), still presumes that polarity is something that ‘is’ rather than ‘is perceived’ and therefore prioritises structure over agency to the point of determinism. As Part II of this study has demonstrated, this simply leaves too many questions unanswered when applied to the diplomatic history of the last two hundred years as to be unpersuasive. An analytically eclectic approach to polarity must explicitly engage with both structure-oriented and agency-oriented approaches, or as Martin Hollis and Steve Smith would put it, those attempting to ‘explain’ from the outside and those opting to ‘understand’ from the inside (1990; 1994). A complete and operational version of polarity must be able to “lead us to expect” the kind of contrasting and contradictory understandings of the shape of the global order found in the analysis of chapters Four to Six (and anticipate their effects on the “range of outcomes” expected by the theory).

The only way to do this is to adopt an analytically eclectic approach to theory, including to the methods normally associated with different levels of analysis in IR. If international society is the product of the conscious actions of decision makers, this means that the third and second levels/images are by definition mutually constitutive. It is the perceptions of actors that create structures such as polarity and it is those structures that in turn enable

certain policy choices while constraining the ability to pursue others. Only by interrogating both can we hope to fully understand the workings of either. To put it more directly, without knowing how agents perceive a structure, it is difficult to know whether our theories of how that structure is likely to 'shape and shove' actually play out in practice. But without keeping a focus on the structure as a whole, our analysis is unable to generalise about these perceptions and their effect outside of any one case study. Again, somewhat surprisingly, we can turn back to Waltz for guidance. In the final lines of *Man, the State and War*, Waltz reminds us that,

The third image describes the framework of world politics, but without the first and second images there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results (1959: 238).

While this approach lacks the parsimony and the simple hypotheses generated by pure structuralism, the main argument of this study is that for the concept of polarity to have any claim to capturing an element of international praxis, a more flexible approach to the structure-agency question is unavoidable. If the choice is between parsimony and practical relevance, the latter must surely take precedence for scholars of order in world politics.

Power

From the outset of the historical period analysed in this study, it is impossible to empirically reduce power to the possession of attributes. Chapter Four discussed the establishment of the Concert of Europe and its role in shaping perceptions of polarity by establishing a clear division between great and non-great powers. While the Concert was conceived as a practical response to war and inter-state conflict giving the major powers of Europe (ie. the major protagonists in Europe's wars) a regular mechanism for seeking diplomatic solutions to crises, its operation also helped create the social institution of the great powers. This went beyond constraining the application of material brute force. As William Daugherty has

written, “the great powers consciously assumed *roles*: along with the *right* to impose their collective will on themselves and other European states, they took on the *responsibility* for preserving international order” (1993: 78 emphasis in original). Rights and responsibilities simply do not exist, at least not in a theoretically coherent sense, in an analysis of structural power that remains in the systemic realm.

But more than just suggesting that power cannot be reduced to material capabilities, the historical analysis has confirmed what many scholars are now suggesting, that different capabilities take on different meanings as time moves on. An historically focused analysis suggests that it is not possible to equate power and status with the same resources at the disposal of states throughout history. As one account puts it persuasively in relation to the current situation, “To an unprecedented degree, the major powers now need one another to grow their economies, and they are loath to jeopardize this interdependence by allowing traditional military and strategic competitions to escalate into wars” (Gelb 2010: 37). This means that polarity analysis, if it is to be able to capture the way that the great/superpowers are actually perceived, must be attuned to changes in the nature of power itself. More than this, our analytical approaches must expect power to be something that is subject to change over time and in different social circumstances. It is difficult to see how by not adopting the approach outlined here, and instead maintaining a traditional neorealist understanding of polarity, that this can be done. While this thesis has focused more on tracing divergences in perceptions of polarity than following this ‘all the way down’ to analysing in great detail the exact sources of perceptual change on the part of different actors, such work clearly stands out as the next stage in this research programme. However the important point to note for this study is, that without making the theoretical moves in which perceptions of polarity become the central variable in explaining the effect of polarity and changes in polarity in world politics, such work lacks a theoretical basis for which to provide anything other than

highly specific discussions of different sectors or issue areas. While it may be true that “Different domains of world politics have different structures” (Bukovansky *et al* 2012: 74), the appeal of polarity analysis is that it captures an important feature of the whole rather than explaining how power operates separately in all parts of international life. Therefore polarity analysis needs both more flexibility and more holism in its theoretical underpinnings to be able to factor in the changing nature of power over time. An analytically eclectic approach which reconfigures polarity by maintaining the neorealist assumption that system (or in this case society) wide pressures remain of fundamental importance provides a more fruitful avenue than taking polarity analysis ‘all the way’ to the critical end of reflexivism. An approach to polarity as an element of international society can be contrasted with postmodern theories which, “inevitably devolve into a study of conflicts from within their local, contingent and historicised locations, because postmodernists operate on the assumption that there is no universal rationality that can uniformly comprehend and evaluate the entirety of global politics” (Sterling-Folker and Shinko 2007: 261). While the analysis here has attempted to correct the historical and social blind spots of neorealist polarity analysis, it is precisely the conclusions about the importance of historical ideas about what the great powers are (as a social institution) that require a universalist conception of order. Within the framework of international society as both a theoretical construct and expression of actual historical practice, one can find a middle ground in which to analyse polarity as a recurrent phenomenon shaped by the contingency of actor’s perceptions. Not only does this approach help ‘rescue’ polarity analysis from neorealism, but it also brings structural power ‘back in’ to the English school in a way which is compatible with its key ontological assumptions. Future research in this area can build on this by thinking through the implications on other major debates within the English school, for example about the impact of a move towards a world society (or in the

framework used here, the increasing dominance of world society along the international system-international society-world society spectrum), of a closer engagement with the polarity analysis literature.

Polarity Analysis, World Politics and Academic IR

Part I of this thesis argued that while the concept of polarity is used by practitioners in world politics, IR theory will need some way of understanding its effect on the interactions of states. If Douglas Lemke is right in arguing that, “If one were to understand the present and predict the future based on extrapolations of a pre-existing theory, one should select a theory that accounts well for the events of the past” (1997: 24), then polarity analysis must be able to account for the historical cases of cognitive dissonance in relation to perceptions of polarity identified throughout Part II. The arguments made by Cox (2012), discussed in Chapter Six about the need to question the current ‘multipolar narrative’ are centrally important to the conclusions that we should draw from the analysis in this thesis about the future of polarity analysis and its impact on policymaking. Cox argues forcefully that,

...too much of what has become the new mantra predicting an almost inevitable revolution in world politics, with one part of world declining and another rising, is based on the altogether questionable notion that we can easily know what the world and the world economy is going to look like in 5, 10, 15 or nearly 50 years time. We need to be a bit more circumspect. After all, only a few years before the end of the Cold War, it was predicted that the USSR would remain the same – and it did not (2012: 381).

Cox’s point may be sound; it is true that there is very little evidence that economic projections alone are a reliable guide to the future shape of international society in terms of its power hierarchy. However, it does obscure a fundamentally important point. Unless the majority of the members of international society accept his and others’ arguments about taking stock and not letting the narrative overtake the reality, it will soon become reality. To put it simply, if decision makers believe they are now in a multipolar world, and in turn act as if they are in a world with multiple centres of power, for all intents and purposes the

world will be multipolar. If the theoretical framework with its ontological argument about the existence of polarity in a social context is accepted then such a trend should not be unexpected. Once the theoretical move is made to redefine polarity as the number of states that hold a particular social status, then the idea that polarity will not be uniformly assessed and understood becomes possible. The historical analysis in Part II of this thesis suggests that in fact this cognitive dissonance in relation to the polarity of international society is not only possible but likely in the future.

While one should not read this as a conclusion from the previous chapters as saying that no attention should be given to material indices which can be quantified and assessed with some degree of objectivity, the fundamental picture that emerges from a redefined concept of polarity is that perceptions matter most. Therefore, while a narrative of a particular change in polarity may be inaccurate in relation to the distribution of material capabilities, this does not mean that it is inaccurate in describing how most members of international society understand their world. In this sense, continuing to engage in polarity analysis will remain important for the foreseeable future but we must find ways of doing so that engage with the experience and therefore the perceptions of actors rather than simply relying on abstract structural theories.

This thesis has raised serious questions about the standard polarity analysis literature and its ability to fully account for great power politics ‘out there in the real world.’ The idea that structural power can be analysed in a purely systemic/mechanistic sense using objective and quantitative methodologies has been shown to be theoretically problematic and empirically disputable. But it has also put forward an alternative theoretical framework for reconfiguring polarity analysis under the broad rubric of analytical eclecticism and the specific understanding of the great powers as a social institution found in the English school. Setting out what a reconfigured version of polarity could look like and also the way

in which this brings out a different diplomatic history of the last two hundred years, demonstrates that allowing one theoretical tradition to monopolise polarity analysis has been a mistake. IR theorists (not simply those working within the English school tradition used here) can and should return to some of the central questions of the structural effects of different forms of polarity but in ways which are not constrained by materialism and parsimony. The next step will be to take this broad theoretical move and drill down further into the implications for policymaking in a world in which ones own perception of the inter-state order may not be shared by other important actors within international society. Issues around how to construct multilateral institutions, conflict resolution mechanisms and even individual foreign policy strategies and objectives in ways which can maximise the order provided by the managerial role of the great/superpowers, even in times of perceptual discord in relation to polarity, will all require the attention of scholars.

The central contribution of this thesis is the attempt to find a way of theorising about polarity which is directly related to the way the concept is used in practice. It has redefined polarity away from a simple understanding of the distribution of material capabilities to a more nuanced conception of the number of states holding a particular status in international society. By combining the neorealist notion of counting the poles of power of the inter-state system with the English school understanding of the social institution of the great/superpowers in international society we can hope to make sense of the future of the global hierarchy of states in all its complexity.

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