

POLARITY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: A UNI-INTERPOLAR ORDER?

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ABSTRACT

The structure of power in the international system has generated interest amongst scholars around the globe. Some argue that the international system is unipolar. This is premised on the notion that the United States is the only state with preponderance in all components of power – military, economic, technological and cultural. Other scholars view global politics through a multipolar lens. Unlike the ‘primacists’ (proponents of unipolarity), they posit that the United States has lost its primacy in the global arena and that new players have emerged that compete with it. Furthermore, many scholars posit that the structure of power in today’s international system has become so sophisticated and complex that traditional models such as unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity are insufficient to explain the reality in contemporary international realpolitik. It is in this context that Huntington’s uni-multipolarity, Grevi’s interpolarity and Haass’ nonpolarity can be located. Using both primary and secondary data, this article explores the structure of power in contemporary international politics. It seeks to determine whether or not existing models are adequate to explain the dynamics of such politics. It concludes that uni-interpolarity (a hybrid of uni-multipolarity and interpolarity) best explains the features of today’s global politics.

Keywords: Polarity, Uni-interpolarity, United States, BRIC, MINT, Interdependence

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to unravel the structure of power in contemporary international politics. The debate on the rise of emerging powers such as Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC)¹ vis-à-vis the United States' (US) relative decline is common in the literature on polarity. Thus, this article will not attempt to reiterate these discussions. Instead, it identifies other non-BRIC actors and features of the contemporary international system that significantly shape the structure of power. It investigates the relative importance of other states such as South Korea, South Africa and MINT (the acronym for the emerging economies of Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey) and non-state actors such as international organisations, multinational corporations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in global politics. The growing interdependence among states is also explored, as well as its attendant multilateralism which manifests particularly in the realms of security, energy, economy and the environment and, by extension, shapes the relations among states and the great powers' policy options.

This article is based on the premise that all these characteristics of global politics must be adequately considered in order to formulate a model that sufficiently explains polarity in contemporary global politics. Thus, I explore the possibility of a uni-interpolar order as an alternative model to explain today's global structure of power. Uni-interpolarity is an attempt to synthesise Huntington's uni-multipolarity and Grevi's interpolarity. Huntington (1999, 36) defines uni-multipolarity as a structure characterised by one superpower and some major powers. Grevi (2009, 5) defines interpolarity as 'multipolarity in the age of interdependence'. I argue that a hybrid of these two models best captures the major features of contemporary global politics. Any attempt to understand the structure of power in global politics requires a sound grasp of the term 'polarity'. Toje views polarity as 'the distribution of power among the actors in the international system' (2010, 7). Unipolarity has one dominant power centre, while bipolarity has two and multipolarity has more than two. Polarity reflects the distribution of power among major powers at the global level. In the anarchic international system, states strive for power in order to influence global affairs. It is against this background that Newnham and Evans (1998, 34) argue that 'polarity implies that within a definable system certain actors are so important that they constitute "poles" against which other actors have to respond by joining coalitions or remaining non-aligned'. Thus, a polar actor is one whose rapid decline would distort the structure of the system. Grevi defines poles as 'states endowed with the resources, political will and institutional ability to project and protect their interests at the global level, multi-regional or regional level, depending on the size of the power in question' (Grevi 2009, 19).

BEYOND BRIC: OTHER EMERGING STATES

Other relevant state actors in the international system include but are not limited to the economic powerhouse of Asia, South Korea; the latest member of BRICS, South Africa; and the MINT countries. South Korea has huge potential to play a major role in international politics. According to the World Bank, with a GDP of \$1 410 383 trillion, the country ranks thirteenth in the world economy (World Bank 2015). In 2011, South Korea achieved a trade volume of \$1 trillion, previously recorded by only eight states (Shim and Flamm 2012). South Korea is among the leading countries in a wide range of economic sectors such as heavy industries (especially cars, ships and steel), petrochemical, and the nuclear and electronic industries (Shim and Flamm 2012). It is home to powerful multinational companies such as Samsung, LG, KIA and Hyundai. At \$36.7 billion, Seoul ranks tenth among the countries with the highest military expenditure (SIPRI 2015). The robustness of South Korea's economic capability is the primary indicator of its middle power status (O'Neil 2015). However, the country also enjoys substantial ideational power which other developing countries might wish to emulate, including, amongst others, its transition from a developing to a developed economy and from authoritarianism to democracy. Furthermore, South Korea is the first state to have transited from a net recipient of aid to a net donor and it is one of the pioneers of the G20 (O'Neil 2015). Given these capabilities, South Korea is no doubt an important player in the international system.

While South Africa's capability and influence do not match those of the other members of BRICS, this African player is an important global actor. It claims to represent Africa in a number of forums such as BRICS, India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) and the G20. According to Habib (2009), South Africa has promoted African interests at the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It is for this reason that scholars such as Habib (2009) and Monyae (2012) have described South Africa as a regional hegemon. Indeed, South Africa has striven to be the major actor that maintains peace and security in Africa. This is not too difficult a task due to its status as the only African country with the capacity to produce significant military hardware (Wezeman 2011). South Africa's peace keeping role in Africa such as in DRC and Burundi fits this context.

Jim O'Neill, the Goldman Sachs investment banker who coined the term 'BRIC' in 2001 (and argued that these countries would emerge as economic powerhouses in the international economic order) has identified new states, MINT, that will shape the future global economic order (BBC 2014). Following research carried out by *Spear's Magazine* and Wealth Insight (a London-based research service), it was predicted that the MINT countries would outstrip the BRICS countries and the G8 in the ranking of states with the most millionaires (Forbes 2014a). Excluding Turkey, the MINT countries are also leading commodity producers, and are benefitting from

the high economic growth rate in Asia that has accelerated demand for fuel and raw materials. With the exception of Nigeria, the MINT countries are members of the G20 group of developed and developing countries. They share common attributes like large and youthful populations that give them an advantage over other developed and some developing countries like China with ageing populations that will consequently experience a lower growth rate in the near future (Adibe 2014). The strategic location of the MINT countries is also fundamental to their success. Indonesia is geographically located at the centre between China and Australia and possesses huge resources which have facilitated a rapid increase in inward foreign direct investment (FDI) (Adibe 2014). Indonesia has successfully used its diplomatic muscle to mediate the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand and has also provided assistance primarily in terms of advice to countries such as Burma and Myanmar in their transition to democracy (Chandramohan 2014). While China and India are arguably more influential than Indonesia in the Asian region, Indonesia's subtle diplomacy might be more appreciated than China and India's foreign policy which is perceived as aggressive and arrogant, respectively (Chandramohan 2014). Thus, Indonesia could benefit from the positive view of its engagement with the other countries in the region.

Mexico is located at the centre between the US and Latin America. Pellicer (2006) observes that, given its economic endowment, demographic structure, and geopolitical location, Mexico deserves middle power status. However, it has been punching below its weight in the international arena. Despite being one of the largest contributors to the UN, Mexico has generally shown little interest in actively participating in this international body's activities (Bruer 2015). Therefore, in order to fully realise the country's potential, Mexico's leadership needs to show more commitment to international affairs.

Turkey is close to the European Union (EU) and also lies between Asia and Africa (Adibe 2014), serving as a gatekeeper to these two continents. Turkey's economic and political transformation, which heralded more popular participation and the elevation of the middle class, has increased its influence both in the region and at global level. The country's strategic location in a crisis-ridden region means that its territory is vital for the transport of arms and personnel, especially by its traditional allies – the US and NATO (Zanotti 2014). Thus, Turkey appears to be the country with the wherewithal to maintain stability in the Middle East. It is within this context that its commitment to the training of Afghan troops and other efforts to promote stability in this war-ravaged country can be located.

Amongst other things, Nigeria's credentials in the global arena include its favourable demographic structure, its commitment to and participation in maintaining global peace and security under the auspices of the UN, its commitment to liberation struggles across Africa and the success of its democracy (Imobighe 2012). Furthermore, Nigeria has recently overtaken South Africa as the largest

economy in Africa. Thus, it is not surprising that Nigeria is one of the few African contenders to seek a permanent UN Security Council seat if that body is indeed reformed.

THE RELEVANCE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

States are clearly the most important players in international politics. They set the agenda and, most importantly, make international law. However, recent developments in global politics have revealed that states' influence in the global arena has dwindled and that non-state actors such as intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), NGOs and terrorist organisations have increased influence. According to Haass (2008), globalisation has impacted on the international system in two fundamental ways. Firstly, many cross-border activities take place without the control and knowledge of governments; this reduces the great powers' influence. Secondly, these activities increase the influence of non-state actors such as terrorist organisations and energy exporters. The influence of non-state actors such as IGOs, NGOs, multinational corporations (MNCs) and terrorist groups is increasingly significant in the international arena, to the extent that scholars such as Haass (2008) have concluded that states have lost their primacy in this arena. Therefore, the relative influence of these actors is worthy of consideration.

Numerous IGOs have been established, essentially to modify states' behaviour and promote the collective good. Member states are expected to abide by the principles of the international organisations they join. Such organisations thus limit state sovereignty as they seek cooperation among member states to resolve problems in the international system (Weiss et al 2013). IGOs create, monitor and enforce international norms and rules among member states. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is a good example. It seeks to monitor the conformity of member states to Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Ataman 2003). The Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) sets a production quota for member states in order to maintain high and stable oil prices in the international market. IGOs such as the UN and the EU have the capacity to impose sanctions on erring member states. The UN has imposed sanctions on countries such as Libya, Iraq and Iran. Therefore, IGOs serve as an alternative to the state-centric international system in that they regulate states' behaviour in order to reduce instability and offer solutions to the world's problems.

The EU can be likened to a supranational organisation with substantive authority over its member states. It has most of the institutions of national governments such as a presidency and positions for foreign ministers as well as courts, and makes policies and imposes tax on member states. The EU is undoubtedly an important player in international affairs. It is the largest trading bloc in the international system and its policies (especially agricultural and monetary) have a considerable impact

on other states in the global arena (Smith 2013). Other regional organisations (with varying degrees of power) include the African Union (AU) in Africa, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Asia, and the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) in South America.

NGOs are transnational organisations made up of individuals which seek to promote the interests of their members. These interests include but are not limited to peace, the environment, human rights, and economic, religious and cultural issues. Unlike IGOs, NGOs have specialised functions. For example, the International Air Transport Association focuses on managing airline companies, while Amnesty International deals with human rights, Planned Parenthood for Reproductive Rights focuses on family planning, Transparency International is concerned with the fight against corruption, and Greenpeace International and Friends of the Earth International focus on the environment. In order to be heard, NGOs often establish their presence across the globe. For instance, Friends of the Earth International, which has its head office in the Netherlands, maintains a presence in 75 countries² and Greenpeace International has its headquarters in the Netherlands but maintains offices in more than 55 countries³ around the world. NGOs with global appeal such as Greenpeace are given observer status at the UN and participate in that body's meetings to discuss issues related to their interests. NGOs provide vital information, persuasive arguments and electoral support to policy makers in order to influence domestic and international policy making processes (Rourke 2007). They have thus emerged as one of the determinants of a state's foreign policy.

On the other hand, MNCs are fundamentally agents of economic globalisation. They significantly influence states' foreign policies, including the great powers, and consequently play an important role in international politics (Ataman 2003). MNCs' influence in the international arena is evident in the resources at their disposal. Many industrial MNCs record annual sales to the tune of tens of billions of dollars and the most powerful such as Wal-Mart, Royal Dutch Shell, China National Petroleum, ExxonMobil, British Petroleum, Volkswagen, Toyota and General Motors record annual sales of hundreds of billions of dollars (Fortune 2015). Goldstein (2008, 338) observed that in 2006, the GDP of only 35 states outstripped the annual budget of ExxonMobil. In the fiscal year 2015, Walmart realised \$485.7 billion and had 2.2 million workers (Fortune 2015). This implies that, the company had more employees than the population of almost 100 countries.⁴ It had more workers than the population of countries such as Qatar, Botswana, Macedonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Gambia, Kosovo, Trinidad and Tobago and Cyprus. Only the top 26 states with the highest GDP outstripped Walmart's revenue and Nigeria was the only African states among those states. Accordingly, Walmart is richer than regional powerhouses such as Iran, Israel, United Arab Emirates and South Africa and notable countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Denmark, Austria, Greece and Portugal.⁵

It is worth noting that this is not peculiar to Walmart, other top MNCs such as Sinopec Group, Royal Dutch Shell, China National Petroleum, Exxon Mobil and British Petroleum are richer than many nation states; as such, their influence on international politics cannot be overemphasised. Powerful MNCs command the largest share of global FDI and they facilitate global interdependence and liberalism. Since their primary objective is profit maximisation, they strive to maintain a stable international environment that guarantees the flow of capital, trade and movement with little government interference (Irogbe 2013). To this end, MNCs are the primary actors in the international political economy. Their decisions affect not only their home country but also their host countries. Due to the resources at their disposal and the policies they implement in their host states, MNCs significantly limit the sovereignty of state actors.

Terrorist organisations have received increasing attention in the international system, particularly since the September 11 attacks in the US. This is largely due to their destructive tactics. In expressing their grievances, terrorist organisations often employ tactics such as bombing, suicide bombing, kidnapping, and shooting, and their targets are either civilians or government property. This destruction and killing has huge and long-term effects on the minds of the wider public. Terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, ISIS, al-Shabab and Boko Haram are notorious for their destructive and dastardly acts which are shown on television around the world. Examples include the kidnapping of more than 200 Nigerian school girls by Boko Haram in 2014 and the ongoing ISIS campaign in Syria and Iraq aimed at taking control of some parts of these countries and establishing an Islamic state. Terrorist organisations are extremely difficult to crush and concerted efforts by the international community have not put an end to their activities. In the words of Camilleri (2002, 8) ‘no amount of wealth, military muscle or technological prowess could erect an effective shield against the actions of desperate men’. Indeed, protecting humanity or any state from terrorism seems impossible. This is evident in the case of Israel; while ‘no state goes beyond the measures of Israel in preventing terrorism in security terms ... nevertheless, it is not working’ (Chomsky and Achcar 2007, 9). Terrorist organisations now compete with states for territorial control and some, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), seek to establish Islamic states in captured territories.

Given the realities of the 21st century, states and non-state actors rely on one another for solutions to common problems. There is growing interdependence and multilateralism in the international system; this is explored in the following section.

INTERDEPENDENCE AND MULTILATERALISM

Interdependence is not a new phenomenon in international politics. However, in contemporary international politics, it differs from the past in fundamental ways. According to Renard (2009), in modern day politics, interdependence among states

is not restricted to the economic realm; it has functional and systemic attributes. Functional interdependence implies that actors' choices are shaped by international institutions such as the UN, World Bank, IMF and WTO which have the capacity to enforce binding rules on international actors in order to promote the common good. Systemic interdependence requires actors to share the limited resources available on earth to guarantee their survival. Finally, interdependence today is informed by the concerted efforts of the actors in international politics to combat global threats (such as climate change, nuclear proliferation and terrorism) to the existence of the international system (Renard 2009). The nature of 21st century interdependence dictates that no state, even powerful ones like the US or China, can single-handedly tackle global problems. Therefore, multilateralism is an integral component of today's interdependence.

The US is highly indebted to China. Similarly, China heavily relies on US markets for its manufactured goods and services. According to a Chinese scholar, it is important to understand the duo-phenomenon. China's influence is growing rapidly with a high volume of trade with other countries, although it is perhaps weakened by its excessive reliance on US' markets. The trade amongst the five BRICS countries is much less than their trade with the West. Even though China's trade with the other BRICS countries is increasing, this is dwarfed by its trade with the US and the EU. While China's economic muscle is expanding, this is built on its economic relations with the West. There is an interdependent hegemony which means that old hegemons like the US and Europe are beginning to rely on China and the BRICS countries' economic growth for their economic prosperity. The BRICS' countries economic growth has played an important role in global growth (Anonymous Chinese scholar 1, personal communication, April 10, 2014).

Domestic politics and policies are impacting more on the international system, as illustrated by the 2007–2008 financial crisis that began in the US and spread to other states. The industrial pollution caused by manufacturing industries in China and the US (the biggest polluters) has massive impacts on climate change and global warming (ISS 2010). Continued political instability in the Middle East might have an effect on the international oil price. The Ukrainian crisis might affect Russia's supply of natural gas to Europe, which relies heavily on Moscow's supply.

Today's comprehensive interdependence is accompanied by multilateralism. Goldstein (2008) argues that in the international political economy, interdependence relates more to multilateral relations among states (rather than bilateral relations) in which states rely on the political cooperation of other states to maintain world markets. Actors (particularly state actors) have realised the importance of tackling the challenges of the 21st century through multilateral arrangements. These challenges are regarded as common global problems that require common global action, especially in terms of the economy, the environment, energy and security (Jokela 2011). In the realm of trade, states' interests are intertwined with the WTO. In the sphere of

security and defence, states have turned to OSCE and NATO, respectively, and as for climate change, they rely on the Kyoto Protocol (Lazarou et al. 2010). Thus, regional and global organisations now play a significant role in imposing solutions to global problems rather than the narrow and often selfish solutions individual states might desire (Bouchard et al. 2013). Such narrow solutions do not seem adequate in tackling complicated 21st century problems such as terrorism, climate change and nuclear proliferation.

According to Renard (2009), contemporary international politics is characterised by comprehensive interdependence which is ‘global’, ‘existential’ and ‘complex’. The system is global due to the fact that it involves actors from every part of the world. It is existential because it is characterised by threats such as terrorism and climate change, and it is complex because it involves various forms of interdependence, including economic, cultural and functional. Renard (2009) calls this phenomenon ‘multi-multilateralism’. He argues that multi-multilateralism is a remarkable co-operation process characterised by firstly, increased membership of states of overlapping organizations; secondly, deepening relations among states because of their membership and participation in many forums; and thirdly, the overlapping activities of formal institutions such as the UN and informal forums like the G20.

Having examined the comprehensive interdependence and the influence of state and non-state actors in international politics, the question that arises is: to what extent, if at all, does the US have an edge over the other actors in the international system? The following section addresses this question.

UNITED STATES' ADVANTAGE OVER THE OTHER GREAT POWERS

This section investigates whether the US still has some advantages over the other great powers despite its problems which range from economic to image, coupled with the rise of other powers. Zakaria (2008) argues that the US economy is still largely robust despite the growing economic clout of emerging and resurgent powers. The US has been the world's largest economy since the late 19th century. While there have been predictions of China's emergence as the largest economy, most forecasts suggest that by 2025, the US economy will be double that of China's (Zakaria 2008). Zakaria's position is reinforced by the National Intelligence Council's (NIC) (2008) publication, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* which argues that, if current trends persist, China will remain the second largest economy by 2025. However, scholars such as Grevi (2009) and Layne (2012) posit that China might overtake the US before this period is over. Nonetheless, recent predictions of Washington's economic decline should be treated with caution because the US economy has proven strong and durable despite predictions of decline in the 1980s owing to domestic

challenges and the rise of countries such as Japan. Table 1 that follows shows the GDP of the five largest economies and the overall world total in 2014.

Table 1: The world's five largest economies in 2014

Rank	Country	GDP (\$trillion)
1	US	17 419 000
2	China	10 354 832
3	Japan	4 601 461
4	Germany	3 868 291
5	United Kingdom	2 988 893
	World total	77 845 107

Source: World Bank 2015.

As evident in table 1, the US is by far the largest economy in the world. With over \$17 trillion, US' share of global GDP is 22 percent. Its economy is by a wide margin greater than that of its closest rival – China – a country widely assumed to be the greatest competitor of the United States, most especially in the economic realm.

Nye is of the opinion that:

China has a long way to go to equal the power resources of the United States. Even when the overall Chinese GDP passes that of the United States, the two economies will be equivalent in size, but not equal in composition. China would still have a vast, underdeveloped countryside, and it will begin to face demographic problems from the delayed effects of its one-child-per-couple policy. As the Chinese say, they fear the country will grow old before it grows rich. Per capita income provides a measure of the sophistication of an economy. China will probably not equal the United States in per capita income until sometime near the middle of the century. In other words, China's impressive growth rate combined with the size of its population will likely lead it to pass the American economy in total size, but that is not the same as equality (Nye 2012, 216).

Similarly, a US scholar has observed that:

- a. It is a one superpower world. The US is and will long remain the only super power capable of sustaining a complex alliance system in many regions.
- b. But we are in or are entering a three-tiered great power subsystem. It is no longer 1 + X (one superpower + several great powers), but 1 + 1+ X (one superpower + 1 potential superpower + several great powers). China is the only country that has the potential to be a superpower, though it is a long way from getting there.
- c. This remains consistent with how the scholar has defined unipolarity (Anonymous US scholar 2, personal communication, May 9, 2013).

While one can argue that the US' capability is perhaps exaggerated by the interviewee, no other state matches the robustness of US capability. As the champion of the global economy which is embedded in its liberal ideals and the major promoter of world's security and stability through its alliance system, Washington's provision of the public good⁶ cannot be matched by any other state (Edelman 2010). Shared interest in the success of liberalism and the maintenance of security in the international system explains why a large number of states are not motivated to challenge this power (Edelman 2010). Many states still welcome the US' leadership role and continue to embrace US leadership on global issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation and terrorism (Kissinger 2014). The US has also led the way in the fight against diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola in West Africa, the prevention of nuclear proliferation evident in the Iran nuclear deal, and the fight against terrorism illustrated by the ongoing campaign against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. It continues to promote democracy across the globe.

US leadership is regarded as fundamental in ensuring that countries like China and India are committed to their international obligations to reduce carbon emissions (NIC 2008). Moreover, the other great powers appear to be neither willing nor ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a global hegemon. China – the US' closest rival – has often eschewed such responsibilities and there appears to be consensus even among China's scholars and analysts that the country is not ready for or interested in assuming such a global role. Roy (2013) maintained that China has shown no interest in becoming a superpower. The Chinese elites largely share this predisposition for two major reasons: firstly, China needs to concentrate its resources on addressing its myriad of domestic problems rather than diverting such resources towards global leadership. Secondly, China has learnt from history that aggression is not beneficial. Thus, an attempt by the US to relinquish its leadership role in global issues might create a vacuum which other great powers have shown neither the willingness nor the capacity to fill.

Another major edge that the US has over its competitors is its geographical advantage. Located between two great oceans (the Pacific and Atlantic) and two weak and non-aggressive states (Mexico and Canada), in addition to being a peaceful region, US enjoys territorial advantages (Kissinger 2014). The rise of China in Asia has been met with increasing tension in other Asian countries, especially Japan and South Korea. In Latin America, the rise of Brazil has been marked by Argentina's and Venezuela's growing concern and in the CIS states, Ukraine seeks to challenge Russia. This regional balance of power boosts the US' influence across the world and consequently strengthens its alliances. States such as Japan, South Korea and, to a lesser extent, India, Ukraine and perhaps Argentina seem to welcome the US to counterbalance the influence of the most powerful states within their regions. US ties with South Korea and Japan have also been boosted by growing concern over North Korea's nuclear programme, and the leaders of Asian countries have been

demanding more US assertiveness in Asia to counteract the rise of China and address the security dilemma in the region (Edelman 2010).

In the words of Slaughter (2009, 94), globalisation has created a networked international system in which international relations such as war, terrorism and counter-terrorism, diplomacy, business and the management of international crises entail the mobilisation of 'international networks of public and private actors'. In this networked age, the state with the most geopolitical connections will be the most important actor because it will be able to set the global agenda (Slaughter 2009). It goes without saying that the US is the foremost benefactor in a networked international system, particularly when one considers the US-led Atlantic hemisphere which includes Africa, Europe and the Americas and its close ties with the Asian hemisphere (Slaughter 2009).

Another source of Washington's advantage over its rivals is its energy resources. The combination of US and Canadian resources is only outweighed by the Middle East (Edelman 2010). The US has the largest reserves of coal in the world as well as large deposits of natural gas and most importantly, oil – a RAND study estimates that the deposits of oil in the US states of Utah, Wyoming and Colorado are three times more than the known oil reserves in Saudi Arabia (Edelman 2010). While there is no consensus on the actual quantity of oil in US, there can be no doubt that it is extremely well-endowed. However, Washington still imports oil from across the world, especially from the Middle East and Africa. While it can be argued that this is a long term strategy to preserve this crucial resource in its territory for future economic gain, there is also an element of political calculation. US policy makers have long understood that one way to guarantee the country's unassailable global influence is to control all the strategic regions with significant oil deposits (Chomsky and Achcar 2007).

Two other sources of power apparently put the US in a class of its own; its military arsenal and its soft power. US military capacity dwarfs that of its closest rivals. It is for this reason that Nye (2012) has argued that the structure of power can be illustrated by a three-dimensional chess game. The bottom chess board is characterised by transnational relations that are beyond governments' control. The middle chess board can be likened to economic power which is multipolar, and the top chess board is military power which is significantly unipolar (Nye 2012). The labelling of the top chess board, which is the realm of military power, as unipolar is undisputable when one considers the US military arsenal (both conventional and nuclear), its military expenditure and its military power projections across the globe. In its projection of global trends up until 2025, the NIC (2008) argues that the US will retain its superior military capacity until 2025, particularly its capacity to project military power across the entire world. Many states will continue to rely on the US' military capacity to guarantee security and a conducive global economic environment, especially the uninterrupted flow of energy resources across the globe

(NIC 2008). Table 2 below shows the military expenditure of the top five countries and the overall world total in 2014

Table 2: The five countries with the highest military expenditure in 2014

Rank	Country	Spending (\$billion)
1	US	610
2	China	216
3	Russia	84.5
4	Saudi Arabia	80.8
5	France	62.3
	World total	1.7 trillion

Source: SIPRI 2015.

As table 2 reveals the budget of the US' military expenditure at \$610 billion significantly outweighs the combined spending of the next 4 countries. It is therefore not surprising that the United States share of world's military budget is 34 percent. This implies that no state comes close to competing with Washington in the military sphere. In the realm of soft power, US soft power is completely globalised and no state can match its currencies. In illustrating the robustness of US soft power, over a decade ago, Nye pointed out that:

Not only is America the world's largest economy, but nearly half of the top 500 global companies are American, five times as many as next-ranked Japan. Sixty two of the top 100 global brands are American, as well as eight of the top ten business schools ... the United States attracts nearly six times the inflow of foreign immigrants as second-ranked Germany. The United States is far and away the world's number one exporter of films and television programs, although India's Bollywood actually produces more movies per year. (Nye 2004, 33).

It is remarkable that Washington still maintains hegemony in the exercise of soft power in today's world. The simple implication of this reality is that a large number of people across the globe speak the US language⁷, eat US food⁸, drink US beverages, watch US movies and listen to US music. In an age of comprehensive interdependence and the waning of military power, the effectiveness of soft power has grown. It is less costly to wield its resources than to rely on the use of coercion to influence the behaviour of other states. Soft power rests on attraction that is generated through an attractive culture, foreign and domestic policies and political values (Nye 2004). Therefore, a soft power state engenders other states' admiration. US culture has global reach; its foreign policy is global in character and its political values of democracy, individualism and human rights are widely admired.

A UNI-INTERPOLAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The fundamental features of contemporary international politics were discussed earlier, including the emergence of other great powers; the increasing importance of middle powers and non-state actors; increasing interdependence and attendant multilateralism; and the US' relative edge over other players. The structure of power in today's world reflects these realities. According to a South African scholar, 30 years ago, matters were much more straightforward. The international stage was populated by superpowers, great powers, middle powers and small powers. In today's world, the hierarchy is more complicated. It not only features states, but non-state actors compete with states. Al-Qaeda is competing with the superpowers. Thus, the structure of power in contemporary international politics is very confusing, changeable and complicated. Lines of communication are varied. The UN Human Rights Council coordinates the Universal Periodic Review which reviews the human rights records of all member states. Members submit reports which typically glorify their records. This is not a simple case of countries addressing one another, but it appears to be a multilateral organisation with a life of its own. It also involves the participation of international NGOs such as the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. States' domestic performance is thus now assessed by multilateral organisations, fellow states and a host of NGOs. States are in a class of their own only in that they make international law (Anonymous South African scholar, personal communication, October 31, 2013).

Uni-interpolarity appears to be the only model which explains all these characteristics of the international system. Uni-interpolarity is a hybrid of Huntington's uni-multipolar and Grevi's interpolar systems. Huntington (1999) argues that uni-multipolarity is a configuration which consists of the power play between a superpower and some major powers. In this system, major international decisions are taken by the superpower in cooperation with some of the major powers, although the superpower has the power to 'veto' decisions taken by major powers on important international issues. Thus, Huntington's analysis acknowledges the dominance of the US but ignores the influence of non-state actors and the comprehensive interdependence which significantly influences a state's policy options in contemporary international politics. Grevi (2009, 5) argues that interolarity best describes the coming order. He defines interolarity as 'multipolarity in the age of interdependence' and argues that the international system is characterised by a power transition from the US to the other great powers. This has created a multipolar configuration and deepening interdependence among states due to the reality that the security and prosperity of the great powers are significantly connected. Hence, there is interdependence and cooperation among states on economic, security and environmental issues. While Grevi's interolarity sheds light on today's interdependence and the increasing power of the emerging powers, it downplays the strength of the US. Against this

backdrop, elements of the two models are combined in order to take into account all the emerging and major features of contemporary international politics.

Uni-interpolarity is a structure characterised by comprehensive interdependence, a superpower with undisputable global influence and some great powers with lesser influence than the superpower. In a uni-interpolar system, the extent to which states can embark on unilateral policies is more limited than in other traditional structures, owing to the functional, systemic interdependence that characterises this structure. However, states seldom take unilateral decisions, particularly if these are linked to economic and strategic interests. Due to its global influence and responsibility, the dominant power has the capacity to take unilateral decisions and also has the wherewithal to prevent or frustrate other major powers that adopt unilateral positions. The superpower is also the only state with the capacity and willingness to impose solutions to various global crises. Multilateralism is a key component of a uni-interpolar configuration because certain fundamental issues such as security (terrorism and nuclear proliferation), economic (global recession) and environmental (climate change) concerns cannot be tackled by a single state, not even the most powerful one. Multilateral arrangements enable common solutions to be found to common global problems. The dominant power takes the leadership role and it is able to mobilise states around the world to fight for a common cause.

In a uni-interpolar order, there is a tendency for the superpower and some of the great powers to be dissatisfied with the status quo. Thus, they are likely to attempt to either tacitly or explicitly distort the status quo. This will result in a struggle for power between the dominant state and the other great powers. The dominant state wants a unipolar world and seeks to pursue foreign policy that will restore such a unipolar system. On the other hand, the great powers seek a multipolar world in which their voices can be heard and in which they can take unilateral decisions to further their interests. According to a US scholar, the current structure can be defined as one of unbalanced multipolarity. Several major powers exert global influence – the US, China, Russia, Japan, Brazil, India, and the EU – but the US is by far the strongest. He adds that alternatively, one might describe this as a unipolar system, with the US the sole superpower followed by a number of important regional powers (Anonymous US scholar 1, personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Uni-interpolarity is different from unipolarity because in a unipolar order, there is only one major power and some minor powers. In contrast, uni-interpolarity recognises the existence of many major powers in the international system. It is different from bipolarity because in a bipolar configuration, there are only two major powers and global politics reflects the choices and decisions of these two players. On the other hand, uni-interpolarity recognises many power centres in the globe and, unlike unipolarity and bipolarity, posits that some non-state actors are becoming more assertive and wield influence in global politics. Uni-interpolarity differs from uni-multipolarity in that the latter does not recognise the deepening

interdependence and accompanying multilateralism that characterise contemporary international relations. Furthermore, it does not analyse the role of non-state actors in the international system. Uni-interpolarity differs from non-polarity in that non-polarity ascribes too much power to non-state actors and substantially understates the power of state actors. Uni-interpolarity differs from interpolarity because interpolarity understates the power of the US and exaggerates other great powers' capabilities in an age of interdependence.

A Chinese scholar argues that China and the other BRICS members still have a long way to go in significantly impacting the structure of power. According to him, the structure of power involves four areas: control of knowledge production, control of the financial system, control of the military and control of soft power. While the US does not have total control of these areas and its power is declining, the BRICS countries are far behind (Anonymous Chinese scholar 1, personal communication, April 10, 2014).

In contemporary international politics, the US is indisputably the number one power in terms of its capacity. No state comes close to its global reach. This offers the US the opportunity to take leadership responsibilities in many issues ranging from economic to security and health concerns. In counteracting the unilateral tendencies of the other major powers, the US has successfully mobilised European countries to impose economic sanctions on Russia for its complicity in the Ukrainian crisis. While there are emerging powers, the US is dominant and, together with the Western world, it can impose solutions to the myriad of problems confronting humanity (Anonymous Nigerian scholar, personal communication, November 14, 2013). Another Chinese scholar described the system as a 'hierarchically organised multipolar structure with a leading power' (Anonymous Chinese scholar 2, personal communication, April 15, 2014).

In an attempt to wield more influence in the international arena, the other major powers, especially BRICS members, have attempted to distort the structure of power in their favour. BRICS was founded with the expectation that such an arrangement would foster a multipolar international order. The BRICS Bank that was established recently is intended to serve as a counterweight to US-dominated financial institutions (the IMF, World Bank and WTO). The G20 also serves as a platform for the great powers to exert their influence and popularise their world views. It can be argued that the middle powers and non-state actors do not significantly impact on the structure of power in the international system in comparison with the superpower and great powers. However, the increasing influence of these actors cannot be overemphasised, particularly because they determine the power play between the dominant power and the other major actors which seek to increase and maintain their global influence. The EU, MINT, powerful non-state actors and states such as South Korea, Japan and South Africa are significantly strategic players in the balance of power among the great powers in terms of economic and strategic interests.

CONCLUSION

The concept of polarity in contemporary international politics has generated debate among scholars and observers. This article contributes to this debate by proposing the concept of a hybrid of uni-multipolarity and interpolarity that is labelled 'uni-interpolarity'. Uni-interpolarity captures all the major features of contemporary international politics. It is characterised by comprehensive interdependence, a superpower with global influence, some great powers with less influence than the superpower and powerful non-state actors. Contemporary international politics is characterised by the emergence and resurgence of new and old great powers, respectively; middle powers and non-state actors becoming more assertive; increasing interdependence among actors and multilateralism in international relations; and the relative decline of the US and its advantage over other actors.

Given the realities of today's world, uni-interpolarity captures the structure of power better than any other model. As a result of comprehensive interdependence, states are less likely to employ unilateralism to promote their interests. Today's comprehensive interdependence motivates states to embrace multilateralism rather than unilateralism. This does not necessarily imply that states will completely eschew unilateralism, but rather, that its use will be limited. Indeed, states, particularly the great powers, will continue to go it alone in promoting some of their core or strategic interests that are in conflict with the common interests of the global community. Due to its superior capacity, the superpower has the advantage over other states in adopting a unilateral posture to promote its interests.

Thus, despite the decline of the US and the rise of emerging powers, polarity in today's world can be described as uni-interpolar. The question is the extent to which this system will be maintained in the future. It is the author's contention that one of three scenarios is likely in the near future. The first is the strengthening of a uni-interpolar order, while the second is the emergence of a true multipolar order which will only become a reality if the US continues to decline and the emerging powers continue to rise. The third scenario is a return to a unipolar order. The feasibility of this option stems from the fact that the US' power has proven resilient over the past six decades. While there have been past predictions of US' decline and the emergence of multipolarity following the rise of the USSR, China and Japan, none of these predictions have come to fruition. For the moment, polarity in contemporary international politics is unambiguously uni-interpolar.

NOTES

1. The acronym BRIC is used in lieu of BRICS in this article to refer to the group of emerging powers excluding South Africa. While South Africa is also a powerful force in the international arena, particularly in terms of the enormous influence it wields within

the African continent, it is not a great power like the other BRICS members. South Africa lags behind in its soft power and hard power currencies in comparison to the other BRICS members and consequently does not wield much influence in the global arena in relative terms. BRICS is also used in few instances to present an analysis of the entirety of the BRICS states.

2. See Friends of the Earth International website. Available at <http://www.foei.org/member-groups> (accessed 10 September 2015)
3. See Greenpeace International website. Available at <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/about/contactus/> (accessed 10 September 2015)
4. See CIA. 2015. The World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2119rank.html> (accessed 9 September 2015)
5. See World Bank. 2015. World Development Indicators Database. Available at <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf> (accessed 9 September 2015)
6. Joseph Nye (2002, 239) defines the public good as ‘something everyone can consume without diminishing its availability to others.’ He further argues that ‘A small country can benefit from peace in its region, freedom of the seas, suppression of terrorism, open trade, control of infectious diseases or stability in financial markets at the same time as the United States does without diminishing the benefits to the United States or others’.
7. There is no gainsaying that the English language can be ascribed to Britain. However, Americans and many people around the world communicate in English and it is perhaps the most influential language. This offers the US a significant advantage in terms of social and commercial engagement.
8. US food outlets such as McDonalds and KFC are visible across the world.

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