Power Concentration, Geography and Socialization: a Neorealist model of Unipolar Stability

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Abstract

The persistent character of Unipolarity keeps questioning the explanatory power of Neorealist Theories. The absence of balancing behaviors against United States and the general observable patterns of cooperation across the International System both seem to disconfirm the central claim of structural realism, that is States always balance against a preponderant power. At the same time, this specific dynamic seems to come in support of the findings of the Hegemonic Stability theories as well as the Constructivist claims about the role of ideational factors in shaping international political outcomes.

In this paper I propose a neorealist structural model, trying to reconcile the above mentioned approaches by modifying two elements of Waltz’ original theory. Instead of relying solely on systemic polarity, the number of Great Powers in the system, I focus on power concentration, that is the relative inequalities between Great Powers, which helps distinguishing between concentrated systems and diffuse systems. Moreover, I classify States between Land Powers and Maritime Powers.

While polarity points to the dimension of the international systems by simply “counting” the number of Great Powers, power concentration analysis evaluates the differences in relative capability between them, clarifying the link between structural incentives to action, power and cost-benefit approach.

Great Powers’ geographical position effectively affects systemic dynamics, given that the interests of a Maritime Power and the threats which it poses are fundamentally different from the ones of a Land Power, as it is largely outlined by offensive realism.

Going further, specific configurations of this kind of system’s structure could foster the emergence of process variables (or intervening variables). The one I focus on is socialization. Waltz’ first treatment of socialization was about the process through which States get socialized to the fundamental rules of the system. In this work, socialization is conceived as the process which inhibits the recurrence of the balancing systemic tendency as a result of a policy of self-restraint enacted by States. In this frame, socialization as an intervening variable is more likely to become manifest in conjunction with high levels of power concentration.

From a theoretical point of view, the result is an “enriched” version of Waltz’ structural model, which contributes in redefining the causal link between systemic polarity, States’ behaviors and stability. On the one hand, it looses the mechanistic character of Waltz’ structural realism by considering balancing one among many optimal policy option. On the other hand, by focusing more closely on the role of power and geography as the prime determinants of States’ behaviors, the model intervenes on the fundamental realist assumption of constant structural incentives to States’ action, assuming that these incentives change as the international structure experiences shiftings in the power concentration level.

From an empirical point of view, I apply the model to the current Unipolar system, to demonstrate why the absence of balancing, rather than an anomaly, could be considered one among others possible political outcomes, like sustained cooperation fostered by an underlying socialization process.
This article tries to recast the conventional neorealist structural approach to international politics, by assessing the role played by power concentration, geography and socialization together in the definition of the structural influence over States' behaviors.

Since the rise of the current unipolar system, International Relations (IR) scholars developed a large set of theories and methodologies trying to explain such particular political outcomes like the absence of balancing against the unipole and cooperative patterns with him, which seem to be in slight contrast with the basic neorealist tenets.

Both the endurance and the stability of the current unipolar system question the central claim of neorealism about the inherent instability of unipolarity. Defensive and offensive realism's main disagreement is about against what States balance and when they do it. While defensive realists assume security and relative power to be the main concern of States, offensive realists assume they are power maximizers and that they discount heavily power. Unipolarity disconfirm both approaches by neglecting the unit-level motivations assumed by these two strands of realism. In neither case we experience balancing nor band-wagoning.

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) assume the would-be hegemon’s power preponderance to be the main driver for the absence of observable balancing patterns. By doing this, however, HST departs from the neorealist structural framework by simply neglecting the role of anarchy on States’ motivations and assuming that, wherever it will rise, a hegemonic power will not face any kind of opposition. For HST, the only

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3When coping with the absence of balancing or the existence of cooperative paths, the necessary step taken by scholars is to look inward to actors’ characteristics as domestic level preferences and national interests’ formation processes. The efforts to incorporate neorealist paradigm with first-image elements have come under severe scrutiny by Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?”, *International Security*, 24:2, (Fall 1999): 5-55; and John A. Vasquez, “The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz’s Balancing Proposition”, *American Political Science Review*, 91:4, (December 1997): 899-912.


circumstances in which a hegemon will experience a decline in power, is imperial overstretching and the relative growth in power by other States thanks to their free-riding behavior. However, HST adds valuable insights where it conceptualize the hegemon as a systemic public goods provider, which explains the general tendency towards flocking and cooperation with him.

Constructivist scholars, on their side, oppose to the epistemological validity of structural realism built upon anarchy and power distribution, as they trace international political outcomes back to the social structure of international politics, which is made of, they claim, shared culture and ideas shaping States’ identities and behaviors. Although constructivist school is born as a “reaction” to neorealism’s materialist bias, its methodology is very similar to neorealist structural framework in that it subsumes the structural features of anarchy and distribution of power and poses them in causal relationship with behavioral outcomes by substituting material power with ideational factors.

The picture emerging from this variety of theoretical positions is one of extreme disagreement about the prime determinants of systemic stability and states’ behaviors. The model proposed in this paper is developed on the basis of a neorealist structural approach, and tries to partly reconcile these approaches by showing that “what States have” determines “what they want”, “how they want it” as well as “who they are”.

The structural model I’m going to introduce in the following pages is aimed to explain Great Powers’ behaviors under the constraints of an overwhelming unipolar power structure. Firstly, I consider the role of polarity in combination with power concentration, a variable that, I argue, could clarify the causal relationship between the systemic distribution of capabilities and behavioral outcomes. Secondly, I analyze the role played by geography as an explanatory variable, carrying out an important task in defining the type of system within which States interact and the type of threats they must face. Finally, socialization comes into play as an intervening variable, explaining how the international power structure could, at certain conditions, make clear to States “who they are” and, thus, making them acting accordingly to their power

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6 Paul Kennedy, “Rise and Fall”

7 Gilpin, “War and Change”


11 The most comprehensive effort to incorporate ideational factors in neorealist framework is Cameron G. Thies, “State Socialization and Structural Realism”, Security Studies, 19 (2010): 689-717. Thies builds on the previous and continuous work of Barry Buzan, which tried to reconcile neorealism and the English School by appreciating the role of power and
status. The final figure should be on of a structural framework, rooted in neorealist tenets, which is able to explain why unipolarity is not a “transient” anomaly in international politics, but it is rather a unique typology of durable and stable international system.

The article is organized in four sections. In the first section I will review the main weaknesses of traditional structural reasoning to assess where and why it falls short of arguments faced with the current unipolar system structure. The second section will deal with the integration of the above mentioned variables of power concentration, geography and socialization in the neorealist structural framework. This will lead to the third section, where the main logic of the model will be presented and applied to the current unipolar system. Finally, the fourth section will assess an overall evaluation of the model, the policy prescriptions that could be derived from it as well as the theoretical implications it poses for future developments in IR thinking.

**Known weaknesses of structural realism**

Waltz’s well know definition of system structure is a tripartite theoretical one. It relies on (1) the ordering principle, either anarchy or hierarchy, (2) the functional differentiation between units and (3) the distribution of capabilities. His principal focus is about the constant systemic tendency leading the international political system towards a balance of power between Great Powers, either by internal or external balancing. Thus, he elaborates a parsimonious and abstract theory in order to explain a “small number of big and important things”. Due to the specific aim of his theory, Waltz abhors the “reductionist” approach to the study of IR, which is the focus on unit-level characteristics in order to explain their foreign policies. Structural realism provides a useful framework to understand the conditions under which States behave and conduct their relations, although it is rather thin. Under the constraints posed by an anarchic environment and an overwhelming structure, they adjust their behaviors to reach their primary objective: survival. Anyway, it is not fully clear to what extent Waltz confers more explanatory power either to anarchy or to the distribution of capabilities.

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12 Kenneth Waltz, “Theory of International Politics”, ch. 5.
15 This point is particularly evident when neorealism confront itself with the absence of counterbalancing coalitions within the current unipolar systems, which instead are predicted by the theory. See Charles Krauthammer, “The
According to Waltz, anarchy is the prime determinant of States’ motivations, oriented in terms of survival seeking. Anarchy shapes a world in which every State has to provide by itself to its own security, in a self-help environment. Uncertainty, lack of control over systemic outcomes and over other’s intentions are the key features of Waltz’s neorealist world. At the same time, he assumes distribution of capabilities, or system’s polarity, to play a central role in defining what States can and cannot do, according to their relative position in the international power structure. The final result is a world where the most powerful States are always concerned with other’s endowment of capabilities, struggling to achieve a relative power parity which would let them to survive in an international system lacking a central authority. While the overwhelming power of the structure in shaping and shoving States’ behaviors is sufficiently clear, it is not so clear under which conditions States would act to balance against a preponderant power. Waltz’s assumption that States always balance against a preponderant power because of the threats to their own security posed by an anarchic environment, is slightly in contrast with his own conception of the role played by capabilities distribution: if States act, primarily, according to their capabilities, there will always be situations in which States will simply lack opportunities to balance. In Waltz’s world, States will always balance power, because of their fundamental quality of security maximizers, even when they lack the capabilities to do so. In the real world, actually, they do not. If a structural theory aims to explain how structural factors shapes the way human beings behave, there is no need to assume that the effects of anarchy will always prevail over the real capabilities upon which actions are to be taken. The relative weight of anarchy’s effects is evident in the alternative offensive strand of realism developed in Mearsheimer. Contrary to Waltz’s argument, for Mearsheimer anarchy has the sole effect of making States power maximizers, thus removing the main concern over security. In Mearsheimer’s world, the only mean States have to achieve security is to become power preponderant entities. In both realms, States are concerned with survival-oriented motivations, but they act to achieve this specific goal in very different ways, in conformity with some specific orientations attached to them by the two theories16.

Where Waltz’s proposition falls short of arguments to explain why in a unipolar system units do not balance, Mearsheimer’s overemphasize anarchy’s role in determining their power-maximization attitude. In sum,


16 This is why Waltz’s and Mearsheimer’s theories are considered two strands of the neorealist paradigm, namely defensive and offensive. It is evident that this classification is due to an a-priori appreciation, by the authors, of the base motivations that drives (or should do it) States action. The same logic underlies, for instance, the work of Randall Schweller, when he assumes fixed motivations for the actors by discerning between status-quo and revisionist oriented States. See Randall Schweller, “Tripolarity and the Second World War”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 37, (1993): 73-103. This is even more surprisingly if we are to evaluate the criticism carried out by Schweller against neorealism’s status-quo bias, in Randall Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?”, *Security Studies*, 5:3, (1996): 90-121.
both approaches consider threats to security as endogenous to power, while in the real world we have experience of cases in which this could not be the case.

On the opposite, Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) tends to neglect the role of anarchy in shaping States motivations, assuming power to be the sole determinant of States’ behaviors. HST scholars argue that States’ actions are driven by the hegemonic distribution of power, thus excluding survival concerns generated by the anarchical environment and assuming that the better strategy for a non-hegemon to survive is to bandwagon with the hegemon. However, by neglecting the role of anarchy and relying solely on the hegemonic distribution of capabilities, HST reveals to be even more mechanistic than neorealism. In HST framework, band-wagoning is treated as an alternative to balancing but, actually, it is not. If balancing is a strategy through which a potential threat to State’s survival is re-absorbed, there is no reason to consider band-wagoning as a valuable alternative. The only way to grant it as a suitable option is to assume the hegemon to be a benign one, thus incurring in the same kind of weakness realist scholars experience when they assume States to have fixed motivations leading them to action.

From a completely different point of view, the constructivist turn in IR has pointed out how structural realism, with its hard-nosed approach to material power, has completely missed the ideational content of interstate relations. The key-point of the constructivist school of thought is that interstate relations take place on the base of the shared ideas and political culture existing at a certain time in an international political system. Constructivist scholars recast structuralism in terms of social structure rather than of material structure of international politics, and is constituted by ideas around a certain systemic asset and sustained by the dominant political culture of the time.

The ideational turn in IR has been fostered by the above-mentioned lack of agency power left to units in the neorealist framework. Although, in principle, one could agree with the claim that “anarchy is what States make of it”, it is nevertheless true that States most of the time do what they can, and not what they want. This evidence can be explained under the auspices of the Democratic Peace Theory, as well as Role Theory.

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18 The seminal tractation of the problem is found in Alexander Wendt, “Social theory of international Politics”.
21 Role theory assumes that International Politics are structured around fixed roles, stemming directly from the structural level. Although role theory is born within the boundaries of social psychology, there have been recent attempts to apply its insights to International Relations Theory. See Cameron Thies, “State socialization and Structural Realism”.
and the emergence of some kind of Epistemic Communities\textsuperscript{22} within the international system. Anyway, it is worth nothing that, in line with the argument pushed ahead in this article, all the dynamics considered by these theoretical approaches take place under specific international power structure configurations. By reversing the argument, it is possible to imagine that units’ agency, far from being excluded at all, could play a relevant role under specific structural conditions. That is, specific configurations of the international power structure could leave a little “maneuvering space” to units, which enables them to bypass some structural constraints. This is not a bizarre idea, given that Waltz himself introduces a similar argument in the last chapter of Theory of International Politics. “Management of International Affairs”\textsuperscript{23}.

The lack of balancing in the unipolar system suggests two things. First, States’ motivations and strategic options are more “flexibles” than it has been hypothesized so far. Second, system’s structure shapes and shoves not only States’ action, but their motivations too.

To proceed in such a theorizing, one must remove the “original sin” of neorealist motivation bias towards status-quo and revisionist oriented motivations. To some extent, it is worth to turn back to Morgenthau and Aron, right to the point where they admit power do exert substantial influence on the way human beings shape their motivations and take their actions. Being a conditional theory, a structural framework must explain how power distribution and anarchy together shape units’ behaviors and their motivations on the premises of what they can do (and not what they want to) at a certain time. This implies that one must think in terms of changing structural incentives, instead of constant structural incentives to action, as well as in terms of shifting motivations and actions taken by units, depending on the particular power distribution at a specific time.

\textit{States’ agency and units’ characteristics}

Affirming that States’ motivations and actions are more flexible than realists had insofar hypothesized, and that system’s structure affects the way units re-orient their motivations, requires to modify some of the previous realist assumptions about units characteristics.

The agency issue and the consideration of unit-level characteristics had always represented the “dark beast” for realist scholars. This is due, I argue, to the rigid conception of the effects exerted by the structure in terms of behavioral constraints on the units. The original formulation of Waltz’ BOP theory contains no base assumption about units as rational actors. The sole observation made by Waltz is that units behave according


\textsuperscript{23} In the last chapter of “\textit{Theory of International Politics}”, Waltz admits that, besides structural constraints over States possible behaviors, there could be situations in which States could serve as “systemic regulators”, by doing so turning their concerns towards absolute gains in power instead of relative gains.
to their specific capabilities, and under the pressure of the overwhelming international structure. On the contrary, Mearsheimer as most of the prominent realist scholars assume system’s units to be rational actors, thus making them behaving upon a cost-benefit approach. The rationality assumption narrows, by definition, the amount of possible behavioral outcomes. The point is sufficiently clear in both defensive and offensive realist realms, where in the former units are expected to always balance for a power equilibrium to recur, and in the latter they are supposed to maximize their relative power quota for the sake of the struggle for power argument of the whole theory. In both cases, actors will behave in the way according to the prediction of the theory, whatever it will take.

A similar approach to units’ rationality occurs in HST, to the extent that band-wagoning is considered to be the “pareto-efficient” strategy when facing with a hegemonic power, while it is totally absent, obviously, in the constructivist approach, where unit’s agency plays a pivotal role in defining international politics as the realm of political culture and ideas.

The rationality assumption does not need to be applied for a structural theorization to be structural in the narrow sense of the term. Structural theories explains how the interaction among units within a system are influenced by an overwhelming systemic structure, which selects and encourage the good behaviors and punishes the bad ones. In this sense, structural theories should be conditional theories, in that they aim to explain how unit react to specific and given structural conditions, which could change from time to time.

Besides its usefulness in assuring a certain degree of internal coherence to the theory, the rationality assumption turns out to be an operational expedient to provide a strong causal link between the theoretical predictions and the expected outcomes predicated by the theory itself. This is the case, for instance, for both defensive and offensive realism, to the extent that they fail in explaining, respectively, the absence of balancing behaviors and power maximization in the current unipolar system. Instead, I take another kind of rationality assumption: a loosened one in the fashion of Gidden’s. Such a loosened rationality assumption implies a certain degree of “consciousness” for the units, which do not isolate themselves from the structural constraints to which they are exposed. In such a structural model, units are not like “balls on a pool table”, but they are more likely to be considered as what they really are: social units interacting in a social system, whose structure overwhelms their desire to act freely as they would.

In other words, a loose rationality assumption differs from the classical one in that it considers units’ behaviors consequential to the system structure and inconsequential with respect to the observer’s beliefs about their own motivations. The direct consequence is that, if this concept of rationality is to be applied to the BOP theory, the final result would be one in which the recurrence of the power balance would be highly

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24 The sole attribute conferred to States by Waltz is of unitary actors.
conditional to the specific structural configuration of the time and scarcely related to the assumed units’ base motivations.

Following the same logic, the units’ base motivations are not defined by the invisible hand of anarchy, but they are adjusted time-to-time, according to their effective material capabilities and under the constraints of the international power structure. This implies that, even if the main goal is to survive in an international anarchical environment, there will be more than one optimal strategies to obtain this result, according to the existing international power structure. The overwhelming character of the structure will affect units’ behavior to the extent that their survival in the system will be threatened if they act in a way inconsistent with their specific capabilities.

This framework offers much more room for units’ agency than the traditional realist discourse does, without turning to a “reductionist” approach or a hybrid one. The loose rationality assumption has the virtue of giving more weight to structural reasoning and structural effects, removing the typical realist bias towards fixed motivations and fixed a priori behaviors justified by theory’s prediction. In this model, the sole prediction is that the structure is likely to shape both motivations and behaviors, by decoupling units’ desires from their actions.

Which role could be drawn for anarchy in such a model? Anarchy still plays a central role, given its structural nature. Coherently with the “reasoning” character of the units, anarchy does not constitute always and unconditionally a constant threat to survival. Intended as the absence of central authority in the system, anarchy plays a role in determining a threat to States’ survival only in the circumstance of an “irrational” behavior taken by a unit, a case in which no other unit would be willing to come in its support, given the self-help environment defined by anarchy. Here I define an irrational behavior as “an action taken in a way inconsistent with the specific capabilities’ endowment of the unit”.

It follows that, in an anarchic system, units are basically driven by the desire to act freely and according to their specific goals, but they will always have to adjust their attitudes to the existing international power structure. The “self-help” environment produced by anarchy has the effect to make units conscious of their lonely status as international actors. By contrasting an anarchical environment with a hierarchical one, the only inference that can be drawn is that, in the latter, there will be some fixed rules to be followed by every actor, which imply a limitation in their capacity to act freely as a result of the constraining existence of a legal structure. In an anarchical environment, the only constraint to units’ capability to act is the existence of a shifting capabilities’ distribution framework they have to cope with.

Treating units as “reasoning” subjects, thus, does not alter the core logic of a structural model. System’s structure still plays a fundamental role in defining how and why units react to international power shifts.
Redefined in such a way, the link between power distribution, anarchy and units’ motivations and behaviors is less rigid and more consistent with a structural framework.

*Enriching Waltz*

*Polarity and power concentration*

The key independent variable of BOP theory is polarity as an ordering principle and it produces direct effects in terms of system’s stability and units’ choices. Therefore, in neorealist framework variations in polarity are associated with a broad set of events, including the possibility of the outbreak of major powers’ conflicts, the degree of systemic stability and patterns of balancing behaviors. Most of IR scholars, and prominently realist scholars, largely apply the concept of polarity in their analysis, with reference to the number of Great Powers populating the international system. The taxonomy thus resulting is one that discriminates between multipolar, bipolar and unipolar systems, each with its own characteristics. Whereas, in Waltz, multipolar systems are more unstable than bipolar ones\(^\text{26}\), unipolar systems, in theory, are the least stables due to the untenable nature of the structural unipolar configuration\(^\text{27}\). The discourse about stability and instability revolving around systems’ polarity is one that deserve attention for two main reasons.

First, the concept of polarity, while providing a tool to classify different kinds of systems, does not fully meet the task to discriminate between polar and non-polar powers. At best, polarity tells us how many units hold together the largest share of systemic aggregate power, and does not provide a clear indication of the relative inequality between these few units\(^\text{28}\).

Secondly, a taxonomy of international political systems based on polarity, provides us with strong and useful findings about the tendencies we should expect within different types of systems, but they all rest on the assumption that threats to security are always endogenous to power and that the final outcome should


always be a balance of power among Great Powers. The resulting figure is one where States always balance (or should do it) against power by means of internal and external balancing, depending on systemic polarity\textsuperscript{29}. As Waltz points out, there are several and important differences between multipolar, bipolar and unipolar systems. The main and most discussed claim made by Waltz is that multipolar and unipolar systems are more unstable than bipolar ones. This is because, in Waltz’s terms, “smaller is better”\textsuperscript{30}. In smaller systems made up of no more than two Great Powers, there are lower levels of instability because of the absence of the coordination problems that affect the relational dynamic in multipolar systems. In a bipolar system, Great Powers are freer to pursue their own internal balancing policies, because they do not depend on other actors but on themselves. This makes alliances and allies slightly irrelevant for the entire systemic dynamic and enables the two poles to act more freely and to focus their security concerns against one and only one adversary. This kind of theorization rests on the assumption that international politics are made of the decisions of the strongest States, to which all the other actors have no choice than to conform. If the underlying logic of “smaller is better” is, in principle, agreeable, on the other side it could turn out to be too concerned with the necessary explanation of the recurrence of a balance of power predicted by the theory\textsuperscript{31}. Actually, if we give a deeper look at the Cold War period, it is possible to describe it as a bipolar system in which one of the two actors enjoyed, for most time, a power superiority to which the other side conformed. Until this power superiority lasted, the system has been relatively stable, but when the power gap between U.S. and U.S.S.R. came close to a parity, like in the central period of the Cold War, the system revealed to be more unstable. In other words, when the system came closer to a real balance of power, the risk of a major systemic conflict became more than a hypothesis. This was the case of the Cuban Missiles, the Second Berlin Crisis and, in general, of the period ending in 1978, characterized by an evident rampant attitude on the part of the U.S.S.R.\textsuperscript{32}

This example points directly to the main argument of this section: an analysis that relies solely on polarity is missing large part of the empirical evidence in favor of an active appreciation, by the States, of the relative

\textsuperscript{29} Kenneth Waltz, “Theory of international Politics”, 163.
\textsuperscript{30} According to Waltz “... Smaller systems are more stable and their members are better able to manage affairs for their mutual benefit”, ibid., 135-136.
\textsuperscript{31} It is worth nothing that the preference Waltz exhibits for small number systems is in slight contrast with Hans Morgenthau views. According to Morgenthau, “This reduction [since 1648] in the number of nations that are able to play a major role in international politics has had deteriorating effects upon the operation of the balance of power”. See Hans Morgenthau, “Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace”, cited in Andrew P. Dunne, “International Theory: To the Brink and Beyond”, Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1996: 70.
\textsuperscript{32} Until 1956, the power gap between United States and Soviet Union were considerable, with the United States still sitting on the top of the international power structure. The concentration of capabilities was so favorable to United States that they could act like hegemons, waging war and direct intervention where they perceived their fundamental interests were threatened, without fostering any Soviet reaction. After 1956, as the power gap started narrowing and the capabilities became more equally distributed among the two actors, the system experienced a growing confrontation between the two poles, which ended up in the above mentioned episodes. This example to show how, under the same structural bipolar conditions, shifts in the relative power inequalities between poles could determine either conditions of stability and instability.
power inequalities between them. Waltz himself highlights the importance of power inequalities among poles in his explanation of buck-passing in multipolar systems, stating that it depends “on the size of the groups and the inequalities within it, as well as on the character of its members”\textsuperscript{33}. By the same vein, while it is possible that “when two powers contends, imbalances can be righted only by their internal efforts”\textsuperscript{34}, there could be cases in which \textit{when two powers contend, imbalances can be righted through external, though weak, balancing}\textsuperscript{35}. Moreover, there are situations in which it is possible to observe a total lack of Great Powers balancing like in the current unipolar system, suggesting that it is power concentration, more than polarity, which makes balancing behaviors and alliance patterns more predictable. It is also a proof that States do appreciate power imbalances among them much more than neorealist thinking has theorized so far. When we evaluate power inequalities between poles, we are considering the differences among poles within a system. Given a structural framework defined by a certain polarity, it is possible to discern between concentrated polarities and diffused polarities\textsuperscript{36}, depending on the level of power concentration in a certain system.

A reliable method of measuring systemic power concentration is still the one elaborated more than thirty years ago by Ray and Singer. Ray and Singer’s index, named \textit{CON}, reflects the power concentration in a system \textit{X}, formed by \textit{N} States at the time \textit{T}\textsuperscript{37}.

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ConT = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{Nt} (Sit)^2 - 1}{Nt}}
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Since its formulation, the index has been employed as the main independent variable in the development of a large number of researches aimed to link a given degree of systemic power concentration to the likelihood of interstate conflict. These researches focused mainly on pairs or groups of States, trying to assess whether or not a specific distribution of capabilities was able to affect the systemic war proneness. In their systematic review of all these works, Ray and Bentley\textsuperscript{38} concluded that is hardly possible to identify a direct relationship between \textit{CON} and the likelihood of interstate conflict, mainly because of the lack of a clear theoretical relationship between \textit{CON}, the independent variable, and the likelihood of interstate conflict. As

\textsuperscript{33} Kenneth Waltz, “\textit{Theory of International Politics}”, 165.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{35} This was the case for the \textit{Détente} era, when the two poles, while keeping on balancing by internal means, struggled at the same time to consolidate their relative blocs in an effort similar, though not identical, to external balancing.
Braumoeller noted, the main problem with such a utilization of CON is that its impact on interstate conflicts’ recurrence varies in large degree according to the kind of capabilities analysts refer to. Given that CON is calculated from the CINC scores, Braumoeller discerns between static and dynamic balances of power of latent or realized capabilities, adding complexity to the whole scenario. In his view, the conditions for a peace-leading structure is one in which a rough balance of power of latent and realized capabilities is set up between Great Powers, but in his analysis it’s not clear to what extent a specific balance of power has pacifying effects over the system. His conclusion is that States could be either satisfied or dissatisfied with the existing balance of power, thus making the balance dependent on the individual attitudes of States. A similar conclusion is reached in Powell, who observes that “the probability of war is independent of the power balance between pairs of States ... and is a simple function of the disparity between the distribution of capabilities and the status quo distribution of territory.” This conclusion sounds even more interesting for this study than the one by Braumoeller, in that it implies that nearly whatever distribution of capabilities is irrelevant in determining the systemic war proneness, due to its dependence to the utility States attributes to the corresponding distribution of territories, which is a difficult to quantify.

The theoretical lack of evidence in favor of a linkage between CON and interstate conflict recurrence could be, I argue, a further evidence of the underestimation, reiterated in neorealist thinking, of a minimal assumption about the responsive nature of actors. As Ray and Bentley highlight, the most complex task to accomplish when implementing the CON index is to determine which actors are relevant in a N-player system and which ones are not, a consideration that brings the debate back to Waltz argument about the common sense criteria to identify the actors that count within an international political system.

The question of whether or not CON is a reliable tool to analyze interstate relations’ paths could be resolved in a different way. Instead of focusing on the distribution of capabilities on a dyadic base, be it pair of States or groupings of coalitions, it would be better suited to focus on the systemic concentration of power, given a defined system made of N actors, thus considering both polarity and concentration. In this sense,
concentration could serve as an explanatory variable that confers more clarity to the causal relation between polarity and behavioral outcomes.

Though this task could seem hazardous, it would confer more explanatory power to polarity as an independent variable within a structural framework,

\textit{Power concentration and balancing}

In principle, one should expect to experience a tight correlation between the number of poles and the level of systemic power concentration, though there could be cases in which this correlation breaks down.

Although the definition of polarity formulated by Waltz and most of his critics is the dominant one in IR, many others exist which employ more refined methods to identify a polar power. The main difference between these approaches is the quantitative criterium employed to determine whether an additional State is to be considered a non-polar major power or a polar one. However, for the scope of this paper, this is not a decisive issue, in that such a refinement could be useful in the case of a systematic study comparing different kind of systems. The definition of polarity that I use here is the classical one, according to which a pole is a particularly powerful State compared to the rest of the States in the system\textsuperscript{45}. In a hypothetical multipolar system, theory tells us, we will experience high levels of instability provoked by the coordination problems that prevent external balancing policies from leading to effective outcomes. Band-wagoning, buck-passing and, in some cases, bait-and-bleed will be the most diffused behaviors we can expect within the system, as a result of the rough parity in capabilities that is assumed to exist in such systems. An analysis of power concentration degree in the system, however, could reveal that, even if all the three, four or five States qualify as polar powers, they may differ sensitively between them in their capabilities, and the magnitude of these differences directly affects the level of systemic power concentration. Take, for instance, two hypothetical multipolar systems, each populated by five actors.

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System 1 and system 3 have the same number of major powers, three polar powers and two major powers. From a structural point of view they are equivalent, but they are not equivalent in terms of their level of concentration. When A, B, C are endowed with a near equal level of capabilities, the systemic concentration will tend toward an upper limit, while a widening of the power gap pushes it to the upper side. As we see, left unvaried the number of polar powers, the systemic power concentration level could shift upward or downward depending on the variations of the capabilities distribution among them. The same logic follows for bipolar systems as well as for unipolar ones. Waltz’ balance of power theory, in principle, admits that power inequalities between polar powers play a role in determining how States will pursue their balancing efforts, either by external or internal means. This is also the distinctive property of each kind of system, to the extent that external balancing occurs in multipolar systems and internal balancing in bipolar ones. This kind of argument relies on the assumption that balances of power tend to form among States and groups of States, and that this happens in different ways, depending on the number of poles involved. The absence of a power balance leads the system to instability, causing the outbreak of a major systemic war. Anyway, power concentration analysis paired with polarity appreciation, could reveal that different kinds of systems may exist under the same polarity, and this could exert substantial influence over the manner in which States balance each other.

For instance, if a bipolar system experiences a shift in capabilities between the poles, the weaker pole could be no longer able to balance the other pole by internal means only. This is a situation in which the other major powers acquire weight in determining the final outcome of the balancing process, and the case for a possible external balancing in a bipolar system. The same logic obtains for multipolar systems, in which the rough parity between poles or a preponderance of one pole over the others could be the decisive factor that influence the likelihood of buck-passing behaviors or the stability of the existing alliances. This example to say that, if on the one hand BoP theory establish clear theoretical links between polarity and balancing behaviors in different kind of systems, on the other it misses the opportunity to further specify under which conditions a particular system is likely to experience different dynamics than the ones hypothesized by the theory. This is due, admittedly, to an intrinsic rigidity of the theory, fostered by restrictive assumptions about actors’ responsiveness to changes in the overall distribution of capabilities. As Posen observes, BoP theories in general simplify reality by not considering the relative capabilities distribution among Great Powers. However, the appreciation of power inequalities between Great Powers could be of great value in analyzing

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47 This argument has been firstly exposed in Edward D. Mansfield, “Concentration, Polarity and the Distribution of Capabilities”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 37:1, (March 1993): 105-128.
all those behaviors that neorealism considers anomalies or “failing” options, like sustained cooperation in an unbalanced environment and no balancing behaviors when facing a preponderant power.

A number of research have showed that such a research path could not be pursued without taking into account ancillary assumptions, of which actors’ loose rationality is one.

In the next paragraph I will introduce the other two elements of the model, geography and the socialization process.

Geography and socialization

The previous paragraph dealt with the benefits that could derive from an analysis taking into account the relative power inequalities between Great Powers, discerning between concentrated and diffused system.

In this paragraph I will introduce a further distinction, between maritime systems and continental systems, depending on the geographical position of the pole(s). Geography, I argue, plays a great role in explaining a large part of the systemic dynamics produced in interstate relations.

Neorealist literature offers two main theories that include geography in their analytical framework.

The first one is Walt’s balance of threats theory, which contends on the ground of neorealism with Waltz. According to Walt, States do not balance primarily against power, but against threats. Threats, in Walt’s view, are generated by the combination of four elements, among which geographical proximity appears to be the most important in that is the main “threat generator” to States. As Walt observes, “States [...] also align in response to threats from proximate power. Because the ability to project power declines with distance, States that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away”.

The rationale for Walt in determining when and why a State will balance or band-wagon is the geographical proximity of another State, combined with its aggregate power, offensive capabilities and offensive intentions. Although Walt is right in considering geography relevant, in his theorization is impossible to determine whether it has causal primacy over threats’ genesis compared with the other three factors the theory accounts for. The problem arises, specifically, if we are to assign causal priority to any of these elements. The scope of Walt theory, in fact, is not to recast balancing and band-wagoning hypothesis in a refined structural framework, but to include some degree of State agency in the neorealist research program. His theory is thus a policy-prescriptive oriented one, and his principal aim is to explain under which conditions balancing is preferred to band-wagoning and viceversa. Although the theory presents some weaknesses,

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50 Ibid., 10.
Walt deserves great merit for having disputed the dominant idea that balancing or band-wagoning always occurs against power, introducing the concept of threat in the debate.

John Mearsheimer offers its own view on how geography affects interstate relations within the international political system. In his offensive realist theory, he builds on the concept of “offshore balancer”, to demonstrate how a dominant power in the global system takes simultaneously advantages and disadvantages from its insular position. An insulated regional power benefits from its geographical position because other States will not perceive it as a direct threat to their security and they will generally seek its support. On the other hand, such a regional power will be prevented by the “stopping power of water” from reaching global hegemony, an option too costly for any would-be global hegemon. Mearsheimer’s theory, as notorious, pivots around the power maximization preference he attributes to States. The resulting image is one of an extremely conflictual international environment, in which threats are always endogenous to power and States behave consequently. The geographical attribute, though not structural, attenuates Great Powers competition by excluding the offshore balancer to be the object of any counter-balancing coalition or balancing efforts, circumscribing them to regional systems.

Both Mearsheimer’s and Walt’s contribution sheds light over an admittedly limiting weakness of realist and neorealist thinking. The idea that States always balance against power and that this tendency explains the regular (or expected) recurrence of a balance of power in the system is the product of an historical biased approach to international politics, and in particular over european politics. Levy and Thompson acknowledged this point. They observed that “It is hardly a coincidence that when balance of power theorists talk about balancing against hegemonic threats, the historical examples to which they usually refer are European coalitions against the land-based military power of the Habsbourgs under Charles V in the early sixteenth century, Philip II at the end of the sixteenth century, and the combined strength of Spain and Austria in the Thirty Years’ War; against France under Louis XIV and the Napoleon; and against Germany under Wilhelm II and then Hitler”. Balance of power theories, in general, elaborate their hypothesis referring to homogeneous systems made up of continental powers, whose security concerns are forcibly casted in terms of threats to their territorial integrity. Rarely the reasoning is pushed beyond this limit, asking why in such maritime systems like the one of Britain in the XIX century or the current unipolar one, with the United States as the sole pole possessing considerable sea power, counter-balancing coalitions do not form. The answer to this question is that in such systems, in which a sea power qualifies as a pole, counterbalancing does not occur just because the threats posed by a sea power differs substantially from the threats posed by a land-power.

51 Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land or at Sea”
52 Ibid., 14.
The State that qualifies as a maritime power will be likely to position itself at the top of the international power structure. Such an affirmation is not hazardous, since sea power implies the capacity to have a global reach to protect specific interests, which are defined in terms of trade and economic influence over continental territories. On the contrary, land powers experience considerably lower levels of capabilities compared with the leading sea power, and their security interests are generally defined in terms of territorial integrity and territorial aggrandizement. It follows that an international system that includes a maritime power will experience higher power concentration levels than other international systems populated by land powers only. The different nature of the threats posed by land-power and maritime-powers helps to explain why counter-balancing coalitions are unlikely to form in such systems and even why it is possible to experience sustained levels of cooperation with the maritime power.

In particular, I consider cooperation not to be the result of the necessary benign attitude of the hegemon, but as a self-restraining behavior induced by some degree of socialization. I assume cooperation to be a self-restraining behavior because of the continued influence of the structural constraints over States’ actions. Waltz himself approaches socialization in his work, defining it as a process, fostered by structural constraints, which forces States to conform to the most successful practices and that reduces behavioral variety as well as observable outcomes.53 Waltz, however, ends up considering socialization as a homogenization process54, a fact that helps in explaining the recurrence of a balance of power.

Put in other terms, Waltz approaches socialization as a constant and not as a variable.55 In this article, socialization is taken as a variable, more precisely a process variable, following the argument proposed by Glenn Snyder.56 In his work, Snyder hypothesizes that at the systemic level some process variables operate as the transmission belts between structure and units, producing effects which are independent from the systemic constraints.57 Snyder considers such process variables emerging spontaneously from systemic interaction among units, and having the effect of permanently modifying States’ preferences despite structural pressures.58

Here I consider socialization as a process variable whose activity is encouraged by specific structural conditions, and whose content consists in the acceptance of the game’s rules established by the most

54 Ibid., 75.
55 Andrea Locatelli and Pierdomenico Tortola, “Taking Waltz Beyond Waltz: Socialization as an Intervening Variable in Structural Realism”, Paper presented during the Annual Italian Political Sciences Association meeting, August 2009
57 Ibid., 172.
58 It is worth noting that Snyder discerns between relationships and behaviors, with the former being the situational context of the behavior. Relationships, Snyder claims, act as a conduit through which structure affects behavior during episodes of interaction and channel the effects of the internal attributes of States to interaction episodes. They are also posited to provide more specific constraints in addition to the broader constraints posed by anarchy and the distribution of capabilities.
powerful actor in the system. The more the system is power concentrated, the more actors will experience structural incentives towards cooperation. Although these incentives are constant for every State, their preferences keeps unmodified and oriented towards the satisfaction of their individual interest. The difference between concentrated and diffused power system is that in the former actors will experience structural incentives towards cooperation, in line with the loose rationality assumption by which they actively appreciate power inequalities among them and modify their base motivations accordingly.

Such a concentrated power structure defines an environment in which units are well aware of their power capabilities, confronted to the capabilities of other States. In such systems, the pursuit of the self-interest is best satisfied through cooperation, given the cost associated with Great Powers competitive behaviors.

The model

The model that follows is intended to offer an enriched version of Waltz’ neorealist framework, by the addition of two explanatory variables, power concentration and geography, and one intervening variable, socialization.

Some studies deepened the link between systemic polarity and stability given Waltz’ declared preference for bipolar systems, which he consideres to be stabler than multipolar ones.

A large part of these studies raises doubts on the causal relationship that neorealism establishes between polarity, Great Powers behavior and systemic stability.

The microeconomic foundations of neorealist balance of power theory let us, at least in theory, to employ some measure of power concentration within the system. In microeconomic theory, more than the system’s dimensions, it is actors’ relative market share that, under the same structural constraints, determines outcomes: an enterprise’s price-taking or price-making behavior, in last instance, is determined by its dimensions relative to the whole market, and not by the market dimension alone. By the same way, within an international political system, States’ behavior will not be determined \textit{a-priori} by the dimensions of the system, but by their relative capabilities compared to those of the other States. The underestimation of power concentration effects over States’ choices and the overestimation of anarchy’s effect on the whole systemic dynamic is the main source of the variety of approaches testified by the existence of, at least, two strands of neorealist theories, defensive and offensive ones.

The model, therefore, departs in some way from the Waltzian understanding of anarchy, which makes “Take care of yourself!” the cogent imperative of international politics\textsuperscript{59}. Anarchy, by itself, determines uncertainty over others’ intentions and forces States to pursue their own national interest in a self-defence environment, but there could be particular configurations of the international power structure, as well as the geographical

\textsuperscript{59} Kenneth Waltz, “Theory of International Politics”, 107.
position of the dominant power, which make possible for States to overcome anarchy’s pressure towards “eternal” balancing. This is why, contrary to Waltz assumption about the endogeneity of threats to power, in the everyday world threats are perceived differently depending on the specific power inequalities within the Great Powers subsystem as well as depending on their geographical distribution. This is the rationale for the differentiation, proposed here, between concentrated and diffused systems and between continental and maritime powers.

The model is conceived to assess the stability of the current unipolar system and to explain how specific configurations of the international power structure could inhibit the recurrence of the formation of a balance of power, which is kept as the dominant systemic policy fostered by an anarchic international structure. For this reason, I will deal only with one typology of system: a concentrated power system with one geographically isolated Great Power, which I call a unipolar system.

Concentrated power systems could be either multipolar, bipolar or unipolar, as discussed in the previous section about concentration and polarity. What defines States behavior, as held here, is not polarity by itself but the difference in relative power capabilities among Great Powers within the system. In concentrated power systems, structural incentives towards balancing will be mediated by the responsive nature of States, which are inclined to discount heavily power imbalances and geographical position. Moreover, concentrated power systems are always characterized by the existence of at least one predominant power in the Great Power subsystem, and in general by a markedly different distribution of relative capabilities among them.

In such kinds of systems, structural incentives towards balancing will be very low if the original distribution of capabilities of the other Great Powers will not let them to enact an effective counter-balancing strategy. In this case, system’s structure will generate incentives for the preservation of the systemic status-quo. For the would-be hegemon, preserving the status quo is the conditio sine qua non he can keep unaltered its control over the system. For the other Great Powers, status quo preservation will be the best choice in a situation in which balancing the predominant power could lead to a serious threat to the balancer’s survival, due to the large amount of resources the balancing effort would drain. Status quo structurally induced orientations are, thus, nothing else than a policy aimed to preserve own’s position within the international power structure. In addition, the more the would-be hegemon is geographically isolated, the more the system will experience an intrinsic stability. This is due to the different interests of a maritime power, compared with the interests of continental powers. Assuming that States articulates their interests along a continuum starting from a minimal hypothesis of survival towards the upper end of dominance, it is not hazardous to affirm that land powers will be more exposed than maritime powers to the “imperial” temptation. This happens because, for land powers, security is strictly linked with territorial concerns, and threats are defined mainly in terms of power shifts that could expose their territory to others’ aggressions. Therefore, for land powers survival concern is quite continuously the main security concern. For maritime
powers, on the contrary, dominance is an unfeasible option because of the high costs associated with the development of an adequate land-based military asset. Maritime powers’ interests lay, usually, in the middle of the scale: the necessary condition for their survival is to realize a moderate/high control over resources and political stability within the system, which let them to keep unaltered their control over global trade and economy. Maritime powers usually do not pose serious threats to land powers’ survival or territorial integrity and, historically, leading sea powers have shown little if no interest at all in getting directly involved in territorial disputes on the continent. Their isolated geographical position contributes in lessening their survival concerns, letting them re-orienting their efforts to more ambitious goals. Moreover, dominant economic states are likely to provide collective public goods to the system, like international security, by doing so pursuing their narrow self-interest to preserve system’s control. This insight, drawn directly from HST, helps explain why in concentrated power systems with a leading sea power, it will be possible to experience high level of cooperation among Great Powers, with cooperation paths prevailing over balancing behaviors. To cooperate or ally with a leading sea power is a way to benefit from economic as well as security gains. Such cooperative paths would be, in principle, incompatible with neorealist insights about the effects of anarchy on interstate relations, because anarchy necessarily forces units, in first instance, to take care of themselves. If we deal with an international structure that provides shifting incentives depending on power concentration levels, as well as with responsive units that adjust their behaviors depending on the relative capabilities distributions and the different kinds of threats originating by different actors, cooperation becomes a possible behavior. Cooperation is here conceived as the behavioral dimension of the socialization process, which implies some level of interaction among units. The more the international power structure is concentrated, the more cooperative interactions among units will become recurrent and stable. This happens because, I argue, in a concentrated power structure, the structural incentives towards the preservation of the systemic status-quo substantially inhibit the operation of the competition process. The point of interest is that, while structural constraints may exert a temporary influence over actors’ motivations, letting them to turn back to security concerns based on power politics once the international power structure has experienced substantial modifications, socialization process may lead to a permanent modification of these motivations towards strict cooperation with the dominant power. Such permanent modifications could result in the shaping of States’ international social identity, which Constructivist scholars claim to be the key for the understanding of international political outcomes. In this regard, State socialization could have substantial impact on the way States develop a conception of their role within the system. Such a claim is compatible with the materialist foundations of structural realism and is coherent with a structural framework in which

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61 In Waltz, the competition process is the first “transmission belt” through which structural pressures are transmitted to the units. Its main effects is to reduce the amount of possible behavior to those compatible with the realization of a balance of power.
the distribution of capabilities, in conjunction with power concentration, lead States to perceive each other in a mutual relationship condition.

The unipolar system

After the demise of the Soviet Union, United States rested as the sole world’s Great Power. Much of the confusion met by realism in approaching the issue of unipolar politics derives from the circumstance that United States became a unipole “accidentally”\(^{62}\), and not after a major systemic conflict. This fact is of great relevance with respect to the effects it has on the BoP theory logic and the expectation, shared by neorealism as well as by HST, that, soon or later, a balancing dynamic should occur.

To the date, balancing against the U.S. is not likely to be recurring, and the only kind of balancing that is done on behalf of other major powers is its “soft” variant\(^{63}\). Moreover, instead of balancing against the United States, most States show a tendency towards “flocking”\(^{64}\) with them, which could lead analyst to think about a radical transformation in the fundamental mechanisms of International Politics, as they have been laid out in the formulation of the first system theories in the ’50s and the ’60s. Today, United States enjoys a disproportionate amount of military capabilities, confronted with the rest of the States, in the field of sea power and power projection capabilities. Today they account for more than one third of the global military expenditures\(^{65}\) and nearly half of the total OECD global spending in R&D\(^{66}\), largely outweighing China and Russian Federation; and, last but not least, it is the only global actor possessing a military global reach.

Such a figure leaves no room for doubts about whether the current system is or not a unipolar one.

The real question that usually entangles scholars is if and how a unipolar system structure affects interstate relations, given that, to the date, we still lack a theory about the functioning of unipolar politics\(^{67}\).

Scholars has focused their attention to the structural conditions that make unipolarity a stable system.

During the ’90s, the prevailing argument was that unipolarity was not durable.

\(^{66}\) In 2013, U.S. spent about 432,583$ billion. Source: OECD online [https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm](https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm)
This argument has been put forward first by Charles Krauthammer, who wrote about the “Unipolar Moment”\textsuperscript{68}. According to Krauthammer, a short time would have occurred before other Great Powers could face American Power, engaging in balancing against it.

Waltz himself thrusted the validity of his own arguments about the regular recurrence of a Balance of Power among Great Powers, and hypothesized that the durability of the Unipolar system would have lasted short, leaving place to a new multipolar world\textsuperscript{69}.

On the contrary, the first example of scholarly disagreement about the durability of a unipolar distribution of capabilities was the one by Thomas Wohlforth\textsuperscript{70}. In his seminal article about “The stability of a unipolar world”, Wohlforth argued that the unipolar system was likely to last for a long time in the future, due to the power predominance of the United States that would have prevented any other State from engaging in a balancing effort with it. According to Wohlforth, \textit{[F]or many decades no State is likely to be in a position to take on the United States in any of the underlying elements of power}\textsuperscript{71}. Thus, for Wohlforth, the durability of the unipolar system was linked with the specific power concentration that characterized the system. Besides its considerations about the durability and the structural determinants of the unipolar systems, Wohlforth argued that the unipolar system enjoyed a great degree of peacefulness. This is likely due, Wohlforth argues, to \textit{the existing distribution of capabilities generates incentives for cooperation}\textsuperscript{72}. The overwhelming power of the U.S., in Wohlforth’s view, inhibited any kind of hegemonic rivalries and gave the United States the possibility to manage global security, thus limiting major-powers’ competition\textsuperscript{73}.

Wohlforth, has been followed by many other scholars on his line of argument, with most of them supporting the thesis of the power-preponderance effects in limiting, if not neutralizing, the underlying logic of the realist BoP theory.

Anyway, does exist a declinist school, which is particularly confident with the likely eventuality of a U.S. decline leading, in the best case, to a new multipolar era\textsuperscript{74} and, in the worst case, to a global chaos\textsuperscript{75}.

On the other hand, the matter of how much the unipolar system is peaceful or not had received little attention, mainly for the confusion made in conflating stability with durability and peacefulness.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Kenneth Waltz, \textit{“The Emerging Structure”}.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Thomas C. Wohlforth, \textit{“The Stability of a Unipolar World”}, \textit{International Security}, 24:1, (Summer 1999): 5 - 41
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 38.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 7-8.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Cristopher Layne, \textit{“The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise”}, International Security, 17:4, (Spring 1993): 5-51
\item \textsuperscript{75} Charles A. Kupchan, \textit{“No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn”}, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
\end{itemize}
As highlighted by Monteiro\textsuperscript{76}, the unipolar system is not peaceful, given that in 22 years (at the time he was writing) of unipolar distribution of capabilities, the pole has been involved at war for 13 years, that is 59% percent of the time, compared to 16% in bipolarity and 18% in multipolarity\textsuperscript{77}. This figure, according to Monteiro, shows that the stability and peacefulness are not the product of the same determinants, and that stability attains exclusively to the durability of the system.

The fact that the unipolar system is stable but not peaceful encourages the structural framework I laid out in the previous section. If we are to evaluate stability, in terms of durability, relative to a certain distribution of capabilities, the sole prediction that we can make is that the system will undergo a structural transformation (thus, a change in polarity), only when the pole will experience a decline in its relative capabilities. Durability, in fact, can be evaluated only in terms of structural changes.

When confronting with the issue of the peacefulness of a unipolar distribution of capabilities, we are dealing with a completely different set of arguments, that is how this particular structure affects states-interaction and to what extent this interaction will take place on defensive or aggressive basis.

My model would answer both questions.

On the first issue of stability, the answer is that the Unipolar system is stable, due to its extremely concentrated power structure. Lacking the capabilities even to think of a possible counterbalancing action against United States, all other States accept this particular kind of polarity, without trying to overthrow it.

On the second issue of how the unipolar structure affects interstate relations, the model offers an explanation based on the changing incentives that the international power structure offers to the actors, according to the shifts in power concentration levels, as well as the intervention of the socialization process.

\textit{The structural specificity of Unipolarity}

To date, we have many definitions of unipolarity, all of them trying to capture the very essence of the unipolar system.

All these definitions tries to capture the main characteristic in which the unipolar system differs from bipolar, tripolar and multipolar systems. It is the existence of only one pole, which benefits from an enormous share of capabilities compared with other States within the system.

\textsuperscript{76} Nuno P. Monteiro, “Unrest Assured”
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 18.
Although some scholars tried to assimilate unipolarity with hegemony 78 or empire79, unipolarity has its distinct features that differentiate it from the mentioned typologies.

The unipolar system is an anarchical interstate-system. It is anarchical in that it lacks a central authority retaining the monopoly of force and coercing all the entities through a formal-legal framework of norms and rules. This implies that the unipole, though powerful, is not able to control the external behavior of other States and that these States are free to pursue their own interests in the way they prefer. This is a discerning point between anarchy and hegemony. It is also an interstate system, because “it implies the existence of many juridically equal nation-states, something an empire denies”80. Finally, unipolar systems have only one great power qualifying as a pole, which means that, on the global level, this Great Power is free to pursue its own interests and strategies facing no direct competitors81.

Unipolarity, thus, refers only to the specific polarity of the international system, and not to the order reproduced within it.

In a unipolar system, there is only one Great Power. The other States differ from it in that they lack the preponderant power as well as the global reach of the unipole. Such States are usually classified into two distinct categories, major and minor powers. Major Powers, although lacking the capabilities to confront directly the pole, have the capacity to deter any other State in the system, including the pole. Minor powers lack the capabilities to deter the pole and, in cases of conflict, they would be able to confront only a major power82.

In multipolar and bipolar systems, the systemic order is at the same time a product of the structure that influences actor’s behaviors, and of the units trying, through competition, to set their environment.

In a unipolar system, on the contrary, the sole Great Power is free to set its own systemic order, according to its own interests and through its preferred strategy83. This distinction is important in that it helps discerning structural effects from systemic effects. In the case of unipolarity, structural factors determines the pole’s condition of freedom from structural constraints and the absence of balancing against him. Systemic effects, on the contrary, are likely to stem directly from States’ interaction, and most of the time

82 The distinction between major power and minor powers is of no analytical relevance for the purpose of this article. The distinction is nonetheless useful to stress the extreme diversity occurring between the unipole and other States.
83 Reversing Waltz’s argument, it is possible to affirm that in a unipolar system, the unipole possesses “global interests which it can care for unaided, though help may often be desirable”. Kenneth N. Waltz, “The stability of a bipolar world”, 888; cited in Nuno P. Monteiro, “Unrest Assured”, 13.
they take the form of unintended, non-linear effects. In a unipolar system, the magnitude of these effects is directly dependent on unipole’s strategic behaviors.

In my view, the very defining property of a unipolar system is that it could emerge only in presence of a preponderant sea power. This assumption

This implies that there will be a global level and a regional level of interaction, with the first concerning interstate relations between the pole and all other States, and the second one concerning interstate relations between all the other States, within a region or between contiguous regions, where the logic of BoP theory still obtains.

Testing the model

The main argument of the model is that high degrees of systemic power concentration are conducive to systemic stability. In such a concentrated system like the unipolar one, I argue, structural incentives drives every States’ motivations towards status quo orientations for two main reasons. The first is that the specific power structure of a concentrated system like the unipolar one generates incentives for the stronger party, the unipole, to retain its position within the international power structure. As discussed earlier, an outweighing power as the one enjoyed by the United States frees a State from the structural constraints of Great Powers’ competition and lets it pursuing its own interests nearly everywhere across the globe. As highlighted by Layne, “A hegemonic power establishes the rules and norms of international order, and acts to provide security and stability in the international system”.

The condition of the pole is one of a State “liberated from the ropes”. A unipolar distribution of capabilities, thus, sets by itself the condition for the pole to preserve its position: by excluding any source of threats for its predominance within the system, it allows the pole to intervene constantly in support of its interests abroad. In this regard, the unipole is allowed to act freely within the boundaries of system preservation and, consequently, it will act in a preventive way, be it defensive or offensive, depending on the reach of its aim. To say it plainly, the unipole’s gap between “What he wants” and “What he can do” is very narrow. He has no security concerns about survival, and he sets its goals on more ambitious standards.

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85 Monteiro proposes his own “Theory of Unipolar Politics”, which revolves around the idea that, in a unipolar system, system’s dynamics are defined, in first place, by unipole’s selected strategies. Due to the high freedom the unipole experiences under a unipolar distribution of capabilities, the system’s balance will coincide with the one selected by the unipole, according to its evaluation of three characteristics: territorial arrangements, international political alignments and global distribution of power. If, on the one hand, is true that under unipolarity the only Great Power experiences a great freedom of action, it is nevertheless true that it will cope with structural constraints like anarchy, which will prevent him from achieving excessive goals.
88 Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 126.
After September 11th, for instance, United States felt their power position put in discussion by the hazardous action of Al Qaida, at home and abroad. The military campaign carried out by the United States against Afghanistan and Iraq, in order to overthrow their regimes, perceived as hostile to American Power, served to the declared goal of removing sources of instability from the system, and to preserve the systemic status quo. The final declared intention of the U.S., in the case of Iraq, was to “re-align” it and decrease its relative power by installing a more accommodative regime in Baghdad and ending its putative program of WMD.89 This has been the case for an offensive strategy fostered by status-quo oriented motivations, but there have been cases of defensive strategies pursued for the same goal. The most prominent example is the long-lasting struggle with China over economic and financial issues, pivoting around the dollar-yuan currency war. China’s claims of “peaceful growth”, in fact, are considered by the United States as a clear attempt to couple economic and industrial growth with the parallel development of the latent capabilities underlying realized military power.90 This would constitute a clear threat to American interests in that it would undermine the U.S. international power position as a pole. Among the most recent episodes, we find the harsh diplomatic and political confrontation with Russia, since the latter has taken a more active military role over the Syrian dispute. The eventuality of such a pro-active Russian role in the Middle-East alarmed American authorities, in that it would be highly undesirable for the U.S. to have Russia exerting influence in a region they consider of vital national interest.

The same logic obtains for secondary States, both major and lesser power. They experience the same structural incentives towards status-quo preservation, although they find themselves in a more uncomfortable situation. For secondary States, the preservation of the systemic status-quo is functional to their fundamental interest of survival. Any effort in changing the system, though too costly, could reveal to be fatal because the unipole could perceive it as an attempt to undermine its position. Such a behavior would surely end-up with a reaction of the pole. For secondary States, the gap between “what they want” and “what they can do” is particularly wide, and the best option is, still, to preserve their relative position within the international power structure by keeping the system unchanged. Even if they would favor a systemic change, this would mean to undertake a transition that would be both too costly and too difficult to manage, and whose final outcome would be highly uncertain. Their status-quo attitude, thus, is a structurally induced orientation that directly modifies their base motivations towards systemic preservation. There could be situations in which secondary States act on themselves to preserve their position in the international power structure and, as well as the pole, they can frame their behaviors in defensive or offensive ways, depending on the degree of the threat they face. For secondary States, even in a unipolar system, the logic of BoP theory

still applies. They are secondary States confronted to the unipole, but they are still near-equal capable actors in their regions.  

Although balancing is quite unattainable for secondary powers, they will even be less likely inclined to bandwagon with the unipole. Band-wagoning with the unipole, in a unipolar concentrated power structure, I argue, would imply an hypothetical engagement in meeting its military standards (although on a lower scale), that would reproduce the material difficulties of balancing. Band-wagoning, which some scholars conceive as a valuable alternative to balancing, is even counterproductive for secondary States’ interests, in that it could subsume their interests to the unipole’s commitments, diminishing sensibly their level of autonomy. The same logic attains for the unipole. Given that its primary focus is over systemic status-quo retention, and that in a unipolar system he does not face any direct threat to its survival, letting a State to band-wagon with him would mean getting entangled in possible territorial disputes which are well beyond the scope of its strategic interests. In a concentrated power structure, the unipole will be less likely to entangle himself in multilateral engagements and procedures, because it would lower its freedom of action in the pursuit of its strategic interests. For instance, during the first month of George W. Bush Jr. Presidency, the new Administration carried out a deep revision of its international commitments. During that month, the Administration abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, “unsigned” the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, repudiated the Kyoto Protocol, blocked a verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention, opposed a draft UN convention to reduce illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons, and reaffirmed the Senate’s 1999 rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The underlying justification for such an attitude was resumed by the motto “multilateral when we can, unilateral when we must” (Clinton administration).

Cooperation and socialization

My argument about sustained paths of cooperation within concentrated power structures is built upon the assumption that cooperation is the best option both for the unipole and other States. Moreover, the absence of the competition process on the global level, due the specific structure of unipolar systems, leaves more space for the socialization process to operate, through paths of cooperation. Whereas in bipolar and multipolar systems the security dilemma prevents units from coordinating themselves through

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joint policies, in unipolar systems this obstacle is removed and the choice to cooperate or not rests upon the single actors, depending on their satisfaction with the current order. Given that in such concentrated systems motivations are oriented towards status-quo preservation, the unipole will pursue its individual strategies to retain its dominant position within the system. The pursuit of this strategy, although functional to unipole’s interests, could entail some costs, be they political or economic. Cooperation is a viable alternative to avoid these costs when implementing strategies aimed to preserve the systemic status-quo. The impossibility of balancing and the undesirability of band-wagoning, both push secondary States to consider cooperation as a suitable alternative to enhance their position within the system. Through cooperation, in fact, they could benefit more broadly from the public goods provided by the unipole. In some cases, like in the one of cooperation over economic or security issues, it could turn out to be a suitable strategy to improve the position in the international power structure relative to other secondary States, while preserving the systemic status quo. It is worth nothing that cooperation is not the same of free-riding, in that it presupposes a symmetrical or a-symmetrical relationship between actors, measured on the scale of their real capabilities. Moreover, the existence of only one Great Power in the unipolar concentrated structure, removes the main obstacle to international cooperation, traditionally identified with the security dilemma fostered by Great Power competition. In a unipolar power structure, where anarchy eventually tames only unipole’s ambition to turn the anarchical order into a hierarchical one, there are no security gain concerns between the unipole and secondary states. The logic that security gains by one actor decreases the level of security of the other actor, thus preventing the two from cooperating, does not hold in a unipolar systems. The unipole, in fact, enjoys the maximum degree of security due to its power preponderance and geographic isolation, and

In a concentrated power structure like the unipolar one cooperation is thus encouraged by both structural conditions and actor’s motivations.

A striking example of this dynamic is given by the mass “migration” into Nato and EU, after 1990, of the former Warsaw Pact Countries. Through this re-alignment, such countries like Poland, Hungary and the Baltic States improved substantially their power position confronted to the former Soviet Union but, at the same time, they gave substantial support to the concentrated power structure of the time revolving around American power concentration.

In a concentrated power system like the unipolar one, cooperation paths take the form of asymmetrical relationships, in which the weaker part (secondary States) will add substantial stability to the system through

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96 Ibid., 169
the joint enactment of the unipole’s preferred policies. It is a matter of “take it or leave it”97, where secondary States have to decide whether to cooperate with the unipole is a game worth the candle or not. By the same vein, the unipole will cooperate if the benefit of taking on multilateral commitments through cooperation will outweigh the cost of entangling himself with such commitments. This is not to say that the unipole’s behaviors depend on its internal characteristics, like domestic political processes or internal preferences98. More simply, the unipole is animated by the desire to retain the systemic status quo, and he will go alone in achieving his goals when this option will not entail too high political and economic costs.

I defined cooperation as the behavioral dimension of socialization. This implies that when two or more actors are cooperating within the system, a socialization process is at work. Depending on the duration and the intensity of this process, socialization could permanently modify States’ preferences and perceptions about the “other”, in a self-reinforcing fashion. In this regard, the socialization process could exert substantial stabilizing effects on the system because it narrows the set of perceptions and beliefs that an actor could hold about another one, thus rendering interstate relations less exposed to uncertainty and misperceiving attitudes99.

By reiterating their cooperative paths, States socialize into the fundamental rules of the game of the system they live in. The EU is a striking example of a highly institutionalized environment, which led to full cooperation among its members, but others examples could be found in Nato as well as the other multilateral fora like G8, G20, WTO. The history of Transatlantic Relations showed to what measure continued cooperation could exert a substantial influence in reducing the foreign policy options of the States taking part in the process, a process that has gain even more momentum with the uprising of the unipolar system.

The main effect of socialization is thus to convey secondary States under the influence of the unipole, and to absorb them into the institutional and legal framework it has created to retain systemic status-quo. Such an absorption implies an acceptance of the role of the United States as the systemic regulator, and thus of the rules he sets to keep the status-quo unaltered. Such rules are the respect of human rights, the rule of law, the inhibition of nuclear proliferation, the free trade principles acceptance, the values of democracy. The more these rules are accepted and shared, the more the socializee shows willingness to accept the U.S. led order, thus reinforcing the overall stability of the system. U.S. – EU relations are one case of complete

99 This is not the case for a “Mature anarchy” to spring. The idea that I try to push forward is that in getting socialized, States tends to transform the international system into an international society. This is also the opinion expressed in Locatelli-Tortola, “Taking Waltz Beyond Waltz”, 11. See: Hedley Bull, “The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics”, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997
socialization, and one of the most successful examples of sustained cooperation despite adverse structural constraints.

There could even be cases in which the socialization process takes place in an incomplete manner, like in the case of U.S. – China relations. The relations between China and United States characterizes as a history of suspiciousness and mistrust. Starting in 1970, the gradual rapprochement between the two States left some gray spaces in their relations, mainly in the field of the acceptance of the liberal principles regarding human rights and democracy. Although China experienced a significant growth in capabilities over the years, the two States kept following their cooperative path, with an acceleration and an expansion of the involved issue areas after 1990. At the date, China is part of the WTO, has tight economic and political relations with the U.S. and shares responsibilities in international counterterrorism activities. Moreover, China is gaining diplomatic weight on the international stage, in such areas like global carbon emissions reduction. Besides this cooperative attitude, China shows also an orientation towards rearmament, both in naval and land power\textsuperscript{100}, with a sound defense spending increment of 180% during the last decade. Moreover, China shows the desire to gain more political weight on the Asian Continent through the means of economic influence. Although it seems that China has started abandoning North Korea to its faith, it nevertheless keeps opened the Taiwan issue. Nonetheless, the frictions that U.S. and China experience over the economic-military issue seem not to have effects on their cooperative path, as much of the disagreement is perceived to rest on the part of China over the acceptance of the liberal principles of democracy and human rights\textsuperscript{101}. In either case, given the rapid growth of the Chinese power, such a socialization process into the U.S. led order could lead to a less turbulent transition than hypothesized by neorealist when the time will come to China to become a Great Power\textsuperscript{102}.

The cooperation path with China is, probably, the most sensitive to the claim I advance in this paper, that is high levels of power concentration would lead to sustained path of cooperation. In the case of China, this is true, even if it qualifies as the most probable competitor of the United States in the near future.\textsuperscript{103} Such a cooperative path supports the idea that in concentrated power structures, structural incentives towards the preservation of the systemic status quo are so high, that even a likely competitor of the leading power could opt to cooperate with it instead of trying to change the system in its favor.

Moreover, cooperation through socialization has undoubtedly stabilizing effects over the whole system, because it encourages both the unipole and, in this case, the likely competitor, to solve their frictions in ways


\textsuperscript{102} Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, “After Unipolarity”

different from military confrontation. This is due to an underlying property of the socialization process, that is its capacity to gradually turn interstate relations from power-based relations into social based ones. In other words, sustained cooperation paths, entailing a socialization process, lead to the stratification of international roles which, at the origin, where described only by power’s relation based on the international distribution of capabilities. The more these cooperative paths hold the more States’ perceptions and evaluations about a relationship of alignment or hostility are transformed into a specific role, which goes well beyond the realist logic of the influence of material structural constraints. In this respect, the roles emerging from the socialization process could be considered as a sort of structural modifiers, borrowing from Snyder’s insights.\(^\text{104}\)

Take, for instance, EU-U.S. relationship in the contemporary political system. The relationship between these two entities affected the way they interacted since 1990. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, European States gradually changed their mind towards their relationship with the U.S. from a “necessary” one into a “useful, just” one. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, relationships with the U.S. were founded primarily on the necessity to get the shoulders covered from the Soviet threat. What European States expected from the relationship with the U.S. was the provision of security and economic strenghtness. This was, thus, a relationship based on a medium degree of alignment, of which Nato was the most direct expression. After 1990, the disappearance of the Soviet Threat had a substantial effect on the way European States conceived their relationship with the U.S. They changed their mind from a “necessary alliance” to a “useful and just partnership”, thus migrating from a relationship of alignment to a relationship of strong partnership and cooperation. The point of interest is that European shifts of expectations with respect to their interaction with the U.S., occurred when the international power structure undergone a substantial change. It was not the relationship to modify the structure, nor the role of allied emerging from it. Rather, the way the international structure affected U.S. – Europe interaction was mediated by the role of allied emerging from such a relationship of alignment, and to which both actors conformed. Before the structural change from bipolarity to unipolarity, U.S. – Europe relations were already framed in a moderate cooperative interaction. After the change, structural incentives to cooperation modified the interaction path between the U.S. and the European States, leading to a more strict cooperation and its broadening over a large amount if international issues. The socialization process through which U.S. and European States got used to relate to each other as allied kept working, bringing them to recast their interaction in terms of strong global partners, as a consequence of the change of the underlying relationship. In a concentrated power structure like the

\(^{104}\) Glenn Snyder originally thought of structural modifiers like technology, institutions and norms, in his effort to expand neorealism explanatory power. The rationale for such a theorizing was that, despite material structural constraints exert a real influence over States’ interaction, a great deal of structural effects could be better explained by integrating the analysis with non-material factors which stems directly from unit-level interaction. In this respect, roles, which are the behavioral translation of relationships, could rise as the structural modifiers which permanently modify the way in which international political structure affects States’ interaction.
unipolar one, the role of strong partners affects the way U.S. and E.U. interact in that it leads to higher degree of cooperation than it would be expected by relying solely on the traditional neorealist framework. The same logic obtains even for U.S. – China relations, which are characterized by ambivalent relationships of alignment, common and conflicting interest and interdependence. The roles emerging from such an ambivalent relationship are various, and they could be summed up as: Global protector vs. Regional balancer, Great Power vs. Rising power, Global Partners.

In this case, the socialization process works in strengthening these role differences, framing in a more defined way the social context within which the two actors interact. The definition of these roles affect the way the unipolar power structure influence U.S. – China interaction, by limiting the number of the strategic options they will chose when facing with particular issues. The result is a modified interactional dynamic than the one expected by a purely material neorealist theorization, which, possibly, is able to neutralize some structural effects. In this specific case, the most likely one could be a peaceful structural change.

Despite structural changes, thus, states’ relations could acquire a resilient character thanks to the definition of specific roles for each one. The socialization process, in this respect, works as a selector in that it punishes the inobservance of a specific role and rewards the adherence to it. Following this logic, the general paths of cooperation that we can observe in the current concentrated unipolar power structure, could be a product of such a stratification mechanism, which prevents balancing from taking place even if an actor is capable of engaging in it.

**Conclusions**

Structural realism is still the most valuable methodological approach to IR to explain the complex reality of International Politics. The evolution of IR theory marked several step forward in expanding the explanatory power of theories and models, broadening the field with a more interdisciplinary approach in the study of International Relations.

Political realism still provides solid bases for the development of IR paradigms, be them aligned or in contrast with realists formulations, as well as it has been the main theoretical bedrock on which Neorealism has developed its own approach. Although realism is still considered the most original insights provider for the study of IR (actually, a well-deserved reputation), it has not yet found its definitive theoretical dimension. Neorealism, realism’s spin-off, has been an effort to reframe realist thinking into a more scientific conceptualization of International Relations. Despite the powerful hypothesis provided by the Neorealist paradigm, however, it still remains stuck with some conceptual as well as theoretical weaknesses. Some of these weaknesses has been unveiled with the emergence of Unipolarity and the specific dynamics that take place within.

In this article I tried to reframe structural realism in a way consistent with the main realist tenets, and incorporating some useful insights from other IR paradigms.
Going beyond the notorious parsimony of Waltz BoP theory, I enriched its structural realist theory with three variables, Power Concentration, Geography and Socialization, in the effort to overcome some of the explanatory problems that his theory faces when confronted with Unipolarity, in particular the one of its stability.

First, I assumed that international actors are responsive agents, sensitive to shifts in capabilities in addition to structural constraints. Such an assumption makes a fundamental depart from the traditional realist assumption of actors’ rationality, and draws directly from sociology and structuration theory. Through the integration of the power concentration variable, as a underlying property of polarity, I tried to show that, apart from shifts in the number of poles, the effects of anarchy are mediated through actor’s active evaluation of power inequalities between them. I discerned between two kind of power structures, diffused and concentrated. The former obtains when capabilities are near-equally distributed between the poles, the latter when their distribution is more uneven. Both power structures could exist under different polarities. By virtue of their responsive nature, actors adjust their attitudes and orientations in accordance with their real capabilities. I tried taking the reasoning a step further in the explanation of the causal link between polarity and stability, overcoming the rather mechanistic explanation of structural realism about behaviors under certain polarities.

Secondly, I integrated geography in the broader neorealist theoretical framework, as an explanatory variable for the changing attitude towards different type of actors. The main assumption is that there is a fundamental difference between continental powers and sea powers, in that they pose completely different threats to security. The kind of interests held by sea power are inherently different from the ones held by continental power. Due to their geographical position, sea powers are less concerned with the imperative need of survival, and set their goal in a more ambitious, less threatening for other States’ security, way. Therefore, jointly with power concentration, actors discriminate between different kinds of threats, and are more prone to accept the existence of dominant sea power than a continental one. This proved usefully in explaining why in concentrated power structures, there could be cases in which a predominant sea power faces no balancing, even if the distribution of capabilities could allow active engagement.

Finally, I have drawn from the Constructivist paradigm and Role Theory to further develop the concept of socialization and the role it plays in the international dynamic. According to Waltz, socialization is a transmission belt through which structural constraints exerts their influence on structural behavior. Building on Waltz insight of socialization, I tried to show that socialization works in a way that could consolidate a structural condition of extreme power concentration, like unipolarity, through the enforcement of particular roles. The stratification of such roles in interstate interaction could be able to countervail some structural effects in terms of interstate interaction as, for instance, is the case for continued and sustained cooperative paths of interaction under unipolarity. Framed in this way, roles play the function of structural modifiers, and
can change completely the way in which international structure affects actors’ behavior, bringing a radical shift in the international dynamic.