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Introduction

1.1 Identity and polarity

To understand the subject of this book ask yourself: what would world politics have been like between 1945 and 1989 if the US and the Soviet Union had both been democracies? What difference would it have made if the two superpowers that emerged to dominate international relations after the Second World War had shared a liberal ideology rather than being at opposite ends of the political spectrum? If you think there would have been little difference, then you accept the logic that the distribution of power – in that case bipolarity – is the overriding determinant of how great powers relate to each other. You assume that *any* two great powers facing each other in the international arena will necessarily fall into rivalry and seek at least to balance, and perhaps to destroy, the power of the other. You will discount the arguments of believers in democratic peace theory that liberal democracies relate to each other in a less security-driven way, and that condominium might have been an alternative outcome to rivalry. You will also have to reject much of Huntington's (1996) argument about the clash of civilizations, the logic of which rests on differences of identity much more than on the distribution of power. If, on the other hand, you think that a bipolar world composed of two liberal democracies would have generated a very different history from that of the Cold War, then you accept that identity matters, and that by itself the distribution of power cannot predict how the major states in the international system will relate to each other. The first view offers a compellingly simple way of understanding world politics, but only at the price of the heroic assumption that identity doesn't matter. The second view is inevitably more complicated because it introduces another set of

factors into what one needs to know in order to think coherently about world politics. Some of the flavour of this complexity can be exposed by asking yourself what the 1945–89 history would have been like if both superpowers had been communist ruled? Given the actual record of rivalry among communist states during the Cold War it is not unreasonable to speculate that, in such a case, ideological closeness of that particular kind might have produced an outcome not all that dissimilar from the Cold War. Indeed, taking into account the narcissism of small differences, an inter-communist rivalry might well have been worse than that between the champions of communism and capitalism. If identity makes a difference, it does so in ways that depend heavily on the particular characteristics of the identities in play, and not just whether they are similar or different. The aim of this book is to explore what a combination of polarity and identity can tell us about the structure and character both of the world politics we have been in since the ending of the Cold War, and of the world politics that lie ahead post-September 11.

The question of how polarity and identity play into each other matters for two reasons, one broad, one narrow. The broad reason is that the idea of polarity has been, and continues to be, enormously influential in the media and public policy discussions about world politics. During the Cold War, bipolarity framed the entire understanding of what was going on. Because there was nearly complete harmony between the polarity assumption that two superpowers must be rivals, and because of the ideological clash between totalitarian communism and democratic capitalism, the identity issue got largely absorbed into the debates about the distribution of power, only re-emerging when the Soviet Union began to abandon its ideological position. Bipolarity defined Africa, Asia and Latin America as the third world, and supported a logic of balancing that legitimized not only huge accumulations of weaponry, but also many interventions, some large and deeply destructive to the societies concerned. With the ending of the Cold War a period of confusion developed in which there were competing claims about whether the world was (or was shortly going to be) multipolar or unipolar. There was also a strong challenge to the whole idea of polarity in the rhetoric of globalization, which put forward a quite different, much less state-based, way of understanding the general structure of world politics. But by the late 1990s, and particularly after the events of 11 September 2001, the idea that world politics was unipolar had achieved dominance in the public debates. The narrow reason why the question of polarity and identity matters is that polarity theory is a lively and influential force in academic theories about how to understand the operation of the international system. So although it is contested, polarity plays a big role in how large numbers of people, both expert and lay, understand the world in which they live. Since in the

social world how we understand things conditions how we behave, the prominence of polarity as a concept is itself part of the political reality it purports to explain. And since polarity is important because it is believed, it is vital to make explicit the limits to the understanding of identity that are built into polarity theory.

In this book I do four things:

- I set out the idea of identity, survey the problems of using this idea to think about world politics, and look specifically at how identity and polarity interact with each other. This is the subject of chapter 2 and the conclusions to part I;
- I investigate the concept of polarity and the theory attached to it in their own right, identify some core problems with the basic ideas, and propose solutions to them. This is the subject of chapters 3 to 5;
- combining these two approaches, I develop three scenarios for thinking about the future of world politics in terms of the most likely combinations of polarity and identity. This is the subject of part II;
- finally, I offer some reflections on the policy opportunities and constraints that affect how both the US and the other great powers can affect which of the scenarios becomes dominant.

The book is thus a conscious attempt to combine material and social approaches to understanding world politics. Polarity is a materialist concept. It assumes that the distribution of capabilities largely determines what the behaviour of the actors in the system will be. Identity is a constructivist concept. It assumes that who the actors think they are, and how they construct their identities in relation to each other, shapes behaviour independently from the distribution of capabilities. In a materialist view, the basic relational dynamics of the world never change: power politics is always the game, and the only key variable is the distribution of capabilities. In a social view, a whole spectrum of games is possible, ranging from conflictual power politics on one end, through coexistence and cooperation in the middle, to convergence and confederation on the other end. My approach will be to locate polarity within a social context. I take as given that there is a society of states which has its own rules, norms and institutions (Buzan 2004a). The character of this society is itself open to change as some institutions die out (e.g. colonialism), others rise to prominence (e.g. nationalism during the nineteenth century, the market and multilateralism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and yet others remain in place but get reinterpreted in ways that alter the practices that they legitimate (e.g. sovereignty and non-intervention, war and balance of power during the second half of the twentieth century). The society of states is the container within which the distribution of

capabilities and the logic of power politics operate. Sometimes the social structure will line up with, and reinforce, the logic of power politics, as was the case during the Cold War. Sometimes the social structure will undercut the logic of power politics, as might have been the case if both the Soviet Union and the US had been liberal democracies after the Second World War, and as many thought was the case in the decade after the end of the Cold War.

A discussion of this sort inevitably hinges to a considerable extent on definitions. I will have more to say on definitions in subsequent chapters, but let me set down some general markers now. Under the influence of Waltz (1979) the usage of polarity has become more disciplined. Polarity refers to the number of great powers in the international system. It does not mean the coalition structure among the powers, which is (somewhat confusingly) called *polarization*. Thus a multipolar system like that in 1914, which had as many as nine great powers, was bipolarized because most of the powers were members of either the Triple Alliance or the Triple Entente. Polarization may or may not follow the pattern of polarity, but in this book I intend to observe the distinction between these two concepts. Identity has many facets, and I will explore these briefly in chapter 2. Because this is a book about international relations generally, and relations among great powers in particular, my main focus is on how identity, and the interplay between Self and Other, works for collective actors (mostly, but not only, states). I concentrate specifically on political identity, particularly the ideologies that political actors use to constitute themselves, legitimate their political structures and processes, and differentiate themselves from each other.

1.2 Outline of the book

The four chapters in part I set out the ideas of identity and polarity on which this way of understanding world politics rests. Chapter 2 focuses on the question of collective identity in international relations as a way of understanding how the major powers relate to each other. The inherently relational quality of the linkage between Self and Other means that identity is an inescapable part of whether the major powers interact as enemies, rivals or friends. Indeed, the status of great power is itself an element of identity which shapes how certain states see themselves. The particular character of specific collective ideological identities also matters, with some forms and combinations particularly likely to generate conflict, and others more open to possibilities of coexistence or friendship. The problems of (in)stability in identity are investigated and found to be neither more nor less difficult than those associated with

changes in material power. I adopt a Wendtian scheme of enemies, rivals and friends for looking at the social structure of interstate society as composed by the major powers, and link this into neorealist, liberal and English school models for understanding interstate society. The conclusion is that polarity structures can only be understood and interpreted on the basis of knowing what sort of international social structure contains them.

Chapters 3 to 5 take a close look at both the concept of polarity and the concept of great power, which underpins polarity and establishes why the domestic character of such power matters. The reason that polarity gets three chapters while identity gets only one is that my use of identity is fairly straightforward, whereas I need to argue for some significant changes to the conventional understanding of polarity. The central concern is that neorealism's commitment to what Hansen (2000: 18) calls a single stratification of states into great powers and other states is flawed, and this flaw is crucial to how polarity is understood. The argument is that the approach more common among practitioners of distinguishing between great powers and superpowers is both more descriptively accurate and more theoretically rewarding. This discussion is focused primarily on the internal logic of polarity theory, largely leaving aside the question of how polarity and identity relate.

In chapter 3 I sketch out what polarity means, what role it has played in academic and public policy debates over the past half century, and what its strengths and weaknesses are as an analytical device for understanding international relations. I raise the question as to whether it is polarity in general that is interesting, or only bipolarity, and note that, while unipolarity has become a mainstream way of characterizing the present international power structure, the theoretical and analytical implications of this have only begun to be addressed. In the chapters that follow, I argue that polarity remains a valuable way of understanding international relations, and particularly international security, but not in the excessively narrow and rigid form that has followed on from Waltz's formulation of neorealism. The aim is to combine in a single argument the insights of policy debates and academic theory, and to bring these two worlds into stronger contact.

Chapter 4 presents a critical survey of how the concepts of great power, and more recently superpower, are used to understand the structure of international power politics during three historical periods. The period before 1945 is generally thought of as multipolar, and is talked about in terms of between four and nine great powers. The Cold War period is almost always characterized as bipolar, and is talked about in terms of two superpowers. The period since 1991 has proved more difficult to pin down in polarity terms. Some talk of unipolarity and a single

superpower, others of re-emergent multipolarity, and others of some kind of mix containing one superpower and several other significant powers. The argument is that most of these usages represent a flawed conception of great power. The source of this flaw is traced to the transfer of the concept from a European to a global context, and I argue that here, as elsewhere, size matters. What serves on one scale does not necessarily work on other scales. Some of the confusion about the present era arises from failure to recognize that the distinction between great powers and superpowers also operated during the Cold War and pre-1945 periods. Understanding that, and following through its implications, makes the present era look less unusual than it does if seen as following from a strict bipolar structure.

Chapter 5 turns to the problem of definition on which these confusions rest. It looks first at the classical definitions of great power, and at the two contending traditions – material capability and standing in international society – underpinning these. It also looks at the longstanding problem of inability to devise objective material measures with which to underpin a ranked classification of states in terms of power. The argument builds on the understanding from chapter 4 that there are reasonably clear and systematic criteria by which great powers and superpowers can and should be differentiated from each other. It goes on from that both to propose new all-purpose definitions for *great powers* and *superpowers*, and to set up *regional powers* as the most useful way of designating the next rank down. The chapter concludes by examining two main consequences of these redefinitions for polarity theory, and for the public policy discourse that rests implicitly or explicitly on the idea of polarity. The first consequence of a framework based on distinguishing among superpowers, great powers and regional powers is to render almost unworkable the idea that simple characterizations such as bipolarity can be used as a basis for general cause–effect statements about world politics. In a world in which both superpowers and great powers are recognized as coexisting, simple polarities will be the exception rather than the rule. But since much effort over the last decades to find firm relationships between polarity and a variety of aspects of war and peace has anyway proved fruitless, this loss is not as serious as might at first appear. The second consequence of the differentiation among superpowers, great powers and regional powers is to highlight the need to investigate structural questions about how different combinations of superpowers, great powers and regional powers relate to each other. This turns out to be the basis for some very useful scenarios (the subject of part II) with which one can capture the essential dynamics, dilemmas and directions of the post-Cold War international system. The essential idea of polarity theory – that one can understand a few big and important things about world politics by

looking at the international power structure – turns out to be sound. What gets opened up is both a more accurate conceptualization of the global power structure and a set of hypotheses with which one can explore the structural logics both of power politics within any given configuration of power, and of the potential transformations from one configuration to another. What may be lost in the ability to represent the international system in terms of simple numbers is made up for by the ability to explore the interplay between superpowers and great powers, and between both and regions. In this case, bringing the academic and practitioner conversations about polarity more into line may not only facilitate communication between them, but also make theorizing more relevant to policy.

The conclusions to part I draw together the arguments about polarity and identity by showing how they fit into (neo)realist, neoliberal and solidarist assumptions about the social structure of international politics in terms of Wendt's scheme of enemies, rivals and friends.

The three chapters in part II focus on the interplay of polarity and identity, or material and social structure, in the contemporary world. Each takes on one of the main scenarios suggested by differentiating great powers and superpowers. The current system is presented as one superpower plus four great powers (China, the EU, Japan, Russia), and if that is accepted then there are three main scenarios that define its most probable future. The key to these scenarios is possible change (or not) in the number of superpowers.

Chapter 6 explores the first and most likely scenario, which is for relative continuity with one superpower plus several (e.g. three, four or five) great powers. In this scenario, the US remains the sole superpower, and the number of great powers either stays the same or rises or falls slightly (perhaps India makes it into the great power ranks, perhaps Russia drops out). The scenario starts by deriving some basic neorealist-type rules for how the superpower and the great powers relate to each other under these structural conditions, and widens out from this narrow assumption of enemies and rivals to consider social structures of rivals and friends. The argument is that, while the US is substantially conforming to neorealist expectations, the great powers are doing so only in a limited way. The chapter then turns to the interplay between powers and regions, looking at the role that regions play in sustaining, and even defining, the US position as the sole superpower. The US has adopted a *swing-power* strategy in which it positions itself as a member of three macro-regions (Asia-Pacific, North Atlantic, Western hemisphere) as a way of legitimizing its actual presence as an outside power in Europe, East Asia and Latin America. The chapter concludes that continuity of the existing structure is more possible than is suggested by strict neorealist rules, and

that the major potential for disrupting the present structure lies in how the US conducts its foreign policy.

Chapter 7 sets out the scenarios where, in a reversal of the historical trend towards decline in the number of superpowers, their number increases. What would a world politics with two or possibly three superpowers plus several great powers look like (e.g. where there are three or four great powers, and either China or the EU, or both, achieve promotion to superpower status)? These scenarios are the least likely ones for the near future because neither the EU nor China is convincingly positioned to achieve superpower status for at least a couple of decades. A two-superpower scenario would return us to the polarity structure of the Cold War, but I argue that, whether the second superpower was either China or the EU, the social structure, and therefore the whole character of relations among the superpowers, would be sharply different from what happened between 1945 and 1989. With the EU, and even with China twenty years down the line, there would be much less of an identity clash with the US than there was with the Soviet Union, and much more possibility for relationships of rivals and/or friends. The three-superpower scenario would create a polarity structure similar to that of the interwar years, yet again with a radically different and much less ideologically divided social structure. In each case the same approach is used as in chapter 6, starting out with rules for superpowers and great powers, and looking at the consequences for and from regions. Among other things, the development of this scenario would sharply undercut the swing strategy that is a core feature of present-day US superpower status.

Chapter 8 opens with discussion of a scenario that has so far been largely hidden by the rigidities of neorealist definitions of polarity, but which comes into clear view when the distinction between superpowers and great powers is introduced. This is the case in which the historical decline in the number of superpowers continues, leaving a system with no superpowers and a number of great powers. I argue that this is the most likely alternative to the present structure of one superpower and no great powers. The necessary condition is that the US either loses, or steps down from, its superpower status, leaving a system composed only of great powers. As far as I am aware, nobody has explored the idea of an international system which has *no* truly global powers in it, but only a collection of super-regional great powers. For the all-great-power scenario the key question is whether or not one or more of the powers would bid for superpower status. Neorealist reasoning would suggest that such a bid, or possibly more than one, should be the expected outcome. This idea and the possible alternatives to it are given close examination, as is the argument that any expectation of such an outcome

would be a constraint on US options to abandon the sole superpower slot. Both scenarios are examined in terms of how the present behaviour of the powers lines up with or against the expectations of the rules of power politics. In addition, I extend the discussion of the significance of and for regions in such a global power structure, and also for international society and the international political economy.

The two chapters in part III focus on US foreign policy and what can be done about it. In chapter 9 the key questions are why the US has moved into a more imperial mode, and how durable that shift might be. Because the US plays such a central role in all three scenarios, the intertwined questions of how its domestic character plays into its foreign policy, and how international relations play into US domestic affairs, become absolutely crucial. I look at the sources of US foreign policy in American exceptionalism, and at the impact on these traditions first of unipolarity, and then of September 11. The argument is that unipolarity and September 11 have greatly amplified predispositions towards unilateralism, Manicheanism and hypersecuritization, and that while this shift could be durable it creates tensions with other powerful strands within American exceptionalism.

Chapter 10 provides a summary of the main arguments, and then examines the options and responsibilities of the great powers in relation to the US and the structure of international society. Because a substantial part of the structure of unipolarity is social, what the great powers do matters both to the stability and the character of the sole superpower system, and to which of the alternative scenarios becomes its most likely successor. The great powers have some ability to shape US behaviour, and have to face hard and complicated decisions about whether the new imperial tendencies in US policy are best countered by opposition to, detachment from, or seeking to remain in partnership with, a sole superpower displaying rogue tendencies. I argue that the great powers need to accept US leadership, but to reject its imperial project. They have to reassert the role of loyal opposition and friendly critic, and reject emphatically the ‘with us or against us’ choice offered after September 11 by President Bush.

Throughout the argument I adopt a strategy of deliberate theoretical pluralism. My argument rests on the conclusion that, while a strict neorealist approach is an interesting and powerful place to start, it is by itself too narrowly based to tell us all that much of interest about the condition of unipolarity. The distribution of material power among states is a key foundation on which to build, but the other neorealist assumptions about survivalism and the struggle for power represent an impoverished, and in some ways dangerous (because of the risk of self-fulfilling prophecies), view of the motivations and relationships that comprise

international relations. So also does neorealism's sidelining of the domestic level, which puts too much weight on systemic determinants of behaviour and the 'likeness' of units, and largely reads out of the analysis the effect of the internal structure and ideology of the great powers. To build on the neorealist foundation, one needs to take into account not just power and conflict, but also the social and economic structures of the international system, and the way these are projected by, and play into, the domestic life of the major powers. To accomplish that I bring in insights from the English school, IPE, globalism, and constructivism about international society, as well as from literatures focused mainly on the domestic character of states, and explain how those elements play into foreign policy and are affected by inputs from the international system.

My approach retains a neorealist quality in its emphasis on the major powers. I broadly accept the proposition that this simplification is an efficient way of capturing many of the core features of international relations. This view is compatible with English school thinking, which allocates a central managerial role to great powers; with the Wendtian version of constructivism; and with those branches of IPE that make hegemony or its absence their focus of concern. Particularly in the context of a discussion about unipolarity, it can also be interpreted as having some complementarity with those branches of globalist thinking that highlight a centre–periphery structure as their way of understanding international relations. As a corollary, I accept the costs of such a simplification, among which are that the analysis marginalizes both the smaller players and issues such as human rights, which have high moral claims but which rank lower in the practical agenda of the powers. This choice reflects the theorist's inclination to simplify in order to understand the essentials of things that are otherwise too complex to grasp in full. It also reflects the normative view that a better understanding of these big things is a precondition for effective action on a wide range of other agendas. I do not take up the macro-critiques of neorealism partly on the grounds that my theoretically pluralist approach covers some of them, and partly on the grounds that such a move would take the book into the general debates about the conceptual and normative problems of theorizing international relations, a subject adequately covered elsewhere in the literature (Hollis and Smith 1990; Smith et al. 1996; Rengger 2000). To this extent, my approach is in bed with neorealism, but in several other ways it runs quite strongly against the neorealist canon. I take the particularities of history not as an unimportant background above which structural forces play, but as an important counterforce against pure structural logic. I depart from a strictly military/political (and, more to the point, materialist, power political) view of structural theory, and accept the role of social and economic structures as independent determinants of

behaviour. And I reject (its attractions as another great simplifier notwithstanding) the strict rationalist view that actors and their interests and identities are preconstituted and fixed. The rationalist approach, it seems to me, is only tenable (and perhaps not even then) within a single sector (whether economic or political). When one moves into consideration of multiple sectors, the playoffs among different interests and identities, and the necessity to resolve them in some way, point powerfully to the mutual constitution of actors and structures. Combining insights from these different theoretical layers is a way of building a bridge between the insights of academic theorists and those of the public policy discourse.

