

## Polarity and War: The Weak Case for the Bipolar Stability Theory

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*The idea that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity has become dominant in the last decades. However, few studies have used historical cases of bipolarity for supporting or contradicting this theory. This paper briefly describes all the known cases of bipolar systems in history, with their duration, the distribution of power, and major wars. It then compares the occurrence of major war under both bipolarity and multipolarity. The results of this study show that bipolar systems are more unstable than multipolar ones.*

**Keywords:** *bipolarity, multipolarity, major war, peace, international system*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Soviet-U.S. competition and the ‘impossible peace, unlikely war’ that characterized the Cold War era has naturally led to numerous studies from researchers attempting to find out whether bipolarity could lead to a peaceful conclusion or if World War III was the only way out. Bipolarity has of course been extensively compared to the multipolar system that existed until 1945.

Much has been written about the respective merits of bipolar and multipolar systems. Most of the arguments that have been suggested are theory-based and rely on an abstract vision of bipolarity grounded in the experience of the Cold War. The mainstream view is that bipolar systems are more stable - i.e., less prone to the outbreak of major wars - than multipolar ones.<sup>1</sup> This view has become dominant with the advent of neorealism. For simplicity, I refer hereafter to this line of thinking as the ‘bipolar stability theory’. Several arguments supporting the bipolar stability theory have been proposed (Beres, 1973: 652–654; Gaddis, 1986: 108–109; Mearsheimer, 2001: chap. 9; Waltz, 1964: 883–884, 1979: chap. 8):

- A multipolar world will be more violent simply because there are more opportunities for war than in a bipolar world. Statistically, the larger the number of dyads, the greater the possibility of conflict.
- The larger number of great powers there are, the harder it is to decode the intentions of each of them. Therefore, in a bipolar world, a great power is less likely to miscalculate the resolution of its rival than in a world of numerous great powers. Bipolarity also makes it simpler to assess accurately the balance of power.
- In a world of only two great powers, it is impossible to pass the buck of balancing to someone else; great powers have an incentive to react quickly to any crisis. Thus a potential hegemon has a harder time to ‘divide and conquer’ than in a multipolar world. Under bipolarity, there should be no big imbalance of power; states would therefore be less tempted to attack. Deterrence is easier to maintain. Moreover, small allies enjoy close relations with their bloc leader. One great power cannot attack the other great power’s allies and hope that it will not defend them; there is less leeway for potential

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<sup>1</sup> The words peace and stability are used here indifferently.

wars.

- In a bipolar world, allies have little effect on the global balance of power. The two great powers rest mainly on internal balancing for competing. Since great powers depend less on their allies, allies cannot drag them into unwanted wars as easily as it would be under multipolarity. The bloc leader in a bipolar world can also use its preeminence to interfere into its small allies' internal politics and so align the small allies' policies on its own interest, thus making entrapment less likely.
- The absence of third parties makes it easier for the two great powers to enter into agreements or to cooperate. Consequently, it is much simpler to create and maintain collective security regimes. Fear of attack is less pronounced, since two great powers cannot gang up to attack a third one as in a multipolar world.
- Paradoxically, crises may be recurrent under bipolarity because leaders may prefer to start a diplomatic crisis immediately rather than letting the situation degrade until a limited or even a total war becomes unavoidable. Diplomatic crises are used as a way to diffuse tensions. Both great powers are very wary not to escalate beyond the point of no return. This pattern of preventive crisis is quite visible in the Cuban missile crisis.
- A bipolar world rests on a delicate balance. Political leaders are more likely to handle the relations with the other great power with care. Because the stakes are high, they would be more likely to opt for cautious policies and restraint. Great powers have therefore an incentive to pick high-quality leaders and not risk-taking mavericks.

Other theorists argue that multipolar systems, on the contrary, should be less violent than bipolar ones. This way of thinking can be traced back to classical realism and has been supported by several lines of argument (Deutsch and Singer, 1964: 396–402; Kaplan, 1957: 692–693, 1962: chap. 12; Morgenthau, 1973: chap. 19; Van Evera, 1990: 36–40; Wayman, 1984: 61–62):

- In a bipolar system, no third party exists to redress imbalances of power. External balancing is impossible. Great powers rely on their own forces alone. If a gap of power forms, there is no way to fill it back. This lack of potential allies can lead to desperation and more aggressive policies. At the unit level, the inescapability of internal balancing obliges states to develop massive defense apparatuses, thus fostering militaristic tendencies.
- When a potential hegemon arises in a multipolar world, it is usually faced by an overwhelming balancing coalition. On the contrary, in a bipolar world, the would-be hegemon does not have to fear the formation of a crushing coalition. There is nothing to limit its ambitions. Since, in a multipolar system, potential hegemons have to impede the others from following the same path, they show greater proclivity for maintaining a stable balance of power.
- In a bipolar world, there are no powerful allies to restrain the great powers, since great powers are militarily independent from their weak allies. There is no potential moderator or balancer for intermediating in great power conflicts. On the contrary, in multipolar systems, states have to mind several powers and not just one. Under bipolarity, great powers are freer to attack each other without having to worry about a potential attack from a third great power.
- Multipolarity obliges states to divide their attention between several powers. Patterns of great powers relations are more complex and the enemy of today can become the friend of tomorrow. Relations are thus less implacable and definitive. Under bipolarity,

great powers have only one other great power to mind and are so trapped in an endless duel. Consequently, in a bipolar world, arms races escalate faster because any military buildup is inherently directed against the other great power, which has to react promptly. More poles therefore mean more stability.

The only way to test these hypotheses and the validity of the bipolar stability theory is to resort to a study of bipolar systems throughout history. In this article, I briefly describe all the cases that match my definition of bipolarity, with a focus on the occurrence of major war. In the discussion part, I compare major wars under both bipolarity and multipolarity. This shows that the bipolar peace theory is not supported by history.

## 2. KEY CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGY

Surprisingly enough, few studies have analyzed bipolarity through an historical approach.<sup>2</sup> The present study's aim is to bridge this gap by examining all the cases of bipolarity observable in history and by doing so exhibit the relationship between bipolarity and stability. I define stability as the relative absence of major war.

Before everything else, it is important not to confuse two concepts that are sometimes not clearly distinguished: bipolarity and bipolarization (Rapkin, Thompson, and Christopherson, 1979). Bipolarity is understood as an international system where only two great powers are found. Bipolarization describes an international system divided between two main alliances or blocs. Indeed, a multipolar system can become bipolarized (for example pre-World War I alliance systems). Wayman (1984: 76) argues that the two phenomena have contrasting effects; while bipolarity is a stabilizing force, bipolarization maximizes the risk of war. The present study is only concerned with bipolarity.

What makes a great power must be defined. I have employed Mearsheimer's definition of a great power as a state having "sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world" and, for contemporary cases, possessing "a nuclear deterrent that can survive a nuclear strike against it" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 5). Military might is thus the ultimate form of power; other factors such as population and economy are taken into account as long as they are inputs for generating military capabilities. In detail, land forces are the most essential form of military power; I add naval power to the analysis only when it is relevant for explaining the balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2001: chaps. 3–4). No secondary state is strong enough on its own to compete and potentially defeat a great power. Consequently, a bipolar system is a system where military capabilities are mainly concentrated among only two states. A large gap of military power divides these two states from the third more powerful one (Wagner, 1993: 85).<sup>3</sup> In a bipolar system, all the states outside of the duopoly, starting from the number three power downward, are considered as secondary states.

The concept of system is used here in the realist sense of the term; several states interacting together form an anarchic international system. International systems are defined by Aron (2004: chap. 4) as a grouping of states which enjoy regular relations and where all of

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<sup>2</sup> Among them, the strongest and most extensive is Copeland (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Some have tried to define polarity based on precise thresholds in the distribution of power (for example, Rapkin, Thompson, and Christopherson, 1979: 268–274).

them could possibly be engaged in a general (systemic) war. The current international system is then global in nature; most of the states have regular relations with most of the others and could theoretically be part of a general conflict. It is a group of states where “the behavior of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of others” (Bull and Watson, 1984: 1). This for example cannot be said of the Antiquity. The Romans barely knew the world beyond Persia in the East and the Sahara Desert in the South and could not even imagine of the American continent. Roma and China could reasonably not have taken part in a general war. It is thus possible to identify a closed Euro-Mediterranean international system.

This study focuses on the occurrence of major war. It follows Copeland (1996: 29) in defining major war as a high-intensity conflict including most of the great powers of an international system where the very survival of one or several of these great powers could be at stake. Such a war has the potential to change the structure of the international system itself.

Mearsheimer (2001: chaps. 2, 9) adds another level of classification by distinguishing between balanced and unbalanced international system. A balanced system, be it multipolar or bipolar, is a world where great powers have a rough parity of power; no single power is able to become dominant. In an unbalanced system, one state has a clear advantage that makes it a potential hegemonic power while the number two state cannot seriously endanger that would-be hegemon. The difference between a unipolar system and an unbalanced system may look quite blurred. Unbalance occurs when the number two state becomes very unlikely to destroy the number one state in an all-out war (typically less than 25 percent chance of victory), but has reasonable chance (typically between 25 and 75 percent) to fend off an attack. Unipolarity is a system where the sole great power can defeat with a high level certainty any other state or coalition of states, both offensively and defensively. An unbalanced bipolar system is then a system where the potential hegemon is unlikely to be destroyed by the other great power, but is still uncertain to be able to destroy this number two state.

For Mearsheimer, an unbalanced bipolar system is hard to conceive because it would likely collapse quite quickly. The potential hegemon would indeed be very tempted to eliminate its inferior competitor which would have no way to correct the unbalance of power. He consequently assumes that unbalanced bipolar systems should be more violent than balanced bipolar systems. The contrary argument also exists; Volgy and Imwalle (1995) findings suggest that, as the gap of power diminishes, the system should tend toward instability. Mearsheimer’s hypothesis will so be tested against historical cases.

This study uses the three cases - Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C., Carthage and Rome in the third century B.C., France and the Habsburgs in the 15th-16th century A.D. - developed by Copeland (1996), although with serious reserves concerning the bipolar nature of two of them. It also describes other cases of bipolarity: Chu and Jin from 636 to 546 B.C., Persia and Rome from 63 B.C. to 395 A.D., the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties between 439 and 534, Northern and Southern China between 960 and 1211, and the Soviet Union and the United States from 1946 to 1991.

These cases have been selected according to the above conceptualization of international systems and bipolarity. All of them are found in closed international systems (as opposed to regions or subsystems),<sup>4</sup> where polarity can produce its systemic effects. In all of these cases,

<sup>4</sup> For Chu and Jin, Northern Wei and Southern Dynasties, and Liao and Song cases, the East Asian system. For Athens and Sparta, the Eastern Mediterranean system. For Carthage and Rome, the Western Mediterranean system. For Persia and Rome, and for France and Habsburg cases, the Euro-

two states concentrated a large part of the military capabilities in the system while enjoying an important gap with the number three power. In most of the cases, power distribution between the two poles was balanced. However, in some, one power had a marked advantage over the other, engendering an unbalanced bipolar system. For each case, I list the conflicts that matches my definition of major war and their duration.

Some potential cases have been discarded. Thompson (1986: 599–609) uses a measurement of naval power for determining systemic polarity from 1494 to 1983 and consequently identifies several supposed cases of bipolarity. Although this approach may have some merits, it leads to surprising results. According to Thompson, the 1545–1550 period, at the height of the France-Habsburg rivalry, is best described as a bipolar system centered on England and Portugal. Using the same metric, the author argues that the years between 1939 and 1943 can be qualified as a Britain-United States bipolarity. Because these results do not match my definition of bipolarity, these few cases are not examined here. Kopalyan (2014: chaps. 4–8), building on Wilkinson (2005: 97–99), describes a number of bipolar systems. Nevertheless, I do not use these possible cases because their definitions of what makes a pole differ from my own. Wilkinson (2004: 665) codes great power based on their appearance in historical records, for example if it is recounted as waging wars or having a sphere of influence; great powers are thus identified following historical narratives. Kopalyan (2014: 41–49) defines poles by including more abstract variables such as political and ideational power while I, following Mearsheimer, focus on military power. Also expanding Wilkinson data, Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth (2007: app. A) identify the 340–330 B.C. decade in the Eastern Mediterranean as a bipolar system centered on Macedon and Persia. Although this description makes sense, such a short-lived and shaky system would make a poor case to study.

As a yardstick, I use Levy's study (1985b: 366–374), which reports 10 major wars, all of which occurred under multipolarity. Since the France-Habsburg case ends in 1556, I consider that the multipolar period used as a base for comparison goes from 1556 to 1945, the starting year of the Cold War. Levy's study is based on comparatively low criteria (p. 373) for identifying major wars. The present article so errs on the side of conservatism. Levy has used an intensity criterion (the ratio of battle deaths for one million European people) while I do not. It looks impossible to develop such an intensity criterion for many of the cases aforementioned, since data about population and casualties are scarce at best. Nevertheless, identifying cases of major war is somewhat easier under bipolarity than under multipolarity. Indeed, an all-out war between the two great powers of a bipolar system is quite automatically a major war, for the destruction of one of the two would mean a shift to unipolarity. Consequently, this difference in methodology is unlikely to affect this study's results.

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Mediterranean system. For the Cold War case, the contemporary global system. I consider with Eckstein (2006: chap. 4) that both Eastern and Western Mediterranean systems disappeared to form a single united one at the very end of the third century B.C.

### 3. CASE STUDIES

#### 2.1 Chu-Jin (636–546 B.C.)

A bipolar case has been identified (Yuan, 2018: 218–222) in China during the Spring and Autumn period. It endured from 636 to 546 B.C. and was a period of intense rivalry between the Chu State in the South and the Jin State in the North.

**Description.** During the mid-seventh century B.C., the Jin State was a rising power. When Qi collapsed to internal struggles in 643, northern China was left without a leader. However, when Wen Gong took power in Jin in 636, he brought stability and reforms to his state, making it a match for the menacing Chu in the South. After having decisively defeated Chu at the Battle of Chengpu in 632, the ruler of Jin was officially declared ‘Hegemon’ by the Zhou Emperor; several small states consequently swore allegiance to Jin.

Based on Hui’s (2005: appendix II) data, it is possible to identify five major conflicts between Chu and Jin: the War of Chengpu (634–632 B.C.), the War of Bi (608–597), the 585–581 war, the War of Yanling (575–571), and the War of Zhanban (558–557). These wars often had as a main stake the control over the small buffer states lying between the territories of Chu and Jin. After the Xiangxu Cessation of War Conference of 546, relations between the two powers became more peaceful. Indeed, by the mid sixth century, hostility between the rising state of Wu and Chu had become more and more acute as Wu gradually established itself as a new great power.<sup>5</sup>

**Balance of Power.** The two great powers were roughly equivalent in terms of population, with a few million inhabitants each.<sup>6</sup> Zhao (2015: part III) noticed that Chu and Jin had a large military advantage over the other states in the system. The standing armies of Chu and Jin counted a few tens of thousands of men each. Their core was made of elite chariot warriors from important families. They both maintained from 600 to 1,000 chariots. The military balance of power varied little during the period (Brooks, 2002: 183–186).<sup>7</sup> Although more detailed data are lacking, there was a rough parity of power between Chu and Jin.

**Summary.** This balanced bipolar period existed during 91 years. Five major wars occurred; they lasted overall for 27 years.

#### 2.2 Athens and Sparta (479–404 B.C.)

The fall of Sestos and the destruction of the Persian pontoon bridges on the Hellespont in 479 B.C. can be used to mark the beginning of the Ancient Greek bipolar period. It would end with the fall of Athens in 404. It is conventional wisdom that the Greek system of the fifth century B.C. was a bipolar system centered on Athens and Sparta. However, it is hard to dismiss the continued existence of the Persian Empire as a great power of that time even after it was routed from Greece. Persia was still a major threat looming upon Greece until the Battle of the Eurymedon River around 466 B.C. After the Egyptian and Cypriot campaigns of Athens, Persia adopted a defensive posture but it did not vanish as a great power. It was

<sup>5</sup> This account is based on Hui (2005: chap. 2), Hsu (1999: 557–562), Whiting (2002: chap. 2), and Zhao (2015: part III).

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Shen Na for this observation.

<sup>7</sup> There were around 10 men per chariot (Whiting, 2002: 49).

in sheer size many times larger than any Greek city-state and even meddled in Greek affairs during the Peloponnesian War.

**Description.** Since the 470s B.C., Sparta's star was declining while Athens' was ascending. By the 460s, both Athens and Sparta had built a very strong network of alliances capable of unitary action. In 462, the Spartans insulted Athens by expelling the Athenian contingent they had called to help them in their war against the Helots. In 461, the Athenians broke the Greek alliance born from the common struggle against the Persians and allied with Sparta's rivals, Argos and Thessaly. A first war, relatively limited, between the two city-states took place from around 460 to 446. They consequently agreed on a 30 years peace.<sup>8</sup> The war between Coreyra and Corinth and the imposition of economic sanctions on Megara in 432 pushed the two countries to the brink. Sparta finally broke the peace treaty and attacked Athens in 431.

What is usually called the Peloponnesian War is indeed two separate wars. The first conflict, the Archidamus War, lasted ten years and ended in 421 by a relative Spartan defeat. However, Athens' attempt to conquer Sicilia from 415 to 413 ended in a terrible disaster. Profiting from this occasion, Sparta attacked Athens again in 414, thus starting the Decelean War. After the loss of almost all of its fleet during the Battle of Aegospotami in 405, Athens was forced to surrender in 404. Sparta reemerged for a while as the dominant power of the Greek world. Thus, two major wars are discernible; one from 431 to 421 and one from 414 to 404.<sup>9</sup>

**Balance of Power.** This system is better described as unbalanced. Although the harsh training of Spartan citizen soldiers gave them an edge in major land engagements, Sparta had at the very best only around 8,000 troops and more likely less than 6,000. There was indeed a sharp decline in Spartan manpower throughout the century. While 5,000 Spartan citizens were available for military service in 479 B.C., Sparta was only able to muster around 2,500 men (excluding allied troops) for the crucial battle of Mantinea. Athens had at least twice as many troops available: 13,000 hoplites, plus a 1,200 men-strong cavalry force and 1,600 archers. The total invasion force of the Peloponnesian League in 431 numbered around 20,000 men. If one takes into account the Athenian territorial army, a 16,000-strong defensive force of less value than the hoplites, then the Athenians alone had more troops in the field than the combined invaders. Athens also enjoyed a clear advantage both in quantity and quality at sea; it had around 300 ships when Sparta had - at least in 431 - none. In addition, the Attic city was more populated and far richer with between 120,000 and 150,000 citizens (plus between 150,000 and 470,000 non-citizens). Sparta could count on less than 25,000 citizens (plus between 35,000 and 350,000 non-citizens). In the final part of the Athens-Sparta confrontation, Sparta was heavily leaning on Persia for the manning and the funding of its fleet.

It is clear that from 479 to 431, Athens was the ascending power and Sparta the declining one. Athens was largely superior to Sparta in almost all regards even if Spartan military excellence on land somehow compensated for its overall weakness. If this case is to be

<sup>8</sup> The exact chronology of the Pentekontaetia remains unclear (Unz, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> This account, profoundly Thucydidean in nature, is based on Cloché (1942), Echeverría (2017), Fliess (1961), and Thucydides (2000). For different explanations of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, see Dolgert (2012) and Lendon (2007). The issue of who is really responsible for the Peloponnesian War remains quite intractable (Tannenbaum, 1975).

considered as a bipolar system, then it was an unbalanced one. Nevertheless, in the end, Sparta, and not Athens, won. Sparta was able to overcome its inherent weakness due to the adjunction of powerful allies and more importantly the strategic missteps of the Athenians.<sup>10</sup>

**Summary.** It is very hard to argue that Athens and Sparta were the only great powers of the time. Persia was still a giant meddling periodically into Greek affairs. Moreover, as noticed by Grundy (1908: 84), the city-state of Argos was more populous and Corinth was wealthier than Sparta. Argos, Corinth, and Corcyra were quite formidable opponents in their own right (Eckstein, 2006: chap. 3). Legon (1973: 171) even suggests that, if Sparta was afraid of the growth of Athens' power, the Athenians themselves were afraid of the growing power of Corinth. Accordingly, this system seems to be more bipolarized than bipolar. If it is nevertheless considered that this case is an unbalanced bipolar system, then it lasted for 75 years and witnessed 20 years of major wars spread over two conflicts.

### 2.3 Carthage-Rome (272–202 B.C.)

According to Copeland (1996: 64–67), the Carthage-Rome rivalry between 272 and 202 B.C. is a case of bipolarity.

**Description.** Rome finalized its domination over the Italian Peninsula in 272 B.C. The rising power of the Roman Republic began to scare Carthage. Soon after, open competition between Carthage and Rome started, notably over Sicilia. The first major conflict occurred from 264 to 241. Although the war was initially limited to Sicilia, Rome was determined to end Carthage's domination over the Mediterranean. After building a fleet capable of contesting Carthaginian superiority at sea, the Romans landed directly on the African coast in 256. This landing put the Carthaginian capital at risk and almost pushed the Carthaginians to surrender. However, the war went on until Roman victory in 241. In the years after, the Romans managed to pull Sardinia and Corsica away from Carthage; this pushed Carthaginian revanchist instincts still more.

Carthage was waiting for a pretext to start an all-out war. Hannibal besieged in 219 Saguntum, a city allied with Rome. Rome was forced to respond and war finally broke out in 218. After its well-known crossing of the Alps, Hannibal invaded Italy and inflicted defeat after defeat on the Romans. Nevertheless, Rome managed to continuously raise new troops and turn the tides in Spain and Sicilia. It finally invaded Carthaginian homeland in Africa. Hannibal's defeat to Scipio during the Battle of Zama marked the end of the Second Punic War in 202. This defeat dealt a fatal blow to Carthage which would never be able to compete with Rome again. Indeed, after the war, the Romans imposed (in addition of taking hostages and requesting an indemnity) the disarmament of Carthage and limited its ability to wage war without Rome's approval. They also reduced Carthaginian territory to its core.<sup>11</sup>

**Balance of Power.** The Carthaginian navy dominated the seas at the beginning of the period while the Romans had more numerous land forces. However, the balance of military power had become more equal by 218 B.C. In fact, at the beginning of the Second Punic War, Rome fielded 64,000 infantry and 6,200 cavalry on land and 220 ships (50,000–60,000

<sup>10</sup> This section is based on Cawkwell (1983), Lazenby (2012: chap. 1), Thucydides (2000), and Unz (1986). This account only considers the strength of the two cities themselves. If allies are included, Sparta could count on the rich city of Corinth for providing a powerful fleet.

<sup>11</sup> This part is based on Copeland (1996: 64–67) and Southern (2016: chap. 6).

sailors) at sea. Carthage could count on 80,000 men and a navy of 100 ships (25,000 sailors). Carthaginian land troops were mostly composed of mercenaries. Its infantry and cavalry were tactically superior to the Romans up to the end of the war. Carthage's famed war elephants did not fundamentally alter the balance of power.

The population of Carthage at the time of the Second Punic War was around one million. Carthage's North African core, when it was threatened, usually managed to raise 10,000 troops. When confronted with its own extinction during the Third Punic War (149–146 B.C.), it raised up to 25,000 infantry and 400 cavalry. The Carthaginians could not match the mobilization capabilities of the Romans. Rome had a population of around one million free people and it had at its disposal the manpower of its numerous small dominions. A few years before the Second Punic War, Rome was theoretically able to mobilize around 700,000 infantry and 70,000 cavalry. Both powers were so roughly equal, even if Rome had an obvious advantage in terms of potential power.<sup>12</sup>

**Summary.** This balanced bipolar period lasted for 71 years and witnessed two major conflicts. These conflicts occupied both powers during 41 years. Although Carthage was no longer a great power, the Romans were wary of a potential Carthaginian resurgence. Rome's armies destroyed Carthage once and for all in 146 B.C.

#### 2.4 Persia-Rome (63 B.C.-A.D. 395)

A bipolar system composed of the Parthian and Sassanid Empire ('Persia' is used hereafter indifferently for designating both) and Rome existed from the mid-first century to the late fourth century. It saw the confrontation of the Roman Empire at its peak with far weaker but resilient Persia (Bullough, 1963).

**Description.** The second century B.C. was a time of great changes. The Battle of Magnesia in 190 B.C. and the subsequent Peace of Apamea in 188 plunged the Seleucid Empire into decay. The total destruction of Carthage in 146 assured Rome's control over North Africa. The end of the Third Mithridatic War (74–63) marked the beginning of the bipolar era. The Romans long held the ambition to complete their conquest of the known world by absorbing Persia and reaching India. More locally, a recurring stake of the Persian-Roman confrontation was Armenia. Indeed, the control of Armenia by Rome was a prerequisite before envisaging the conquest of Persia.

A first war occurred when Crassus attempted to invade Parthia, profiting from a succession crisis (54–53 B.C.). Parthia then tried to benefit from Rome's own internal disorders by invading Syria in 41. The Parthians temporarily controlled almost all of the Roman East. They were nevertheless repulsed. The Romans counterattacked and launched a full-scale invasion of Parthia in 36 B.C. but were forced to withdraw. The Armenian problem was temporarily extinguished in 66 A.D., leading to half a century of peace.

Emperor Trajan, pushed by its eagerness for conquest, waged war from 114 to 117. However, the next Emperor, Hadrian, decided to withdraw behind the Euphrates. Decades of peace ensued. The next major war started in 161, with a Parthian invasion of Armenia, and ended in 166. Septimius Severus launched the next round of conflict between 195 and 202. Caracalla also attempted an invasion of Persia in 216 (until 217).

<sup>12</sup> This account was made following Scullard (2016: chap. 9), Southern (2016: chaps. 5–6), and Wise (1982).

The newly installed Sassanid dynasty invaded Mesopotamia in 230. The Romans counterattacked massively in 232 and assaulted Persia. The war ended in 233. The Persians attacked Mesopotamia again in 241. However, they were defeated by the Romans in 244. They tried once again in 258 but were repulsed by the Roman forces in 263. Carus took up the torch and decided to finish Persia off once for all but died while campaigning (282–283). War resumed by a Persian offensive from 296 to 299. The new Persian ruler Shapur II was decided to confront the Romans. A first war occurred from 337 to 350. He attacked again from 359 to 361. After regaining the upper hand, Emperor Julian counterattacked by invading Persia in 363 but he was killed in the process.

Several decades of peace followed. Armenia became once again a source of tension in 383. However, Persia was busy fighting the Huns and Rome was busy fighting the Goths. The two empires then simply agreed to share Armenia and cut it in half. This led to decades of peace and even some moments of cooperation against the Huns. After the final division of the Roman Empire in two parts in 395, it is no longer possible to treat it as a single great power. It is therefore the ending date of this bipolar period.<sup>13</sup>

**Balance of Power.** The balance of power became more and more unfavorable to Persia as time passed. Around 0 A.D., Rome's population was around 45 million. By the mid second century, the Empire counted at least 65 million people. During the bipolar period, it can be estimated that the Persian population was close to five million.

Overall, the Roman army numbered 500,000 men (including 150,000 legionaries). The Roman Empire gave greater and greater attention to its eastern border from the first century onward. At the beginning of the period, four legions were deployed in the Middle East. In the second century, eight legions and as many auxiliary units (barbarians)—around one hundred thousand men—were present in vicinity of Persia. By the end of the third century, there were from 26 to 28 legions with corresponding auxiliaries. It represents in theory around 250,000 men, even if this huge force was partly paper figures. Contrary to the Romans, the Persians did not have a standing army. Their largest army, assembled against Mark Antony in the late first century B.C., numbered 50,000 warriors (both empires had so around one percent of their total population composing their active force). The Persians were largely outmatched.

They were however not defenseless. Although they were militarily inferior to the Romans, their army was well-organized and familiar with Hellenic warfare. Rome had a superior infantry but Persia's powerful cavalry gave it an edge on open terrain. They demonstrated several times their ability to defeat overconfident Roman generals such as Crassus at Carrhae in 53 B.C. Despite this staying power, it is obvious that Rome was largely dominant in this unbalanced bipolar system; as summarized Fettweis, "the Parthian Empire [...] was more a target than a threat" (2018: 138).<sup>14</sup>

**Summary.** This unbalanced bipolar period endured for 459 years. 14 major wars occurred and they lasted for overall 66 years.

<sup>13</sup> This part is based on Kohn (2006: 451–453), Lightfoot (1990), Sicker (2000: chaps. 10–15), and Whittaker (1994: 32–59, 135–143).

<sup>14</sup> This section was written based on McEvedy and Jones (1978: 149–153), Sicker (2000: chaps. 10–15), UNRV (2019), and Whittaker (1994: 50–56, 135).

## 2.5 Northern Wei-Southern Dynasties (439–534)

A clear case of bipolar system is noticeable in East Asia during the fifth and sixth centuries. This system had as great powers the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, each ruling over one half of China. Bipolarity existed from the unification of Northern China in 439 to the secession between Western and Eastern Wei in 534.

**Description.** The Northern Wei dynasty managed to reunify Northern China in 439. A first major conflict occurred when the South tried to invade the North in 450. It ended up in a disaster, and the North counterattacked the next year. The war wreaked havoc in the South, which had to fall back from the Huai to the Yangzi River. The South returned on the offensive in 452, without success. Domestic conflicts led many wealthy commandries of the northern part of Liu Song to surrender to the North, leading to a growing imbalance of power. In 479, the Liu Song was replaced by the Southern Qi dynasty. After several other rounds of conflict, a peace treaty was signed in 490. However, the peace was short-lived, as the North attempted a major invasion of the South from 495 to 498. In 502, the Liang dynasty took power in the South, subsequently starting a new series of war. In 505, a Liang campaign succeeding in reaching again the Huai River. In 528, the Liang attempted to benefit from domestic unrest for invading the North but they were defeated. The conjugation of succession disputes, fiscal difficulties, famine, misattribution of resources, and barbarian raids finally led to the collapse of the Northern Wei dynasty in 534.<sup>15</sup>

**Balance of Power.** At the beginning of their rivalry, Northern and Southern China were more or less equally matched, even if the North was notably more populous. It was relatively harder for the South to raise troops. Moreover, the South always had to face the relative inefficiency of its army, which also lacked the mobility offered to the North by its numerous and high-quality horsemen and mounted archers. On the other side, the South could count on its wheeled carts tactics and a relatively powerful river fleet. As time passed, the balance of power evolved more and more to the detriment of the South. The difference in population and wealth was growing. This became evident after the South's defeat in 451. The balance turned more unequal still with the loss of the rich lands north of the Yangzi River. This bipolar system can so be considered as unbalanced from 469 on.<sup>16</sup>

**Summary.** This bipolar period lasted for 96 years. After three decades of balanced relations came 65 years of unbalanced bipolarity. Excluding the numerous small campaigns, there are only two major conflicts; the 450–452 and 495–498 conflicts, for a total of seven years of major wars.

## 2.6 Liao/Jin-Song (960–1211)

Some identified the opposition between Liao and Jin on one side and Song on the other as a case of bipolarity (Wang, 2013; Yuan, 2018: 222–226). While the Liao Dynasty was rising in Northern China, the appearance in 960 of the Song Dynasty in the South ended the period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, which followed the collapse of the Tang Dynasty. Liao and Song were therefore the two great powers of that time.

<sup>15</sup> This account was made following Goldin (1999: 55), Graff (2002: chaps. 4–6), Liu (2018: 110–112), and Xiong and Hammond (2018: section 2).

<sup>16</sup> Graff's (2002: chap. 6) rendering is used here.

**Description.** Bilateral relations were at first peaceful, as Song was busy reinforcing its control over southern China. The Song Dynasty had long aspired to seize the Sixteen Prefectures, the economic heart of Liao. They attempted a first invasion of Liao territory in 979. Although it was not successful, they benefited from Liao's internal problems and attacked again in 986 with nearly 200,000 men, operation which was defeated too. In order to eliminate the threat of a Song attack, Liao attempted a full-scale offensive in 1004 but failed to eliminate its rival. The cost of the war and the impossibility for both sides to obtain a decisive victory led to the Treaty of Shanyuan in 1005; peace would last for over a century (until 1122). The Jurchens interrupted this bipolarity for a few years and, with Song's help, conquered Liao and destroyed it in 1125.

However, *plus ça change, plus c'est pareil*; the Jurchens founded the Jin dynasty in the North, thus reestablishing bipolarity. In the same stroke, in 1125, they invaded Song and captured its emperor. Since the Song had to retreat southward, it went down in history as the Southern Song. After these drawbacks, Song was able to raise new and more efficient armies and to push back while the Jin faced domestic problems. War finally ended in 1142. Jin attempted again to destroy the Southern Song in 1161 but Song forces held them back; the war was settled by the Longxing Peace Accord of 1165. A relative shift of power in favor of Song allowed it to retake the offensive; it launched a massive attack on Jin in 1206 but met defeat in 1208. This bipolar system collapsed in 1211 with the Mongolian invasion of China.

**Balance of power.** Liao was arguably superior in terms of offensive military power over Song. Its cavalry was dominant both in quantity and quality. Conscious of their military weakness, Song tried hard to balance internally with the hope of conquering the North. Song was superior in potential power; it was more populous and could count on superior revenue. Overall, there was a rough parity of power between both sides. The same can be said of the Jin and Song balance after 1125. Jin was inhabited by around 44 million people in 1187 while Southern Song had more than 70 million people. Overall the North had superior cavalry which gave it the advantage in open terrain while the South's numerous infantry offered it the upper hand on difficult terrain and in siege warfare. The South also had a relative advantage thanks to its river fleet.<sup>17</sup>

**Summary.** This case is 252 years long; the two sides fought in six major wars which overall lasted for 30 years.

## 2.7 France and Habsburg (1496–1556)

The rivalry between France and the Habsburg Monarchy between 1496 and 1556 has been identified by several scholars as a case of bipolar system (Copeland, 1996: 67–71; Levy, 1985a). France emerged from the Hundred Years War as the first European power while England fell into turmoil. By marital alliances, the House of Habsburg added numerous lands to its Austrian core, but the big prize came in 1496 with the acquisition of Spain.

Although the baroque rivalry between Charles V and Francis I has gone down in history as one of the fiercest cases of hatred of all times, it is doubtful that this era can be considered as a bipolar one. The Ottoman Empire was a formidable power which, it was feared at that time, was threatening to overrun Germany (Tracy, 2002: chap. 1). Hopf (1991: 479–480) even considers that if there was a bipolar rivalry, it was between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, not the French. Although this assertion is hard to accept, it is clear that the

<sup>17</sup> This description is based on DiFiore (2011) and Wang (2004: 184–186, 2013).

Ottoman Empire was a major power of that time. This case may therefore be better described as a multipolar case.

**Description.** The association of Austria and Spain made of the Habsburg family a dangerous opponent for the French kings and their ambition to conquer Italy. The Italian Peninsula was wealthy but divided among many small states. Moreover, Italy laid between Austria and France at a time where European life was still centered on the Mediterranean. It was accordingly the main stake in the French-Habsburg rivalry. The hostility between France and Habsburg escalated and became existential when Charles V was crowned king in 1516. Charles inherited Austria, Spain (with its colonies in America and its dominions in Italia), parts of southern Germany, the Netherlands, and Franche-Comté. Pushed by his dream to unite Christendom under his control to fight the Ottomans, he succeeded in being elected as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1519 instead of Francis I. It was a sharp increase in Habsburg power by adding new German and north Italian territories to the empire.

France reacted by starting the first major war with an all-out invasion of Habsburg territory (toward Navarre, Luxembourg, and Italy) in 1521. This conflict ended in 1526, after the French defeat of Pavia in 1525 and the capture of Francis I by Imperial troops. Amidst more limited conflicts, the next round of major war occurred from 1542 to 1546 after Charles' decision to give Milan to his son Philip. It also started by a French offensive toward Luxemburg and Spain before spreading to Italy. The burden of war revealed too expensive for both sides and it ended in a stalemate. The Last Italian War (1551–1559) is the final major conflict of this period. The first offensive came when the French attacked Luxemburg and then Habsburg Lorraine in 1552 to support a Protestant revolt (with massive Ottoman support in the Mediterranean). They wanted these regions in order to strike next the heart of the Holy Roman Empire. This war and the overall France-Habsburg confrontation came to an end by the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559 for several reasons. The Habsburgs had failed to squeeze the Protestant revolt in Germany. The abdication of Charles in 1556 led to the separation of Austria and Spain, with the rise of Spain changing the balance of power within the Habsburg family. Moreover, constant warfare had led both France and Spain to bankrupt while France itself was plagued by domestic problems.<sup>18</sup>

**Balance of Power.** According to Hopf's (1991: 479–480) data, during the early part of the period, France and Austria-Spain were closely matched in terms of population (15 million against 18) and troops (35,000 against 32,000). However, the French state was at least twice as rich. By the beginning of the third decade of the sixteenth century, a relative shift of power had occurred. France had 17 million inhabitants while Habsburg 30; France had 32,000 soldiers against 62,000 Imperial troops; Habsburg revenues were also larger. Copeland (1996: 71) is arguably correct when he estimates that although Habsburg was superior in terms of potential power and was growing faster than France, both countries were roughly evenly matched.

**Summary.** This period of almost constant French-Habsburg warfare lasted 61 years and witnessed three major wars. These major conflicts lasted for overall 17 years. However, it is difficult to consider this period as purely bipolar. The Habsburgs were at least as concerned by the Ottoman threat as by the French one. They attempted several crusades all around the Mediterranean to dislodge the Turks. France regularly allied with the Ottoman power

<sup>18</sup> This account is based on Koenigsberger (1958), Lee (1984: chap. 8), Spooner (1958), and Tracy (2002: chaps. 2 and 9).

against the Habsburgs. As for the Ancient Greece case, this case may be better described as a multipolar one.

## 2.8 Cold War (1946–1991)

The case of the Cold War is probably well known to the reader and does not need a long elaboration. World War II left the Soviet Union and the United States as the two dominant powers of the postwar era. Bipolarity ended with the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in late 1991, while the United States remained as the world's sole great power. Both states were roughly equivalent in terms of military capabilities. This period endured for 46 years. Although crises and clashes through proxies were legion, direct war did not occur.

## 4. RESULTS

The bipolar cases described in this study need to be compared with historical multipolar systems. Levy (1985b: 372) counts 10 major wars, all of which occurred under multipolarity:

- War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada (1585–1609, 25 years)
- Thirty Years' War (1618–1648, 31 years)
- Dutch War of Louis XIV (1672–1678, 7 years)

**Table 1.** Case Study's Results

	Period duration			Major wars			War duration		
	Total	Balanced*	Unbalanced	Total	Balanced	Unbalanced	Total	Balanced	Unbalanced
Chu-Jin	91	91	-	5	5	-	27	27	-
<i>Athens-Sparta</i>	75	-	75	2	-	2	20	-	20
Carthage-Rome	71	71	-	2	2	-	41	41	-
Persia-Rome	459	-	459	14	-	14	66	-	66
Northern Wei-Southern Dynasties	96	30	66	2	1	1	7	3	4
Liao-Song	252	252	-	6	6	-	30	30	-
<i>France-Habsburg</i>	61	61	-	3	3	-	17	17	-
Cold War	46	46	-	0	-	-	0	-	-
<i>Weak cases included</i>	1151	551	600	34	17	17	208	118	90
<i>Strong cases only</i>	1015	490	525	29	14	15	171	101	70

\* 'Balanced' designates here balanced systems where the two great powers are roughly equal in terms of power, while 'unbalanced' designates systems where one of the two states is notably more powerful than the other.

- War of the League of Augsburg (1688–1697, 10 years)
- War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1713, 13 years)
- War of Jenkins' Ear/Austrian Succession (1739–1748, 10 years)
- Seven Years' War (1755–1763, 9 years)
- French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815, 24 years)
- World War I (1914–1918, 5 years)
- World War II (1939–1945, 7 years)

If it is accepted that multipolarity was dominant from 1556 to 1945 (390 full years), there is on average one major war every 39 years and overall 141 years of major war, almost one year of major war for 2.77 years of peace.

If only the strong bipolar cases are examined, major war occurs on average once every 35 years (34 if the weak cases are included). According to Levy's data, major war under multipolarity is observed once every 39 years.<sup>19</sup> Bipolar systems are overall more prone to major wars.

Concerning war duration, bipolar war is on average shorter than multipolar war (5.9 years against 14.1). There is one year of war for 5.94 years of peace under bipolarity. Wars under unbalanced bipolar systems are somewhat shorter (4.67 years) than wars under balanced systems (7.21 years). Bipolarity may foster shorter wars, since it is easier to end a war between two states than between a multitude of them.

This study does not support Mearsheimer's intuition that unbalanced bipolarity should be more violent than balanced bipolarity. Mearsheimer also predicted that unbalanced bipolar system would be short-lived, since the stronger power would eagerly attempt to destroy the weaker one. It is very noticeable in the Rome-Persia case that several Roman emperors clearly expressed the intention to finish Persia off. However, thanks to the military (often logistic) limitations of the dominant power, neither Persia nor the Southern Dynasties in China were ended by their bipolar competitor. One could reasonably expect the stronger power to initiate major wars more often. Surprisingly, Persia was the aggressor eight times while Rome attacked only six times. In medieval China, Northern Wei launched only one major war against the South in the course of the unbalanced period.

A theoretical argument sometimes used for defending the bipolar stability theory is that allies are relatively unimportant in bipolar systems. However, it seems that allies are just as central as in multipolar systems. It is visible in many Cold War crises (Aron, 2004: 148). Several conflicts of the Chu-Jin case started by disputes concerning allies. Persia and Rome fought fiercely over the control of small Middle East states and especially of strategic Armenia. The Second Punic War started over the siege of Saguntum by Carthage. Allies are a potent cause of war, regardless of polarity.

It is arguable that the longer the bipolar system holds, the more stable it will be, since both powers would inevitably come to know each other quite well with the passing of time. After all, the first years of the Cold War looked more frightening than the post-1962 period. However, this idea is not confirmed by history; the longest case (Persia-Rome), was especially war-prone. The second longest (Liao-Song) is just a little less violent than the Athens-Sparta rivalry.

<sup>19</sup> If the cases are listed in the order of the most war-prone to the least war-prone: Chu-Jin (one major war per 18 years), France-Habsburg (1/20), Persia-Rome (1/33), Rome-Carthage (1/36), Athens-Sparta (1/38), Liao-Song (1/42), Northern Wei-Southern Dynasties (1/48), Cold War (0).

The most stable case is the Northern Wei-Southern Dynasties bipolarity. According to Graff (2002: chap. 6), the problem of logistics, hostile terrain, the strength of enemy fortifications, sometimes combined with internal divisions and lack of political will, contributed to discourage conquest attempts of both sides. The impossibility of easy military victory - conventional deterrence - looks more stabilizing than some effects of bipolarity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study's results do not support the bipolar stability theory. Consequently, the Cold War stands as a mystery. How can the absence of major war between the Soviet Union and the United States be explained? A common argument is that nuclear deterrence discourages great power wars. Gaddis (1986) notices several factors other than bipolarity explaining this 'long peace': no history of direct war in the dyad, no direct territorial grievance, economic independence from each other, few domestic pressures for war, caution due to nuclear weapons, modern reconnaissance technologies which limit the risks of surprise attack, ideological moderation, mutual recognition of limit and 'rules of the game'. As in the relatively stable Northern Wei-Southern Dynasties rivalry, conventional deterrence may also have been a major stabilizer (Mearsheimer, 1983). It is doubtful that bipolarity by itself can explain the stability of the Cold War era. The Northern Wei-Southern Dynasties case witnessed a major war every 48 years; the Cold War lasted for only 46 full years. Peace could so very well be explained by the short duration of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. bipolar system.

What are the implications of this article's results for today's world? The reader may doubt that the study of pre-Christ international systems yields much value for the twenty-first century. Almost everything, from military technology to economic models and political regimes, looks different. In addition, the system has moved to a truly global one, where the situation here or there can influence the calculations of state on the other side of the planet. However, regardless the size of the system, the epoch, or the specificities of the units, structural incentives work the same way. The international system brings on the states that compose it identical pressures, be it Jin, Carthage, or the Soviet Union. Although today's world is not bipolar, but tripolar, with the United States, China, and Russia as great powers (Mearsheimer, 2019: 8), if the system was ever to move to bipolarity again, one can expect, *ceteris paribus*, a high risk of armed conflagration.

That said, it is hard to identify a single variable able to explain war and peace for all the aforementioned cases. Future studies detailing the incentives and strategies of the actors under both bipolarity and multipolarity would be enlightening. Specific arguments made by both proponents and opponents of the bipolar stability theory could be tested against the historical cases developed above. For example, major wars are on average far shorter under bipolarity than under multipolarity. It is therefore not entirely unthinkable that polarity affects states' decisions in subtler ways than previously thought.

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