

Power, Polarity, and Prudence: The Ambiguities and Implications of UK Discourse on a Multipolar International System

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Abstract

What do UK policymakers mean when they say that Britain’s strategic environment is returning to “multipolarity”? In realist international theory, polarity is a specific causal concept; the number of powers capable of balancing even the most capable other state(s) in the international system (“poles”) is taken to determine the system’s stability. Does the post-2017 appearance of polarity references in British security policy documents therefore reflect some unexpected UK renaissance of realist thought? Or is something else going on, as recent work by Ben Zala (2017) suggests? This article will demonstrate that, while UK official usage of the “multip—” word has indeed flourished recently, the term is actually being used in a more elastic, less bounded way than realism prescribes in order to generate other kinds of political effect. Specifically, “polarity” (and its “multi-” prefix) is used to characterise the behaviour of those major states that oppose Western-preferred international order, to elide Britain’s own relative power/status tensions, and to capture an expansive laundry-list of perceived international dangers. The article then discusses five ways in which a shift in polarity could negatively affect Britain; important consequences that merit preparatory contemplation, yet that an imprecise, catch-all understanding of “multipolarity” too readily obscures.

Across the Western world, a sense has emerged that relative power is shifting to major non-Western states. This does not mean that European and North American power – particularly its concentration in the United States – is suddenly about to collapse, but simply that three post-Cold War decades of strong growth among large emerging markets (China most prominently) have given such states new wherewithal to constrain and oppose Western policy when it affects their own interests. And in the UK context, this has manifested itself since 2018 as the appearance of the term “multipolarity” in official policy statements.

Polarity is a crucial concept in International Relations (IR) theory. For structural realists, the distribution of capabilities determines the stability of the international system, in terms of its tendencies towards war or peace between major states. The number of “poles” – that is, great powers with sufficient capability to balance the forces of other states meeting the same elevated threshold – is therefore a central causal variable in such theories.¹ Specifically, while a unipolar system – as characterised the extreme concentration of relative power in the United States after 1990 – necessarily lacks potential for true great-power conflict (because there is only one true great power), a multipolar system does not benefit from such impediments. As such, if the world is indeed returning to a polarity of more than one, that could have fundamental implications for the security environment and associated strategic choices of every state operating in the international system, Britain included. Yet is this what contemporary UK invokers of “multipolarity” mean? Does policymakers’ recent (re)discovery of the discourse of polarity reflect a specific causal claim about the number of great powers and the implications of changes in that number for UK strategy? Or is the claim actually fuzzier than that, serving as a form of nebulous political rhetoric? This article addresses these questions in order to advance the precision – and thus strategic utility – of Britain’s contemporary debate.

In fact, the unfolding UK discourse of “multipolarity” can be seen to reflect the country’s own tortured concerns with power and status. On the one hand, the UK is deeply invested in the club goods provided by the Western hegemonic order that US unipolarity delivered after the Cold War. American power – infused with the ideational but buttressed by the material – has delivered security and prosperity for Britain since 1945 in a way that could easily not have occurred under slightly different circumstances (Schake 2017), and that US relative power advantage increased even further in 1990. On the other hand, Britain has its own enduring obsession with national “greatness”: a politically contested, but undeniably

¹ See, most seminally, Waltz 1979.

present, understanding of a special national “role” in the world. Since Britain is evidently not an economic or military superpower, but nonetheless wishes to be considered influential, this produces a hankering for a conception of “greatness” understood in terms beyond relative material capacity alone. And on still another hand – to contrive a three-armed metaphor – Britain’s strategic and broader political context is such that there is no common understanding of what “polarity” actually *means*; if polarity itself has no common definition, then any inferences about the consequences of its increase will lie on similarly contested ground. So, while the term has recently found a place in official documents and discourse that it did not previously enjoy, it is also deployed as a political speech-act: to mean and prescribe different things by different actors depending on their policies, preferences, and proclivities. In summary, then, this article argues that US-dominated unipolarity is indeed giving way to a system of more than one pole, but that while official policy statements have recently started to recognise this shift, ideationally-motivated imprecision in conceptualisations of polarity risks obscuring the strategic adaptation that is needed to optimally cope with such a change.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it surveys the strategic backdrop, in the form of a brief history of the UK priorities and associated force posture that the US-dominated “unipolar moment” enabled.² Second, it discusses Britain’s newfound eagerness for discussions of “multipolarity” – along with various related terms, such as “peer adversary” – and the confusion that surrounds their invocation. Third, it considers Britain’s own ideational obsession with “great powerness” and the policy contradictions that it engenders. Fourth, it assesses how the relative power shifts that are afoot in the wider world might affect the UK’s strategic environment; shifts that – domestic political actors’ hand-wringing about Britain’s own greatness or otherwise aside – are already affecting UK security policy debates. In closing, it offers some recommendations for British strategy in a multipolar age.

The article concludes that while Britain has not been a systemic “pole” since 1945 and will not be one again,³ the country remains an important major power in the Euro-Atlantic region (conceived broadly to include the Mediterranean, South Atlantic, and High North). The UK also retains some residual capacity for – and interest in – modest strategic involvement in the non-Atlantic world. However, a lack of clarity over what multipolarity actually means coupled with Britain’s own ideational obsession with international “role” risks precluding the prudent national strategy required to defend and advance UK security

² On the notion and (contested) implications of such a “moment”, see Krauthammer (1990/91), Wohlforth (1999), Wohlforth and Brooks (2008, 2015), Monteiro (2014).

³ At least barring some vanishingly unlikely contingency, e.g. state dissolution in both America and China.

and prosperity in the environment of diffused non-Western power centres now emerging. As such, Britain's discourse of (multi)polarity and relative power is not just some academic curiosity. In fact, it has very real consequences for both Britons and the many allies that benefit from UK security commitments.

The Backstory: UK Posture through Unipolarity and Its Twilight

The collapse of the Soviet Union over 1989-91 removed the sole power capable of meaningful opposition to US global preponderance. Of course, the Soviet economy was in trouble long before the late 1980s; the USSR was only a "pole" in terms of the size of its military forces, rather than any long-spent industrial prowess, by the time Mikhail Gorbachev attempted his ill-fated programme of domestic reform. Nonetheless, the sudden disappearance of the closest thing that Washington faced to a "peer-competitor" freed the now-unipolar United States and its developed, capable allies – Britain foremost among them – to tackle foreign-policy concerns beyond the previously all-consuming task of balancing Soviet power. The 1990s were accordingly a decade of relatively successful multilateral cooperation (Rubinstein 1994), defence budgetary consolidation under the banner of the so-called "peace dividend" (Sabin 1993), and – most prominently – growing appetite for humanitarian intervention to militarily oppose atrocities committed in other countries that violated Westerners' sense of acceptable conduct (Daddow 2009; Wertheim 2010).

Moving on from the 1990s, UK foreign and defence policy was dominated through the first decade of the twenty-first century by London's participation in the coalition response to the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks on Britain's most important ally, the United States, along with smaller-scale attacks from similar sources on the UK itself (e.g. 7 July 2005). The ensuing "Global War on Terror" (GWOt) – as incensed, fearful US policymakers dubbed their expansive commitment to eradicate anti-Western Islamists – and the Iraq/Afghan campaigns that it spawned consumed resources and attention to the exclusion of pretty much all else in British defence. Of course, other routine military commitments continued as normal; small pockets of troops, aircraft, and warships deployed hither and thither, while the Royal Navy (RN) sustained its unceasing nuclear-armed submarine patrols – the ultimate backstop of deterrence against some re-emergent state-based threat. The 1990s' humanitarian impulse also still persisted, now under the UN-endorsed banner of the "Responsibility to

Protect”⁴. Nonetheless, Britain’s corps-sized commitment to the Iraq invasion, divisional-sized embroilment in Afghanistan, and the bloody, intractable counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigns that each occupation descended into coloured the whole of UK defence (Blagden 2009).

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the outcome of successive official defence reviews and the military force postures that they delivered. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), conducted by the “New” Labour government shortly after it won power following eighteen years in Opposition, had promised a balanced force oriented around maritime and airborne power projection (HM Government 1998). It marked a significant shift from the force posture of the Cold War, certainly, with the need to fight for control of both the Northeast Atlantic and Central Europe seemingly at an end (Taylor 2010, 11-12; Blackburn 2015). But it still promised naval, air, and mechanised ground forces of substantial scale, in line with the then-influential view – following recent experiences in the Balkans – that Britain could be a humanitarian “force for good” around the world. Over the ensuing decade, however, the Iraq and Afghan commitments relentlessly gutted the 1998 SDR’s promised force. Fighting two protracted, sizeable wars on a tight defence budget and with only narrowly bounded additional contingency funding from the Treasury saw the sorts of air, naval, and heavier ground forces best suited to defence against hostile states progressively sacrificed on the altar of a lighter, more deployable Army – and supporting air-maritime logistics tail – optimised for COIN (Cornish and Dorman 2009; Blagden 2009). This situation was compounded by the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) – the first such full review since 1998 – conducted by the new Conservative government, which had been elected against the backdrop of the 2008-9 financial crisis and associated fiscal overstretch with a mandate for swingeing budgetary consolidation (HM Government 2010a; Blagden 2009; Edmunds 2010; Cornish and Dorman 2011). With the Army still knee-deep in Afghanistan, it was spared cuts to entire capability areas (although it still lost personnel). For the RAF and particularly the RN, meanwhile, the 2010 SDSR saw steep reductions. The RAF lost one of its three classes of combat jets (among many other personnel

⁴ The “R2P” phrase was coined by the Canadian-instigated International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in the same year as the 9/11 attacks (2001), and was subsequently endorsed by the UN at the 2005 World Summit. Of course, what was already a controversial notion – external powers giving themselves the prerogative to intervene in other states’ domestic affairs if they did not like those states’ chosen policies – became further tainted through its invocation by powers, Britain included, engaged on military operations in theatres such as Iraq for other, manifestly non-humanitarian reasons (Moses, Bahador, and Wright 2011). Indeed, Britain’s choices on Iraq managed to neither reinforce the US alliance *or* uphold the authority of the UN Security Council – both professed goals of “liberal” UK strategy (Ralph 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

and equipment reductions), while the RN lost people and warships of all kinds, including – most iconically – its two remaining fixed-wing aircraft carriers.⁵

What does this potted history have to do with international-systemic polarity, a concept rarely mentioned in UK security policy at the time? The in-vogue mantras of the era – that “war had changed”, was now fought “among the people” (rather than against state adversaries), and that COIN and terrorism would be the enduring preoccupation of British defence (Blagden 2009) – were in fact by-products of a particular international-systemic distribution of power.⁶ UK forces could be optimised for campaigns against weak- and non-state adversaries precisely because – as America’s closest and most capable ally in an American-dominated post-Cold War unipolar system – there *were* no major powers capable of meaningfully opposing Western interests. Those actors that *did* seek to oppose US hegemony had to resort to “asymmetric” tactics (e.g. terrorism) as a way of imposing costs on the superpower, as seen both on 9/11 and in US-opposed “rogue” states’ particular interest in obtaining chemical, biological, or ideally nuclear means of deterrence – hence the ensuing “GWOt” and its conflation with armed counter-proliferation. Britain’s military commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan was motivated by a belief in their inherent liberal-progressive promise coupled to a more “realist” grand-strategic heuristic – embedded in London since the Suez debacle of 1956 – that it is in UK interests to bind American power to British security by hugging Washington close (Porter 2018a).⁷ But such commitment was made *possible* by the absence of meaningful state adversaries under the most acutely unipolar concentration of power seen since the height of the Roman Empire. In such a system, there still remained a

⁵ Illustratively, between the 1998 SDR and the 2015 SDSR, Royal Naval frigate/destroyer numbers fell from 35 to 19 while “hunter-killer” submarine (SSN) numbers fell from 12 to 6, highlighting the deep cuts to the sorts of capabilities most needed for securing control of Britain’s maritime region against major state adversaries. It is important to recognise too that – with an approximate training-maintenance-deployment ratio of 1:1:1 for such forces – this means a deployable average at any one time of only six frigates/destroyers and two SSNs for all of the UK’s global naval commitments, stretching the fleet unprecedentedly thin. Of course, the flaws of the 2010 SDSR even in dealing with the sorts of “discretionary” operations that it anticipated were manifested almost immediately (Dover and Phythian 2011).

⁶ They were outputs of a particular configuration of bureaucratic politics too (Crowcroft and Hartley 2012), naturally, but the options available to different arms of Britain’s foreign-policy machinery were all ultimately underpinned by a particular configuration of relative power. Indeed, some combination of liberalism and self-interest operating within a unipolar system likely explains the observed continuity in UK appetite for interventionism throughout the premierships of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron – despite their partisan differences and the intervening shock of 9/11 – at least until the Ukraine crisis of 2014 swayed Cameron back to concern for state-based defence via the 2015 SDSR in the latter years of his government (Honeyman 2017).

⁷ Britain has at times sought to support US hegemony without deep military entanglement of its own, of course, most notably by eschewing a troop commitment to the Vietnam War. Yet even here, Britain still provided diplomatic support and various forms of stand-off/covert military assistance, while also providing the most important prop to the European dimension of US global strategy (and thereby enabling Washington’s massive Asian commitment of the time).

clutch of “non-polar” major powers conceivably capable of thwarting direct US intervention in their own territory, Britain included (Monteiro 2014, 43-45). But such states were otherwise incapable of effectively opposing American foreign policy preferences (Monteiro 2014), with the US enjoying unprecedented command of the global “commons” (Posen 2003). Such post-1989 systemic conditions meant that for a capable second-tier power enjoying a reliable and comprehensive US security guarantee, there was suddenly strategic “spare capacity” for pursuing other liberal foreign-policy preferences – at the barrel of a gun, where desired – rather than focusing military effort on defence against other powerful states, as had characterised Britain’s strategic history prior to 1990. Such conditions also account for the growth of international law and institutions since the Cold War, advocacy of which has been another central plank of UK strategy.

The happy illusion underpinning this UK posture – that Western preponderance was so comprehensive as to ensure that there would never again be meaningful opposition from capable state adversaries (Blagden 2009) – was shattered for British policy elites and voters alike in 2014. Russia’s operation to lop Crimea off Ukraine and subsequently freeze any further moves in Kiev towards EU/NATO alignment by destabilising the eastern part of the country through a combination of large-scale conventional coercion and deniable subversion proved highly effective. This series of events, along with the accompanying deterrent signalling (e.g. Korsunskaya 2014), brought home to Western policymakers – in a way that even Russia’s Georgian intervention of 2008 had not – that there was once again a major power in Europe with sufficiently recapitalised capabilities and ample resolve to oppose further NATO encroachment.⁸ Russia’s ability to frustrate Western preferences in Syria and China’s increasingly capable area-denial perimeter over its maritime periphery have further emphasised this new reality, as has both powers’ readiness to disregard the Western-backed international “rules” by which UK enthusiasts had set so much store.

That new major powers would rise – or resurge, in Russia’s case – and then use their newfound capabilities to protect and advance their interests, even if that means opposing Western interests in the process, was always probable. One consequence of expanded cross-border factor flows of the kind that characterised post-1990 economic globalisation is the diffusion of productive capacity to states not yet at the leading edge of the development frontier, as capital, skills, and technology seek higher returns in environs of greater relative scarcity. As such, the very economic system that Western powers had created after 1945 and

⁸ On such encroachment and Russian sentiment towards it, see Shifrinson (2016).

then expanded globally following the Soviet Union's demise was also the system that gave large emerging economies the scope to experience substantial "catch-up convergence" development gains, with major implications for such powers' national capabilities (Blagden 2015, 334-37). Foremost among such states has been China, to the point where the United States now faces the most economically potent rising rival since its own emergence as a great power.⁹ Russia, for its part, was never the same kind of "emerging" economy – rather than *new* industrialisation, it underwent catastrophic *de*industrialisation in the 1990s followed by stabilisation and (partial) recovery in the 2000s – but the demand for Russian hydrocarbons and enduring technological specialisms that the post-Cold War globalization era created has nonetheless been instrumental in restoring Moscow's capabilities to oppose Western policy.

Of course, none of this means that the United States is about to lose its overall development edge, military superiority, or associated systemic leadership – all measures on which it remains far ahead of China (a country beset by development challenges of its own), let alone Russia (Beckley 2018). But one does not need to forecast the collapse of American power to still see that other major states have now acquired sufficient capability to constrain US behaviour and threaten US-aligned interests, especially in their own regions, and especially given the scale of global demands on American capabilities (Shifrinson and Beckley 2013, 172-77; Blagden 2015). US unipolarity, in short, is now less concentrated and more constrained than it was in the 1990s and 2000s, and possibly even now better characterised as a variant of bi- or multipolarity, albeit still favourably skewed towards US power and interests. While this latter fault-line is a subject for debate beyond the remit of this article, the point is that relative power is shifting as it diffuses away from the particular concentration seen in the post-Cold War West. And UK strategy, for its part, is starting to recognise that fact – but still with much confusion about what the erosion and possible end of unipolarity might mean and imply.

Contemporary British Invocations of "Polarity": Clarity and Confusion

Since the Ukraine-Russia shock of 2014, in which a major power used force to redraw European territorial boundaries and militarily coerce NATO states out of pursuing their preferences, discussions of state-based threats have returned to prominence in UK strategic

⁹ The Chinese economy is already bigger vis-à-vis its US counterpart than the Soviet Union's ever was. Of course, China also faces much more acute demands on its wealth than the US, given its relative development disadvantage – but that was also true of the USSR, which nonetheless managed to function as a systemic "pole", not least because it avoided an ambitious US-style grand strategy of global power projection (as China has also eschewed thus far).

discourse. The 2010 SDSR had not completely dismissed state-based threats, but beyond its focus on terrorism and insurgency – plus emerging risks, like pandemics, climate conflict, and cyberattack – it saw only a need to retain a baseline deterrent and “the ability to regenerate [conventional] capabilities *given sufficient strategic notice*” [emphasis added] (HM Government 2010, 10). Its post-Crimean successor, by contrast, promised to “respond robustly to the re-emergence of state-based threats” (HM Government 2015, 11)¹⁰ – revealing that 2014’s escalation of Russian *behaviour* prompted this assessment of a “re-emerged state threat” [sic], rather than the recovery of Russian *power* (since such capability-growth was also evident back in 2010). Likewise, whereas SDSR 2010 named Moscow as only a “partner” for “dialogue” (HM Government 2010, 61), SDSR 2015 made Russia the main subject of a sub-section on “the resurgence of state-based threats” (HM Government 2015, 18). The military capabilities prescribed by that SDSR for the decade ahead, “Future Force 2025”, were correspondingly reoriented away from COIN and back to state-on-state defence.¹¹ Still, this 2015 iteration – as is the way with high-profile public policy statements that must guard against adverse diplomatic consequences (Blagden 2018a, 726-27) – remained reticent to name *other* major powers as anything other than valued friends, despite their sometimes less-than-friendly conduct.¹² As such, while the post-Crimea SDSR reflected a reintroduction to top-line UK official security policy discourse of concern over capable state adversaries, it was still hardly some full-throated recognition of a multipolar threat environment.

Looking beyond the high-level statement of UK strategic priorities and posture provided by the SDSR, however, the “multip—” word and its corollaries have started to appear across the British security policy landscape. Launching the Public Consultation for the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) – an inter-SDSR mini-review of UK military needs – in March 2018, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) stated explicitly that “the rules-based international order is under significant pressure *from emerging multipolarity*” [emphasis added] (HM Government 2018b, 1). The MDP itself, when eventually published in the

¹⁰ Note that – unlike its 2010 predecessor – the 2015 SDSR was published as a single combined document with that year’s National Security Strategy.

¹¹ Contrary to widespread expectations, furthermore, the Government refrained from further cuts to the Defence Budget during the 2015 Spending Review – although this decision had domestic-political motivations, as well as international-strategic ones (Dorman, Uttley, and Wilkinson 2016).

¹² China is mentioned only as an esteemed economic partner, for example, despite the document also featuring a sub-section (HM Government 2015, 18-19) on foreign intelligence agencies’ cyber efforts to penetrate UK government/infrastructure and steal commercial secrets – both known Chinese tactics. On UK defence/intelligence fears over Chinese leverage, particularly in cyber infrastructure, see – for example – BBC (2018).

December of that year, asserted that “After almost three decades of relative international stability, the world has now re-entered a period of persistent and intense state competition” (HM Government 2018c, 11) – not far from an official UK government concession of the end of the post-Cold War “unipolar moment”, albeit without usage of the “polar” term itself. The MDP also pledged to create a Net Assessment Unit in the MOD to look “across all dimensions of military competition to assess how the capability choices of both friends and foes may play out”, in further recognition of the need to take the relative strategic balance vis-à-vis other powerful states seriously for the first time since the 1980s (HM Government 2018c, 17). The 2017-18 National Security Capability Review (NSCR) that spawned the MDP – a broader security/intelligence review concluded just after Russia’s fatal March 2018 use of a military nerve agent in Salisbury, and bearing a vociferous foreword from the Prime Minister reflecting that development – also featured a section on “intensifying” state competition (although it still placed such competition behind terrorism in its list of security concerns) (HM Government 2018a, 6). The bureaucratic-political incentives for such moves are not hard to discern, moreover (Allison and Halperin 1972); articulating a transformed new threat environment may be a good way to extract resources and attention from the rest of government.

Moving outside the central MOD and Cabinet Office NSCR/MDP machinery, further direct references and indirect allusions to multipolarity abound. The Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) – the MOD think-tank tasked with, among other things, conducting the Global Strategic Trends (GST) futures analysis programme to inform defence planners – has long maintained that power diffusion away from the West would eventually bring about the rise of newly-capable rivals.¹³ But in its 2018 version of GST, unlike its 2014 predecessor, DCDC first invokes “multipolarity” as an explicit characterisation of the future – albeit as only one possible future among others (HM Government 2018d, 24-25). Turning from the executive to legislative branches of government, meanwhile, organs of Parliament have also come to pay close attention to ongoing relative power shifts. The House of Lords/Commons Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS), for example, incorporated the language of “competitive multipolarity” and “peer military forces” (naming Russia and China) into its 2018 report on the changing UK national security environment (JCNSS 2018, 13, 18). The House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC), for its part, did not use the “multipolar” label explicitly in its 2018 analysis of the threat environment that the

¹³ For one such exemplar from the pre-Crimea era, see HM Government (2010b). For similar US National Intelligence Council analysis from a similar time, see US Government (2008).

MDP would have to confront – but it did deploy the term “peer adversaries”, implying multiple powers of approximately equal capability (i.e. close to a definition of multipolarity) (HCDC 2018, 27, 37, 44).

With such discussion of relative power shifts and resurgent state-based threats finally permeating policy, even if a little later than certain scholars would have preferred, is the UK now well placed analytically to cope with a post-unipolar security environment? Unfortunately, despite Britain’s security policy community reaching clarity on one important axis – that US-underpinned Western preponderance may not last forever and that new threats can be expected to correspondingly emerge – confusion remains along others. Tellingly, the multipolarity-invoking 2018 MDP Consultation went on to explain that “Increasingly sophisticated capabilities are being used in new domains of warfare, both by state actors...and by non-state actors that have diffused and disaggregated” (HM Government 2018b, 1). This elaboration of “multipolarity” (the subject of the preceding sentence) with reference to new domains of warfare and diffuse, disaggregated non-state actors belies a common theme of power-diffusion discussions in UK strategic discourse: “multi-” is often taken to mean not just a specific category of sufficiently capable states (“poles”), but new dangers of many kinds.

For structural realists, à la Kenneth Waltz or John Mearsheimer, “polarity” is tightly defined by a stringent criterion, namely the capacity to balance independently against even the most powerful other state in the system without recourse to the charity of allies.¹⁴ Such a specific understanding may itself be unhelpful in certain contexts, especially since nuclear weapons gave even conventionally weak states the ability to deter through the threat of unbearable punishment, but it is valuably parsimonious. For the various official UK policy statements referenced above, however, “multipolarity” is all things to all people. For DCDC’s GST, “multipolarity” is only one possible world, alongside three other posited options – “multilateralism”, “network of actors”, and “fragmentation” – belying an understanding of multipolarity not as a distribution of capabilities but as a behavioural condition (HM Government 2018d, 21). And while such GST documents over the years have indeed focused

¹⁴ Or some variant of this core intuition (Waltz 1979, 129-31; Mearsheimer 2001, 5; Monteiro 2014, 40-47). Of course, this does not mean that realists always agree on prevailing configurations of polarity, or even on appropriate criteria for its measurement (see, for example, Layne (2012) versus Wohlforth (2012)). It is also important to demarcate realist understandings of polarity (a distribution of power) from hegemony (an ordering strategy) (Wilkinson 1999; Cronin 2001). Nonetheless, the central shared insight of structural perspectives is that, while states need not be precisely equal in total capabilities to “count” as poles, they must have the independent capacity to balance against the forces of any other state in the system. For a valuable recent effort to classify “powers” by their proportional share of systemic capabilities, see Shiffrin (2018, 187-189) – but again, this is not the same insight as polarity, which is ultimately about *relational* balancing capacity.

on the diffusion of power, they have covered everything from states to transnational civil society groups, terrorist franchises, lone hackers, mega-cities, and super-viruses within the scope of such diffusion; the 2018 edition, while invoking multipolarity, continues that trend. For the MDP, multipolarity was certainly associated with the resurgence of state-based conflict – but it was also implicitly associated simply with All Bad Things that UK Defence will have to confront, from Russian tanks, to cyber-enabled terrorists, to the resource conflicts born of climate change.¹⁵ Likewise, for the NSCR from which the MDP was spun-off, “resurgen[t] state-based threats” featured as one element of a laundry-list, alongside terrorism, crime, natural hazards, and more besides. For the JCNSS and HCDC, meanwhile, the strategic environment is increasingly clouded by “peer adversaries” – but are these peers of the US, a systemic superpower, or merely the UK, a regional power with a bit of extra-regional influence? If we are talking about US peers, then that would indeed mean genuine multipolarity – but the UK cannot simultaneously call them “peers”, since any peer of the US is significantly more than a peer to the UK. By contrast, if they are merely peers to the UK, then they are not peers to the US – and unipolarity therefore remains intact. Most likely, their “peerness” or otherwise vis-à-vis both Britain *and* America depends on the regional context in which they are operating (e.g. Russia has much more capability vis-à-vis NATO in Eastern Europe than it does in the Western Hemisphere). Yet such caveats and qualifications diminish the clarity and utility of the overall labelling exercise.

All of this is consistent, of course, with Ben Zala’s recent (2017) identification of the discursive power and contestation generated by invocations of polarity. “Multipolarity” meaning different things to different people is not some UK-specific trait, but a feature of linguistic efforts to stratify political actors by capability and status tiers in many national strategic contexts. What *might* be peculiar to the UK, however, is the particular tension generated between capability-centric and status-centric approaches to such thresholds. These tensions are the focus of the next section.

Britain’s Tortured Relationship with “Great Powerness”

Since 1945, Britain has remained obsessed with performing the social role – and maintaining the associated status – of “great power” (McCourt 2014a). On any materially-specified metric, the UK ceased to be a “pole” at the end of the Second World War; this is not to say that Britain was suddenly trivial or that poles must be perfectly equal, but compared to the

¹⁵ This tendency pervades contemporary UK security policy, owing to the post-2010 design of the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) from which all other policy plans follow (Blagden 2018a).

United States and Soviet Union, it no longer met the criterion of being capable of independent balancing against the most powerful state(s) in the system without reliance on allies (Waltz 1979, 162; Monteiro 2014, 3). Even theorists who contended that there was more to “great powerness” than capability alone, in the form of rights and responsibilities to uphold some conception of international “order” – i.e. an international-*societal* dimension – still maintained that such powers should be capable of exercising regional preponderance (Bull 1977, 203, 13-19). Again, the USA and USSR could meet this criterion in their respective zones of control, but post-1945 Britain – for all of its commitment to the Anglo-centric international order that it had done much to create – could not.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the desire to retain the elevated influence and standing of a “special” role has remained strong among British elites and citizens alike¹⁷ – not unreasonably, given the esteem and other benefits that such elevation brings – with keen support from a Washington in search of allies and a Paris in a similar situation (McCourt 2014b, 160). This preference manifests itself as a continued appetite (Daddow 2015), despite 70-plus years of post-1945 defence cuts, for acting militarily abroad to uphold Britain’s conception of international order. At the same time, London has also still sought to retain enough capability in certain areas to at least make an effort at providing national security without wholesale reliance on allies – to remain a major power on “realist” criteria, as well as roleplaying ones (Blagden 2018b).¹⁸ Indeed, the 2015 SDSR promised to retain a UK “ability to undertake war-fighting independently”, even as it *also* stated that Britain “continues to look to [America] to shape global stability” (HM Government 2015, 51).

These different kinds of pressures can pull national strategy in different directions. Consider the 2015 SDSR’s three National Security Objectives, of which the first two – “protect our people” and “project our global influence” – could recommend diametrically

¹⁶ Of course, the USSR itself was never a true “equal” of the USA; Soviet GDP peaked at a mere 44.5% of the US total in 1975 (Maddison 2003), while Soviet technology never matched NATO’s overall lead. Nonetheless, given a combination of favourable PPP terms, willingness to impose domestic privations, and proximate location vis-à-vis the pivotal Western European theatre, the USSR was capable of deploying sufficient military capability to balance the forces (and associated regional policy preferences) of even the most capable other state(s) in the system – a threshold that Britain has not been able to meet since 1945. Mao’s China was also unable to meet this regional balancing criterion, given its inability to thwart American dominance of the Pacific Rim, for all that the 1950s People’s Liberation Army was sufficient to thwart limited US war aims in Korea.

¹⁷ To be sure, voters are often less enthusiastic about military intervention than policy elites. Nonetheless, as recently as 2013 – i.e. even after the government’s failed attempt to win Parliamentary approval for military intervention in Syria on the back of post-Iraq/-Afghanistan public war-weariness – 75 percent of Britons thought the UK should play a major role in the world to promote its economic interests, while 65 percent thought the same to promote national security interests (YouGov 2013, 7-8).

¹⁸ This is consistent with – and complemented by – a posture of “strategic latency”, whereby smaller-than-useful pockets of multiple capabilities are retained on the understanding that they could be scaled back up in a more dangerous future threat environment (Cornish and Dorman 2015).

opposed policies (i.e. if influence-motivated power projection embroils the state in some sort of conflict that jeopardises the people's protection). These are not just hypotheticals, moreover: with RN warships increasingly operating alongside US and Japanese counterparts in the China Seas, Britain is consciously accepting some increased risk of confrontation with the twenty-first century's rising superpower (jeopardising people-protection) in the name of asserting a British conception of "rules-based order" (i.e. influence-projection).¹⁹ Indeed, the very coding of influence projection as a co-equal strategic end, as opposed to merely a *means* to *other* ends, itself tells of a country with a particular interest in international role performance. Either way, the core point stands: despite having ceased to be an international-systemic "pole" on a material capability definition in 1945, Britain retains a preference for continued "great power" status through discharging a particular performative role (where "role" is understood as a bundle of socially ascribed behavioural expectations in a given context, like "father" or "customer" (McCourt 2014b, 160)). All of this supports Zala's observation that the political discourse of polarity actually reflects and reinforces collective concern over status hierarchies more than it corresponds to political scientists' concern for measuring capability distributions (Zala 2017, 12-14).

These tangled preferences further account for – and tie into – Britain's currently confused polarity debate. On the one hand, Britain has been a tremendous beneficiary of the US-led Western hegemonic system. With its own national power much diminished after 1945, the UK managed to closely align US power with its own preferences such that – occasional ructions notwithstanding – Britain has continued to enjoy expansive national security, favourable economic relations, and an elevated diplomatic position while also foregoing sufficient defence spending to afford a generous welfare state. The quid pro quo has been active UK support for US hegemony, to the point where Britain's principal grand-strategic choice has been to serve as a cog – an important and valued cog, certainly, but a cog nevertheless – in another power's grand strategy (Porter 2010, 9). In polarity terms, this means that Britain is deeply invested in the club goods that have been supplied by a US-dominated unipolar system – a distribution of power that many had come to assume as a structural "fact" of the international system – and is aware that the consequences of its erosion are unlikely to be favourable.

¹⁹ For description and enthusiastic advocacy of this behavior, see Hemmings and Rogers (2019). Such risk does not mean that it is necessarily the wrong choice, of course, but neither should policymakers or analysts be deluded that such choices are costless.

On the other hand, however, having spent 70 years with a foreign superpower as the ultimate guarantor of national survival, Britain's strategy community is not accustomed to prioritised demarcation of threats by power and proximity. In line with its role-based concern for "great powerness" under the assumption of US-assured security, UK strategic discourse struggles to distinguish between well-armed states and weak terrorists, between proximate threats and distant concerns, between the existentially vital and the ideologically desirable. Unbounded assertions of a "global" mission to uphold British "values", based on a moralistic division between "good" Britain and (implicitly) "bad" adversaries, are preferred over recognitions of limits to UK power and interests vis-à-vis the power and interests of others. US strategic discourse displays the same moralistic traits, of course – but then, Washington still has an unprecedented concentration of national power at its disposal. The recent British obsession with upholding "rules-based order" – a term invoked no fewer than thirty times by the 2015 SDSR – without reflecting on whose interests such "rules" are designed (not) to serve, which transgressions are most geopolitically salient, or the possible confrontations (and their costs) implied by such "upholding" is a case in point. The willingness to fit threat assessments to a pre-determined defence spending threshold – NATO's much-reified two-percent-of-GDP target – rather than *first* assessing the threat environment and *then* deciding how much defence spending it necessitates is another (HCDC 2018). The assumption that command of the global "commons" and associated resupply from global markets will always belong to "the West" (read: come from the US) is one more (Blagden 2018b, 11-15). And the belief of some that the international environment can be transformed by simply having enough faith in the British character and inherent righteousness of the UK position is yet another (Saunders 2018).

Britain has thus been free to go through the performative motions of confronting perceived threats to its conception of international order, in furtherance of a social conception of its world "role", without actually carrying the buck for its own survival – and this reflects itself in UK discourse around power and polarity. The confused invocation of "peer adversaries", without specifying who these adversaries are "peers" to, is particularly telling in this regard; it belies a Britain simultaneously keen to claim independent great-power status while consuming the low-cost, high-quality fruits of continued US primacy. Specifying a comparator for such "peerness" would force a choice between rejecting US hegemony (undesirable, since Britain wants to prop it up in order to continue consuming its goods if at all possible) or accepting clear subordination to another rank of powers (undesirable, since Britain wishes to retain and maximise its esteem and influence). Failing to specify whether

these “peer adversaries” are peers to the US, peers to the UK, or somehow both therefore avoids any such hard choices. But it also avoids any clarity over (a) systemic polarity in general and (b) whether Britain in particular seeks to claim any kind of great-power “polar” status for itself. 2018’s flurry of hand-wringing about whether the UK can remain a “Tier 1” military power (Press Association 2018) – an obviously absurd notion, since no-one can reasonably claim that Britain (or any other state) is currently in the same military “tier” as the US – betrays this same obsession with hierarchical status rankings alongside collectively useful ambiguity over Britain’s own claimed great-powerness (wanting the benefits of US subordination *and* the standing of great-power equality).²⁰ Such “tier” claims invoke some distribution of polarity, while also – by placing Britain implausibly in the “top” one – necessarily obscuring its presumed configuration. Under such conditions of conceptual slipperiness and empirical imprecision, it is hardly surprising that many contemporary UK security policy organisations’ use of “multipolarity” slides readily from a specific distribution of relative material power, as a structural realist would understand it, into simply meaning “lots of dangerous things that Britain must confront if we are to remain our kind of country”.

The Impact of Global Power Shifts on Britain

If power actually is shifting in the world – not in some vague sense, meaning to social media or insurgents, but in a specific sense, to rising non-Western economies with their own foreign-policy priorities – and US unipolarity is correspondingly eroding, what does that mean for UK security? In short, having discussed the various ways in which “multipolarity” *is* being used in British strategic discourse, what are the conditions under which it *should* be invoked?

At least five potential implications of the end of unipolarity – understood as the emergence of at least one other state capable of independently balancing the post powerful state in the system – present themselves for the UK strategic environment. First, and most

²⁰ Of course, UK strategic options do not distil to some false binary of “independent superpower” versus “US vassal”. As noted above, even under unipolarity, there has still been a structurally-definable category of major powers that – although not “poles” – possess leeway unavailable to most states. And within this tier, different states choose different strategies; whereas China and Russia seek to balance the US superpower, and France pursues a US alliance marked by conscious separation, Britain has complemented its close US alignment with other layers of deep integration into multilateral organisations, regimes, and networks (what two successive Foreign Secretaries respectively referred to as a “global hub” strategy (Blitz, Dombey, and Stephens 2007) and “networked foreign policy” (Hague 2010)). Nonetheless, while states face plenty of choices in terms of how to behave in order to best serve their interests, power is not the same as strategy and “greatness powerness” can thus have only two meanings: whether others see a state as discharging a great-power role/status (i.e. *intersubjective* recognition) *or* whether a state is capable of mobilising sufficient national resources to independently secure their interests against the possible predations of others (i.e. an *objective* criterion). Britain prizes both understandings, but they sometimes stand in tension nonetheless (Blagden 2018b).

pressing for Britain, has been the resurgence of Russia from its post-Cold War economic nadir of the 1990s (Blagden 2015, 338-39). Of course, with an economy smaller than those of Italy and Canada as of 2018,²¹ and facing crippling headwinds,²² Russia is never again going to be a meaningful industrial competitor to America and will struggle to even fulfil its convergence potential vis-à-vis Western Europe. Nonetheless, years of strong economic growth through the 2000s, favourable PPP terms, and a willingness to spend a larger share of national output on defence than is seen among the welfare states of NATO have allowed Russia to reform and modernise its military forces to the point where they are the largest and (on most measures) most capable in Europe. As evidenced by Ukraine's experience, moreover, Moscow is capable of multiplying the strategic effects of its forces through astute use of covert action, proxies, subversion, communications disruption, disinformation, and so forth.²³ US forces remain far superior to their Russian counterparts on a global level, to be sure, but those forces are not "automatically" available for European defence and do not preclude effective Russian subversion, concentrations of local superiority, or escalation to nuclear brinkmanship if sub-nuclear strategic options fail.

Moscow, in short, now has the coercive means to advance its regional interests once again. Foremost among these are thwarting, weakening, and ideally breaking NATO. Note that such a preference does not mark Russia as "bad" or "evil", since Moscow has sound and understandable strategic reasons to wish to roll back a powerful alliance that (a) was created for its containment and (b) expanded across former Soviet allies *and* territory during the post-1989 depths of Russian weakness. Nonetheless, targeting Britain – as the European NATO state that has historically displayed the greatest combination of capability and resolve to balance Russia – could prove integral to any such efforts to weaken or break the Alliance, and this would obviously harm UK security. All of this is also taking place at a time when the US is becoming less equipped to shoulder all of its allies' defence burdens simultaneously as it focuses on balancing the rising Chinese peer-competitor in Asia (see below).

In the face of these international-structural conditions, Britain faces pressing questions for its strategic posture – understood as the selection, configuration, and direction of levers of national power, ultimately buttressed by military forces – all of which can be

²¹ For Russia's 2018 nominal GDP (on an exchange-rate basis) in comparative perspective, see IMF (2019). That said, it is worth noting that Russian GDP on a PPP basis is much larger (close to that of Germany).

²² These include demographic decline, productivity-impeding corruption, creativity-stifling authoritarianism, Western sanctions, lack of trust from potential foreign investors, volatile global hydrocarbon demand, and the "crowding out" of productive investment by the resource-extractive sector (Blagden 2015, 338).

²³ Such tactics are often now dubbed part of "hybrid warfare", although the term is banal – every strategic action in history has been "hybrid" in some such way.

traced back to the fraying of unipolarity and the waning of US preponderance. What if, as part of some limited Alliance response to a Baltic or Norwegian contingency (say), Russia faces incentives to destroy NATO's stand-off air power, including RAF stations, RN carriers, and MOD command/control facilities? How might efforts to preserve the US alliance commitment to NATO by supporting Washington's global strategy – such as deploying British forces to the Gulf or East Asia – suck Britain into commitments that are costly on their own terms, jeopardise the UK's core NATO balancing effort in Europe, and/or bring London into confrontation with Beijing and/or Moscow? What if some Russian action in Estonia/Svalbard/etc sees NATO/Britain – with little help from a disinterested or distracted Washington, in a worst-case scenario – left choosing between acceptance of the *fait accompli* (i.e. the breaking of NATO), costly attempted recapture in the face of a formidable Russian anti-access/area-denial perimeter, or perilous escalation to nuclear coercion? And what would London do if – as part of an effort to weaken NATO by dissuading the Alliance's only offshore European power, i.e. the UK, from contributing to continental defence – Moscow undertook a concerted campaign of coercion against Britain itself? Patterns of Russian naval activity, bomber patrols, cyber/informational subversion, and chemical/radiological weapons use in and around Britain imply that the latter scenario is already not too far away.²⁴

Second, but bound up with the previous point, the erosion of unipolarity means that the United States will be less willing – and eventually less able – to shoulder all of its allies' defence burdens simultaneously (Blagden 2015, 339-41). As noted above, while China has not yet reached Soviet levels of relative military spending or capability, its economy is already larger vis-à-vis its American counterpart than the USSR's ever was – and it still has the convergence potential to become even larger. East Asia will therefore be the principal theatre in which Washington must put forth its balancing effort to safeguard its allies, maritime control, and other aspects of its favoured regional order.

This presents two opposite risks for the UK, which can respectively be dubbed “abandonment” and “entanglement” (or “chain-ganging”). On the one hand, while the United States is unlikely to completely forsake NATO – even Donald Trump's mercurial temperament notwithstanding – the chorus in Washington will only grow louder that America's rich, developed allies in Europe should carry more of the costs of their own security. For a United States that has no intention of giving up international-systemic primacy

²⁴ One silver lining to such developments is that it can be easier to develop broad-based public support for coherent national strategy when there is a direct, defined “threat” than multiple abstract “risks” (Edmunds 2012; Blagden 2018a). That said, Brexit and its domestic fallout may have comprehensively undermined any gains on this front, in terms of national political unity and associated strategic coherence.

if it can be avoided (Porter 2018b), even despite others' rise, getting its capable allies in regions that do not contain a true peer-competitor to US power – which is true of Europe but not of Asia – to provide the bulk of their own defence makes good sense. And if the US *does* eventually give up strategic primacy, *because* of the rise of other powers, then the Europeans will be left with little choice either way. Russia's diminished strategic salience to the United States could therefore present an unpleasant paradox for America's European allies, Britain foremost among them. For despite contemporary Russia being much weaker than the Cold War USSR was, it could present just as great a security challenge for European NATO powers as the Soviet Union did *if* Euro-NATO must do the lion's share of the balancing itself, with only bounded and conditional US support.

On the other hand, British efforts to prop up US hegemony carry risks of entanglement in regions of only peripheral interest to the UK, with potential for “chain-ganging” into others' conflicts.²⁵ The recent British push to forward-deploy naval forces in Singapore, make defence commitments to Japan, and join US-orchestrated freedom-of-navigation operations in contested areas of the South China Sea are all motivated by a desire to demonstrate UK influence in upholding the “rules-based” (i.e. Western-dominated) international order from which Britain has benefitted (Hemmings and Rogers 2019). Yet however much it is packaged as simply an apolitical “upholding” of impartial “rules”, such military commitments necessarily place Britain within a US-led balancing coalition directed at China – for rules to be “upheld”, the interests of the actor “breaking” them must necessarily be countered – with all of the escalatory risks that that relationship carries (Goldstein 2013). This risk could even be *more* pronounced for Britain, if – say – Beijing decided that a UK warship was an appropriate proxy target against which to assert its counter-Western preferences without guaranteeing the full blowback that would follow an attack on a US naval vessel. And on top of all this, any military asset deployed in East Asia to issue warm words about upholding “rules-based order” is necessarily a scarce asset *not* deployed on other, more pressing balancing tasks against more UK-proximate threats in the Euro-Atlantic region, as per the previous point.

²⁵ This is not to say that trade (say) in East Asia is only a “peripheral” UK interest; clearly it is one of the most economically dynamic regions of the world, and Britain will want to pursue commercial opportunities there. Nonetheless, economic engagement does not require a military presence; Germany has massive trade with East Asian states not because it sends warships to their region, but because it makes goods that they wish to buy. And East Asia *is* peripheral to UK security interests – it is geographically distant from Britain, and the UK is not a salient concern for actors in the region except insofar as it militarily positions itself in their vicinity, meaning that British security dilemmas with Asian powers are wholly avoidable.

The final three points are largely corollaries to the preceding two, and can be summarised more succinctly. Third, therefore, a multipolar world is more likely to be prone to interstate military crises with the potential to embroil UK interests (Blagden 2015, 341). Whereas a unipolar world features one great power capable of decisively tilting the balance of any militarised interstate dispute that it cares to join – and simultaneously, if necessary – that would no longer be true in a multipolar world. Beyond the general NATO-Russia and US-China contexts already discussed, potential flashpoints abound: in the Baltic and Black Seas, around Svalbard, in the Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf, around the India-Pakistan and India-China borders, on the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait, in the South Atlantic, in parts of Africa, and many more. But ultimately, the point here is not to provide an exhaustive “laundry list”; the point is to illustrate that in a multipolar world, many more potential conflict dyads in contested locations will contain at least one party that no longer feels sufficiently encumbered by the potential for countervailing action by a sole superpower. And in many of these contexts, the potential exists for British interests to be affected and for London to therefore face stark choices over conceding such interests or risking potentially escalatory entanglement.

Fourth, a multipolar world is unlikely to be a world conducive to arms control or counter-proliferation efforts (Blagden 2015, 341-42). The unipolar world was not universally conducive either, of course – in demonstrating that it would topple regimes that it opposed even if they had already relinquished weapons of mass destruction, as it did in Iraq and Libya, the superpower strengthened the case for nuclear deterrence among otherwise-weak US adversaries (the fates of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi did not go unnoticed in Pyongyang). Nonetheless, for those states that avoided enmity with the unipole, the Western hegemonic system produced relatively few pressures for horizontal or vertical proliferation. A multipolar world, by contrast, may produce more such incentives, insofar as more states are likely to face powerful adversaries that they are not confident they can deter through conventional arms alone. The competitive major-power rivalries of a non-unipolar system may also make cooperative arms control harder to sustain; the recent unravelling of the US-Russia Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty looks ominous in this light (Bodner 2019). Of course, productive arms control measures can occur in multipolar and bipolar systems, as seen via the Hague Conventions of 1899/1907, the naval treaties of 1922-36, and the various force limitation agreements of the Cold War – yet in all such parallels, states refused to relinquish critical means of defending their survival (or defected from treaties once there was a seemingly existential security rationale for doing so), illustrating the appeal that

the ultimate means of deterrence (nuclear arms) will hold in an era of resurgent interstate competition. And again, such developments could negatively affect UK security interests. Britain is hardly some righteous opponent of nuclear arms – indeed, if multipolarity is returning with some of the consequences described here, its own nuclear deterrent will be more salient once again – but it would still face real risks from both the collapse of great-power arms control and/or nuclear proliferation to fragile regimes.

Fifth, albeit following from previous points, a return to competitive multipolarity could once again see contestation of the global “commons” – air, sea, space – that America has commanded since 1990 (Blagden 2015, 342). Many assumptions of UK strategy, meanwhile, have followed from this presumed structural “fact” of such Western command. Military forces have been configured around power projection rather than gaining sea/air control against adversaries capable of contesting them, as for thirty years, UK forces have operated in an environment in which “NATO” (i.e., the United States) has supplied such control with ease (Blagden 2018b). Nowhere is this more apparent than the Royal Navy, which has just commissioned the two large new aircraft carriers promised by the 1998 SDR while having halved the frigate/destroyer, hunter-killer submarine, and mine-countermeasures fleets from the numbers specified by the same Review. Such carriers are no bad thing in themselves – indeed, well screened and equipped carriers are themselves valuable tools of sea/air command – but the decimation of the other sorts of naval forces necessary to escort carriers and secure sea control against adversaries’ denial efforts belies a maritime posture that simply presumes a Western-dominated lake.

Beyond force composition, such assumptions are similarly pervasive in other aspects of UK strategy (Blagden 2018b). For example, as 2011’s Libya campaign exposed – and as an outgoing UK Joint Forces Commander recently lamented (Jones 2016) – British stocks of munitions, spares, fuel, and technical expertise have been run down to unprecedentedly low levels, premised on “just-in-time” resupply from global markets and private contractors, as if defence was a “normal” business. Such assumptions may have maximised efficiency when engaging in expeditionary wars against minor powers, à la the “GWOt”, but they could be cruelly exposed against a state adversary capable of (a) identifying such an obvious vulnerability and (b) targeting supply lines effectively. The same goes for the consolidation of UK forces into a few large bases, again for financial efficiency reasons, with such bases and associated command/control nodes lacking meaningful air defence. And looking beyond military capacity, everything from the vast majority of goods trade to fibre-optic internet cables and GPS satellites resides in those erstwhile uncontested commons. Yet all such

conditions, while often treated as some permanent new reality of international politics, have in fact been a direct benign consequence of unipolarity and – on the UK-specific dimensions – intimate alliance with that unipole. If such unipolarity erodes, therefore, then such conditions may also erode with it. Britain depends on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) not only for its economic prosperity but also for its military capacity and indeed its population’s survival. Even a modest uptick in contestation of the maritime commons could therefore bring profound consequences for Britain, especially if/when it occurs in the UK’s Euro-Atlantic home region.

The Way Forward: Polarity, Prudence, and Precision

Since 2014, UK strategic discourse has been replete with references to resurgent state-based competition, bringing the post-Cold War interregnum of “abnormal” major-power relations to a close. From around 2018, moreover, the term “multipolarity” itself has begun to appear in official policy statements. Such recognitions are not before time: the ongoing shift of economic, political, and military power from Western Europe and North America to emerging, non-Western states is the most important dynamic in contemporary international politics. This was true even during the period of Britain’s self-inflicted embroilment in the Afghan and Iraq campaigns, of course – as scholars noted a decade ago (Blagden 2009) – but at least the drawdown from such GWoT-era commitments coupled to the shock of Crimea has pushed UK defence to once again contemplate concerns beyond COIN and counterterrorism.

While discussions of state-based threats, peer adversaries, and a multipolar world are back in vogue, however, such terms are not being used with clarity or consistency. Such ambiguity is both unsurprising and understandable. As Zala has demonstrated, “polarity” in the discourse of policymakers rarely means the same thing as is meant by political scientists. Like any speech about politics, the language is itself political. British national strategy is caught between wanting to continue to consume the fruits of a US unipolar system while also wanting to claim the social role of a “power” for itself – and all while beginning to recognise that Western hegemony is itself waning. Under such circumstances, while it is good that policymakers and the analytical community that surrounds them are beginning to contemplate the UK security implications of the return of multipolarity, it is also unremarkable that the term itself is being used to mean all things to all people. The discourse of “multipolarity” as it exists in Britain today thus reflects enduring concerns over national standing along with fear over a seeming multitude of threats from terrorists to hackers, from climate change to the

collapse of “liberal order” ...*as well* as the specific meaning recognised by realist theory, namely growth in the capabilities of potentially hostile states to the point where they are capable of balancing the pre-existing powers’ interests.

If Zala’s contention is correct on a positive-explanatory level, then, what normative-prescriptive recommendations follow? If “polarity” *is* being used so expansively, in other words, how *should* it be made more precise? Of course, neither policymakers nor scholars can be expected to possess crystal balls. Efforts in the present to precisely forecast the exact future configuration of systemic polarity in, say, 2050 – or even a mere decade from now, at the start of the 2030s – are likely to be unsatisfactory. Economic growth trajectories can be approximated with at least some insight, of course. But the path between strong economic growth potential and system-structuring national power is so fraught with contingency as to make definitive polarity projections circumspect.²⁶ Just as this article has equivocated about the precise configuration of polarity now emerging, therefore – whether that be genuine multipolarity (balanced or otherwise), some form of US-China bipolarity, or simply a diluted form of unipolarity at the global level that is no longer full unipolarity within certain regions (i.e. where “local poles” are capable of balancing the US in a way that they still cannot in the wider world) – it is perfectly acceptable for policymakers to do the same.

Nonetheless, while it is perfectly forgivable to not know exactly what a post-unipolar future will look like, it is less forgivable to be imprecise about what multipolarity would even mean. Britain is not a pole and will not be again, despite banal efforts to code it as such through nebulously-defined “soft” power resources (Giannangeli 2015). But it remains a major power – and not simply on vague ideational grounds, but also on specific structural criteria (Monteiro 2014, 43-45; Blagden 2018b). London’s suite of diplomatic, military, intelligence, financial, scientific, and cultural levers remains substantial. Such power is most concentrated in its home region, however, while it dissipates through projection – as is true for any country, of course, even the mighty United States (Porter 2015). The contemporary UK can thus be thought of as a regional major power with a bit of extra-regional influence, albeit with efforts to stretch that extra-regional influence serving to drain home-regional capability (this holds for any state, so it is not a pejorative judgement).

For such a country, thinking rigorously about what a change in global polarity would *mean* – and adopting structural precision about what “polarity” actually *is* as a precursor to this – will be fundamental to fashioning prudent national strategy for a post-unipolar age. So

²⁶ For valuable (but inconclusive) debate, see Layne (2012), Wohlforth (2012), Shifrinson and Beckley (2013). Contesting whether polarity is even appropriate for measuring change, see Brooks and Wohlforth (2015).

many traits of the post-Cold War international system that have been assumed to be progressive, irreversible developments by many strategists and scholars alike – the overriding preoccupation with countering terrorism, the seeming authority of international law and institutions, unchecked Western power projection in the name of liberal-humanitarian causes, a free-flowing and Western-controlled maritime “commons”, a Western-dominated internet/satellite communications infrastructure, and so forth – have in fact been products of the “unipolar moment”. We do not know quite what configuration of polarity is coming next, but it is probably fair to say – at the very least – that the acuteness of post-1990 US unipolarity is now waning; China, Russia, and even India all have much less developed economies, but they also have access to new denial capabilities and, unlike Washington, are not trying to project hegemonic power into all regions of the world simultaneously.

If such unipolarity is indeed waning, meanwhile, then fundamental premises of UK strategic posture and conduct will require reappraisal. For while British policymakers now acknowledge relative power shifts, national strategy continues to reflect unipolar habits. The reification of the NATO two-percent/GDP defence spending threshold within UK politics, following a government calculation that there is neither public nor parliamentary appetite to forego other areas of social spending – regardless of the deteriorating security environment – represents a political constraint on power-balancing symptomatic of a state that has not been its own security guarantor for a very long time.²⁷ The recent “Global Britain” enthusiasm for dispatching scarce warships and aircraft to the “Indo-Pacific” – an absurdly expansive “region” spanning two-thirds of the globe, with ample scope for escalation and entanglement – to “project influence” and “uphold rules” even while NATO and UK-national commitments alike go unfilled in the Euro-Atlantic area similarly belies a role-obsessed state that has forgotten (but may painfully rediscover) the constraints of the balance of power.²⁸ The contradictions of Britain’s China policy – bandwagoning in the hope of economic gain, through allowing the penetration of critical national infrastructure (e.g. nuclear power and 5G internet) by Chinese firms to the irritation of Washington, while joining the US-led counter-China balancing coalition in Asia to the annoyance of Beijing – are further symptomatic of a state rusty in the hard trade-offs of major-power politics. So too the provision of diplomatic

²⁷ On the strategic limitations born of not being one’s own security provider, see Porter (2010, 9). On domestic-political constraints on adequate power-balancing, see Schweller (2008).

²⁸ Neoclassical realism provides a structural explanation for such disregard: domestic-ideational pressures exert more influence over states’ policy when they are relatively safe and the constraining effects of anarchy are therefore weaker; in an international system of more pressing relative threats, by contrast, states will have less scope to indulge their domestic-political preferences (Walt 2018, 6). For valuable discussion of UK behaviour through such a neoclassical realist lens, see Hadfield-Amkhan (2010).

support for Ukrainian NATO membership, and military/financial support for the Ukrainian effort to expel Russian occupation, only to be aghast when Moscow engages in similarly militarised coercion of Britain in return.²⁹ Finally, the Brexit indulgence tells of a country deeply flippant about – and cosseted from – the dangers of an anarchic international system.³⁰ For no power that was thinking seriously about the return of a multipolar threat environment would embark willingly on a project that risks shrinking its own economy (and associated capacity for both military spending and productive investment), damaging its own constitution, dividing its own polity, paralysing its own government, estranging its own proximate and powerful allies, weakening the purchasing power of its own currency, increasing its own dependence on capricious patrons,³¹ compromising its own EU-adjointed territories/bases,³² undermining its own fragile internal peace,³³ and quite possibly breaking itself apart (if Scotland and/or Northern Ireland are driven to secede).³⁴

In short, if multipolarity really is returning – as HM Government’s own policy statements now proclaim – then British strategy needs to become less fixated on performative identity, and more focused on defending vital interests through careful husbandry of national power while prudently eschewing unnecessary entanglements.³⁵ Prudence – Hans Morgenthau’s “supreme virtue” of statecraft (1973, 12) – counsels recognition that all political actions entail consequential trade-offs, however worthy their motive, and also that there are limits to humans’ ability to predict and control outcomes (Harriman 2003; Porter 2016, 257-8). As such, following the analysis of the potential consequences of unipolarity’s erosion offered above, prudent UK strategy for navigating a multipolar system must be selective in its ranking of interests – especially where they imply confrontation with the interests of other powerful actors – while also strengthening national capacity to deter and, if

²⁹ This does not necessarily mean that there is *no* case for UK support to Ukraine, of course. It simply means that in choosing to support the expansion of a military alliance created for the containment of Russia into the USSR’s own former territory (still home to important Russian military facilities), and then choosing to join Ukraine’s internal conflict on the Russian-opposed side (via provision of money/equipment/training), London should not then be surprised that such choices engender UK-opposed counter-balancing by a powerful state. Recent UK military cooperation with non-NATO Sweden and Finland – benign though these states may indeed be – similarly smacks of policy chosen without due regard for the likely impact on Russian threat perceptions.

³⁰ For valuable discussion of the relationship between Brexit and Britain’s enduring concerns for world “role” – as now manifested in re-expanding extra-European commitments under the “Global Britain” moniker – see Daddow (2019).

³¹ Trump’s America and Xi Jinping’s China.

³² In Northern Ireland, Gibraltar, and Cyprus.

³³ In Northern Ireland.

³⁴ On such potential balance-of-power implications of Britain’s efforts to leave the European Union (“Brexit”), see Blagden (2017, 9-14).

³⁵ This is not a claim that there is one unitary “national interest”; UK interests are multiple, complex, and contested (Edmunds 2014). Nonetheless, they are all topped by survival, since a state that does not survive cannot achieve anything else either (Mearsheimer 2001, 31).

necessary, prevail against emergent dangers. Prioritising the threats to balance against based on their relative proximity, power, offensive wherewithal, and inferred probability of UK-targeted hostile intent (Walt 1985) – rather than the adolescent absolutism of demanding equal opposition to all violations of Western preferences – would be a good place to start, even while also making the case for a regenerated pool of national capabilities. If the UK strategy community manages this sooner rather than later, Britain may just have a chance of preserving its security, prosperity, and even its much-coveted major-power status through a multipolar twenty-first century.

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³⁶ All URLs accessible as of 11 February 2019.

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