

World Politics after the War in Ukraine: Non-polarity and its South Asian Dimensions

Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam *

Abstract

The world is evolving towards a realization that no individual state or power could steer the world as a unipolar power. The end of the Cold War and the global competition over international suzerainty after the Second World War in 1945 made bipolarity more relevant till the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) happened within that vacuum when the world order was transitioning from the so-called unipolarity to what I have called “non-polarity” This has become even more evident by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has impacted the lives of every individual from Europe to South Asia. The dependency on the food and energy resources of individuals on Ukrainian and Russian sources brings the war uncomfortably close to people’s daily lives while making it compulsory for the powers in control to redesign their policies. The supra explanation ability of ‘polarity’ is challenged if analyzed with a microscopic lens. Nothing will remain unaffected by this radical shift, neither regional politics nor our personal lives. Indeed, the latter point is indicative of massive changes.

Keywords: Unipolar, Bipolar, Non-Polarity, Food and Energy, Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

* Prof. Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam is Co-Director, Centre for AI Futures, Department of Politics and International Studies at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He can be reached at aa106@soas.ac.uk

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Introduction

The world is changing fast with new challenges and opportunities. Having an inherent characteristic of interdependency, nothing will remain unaffected by this radical shift, neither the regional politics nor our personal lives. Indeed, the latter point is indicative of the massive changes that I will chart in this paper. Earlier the US invasions of Iraq (1991), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq again (2003), were fought without a major impact on individual lives in North America and Europe. In fact, while writing about the “Operation Desert Storm,” the invasion of Iraq in 1991, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote that the Persian Gulf War did not actually take place, but was a carefully scripted media event - - a “virtual” war. With the massive increase in the cost of energy and commodities, the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are felt by everyone. The war has come uncomfortably close. In South Asia and in other areas of the Global South, the poorer strata of society are particularly affected, as food shortages are taking their toll. The battle for Ukraine is an intensely fought war.

Moreover, both the US invasions of Iraq in 1991 and Afghanistan in 2001, had happened in a vacuum. The world order was transitioning from so-called uni-polarity to what I have called “non-polarity.” Unipolarity was galvanised by the demise of the Soviet Union in 1988, and the end of the Cold War. The global competition over international suzerainty started in the post Second World War era and formally ended with the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan manifested their resistance as an unavoidable force.

I was a student in Washington D.C in the 1990s. This was more a period of imperialist megalomania in the politics of the United States. Neo-conservatives dreamt about an impending “American Century,” the “End of History” in favour of the United States as Francis Fukuyama put it. Charles Krauthammer, one of the many media protagonists of the neo-

conservative movement propounded at the time, paraphrased Benjamin Franklin and said, ‘History has given you an empire if you will keep it.’¹

Nonetheless, Operation Desert Storm in 1991 was indicative of this almost pathological sense of achievement. Similarly, the so-called “War on Terror” accelerated the speedy demise of the “unipolar moment” exactly, because the “New American Century” was a pipedream. No single country could dominate world politics at any stage of world history.

The truth always hits back and no ideology can create a world order based on myths. The incredibly complex realities of international politics defy grand theorisations that reduce local dynamics to systemic properties such as “polarity.” The term “non-polarity” that I have used in the title of this article denotes exactly this fact: world politics can never be wholly determined by any single actor alone. The assumption that one or two countries can dominate the world upon which some influential International Relations theories such as “neo-realism,” were premised, borders on believing in conspiracy theories. These so-called “grand theories” try to explain immensely complex interactions with simplified “if-then” casualties that do not explain the intricacies of world politics. A good theory is critical, suspicious, historically informed and allows for complexity.

Why Wars Yield Strategic Failure

Non-polarity, however, does not imply that there are no power hierarchies. Of course, there are and they have to be accounted for. But non-polarity explains why no single actor can determine major strategic outcomes. Even during the Cold War, the so-called “superpowers” couldn’t determine the end of every major strategic competition and political upheaval. The United States lost in Vietnam. Similarly, it could not save the Shah of Iran or reverse the revolution in Cuba, a very small country just 90 miles off the US shoreline. The Soviet Union lost in

¹ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited”, *The National Interest*, Vol. 3 No. 70 (Winter 2002/2003), p. 18.

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Afghanistan, and in the end, no one emulated the Soviet model. Non-polarity forces look at micro-dynamics within countries and regions and appreciate strategic outcomes determined by the properties of the international system.

Power works in mysterious ways. What does it explain that the United States has the largest power capabilities in terms of military strength? It is a contributing factor to many dynamics in the international system. It does explain why the United States and its NATO allies are relatively secure from being attacked. It does also allow for some power projection, sanctions, and other tools of foreign policy. These are largely common-sense explanations that may satisfy the mainstream media, but in essence they do not explain much. The military power of the United States could not prevent the invasion of Ukraine despite several warnings to Russia that Washington may react militarily. In fact, one of the reasons why most US strategists did not believe that Russian President Vladimir Putin would take the decision to invade, is exactly because their analysis was clouded by the idea that US military power would act as a deterrent. The myth of uni-polarity did not allow invasions by seemingly minor actors (in their perception) such as Russia. Their theories proved wrong.

In 2021, despite the devastating economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, total global military expenditure increased to US\$ 2.1 trillion.² The five largest spenders in 2021 were the United States, China, India, the United Kingdom and Russia, respectively. Together they accounted for 62% of the overall expenditure, according to the prestigious Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Orthodox realists would condone such staggering military expenditure, as they associate it with strategic success.³

² “World military expenditure passes \$2 trillion for first time”, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, April 25, 2022. Available at <<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time>>

³ Ibid.

However, the facts do not support that assertion. US military power could not bring down Bashir Al-Assad in Syria. It is not as if the United States did not do everything to depose him. It was simply that in this case as well, military power could not determine strategic outcomes. Regional dynamics superseded global determinations, as it was Iran that played a major role in safeguarding the regime in Syria holding on to a trusted ally. Neither could the US military power persuade countries such as China, India and even Saudi Arabia to contain their relations with Russia, even at the height of offence against Ukraine. Other examples are equally revealing. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, may have yielded the end of Saddam Hussein who was already weakened by decades of sanctions and massive opposition by Iraqis themselves. The strategic outcome was clearly not what the United States wanted, as in Iraq too, Iranian allies were suddenly part of the government. So pronounced is Iran's influence in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere, that some of my colleagues within the region truly assume that there is some kind of US-Iranian conspiracy to subdue the Arab world. Though it is incorrect, the military might of the United States simply did not translate into strategic success.⁴

The truth is that the US debacle in Iraq demonstrated that “winning” a war does not bring around a strategic gain. The second pyrrhic “victory” proclaimed against the Taliban after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, also shows that military might does not translate into strategic advantages. After two decades of war and destruction, including the deaths of several Afghans and hundreds of young US and allied military personnel, the Trump administration was forced to accept the Taliban as a government of Afghanistan. It was a war fought in the name of Western political system, human rights and democracy in the first place, yet the presence of the people's power was ghastly ignored. On the other hand, Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, proved to be the burial ground of

⁴ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *What is Iran? Domestic politics and international relations in five musical pieces*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

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empires. Any war fought against the will of the people seldom yields strategic success.

Russia is learning this lesson, too. The war in Ukraine is not going the way it was planned. There is enough material out there about its economic costs at all levels. There may be some minor territorial gains, and this may partially be explained by the military superiority of the Russian army. Above everything else, Vladimir Putin has amassed NATO more firmly against Russia: Sweden and Finland have fast-tracked their accession to the alliance; Europe is militarising; Russia is forced to accept Turkish demands in Syria; Putin's position is compromised in other regions of the world, too, exactly because all of the resources of the state are dedicated to the invasion of Ukraine. If the EU was debating whether NATO could be turned into an inclusive alliance, a position taken by the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and successive French presidents, the Russian invasion has reinvigorated the *raison d'être* of NATO as a *military* alliance.⁵ This is not something all Europeans necessarily feel comfortable with. Moreover, Putin said that the war in Ukraine was meant to prevent the enlargement of NATO.⁶ Nonetheless, war has never been an option. Choosing war over other options achieved the opposite -- a strategic failure that will cast its shadow over Russia for years to come. And this incites me to go back to my stance on the realization of inclusivity and power of individuals as a precursor of non-polarity.

What is Non-Polarity?

Non-polarity is a concept that questions the wide-spread assumption among decision-makers and many scholars that brute military power translates into strategic victory. You cannot bomb yourself to success

⁵ Richard Lough, "Germany's Merkel calls for a European Union military," *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-politics-merkel-idUSKCN1N1IUQ>

⁶ Ted Galon Carpenter, "Many Predicted NATO expansion would lead to war. Those warnings are ignored," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/nato-expansion-war-russia-ukraine>

much in the same way as you cannot murder yourself to being successful in life. Both life and the international system are too complex to be subsumed under facile grand concepts that inform decisions of war and peace, success and failure. Mainstream international theory is more like five-minute lifestyle videos on YouTube that promise you to reveal the secret of happiness, much far from reality. It keeps you more in the web of ideas.

Similarly, the concept of non-polarity also does not purport to explain everything. All it does is to address something simple: to look into internal dynamics within the states, including state-society relations. The impact of non-material powers should be given priority. Non-polarity indicates that no single actor (or particle) has the capability to determine outcomes. The phenomenon is equally scientific. The sum particles of international life find their root cause in the individual capacity of the societies and their reaction. And if considered seriously, these miniscule factors must be taken more seriously. They actually compose the international system. Besides, they are auto-dynamic that tend to cancel out each other. Akin to scientific explanation of physics, the more you push against the other particles with brute force, the less effective you become as the reaction could be counter-productive. In such a disorderly environment with manifold micro-realms to consider, war acts like an implosion that blows right back at the Firestarter. Perhaps that is what forces the warring states to negotiate eventually.

Moreover, the world is much more complex relying heavily on people's concerns while collectively designing an international life. The foremost challenges are in its disorderly and atomistic characteristics. However, this also does not mean that the world is in perpetual anarchy; a war of all against all. In fact, it resembles a complex amalgamation of micro-worlds like any world of biological cell phenomena that are constantly in flux. They escape ordering devices based on brute force exactly because they implode into manifold centripetal dynamics when an outside force acts upon them. Would you yield to an argument based on violence? No. How

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would one yield a peaceful coexistence in an infinitesimally more complex world of international politics? Why can't military conflicts become obsolete when they are least productive?

Why These Wars Do Not Work

There is a profound analytical difference between Operation Desert Storm yielding the war in Iraq in 1991 on the one side, and the so-called War on Terror in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the other side. Right after the end of the Cold War, the George Bush administration invaded Iraq with a UN mandate on March 20, 2003. It was legitimised by almost all the members of the international community, including most of the Arab and Muslim states by voting in favour of the US. Even the crumbling Soviet Union under the legendary late Mikhail Gorbachev didn't veto the US mandate at the UN Security Council since the physical sovereignty, on which there is a universal consensus, was invaded. Thus made "Operation Desert Storm" relatively a successful war, at least for a very short term. At the same time, it gave the US direct military access to the Persian Gulf.⁷

Conversely, the wars against Afghanistan (2001) and even more so Iraq in 2003, were not mandated by the United Nations. The war against Saddam Hussein in 2003, was particularly seen as a major escalation even by the US-trusted allies in Europe. Until the last minute, the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to get the United Nations on board. In the end, he and George W. Bush were left with a "coalition of the willing" without legal justification via the United Nations. Nor did the regional states and other stakeholders support the war as they did in 1991.⁸

As mentioned earlier, such "illegitimate" wars not only destroy a state but disturb a unanimously agreed upon world order. They can never yield

⁷ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy*, London: Routledge, 2006.

⁸ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, politics and counter-terrorism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

convincing strategic success, the outcomes are much more uncontrollable. Power projection on a country by the use of brute force would more likely ensue a situation where relationship between the invader and the invaded would activate the opposing forces to resist within the newly-created vacuum. This also redefines the relationship between the invader and the invaded. It sometimes even binds them together in a new relational dimension within which a new form of actors are enacted. Their objectives are manifold and infinitesimally scattered. In fact, the actor that the Ukrainian leadership currently magnifies has only been able to magnify through this particular Russian invasion. This has eventually helped make “victim narrative” successful in Europe and North America.

In this complex backdrop of propaganda war between Russia and Ukraine, an effort is being made to control the original relationship between the invader and invaded and to win the “truth war.” It is getting further confused. Regrettably, since both countries are intimately linked in this Tango, the more they refer to each other, the more impossible it becomes to win the argument. It is within that topological relationship between inside and outside, subject and object, self and other, resistance and power, invader and invaded, oppressed and oppressor, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia is becoming more complete with each passing day.

According to the Hegelian synthesis, presence of such new actors is never a simple replication for either invaded or invader itself. Rather, it is an effect of military power fighting against resistance which gets swerved or departs from its original purpose in order to subdue diverse powers of the invaded nation. Such circumstances may lead to another dimension which opens up opportunities for the new actors. They do not merely react to the original force exercised by the invader, but effectively expand the boundaries for their own interests and encourage fundamental action-oriented dynamics. Perhaps, this is why Ukraine is still continuing with an effective resistance despite having much lesser military power as compared to Russia.

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The war relationship and the refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated. The crucial problem of wars is not that of voluntary servitude. At the very heart of the war relationship, and its constant provocation, whether directly or indirectly, is the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an “agonism” in a relationship. It is basically a simultaneous mutually generated incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation. It works on the possibility of paralyzing both sides rather than a permanent provocation.

Some insights by the French philosopher Michel Foucault are useful with reference to the war in Ukraine. Foucault conceptualised in the 1970s why Poland and Czechoslovakia resisted Soviet imperialism.⁹ During a lecture on March 1, 1978, he suggested that ‘[D]issidence’ in the East and the Soviet Union “really does designate a complex form of resistance and refusal.”¹⁰ During that lecture, Foucault referred to the Soviet novelist, playwright and exiled dissident Aleksandra Solzhenitsyn, whose *Gulag Archipelago* made a profound influence on his views on dissident activity, in order to contextualize his *discourses* on the resistance movement in the Communist ‘East.’ The political struggles that we put together under the name of dissidence, certainly have an essential, fundamental dimension that is a refusal of this form of being conducted. “We do not want this salvation, we do not wish to be saved by these people and by these means,” says Solzhenitsyn.¹¹

“We do not wish to obey these people. We do not want this system where even those who command have to obey out of terror. We do not want this pastoral system of obedience.

⁹ Jonathan Arac, “Foucault and Central Europe: A polemical speculation, *boundary 2*”, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn 1994), pp. 197-210.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, “*Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*”, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 201-202.

¹¹ Ian Richard Nelton (edited), “Orientalism Revisited: Art, Land and Voyage”, Routledge, 2013. P. 41.

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We do not want this truth. We do not want to be held in this system of truth. We do not want to be held in this system of observation and endless examination that continually judges us, tells us what we are in the core of ourselves, healthy or sick, mad or not mad, and so on.”¹²

So, we can say that this word dissidence really does cover a struggle.

Sometimes decision-makers make a profound mistake and do not learn from history. The same resistance made it impossible to hold the Soviet Union together by force. Similarly, the force used by the Soviet Union on January 5, 1968, and most of Warsaw Pact members against the first reformist and the elected First Secretary of the Communist Party, Alexander Dubček of Czechoslovakia, (KSČ), heralded the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire. The brute force primarily used could not yield much strategic success and faced resistance. It may buy you time, but in the end it is a sorry substitute for statesmanship, diplomacy and international engagement. Legitimacy cannot be achieved in the absence of the people’s will. On the other hand, in life and in politics, hypocrisy has more tendency to damage the ability to act upon the role that the countries ascribe for themselves.

Non-Polarity Case Study: Peace in South Asia

As observed earlier, non-polarity is an issue of life and death for an integrated nation-state. It underlines both the self-destructive effects of war and advantages of diplomacy. In the same context, none of the looming and unresolved crises of South Asia, from the situation in Afghanistan, the issue of Kashmir to recurrent civil strife in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan or elsewhere, can be resolved by the use of force as a form of power. In fact, South Asia is particularly an intricate region. In its historical complexity, the area consists of vastly complex micro-realms.

¹² Michel Foucault, “Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978”, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

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To align within an order governed by any brute force is rather impossible. The states of the region, particularly India and Pakistan, were born in violence. The post-colonial connectivity of the region is held together by an incredibly interconnected matrix. It is impossible to be detached by any brutal or self-proclaimed powerful force as was shown during several attempts of occupation of Afghanistan. In recent history, War on Terror has also denied any claim of a powerful uni-polar world.

On the contrary, the history of the colonial creation of South Asia and the post-colonial violence that it triggered is more in sync with the power-resistance dialectic that I set out in the previous sections. It has created a matrix of minute life-worlds that are connected in a nonpolar spectacle of intense intimacy. I can only focus on this specific argument within the confines of this article. The atomistic ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic connectivity is central to my analysis. Scholars have long established that the administrative boundaries of the British Raj, out of which the current territories of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India emerged and the wider (southern/central/western/eastern) Asian areas have been deeply interdependent since antiquity. The modern idea of nationalism has not severed these ties. It is more based on an unjustified theory of separable national roots and origins. They cannot be simply applied to the intensely interdependent areas of the world such as South Asia. Commonality and historical bonds are particularly pronounced in such ancient areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In fact, nationalism is a sorry substitute for these beautifully diverse transnational bonds. They are experienced on a daily basis.

A prudent foreign policy starts with acknowledging these atomistic transnational interdependencies. To employ them as a starting point for an inclusive, institutionalised security architecture based on mutual respect and diplomacy is a prerequisite of establishing power. In concrete terms and with reference to the geo-political situation in South Asia, this would require rephrasing existing institutional networks such as, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the South Asian Free Trade Area, ASEAN and the Belt and Road Initiative more empathetically

and with reference to commonality, universal peace and human security. Ideologies that attempt to exploit sectarian divisions such as Hindu fundamentalism or Islamism will not succeed. They are more steeped in a sterile discourse of national/religious competition and superiority. They are peripheral to the human quest for peace and tranquillity.

In South Asia, the transnational connections are more pertinent for ethnic and religious and other bonding. The transcultural fabric and its multitude and longitude are potent nodal points for sustainable peaceful security architecture, though they have extensive fodder for massive international explosions, if acted upon with force. This last point strictly substantiates my conceptual precepts outlined in the previous sections, which determines that non-polarity denotes the inadequacy of brute forms of power, including wars, to deliver strategic victory.

I would rather go one step further and argue that in a nonpolar system launching an invasion threatens the viability of the invading state and its long-term stability. This is because legitimacy works both ways. An illegitimate war can destroy governments exactly because it erodes the legitimacy of the state conducting it. This is what happened to Saddam Hussein after his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. It was the beginning of his end. The Vietnam War was a factor behind the failure of Richard Nixon and the victory of the Mujahideen over the Soviet Union. It shattered the myth of the invincible “Red Army” and ended in the erosion of the Soviet Union.

In South Asia, any war conducted by any state would inevitably yield the destruction of the invading state itself. This is because of a potential nuclearization of Pakistan and India. After having experienced both economically and strategically manipulated invasions in the pre and post-colonial era, any incursion would be considered illegitimate. We need to understand that in a nonpolar system, power does not hinge upon military endowments. It requires an ability to create a consensus that is amenable to a legitimate conduct of foreign policies. It is the legitimacy contest that

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needs to be won in order to deliver long-term strategic success. Military might is more of a dependent variable of people's power and not the other way around.

Conclusion

Security cannot be organised through weapons. The best practice could be through diplomacy and empathetic engagement that centres on human security. It is quite logical that a concept such as non-polarity, which prioritises complexity and micro-realms, lodges security within the individual. This could prove a forerunner of stability.

Similarly, the concept of "national security" is also too abstract and needs revisiting. The spaces present in its application facilitates unrealistic concepts and their forces. Good politics requires more justified, attentive and profound observation, while strictly observing unanimously accepted objectives of peaceful co-existence. A strategic success can only be ensured if human security becomes the yardstick of foreign policy. This is why Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela are almost universally revered. Theirs was a human(e)-centred political philosophy. As such, they act as an eternal resource for the legitimacy of their respective countries and subsequently for global peace.

In one of his beautiful poems, the Poet of the East, Dr Mohammad Iqbal once said, "Sick nations have been cured only through love. Nations have warded off their adversity through Love."¹³ Iqbal is one of the most revered political philosophers and thinkers of the Indian Subcontinent. He used the medium of poetry to dispense his ideology during the post-colonial era. Modern convincing research also increasingly delves on the power of empathy and love to promote an effective diplomacy. In a non-polar order where legitimacy has to be carefully constructed, Iqbal's

¹³ "Report of Seminar on Iqbal's Message of Peace, Muhabat Fateh-e-Alam", *Muslim Institute*, Available at <https://muslim-institute.org/PublicationDetail?publication=135/Report-of-Seminar-on-Iqbal%27s-Message-of-Peace,-Muhabat-Fateh-e-Alam> (accessed July 25, 2022).

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emphasis on the healing effects of love is a powerful reminder of the effectiveness of such life-affirming human emotions.

The world has become increasingly interdependent in political, economic and socio-cultural realms. It has become even more pertinent to realize the significance of smaller states, if peaceful coexistence is the ultimate objective.■