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Why Polarity Misleads: Toward a New Grammar of International Relations

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Is the world unipolar, multipolar, or sliding back into a new bipolarity? These categories dominate contemporary debates in international relations. They shape how policymakers describe the distribution of power, how analysts frame strategic rivalry, and how scholars narrate global change. The language is familiar and attractive because it promises order: one dominant hegemon exercising primacy, two rivals balancing each other, or several centres competing in a multipolar constellation. This vocabulary increasingly functions as a mirage. It offers legibility, but not accuracy.

The appeal of polarity lies in its simplicity. It reduces a saturated and unstable international field into a set of countable poles. Headlines speak of the “rise of China,” the “return of great-power competition,” or the “emergence of multipolar order,” each echoing the assumption that systemic change can be understood by tallying actors and mapping their relative strength. These stories are comforting because they make complexity tractable. But they are misleading because they conflate narrative representation with structural reality. The international system no longer coheres around poles. It operates through dense, recursive networks of interaction, where feedback loops intensify, adjacencies overlap, and friction accumulates in unpredictable ways.

This article argues that polarity has lost its analytical utility. It may remain a powerful metaphor, but it no longer reflects the architecture of global politics. The present system is not structured by clear centres of power, but by processes of saturation, recursion, and rhythm. Saturation refers to the condition in which actors or institutions become overloaded by the volume of interactions they must process. Recursion describes the way outputs feed back into inputs, generating loops that reshape both actors and the system. Rhythm points to the temporal synchronisation, or misalignment, of decisions and postures across domains. Together, these dynamics define how power circulates and how coherence is sustained or lost. The persistence of polarity discourse tells us less about structure than about cognition. It survives because it organises expectations rather than describing reality.

Contemporary scholarship depicts international order as an overlapping ecosystem of infrastructures, patronage networks and short-term alliances, fragmenting authority in ways that resist neat categorisation into poles (Cooley and Nexon 2020). Influence in such systems arises from connectivity, non-linearity and feedback rather than positional dominance, a pattern captured in complexity-informed approaches (Bousquet and Curtis 2011). Systemic transformations, as in revolutions, emerge through inter-social networks rather than fixed centres (Lawson 2019). From this perspective, polarity functions as a narrative frame rather than an empirical map, and treating it as structural truth risks distorting analysis and strategy.

The article will proceed in three steps. The first section explores polarity as a narrative practice, showing why it persists despite its declining explanatory value. The second introduces saturation and recursion as alternative drivers of systemic behaviour, illustrated through examples from finance, military operations, and technology. The third turns to the strategic consequences of abandoning polarity, highlighting how states and institutions misread instability when they cling to outdated categories. The conclusion argues for a new grammar of international order, one that interprets geometry rather than counts poles.

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For decades, the study of international relations has been framed through the typology of polarity. Unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity provided the categories through which scholars and practitioners narrated order after the Second World War. In *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Kenneth Waltz framed polarity as a structural variable that determined stability and the likelihood of balancing behaviour. John Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) developed the logic within offensive realism, treating multipolarity as the least stable configuration because it multiplied opportunities for rivalry and miscalculation. Polarity's hold on the field was renewed through unipolarity debates: Wohlforth (1999) argued for its stability, Monteiro (2014) theorised it as a distinct system, and Ikenberry (2001) linked American power to institutional order-building. For a generation of scholars and policymakers, polarity was not merely shorthand but the defining feature of international structure. Even within its own terms, polarity has functioned as much as a story as a measurement. It provides cognitive clarity by translating a complex system into a limited set of categories. As Jackson and Nexon (2009) argue, IR categories often function less as objective descriptions than as orienting narratives. Polarity can be understood in the same way: a device that signals who matters, who rivals whom, and what kinds of transitions are supposedly underway. This interpretive function explains polarity's enduring appeal. It reduces complexity to a story of centres and shifts, even when the system itself is not organised in that way.

The gap between narrative and reality has widened in the contemporary field. The erosion of hegemonic order has not produced neat transitions between polar forms but instead generated overlapping infrastructures, fragmented sources of authority and competing networks of alignment (Cooley and Nexon 2020). None of these developments fit the triptych of unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity. Complexity research reinforces the point. In saturated and interconnected systems, influence arises less from positional advantage than from the relational patterns that shape interaction. In such recursive settings, what matters is not the static location of power but how flows of interaction transform both the actors themselves and the wider field (Bousquet and Curtis 2011; Lawson 2019).

The limitations of polarity become clear when examining specific cases. What is often labelled unipolar dominance can be understood instead as saturation. The United States' position at the centre of global finance, for instance, appears to signal primacy. Crises in dollar liquidity from 2008 to 2020 revealed not control but exposure. The apparent centre of the system was the point of fragility, where pressures converged and spread outward. Claims of bipolar rivalry also risk concealing the fragility of coupled systems. The U.S.–China relationship is frequently described as a return to Cold War-style bipolarity. Unlike the U.S.–Soviet contest, this rivalry unfolds through deep economic interdependence, technological entanglement and overlapping institutional networks. Each side's posture is shaped not only by its own choices but by the reverberations of the other's, producing recursive loops that defy the neat symmetry implied by bipolarity. Multipolarity fares no better. It often reduces to arithmetic: counting how many significant actors exist without examining the geometry of their adjacencies or the friction that emerges from their interactions.

Despite these flaws, polarity remains resilient because of its narrative utility. It provides policymakers with a framework to justify alignment, describe threats, and project expectations. Talking about the “emergence of a multipolar world” or the “return of bipolarity” is politically powerful, even if structurally misleading. It gives diplomats and analysts a common vocabulary to explain change and prepare for it, even when the categories obscure the underlying drivers of instability. The danger arises when this narrative is mistaken for structure. If polarity is treated as a map of the system rather than as a story imposed upon it, analysis becomes distorted. Strategies are designed around balance, transition and centrality when the actual system is shaped by recursion, saturation and rhythm. Actors risk planning for a geometry that no longer exists. They anticipate stability from bipolar rivalry, resilience from multipolar diversity, or control from unipolar primacy. The system fails to deliver because these categories no longer describe how influence circulates.

The resilience of polarity reveals less about international structure than about the human need for interpretive clarity. It endures because it stabilises expectations and reduces anxiety in the face of complexity. Practices of authority in global politics often persist as rituals and performances even after their structural foundations have eroded (Bueger and Gadinger 2018). Polarity belongs to this category of interpretive scaffolding: a metaphor and a ritual rather than a diagnosis. Polarity persists as narrative rather than structure, carrying political weight but little analytical value. Its political weight lies in how it shapes the stories actors tell about their position in the system. Analytically, it now offers

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diminishing returns. If international relations is to capture the actual dynamics of today's saturated and recursive field, it must move beyond polarity and adopt a grammar that attends to interaction, pressure, and rhythm rather than countable centres of power.

The language of polarity assumes that power radiates outward from identifiable centres. A unipolar system is said to have one dominant hub, a bipolar system two, and a multipolar system several. This way of thinking presumes that hierarchy is stable and that influence flows in relatively direct lines. The international field today behaves less like a pyramid and more like a saturated network in which influence accumulates and circulates through feedback loops.

Saturation describes the condition in which actors or institutions are overwhelmed by the density of interactions that pass through them. This is not the same as overstretch in the traditional sense, where commitments exceed material capacity. It is more structural. Highly connected actors absorb disproportionate levels of strain because they are positioned at the intersection of multiple flows. Charles Perrow's classic analysis of tightly coupled systems (1999) demonstrates why: when systems are densely linked, central nodes often generate fragility, since even minor disturbances at the core can cascade disproportionately across the whole network.

The 2008 financial crisis illustrated this dynamic. The United States' role as issuer of the world's reserve currency is often described as structural primacy. When dollar liquidity dried up, that very centrality generated systemic fragility. Stress cascaded outward through financial corridors dependent on dollar-denominated debt and trade. Studies of systemic risk, from Haldane and May's ecological analogies (2011) to Kindleberger and Aliber's historical account of financial crises (2011), highlight how recursive linkages transform local stresses into global contagion. The same pattern resurfaced in 2020 during the pandemic shock, when demand for dollar liquidity again threatened global stability. In both cases, centrality functioned not as a stabilising pole but as a saturation node, the point where pressures accumulated most intensely and spread most widely.

Military affairs reveal a similar pattern. The 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is often explained as a failure of planning or an inevitable consequence of declining political will. It can also be read as an example of saturation. Over two decades, alliance structures, logistical corridors and political objectives became increasingly misaligned. By the time the decision to withdraw was taken, the United States was not acting from a position of control but of exhaustion. Its coherence had been eroded by recursive strain across military, diplomatic and political domains. The apparent pole of global military power was caught in a loss of rhythm, unable to synchronise intent, capacity and timing.

Technology illustrates the same dynamic in a different register. Taiwan's semiconductor industry, concentrated in firms such as TSMC, is often portrayed as a strategic asset conferring immense leverage. In systemic terms it is also a vulnerability. A large share of global technological ecosystems depends on this single node. Rather than functioning as a stable hub, it acts as a saturation point. Any disruption, whether through conflict, supply chain shock or natural disaster, would reverberate across the entire international system. The very concentration that signals dominance also creates exposure.

Recursion helps explain why saturation produces destabilising effects. In a recursive field, outputs feed back into inputs, shaping subsequent actions and conditions. Studies of adaptive systems and system dynamics identify feedback as the core mechanism of complex evolution, where outputs loop into inputs and amplify both strain and adaptation (Simon 1996; Sterman 2000). Actors are therefore not only responding to external change but also to the reverberations of their own choices as they circulate through the system. U.S. financial policy, for instance, affects other states but also loops back through global markets to reshape domestic conditions. Decisions on export controls in advanced technology similarly constrain rivals while generating feedback through supply chains and innovation networks that alter the initiator's own posture.

Recursion transforms centrality into a liability because the more connected an actor is, the more it must process these feedback loops. At some point, the volume and volatility of signals exceed interpretive and operational capacity. This is what produces saturation. Actors appear powerful because they are central, but their coherence is eroded as they struggle to absorb and modulate feedback. This reframes the meaning of power. In a polar

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framework, power is the possession of resources or the capacity to impose outcomes from a dominant position. In a saturated, recursive field, it is better understood as the ability to maintain rhythm across adjacencies and to absorb feedback without collapse. Research on ecological resilience shows that systems with modular design recover more effectively than rigid structures (Holling 1973). Applied to international settings, this logic aligns with Fligstein and McAdam's theory of strategic action fields (2012), where smaller and more adaptable actors sustain coherence by repositioning within shifting relational networks. States or institutions partially insulated from saturation, or able to recalibrate rhythms quickly, may retain coherence more effectively than larger actors trapped in overloaded central positions.

Polarity misreads these dynamics, expecting instability to result from the failure of poles to balance or manage transition. In reality, instability often emerges from recursive accumulation: the gradual build-up of strain, the misalignment of rhythms, and the overloading of key adjacencies. Financial contagion, supply chain breakdowns, or institutional delays are not failures of polar management but symptoms of saturation crossing critical thresholds. This shift changes how instability is interpreted and how strategy is designed. Analysts who continue to count poles are likely to miss the points where instability is actually brewing. A system that appears unipolar may already be in crisis because its central actor is saturated. A system that appears bipolar may in fact be fragile because the two supposed poles are rhythmically out of sync. A system that appears multipolar may still be monocentric if all actors remain tethered to the same recursion source, such as the dollar system or global digital infrastructure.

Saturation and recursion therefore provide a more accurate grammar for interpreting global order. They capture how influence circulates, where fragility emerges, and why apparent dominance so often gives way to exhaustion. They move the analytical focus away from position and toward motion, away from counting poles and toward mapping pressure flows.

The persistence of polarity in international discourse is not just an academic curiosity. It has material consequences because it shapes how governments, institutions and analysts interpret instability, plan strategy and allocate resources. When actors think in terms of poles, they expect change to occur in a sequence of discrete transitions: the decline of one hegemon, the rise of another, or the dispersal of influence across several centres. They prepare for balance, rivalry or coalition-building. In a recursive, saturated system, change unfolds in subtler and more continuous ways. Pressure builds gradually, rhythms drift out of alignment, and adjacencies shift beneath the surface of formal alliances, a pattern described by Miguel Centeno and colleagues (2015) in their work on global systemic fragility.

This misreading generates several recurring strategic errors. One common mistake is overinvestment in symbolic centrality. States and institutions often try to preserve their status as poles by expanding capacity, promoting visibility or asserting institutional leadership. These gestures may signal prominence but they do not secure coherence. The European Union exemplifies the problem. Its global reach and economic weight suggest centrality. Its performance in fast-moving crises often indicates the opposite. Crisis governance has revealed rhythm drift across member states and unsettled assumptions of coherence (Schimmelfennig 2018). During the eurozone debt crisis, migration emergencies and the pandemic, the Union struggled to sustain rhythm across its members. What emerged was not the assertion of a pole but the exposure of saturation, as the very effort to act as a unified centre revealed fragility in the connective tissue of the system.

Another recurring mistake is misdiagnosis of instability. Crises are often framed as shocks to polarity: the rise of China challenging U.S. primacy or the return of great-power rivalry undermining unipolar stability. In practice, many disruptions stem from saturation thresholds being crossed in specific corridors. Histories of finance trace contagion less to hegemonic decline than to the amplification of strain within tightly coupled networks (Tooze 2018). A similar pattern appears in public health governance, where political resistance eroded the effectiveness of global frameworks (Fidler 2020) and uneven national responses disrupted multilateral rhythms (Davies and Wenham 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed fragility not because polar hierarchy shifted but because health shocks cascaded through trade networks, financial systems and political rhythms. Polarity could not explain why smaller states with modular health and governance structures weathered the storm more effectively than larger powers. What mattered was not scale or polar position but resilience under saturation.

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A further pitfall is posture incoherence. Polarity encourages actors to align positionally: to join one camp, hedge between them or pursue autonomy. In a recursive system, however, coherence depends more on timing and adjacency management. States that synchronise their rhythms across domains may remain coherent even without formal alliances, while nominally allied states may generate friction if their decision cycles diverge. Singapore illustrates this logic. Its ability to recalibrate economic, diplomatic and security postures in response to fluctuations in U.S.–China relations shows how rhythm management allows smaller actors to sustain coherence despite structural asymmetry. Research on global governance observes that smaller states often maintain coherence by adapting across multiple domains (Kahler 2018), and Singapore exemplifies this dynamic. Rwanda's repositioning within overlapping regional security and economic corridors in Africa reveals a similar agility, reflecting broader patterns of strategic adaptation in African politics (de Waal 2015). In both cases, coherence derives from the capacity to recalibrate adjacencies rather than from polar status.

Multilateral institutions also struggle. Multilateral organisations such as the United Nations, NATO and the World Trade Organization still frame debates in polar terms, describing instability as the erosion of unipolar leadership or the emergence of multipolar competition. In practice, their difficulties often arise from recursive strain. Complex interdependence creates burdens of coordination that translate into friction and overload (Keohane and Nye 2012). NATO's struggle to synchronise member commitments across different theatres, and the WTO's paralysis in adjudicating trade disputes, illustrate how saturation and misaligned rhythms undermine coherence more than shifts in polar balance. When institutions persist in reading instability through the wrong lens, they risk misallocating resources and misidentifying priorities.

Private actors also expose the limits of polarity as a frame. Multinational corporations, technology firms and transnational financial institutions function as critical nodes in the global system. Firms in the information and communication sectors have become structuring forces in global interdependence, shaping outcomes as decisively as states (Cowhey and Aronson 2009). This role has only deepened with the evolution of supply chains and technological networks. Farrell and Newman's work on "weaponised interdependence" shows how global infrastructures create systemic vulnerabilities (2019) and why attempts at decoupling frequently backfire (2020). Companies such as Apple, Huawei and TSMC operate not as peripheral firms but as saturation points whose decisions reverberate across the system. Analysts who continue to read the world through the lens of polarity downplay these actors' structural importance and underestimate the recursive dynamics they introduce.

These misalignments matter because they translate directly into operational outcomes. Defence planning based on outdated bipolar assumptions risks producing procurement mismatches and interoperability failures. Diplomatic campaigns that seek to construct multipolar coalitions often produce rhetorical fragmentation rather than coordination, because actors remain bound by saturation flows that defy polar alignment. Economic strategies that pursue decoupling as a form of polarity management may backfire, as recursive blowback from global supply chains and financial networks exposes the initiating state to the very dependencies it sought to avoid.

To adapt, strategy must cultivate different faculties. The first is saturation literacy: the capacity to detect overload before it manifests as collapse. This involves monitoring signals of strain, from liquidity shortages and supply bottlenecks to institutional fatigue and narrative divergence. The second is adjacency management: the ability to shape exposure across multiple corridors simultaneously, ensuring that critical dependencies are buffered and that no single saturation point becomes decisive. The third is temporal discipline: the skill of synchronising decision cycles across domains and partners, even in the absence of formal alliances. Finally, strategy requires narrative agility: the ability to adjust interpretive frames as system geometry evolves, rather than clinging to outdated polar categories.

These faculties are unevenly distributed. Large powers often have the most capacity but also the greatest exposure, as their centrality saturates them with recursive demand. Smaller or more flexible actors can sometimes recalibrate more quickly. Institutional inertia may further constrain large actors, while modular institutions or agile states may adapt with fewer constraints. The strategic landscape that emerges is therefore not one of stable poles but of variable coherence under recursive load.

In short, polarity encourages states and institutions to seek stability in fixed categories. A recursive reading of the

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system suggests that stability is always provisional, sustained only through continuous adjustment. Strategic success will depend less on preserving a polar position than on sustaining coherence across shifting adjacencies and rhythms. Polarity persists in international relations because it offers an illusion of clarity. It compresses the turbulence of global politics into categories that appear intelligible: unipolar dominance, bipolar rivalry or multipolar diversity. These frames endure in policy speeches, academic debates and media analysis because they simplify complexity into narratives of order and transition. This article has argued that polarity has outlived its structural usefulness. It is a metaphor that reassures but does not explain.

The dynamics shaping the international system today are better captured by the language of saturation, recursion, adjacency, and rhythm. Saturation highlights how central actors become structurally fragile when the density of interactions they absorb exceeds their capacity to respond. Recursion explains how outputs feed back into inputs, reshaping the system and eroding coherence through loops of unintended consequences. Adjacency reveals that structural exposure is not determined by geographic distance or formal alliances alone but by patterned proximities such as financial dependencies, technological supply chains, and informational flows. Rhythm underscores that coherence depends on synchronisation across time, with instability often emerging not from shifts in polar strength but from timing failures and misaligned cycles. These concepts offer a grammar more suited to analysing the present field. They help explain why the United States can appear both dominant and fragile, why U.S.–China rivalry does not replicate the bipolar stability of the Cold War, why multipolar claims obscure hidden concentrations of dependency, and why small or modular actors sometimes prove more resilient than larger ones. They also explain why strategic surprises occur with such frequency. When instability is interpreted through the wrong lens, early signs of saturation or rhythm divergence are overlooked until they manifest as visible crises.

The implications extend beyond analysis to practice. States, institutions, and private actors that continue to organise their strategies around polarity risk misreading the sources of fragility in the system. They prepare for the wrong kinds of transitions and allocate resources to the wrong theatres. The search for polar stability distracts from the need to manage adjacencies, buffer saturation points, and maintain rhythm across domains. Conversely, those actors that cultivate saturation literacy, temporal discipline, and narrative agility will be better equipped to sustain coherence under systemic strain.

Polarity will not disappear from political language. It remains too powerful a metaphor, too deeply embedded in the rituals of international discourse. But it should no longer be mistaken for structural diagnosis. The international system is not defined by poles but by the circulation of pressure, the accumulation of friction, and the constant modulation of coherence. In such a system, polarity is not an anchor but a mirage. The task of analysis and strategy is to read the geometry of the field as it evolves, to trace how recursion reshapes order, and to sustain coherence not by holding a pole but by navigating motion.

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