Asymmetry Theory and China’s Concept of Multipolarity

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Since 1986 the concept of multipolarity has played a key role in China’s analysis of the world order, evolving from a critique of bipolarity in the late Cold War period into a critique of American unipolarity. Although multipolarity is empirically correct in its questioning of the superpower’s capacity for domination and it is ethically attractive in its insistence on international cooperation, it does not address the real problems created by the disparity of power in international affairs. Asymmetry theory is a new paradigm that addresses the effects of national disparities on international relations. It argues that asymmetry inevitably creates differences in risk perception, attention and interactive behavior between states, and that it can lead to a vicious circle of systemic misperception. Despite such tensions, however, the international order is quite stable, and even asymmetric relations can rarely be forced by the stronger side. Asymmetry confirms multipolarity’s critique of unipolarity’s exaggerated claim to absolute power, and suggests a theory of international leadership based on negotiated relationships that avoid the systemic misperceptions that asymmetry encourages.

The global situation in the new millennium is full of contradictions. On the one hand, no country has ever been as powerful in comparison to its neighbors as the United States of America since the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the United States has been brought into a situation of crisis by the actions of a group that does not represent any state, and there is no end in sight to its war on terrorism. Moreover, there is growing concern about the global leadership of the United States and also about regional relationships. Revising this paper on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq, the tension has risen to a fever pitch between American frustration at being hampered in its intended policy and the anxieties of the rest of the world concerning unilateralism. Only the reader knows the outcome, but at a minimum we can say that the dangerous but familiar game of Cold War bipolarity has been replaced by anxieties concerning an unfamiliar global situation.

‘Multipolarity’ (duojihua, also translated as ‘multipolarism’) has been a key concept for understanding the new global situation. It has been used by scholars and political leaders of many countries, but it has played an especially important role in China. Initially multipolarity was contrasted to the bipolarity of the Cold

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War era, but from the mid-1990s it has been juxtaposed to the unipolarity of American global leadership. While the concept of multipolarity is useful, it would benefit from a larger analytical context. I propose that asymmetry theory, which analyzes the relations of states with different capacities within a relatively stable matrix of international relations, could provide a useful framework for empirical and normative problems encountered by multipolarity.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the development of the concept of multipolarity in China, and then proceeds to discuss first its empirical and then its normative contributions and limits. The paper then sketches a general theory of asymmetry, followed by an application of asymmetry theory to the problems of multipolarity theory. It concludes with some observations concerning international leadership in an asymmetric world.

1. The emergence of multipolarity theory in China

According to Hu Jintao, multipolarity constitutes ‘an important base for achieving a durable peace on this planet’. Similarly, Jiang Zemin has linked the concepts of multipolarization, economic globalization, and the growth of science and technology as fundamental world trends. In reflections on the first 50 years of Chinese diplomacy, former foreign minister Qian Qichen has termed the trend toward multipolarity ‘irrevocable’.

As Qian observes, the current emphasis on multipolarity is in line with a principal theme of Chinese foreign policy, namely the respect for the autonomy of all nations first formulated in the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ in 1953. However, the term ‘multipolarity’ is of more recent vintage. In an article that appeared in January 1986, Huan Xiang claimed that, because the Cold War conflict had become relatively static, the superpowers were losing their ability to control their camps and therefore political multipolarity was increasing. The emergence of the strategic triangle of China, the United States and the Soviet Union was the first step in multipolarization, and the second stage would be a five-pole world that included Japan and Europe. Huan was farsighted in his anticipation of the deterioration of bipolarity. Moreover, his sketch of a five-power world has remained remarkably constant in Chinese thinking about multipolarity.

The importance of the initial concept of multipolarity can best be seen in its contrast with bipolarity and its related notion of hegemony. Although China was never comfortable with a simple division of the world into Soviet and American camps and argued for the importance of what came to be termed the Third World from the late 1940s, it accepted the general consensus that the highest level of world conflict was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

By the late 1960s this conflict was formulated as a struggle for hegemony between capitalism and social imperialism. China’s own foreign policy was deeply critical of hegemony. China promised never to act as a hegemon, and it included an anti-hegemony clause in most treaties. India and Vietnam were criticized as regional hegemons for their respective occupations of Goa and Cambodia. Nevertheless, China viewed the struggle between the superpowers as the defining political reality of global politics, and the prolonged process of normalization with the United States from 1971 to 1979 was justified in terms of siding with the weaker hegemonic power against the more aggressive one.

But beginning in 1982 China shifted gradually to a middle ground between the superpowers, and the concept of multipolarity helped articulate and explain this middle ground.6 Like the American experience in Vietnam, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan demonstrated that Soviet power was limited. The two superpowers continued their arms race, but on the ground they appeared to settle into more static camps. Not only was China an autonomous pole in a strategic triangle, but the economic tensions between the United States and Japan demonstrated that other countries were powerful in their own right. Thus when Huan Xiang first used multipolarity in 1986 it referred to the inability of either superpower to dominate its own camp.

In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to advance multipolarity one step further. Although the United States was the only remaining superpower, China saw Germany as the major beneficiary of the collapse of European communism, and one might argue that China itself was the principal Asian beneficiary of the collapse. If we compare the situations of 1988 and 1991, the United States had one less rival in 1991 but it did not have any more power. The Soviet Union had not been protecting Europe, China and Japan, so its collapse did not affect their situation vis-à-vis the United States. So it was not unreasonable to view the post-Soviet situation as a step forward for multipolarity. Of course, the hegemonic struggle for ultimate power was over, but China had been a critical bystander to that conflict. Meanwhile the critique of hegemonism was redefined as the critique of specific power-seeking behaviors rather than a critique of the now-resolved struggle for ultimate power.7

However, by the mid-1990s it became clear that the United States was asserting a central position in the post-Cold War order that was in some respects more intrusive and less predictable than either superpower had been ten years earlier. The Gulf War provided conclusive evidence of American military superiority, and American attitudes toward China have been driven by a conviction of ideological and political superiority as well. From a Chinese perspective, although the United States is not (and should not be) all powerful, it is clearly more powerful than other major states, and its pre-eminent position has been more stable than expected. In response, China’s concept of multipolarity shifted to its present usage as a critique

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of and an alternative to American unipolarity. There is not more than one superpower, but the other four powers, including China, are still autonomous states whose cooperation is necessary for world order. As Qian Qichen’s remark above indicates, the trend toward multipolarity is still considered the main tendency of world affairs. Nevertheless, the unipolarity of the United States—sometimes attributed to American expansionism—and sometimes generalized into basic tendencies of Western civilization—is clearly the main obstacle, and American hegemonic behavior is the main counterexample to the cooperative behavior appropriate to a multipolar world.

If we return to the three concepts linked by Jiang Zemin, namely, multipolarity, economic globalism, and technical progress, it is clear that all three function both as descriptions of current world trends and as prescriptions for successful states. Each of these is an ‘is and should be’ concept: because the world is going in these directions (and they are good directions), successful policy will cope with and further these trends. Multipolarization is not simply an irresistible trend, it provides the basis for a critique of unipolarity as inappropriate and ultimately unsuccessful. Therefore it is necessary to analyze multipolarity in both its empirical and normative dimensions in order to appreciate it as a theory.

2. Empirical problems of multipolarity

The basic assumption of unipolarity is that the vast disparity in economic and military power between the United States and the rest of the world implies that the United States controls the world’s affairs. The contribution of multipolarity theory is not to dispute the relative capacity of the United States, but rather to argue that its relative capacity does not imply control of others. In contrast to some Western definitions of multipolarity that require that any pole be able to challenge any other pole, the Chinese notion of multipolarity is concerned about the assertion of autonomous influence. According to Zhang Yunling, ‘The main point of so-called multipolarity is that there exist several power centers with important influence on regional and world affairs’. The United States is the strongest nation in the world,
as it has been since 1945, but in the long term it cannot succeed in forcing its will on the rest of the world. To put it simply, relative power does not equal absolute power.

There is plenty of evidence for the Chinese position. On the positive side, economic developments such as the growth of Southeast Asia and China were not caused by the United States, and they change the proportions and balance of world economic capacity. Moreover, most multilateral and international organizations are not under the control of the United States, and their involvement in world affairs is increasing. Lastly, global trends such as economic interdependence and ecological concerns are beyond the power of any one country to control. On the negative side, the tragedy of September 11 demonstrated that even the United States is vulnerable, and the continuing effort to find Osama Bin Laden shows that even overwhelming force can be frustrated. The ultimate proof for the basic multipolarity argument is simple and elegant: if unipolarity were correct, then how could China persist in arguing against it?

Without losing sight of the basic contribution of multipolarity theory, however, two further empirical questions arise that are not easily dealt with. The first is, how many poles are there? The second is, does relative power make any difference at all?

The answer to the first question appears to be easy, since most Chinese theorists give the same response that Huan Xiang did in 1986. Usually five powers are identified: the United States, Russia, China, Japan and Europe. From the early 1970s, scholars outside of China have identified the same five, and no one who would propose a longer list is likely to exclude any of these five. From the perspective of China it is commonsensical to name these five because the other four (if we can treat Europe as one power center) include all of the countries that exceed China in either military or economic capacity. It would not make sense for China to have a multipolar theory that excluded a country more powerful than China, but it does not seem problematic to exclude countries that are less powerful.

While it is easy to explain why China proposes these five poles, it is more difficult to provide a general justification. The logic of expansion from unipolarity to a specific number of poles is not self-limiting. The problem can be posed in two ways, first as a problem of generalization, and second as a problem of logical consistency. While the notion of five poles appeals to common sense in China, it should be capable of being generalized to cover other perspectives as well. However, other countries are in different relationships to world power and hence would probably, like China, prefer a scheme of poles that included their own country as a pole and then closed the door to the ‘pole club’ just behind themselves. By this logic, Europe, as the world’s only economy equal to that of the United States, might prefer a two-member club, while India might prefer a six-member

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group. Southeast Asia might prefer regionally-based groups to national units. Even if there were no questions raised about the rank order of world powers, the problem of where to draw the line does not have an obvious, generally acceptable solution. Since what is at stake is the boundary of the club of world powers, this is an important problem. The quandaries of where to draw the line are reflected in Zhang Yunling’s book *Partners or Adversaries*. Although he gives the standard list of five powers, his title and the structure of the book feature only four, and he mentions the possibility that middle range powers like India and regional associations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can also function as power centers.

The problem of logical consistency is less easy to perceive, but it is even more serious. If the problem with unipolarity is that in fact the relative power of the superpower does not imply control of other countries, and multipolarity is proposed as an improvement, then there is an implicit claim that its expanded set of poles overcomes unipolarity’s problem. In other words, while the superpower does not control the world, the five powers (superpower plus four) do. If multipolarity theory does not want to make the claim that the five powers can do what the one superpower cannot do, then it should either expand its set of poles to include all powerful countries, or it should admit that it is an anti-unipolar theory rather than a multipolar theory. If the qualification for pole status is that a state is capable of maintaining its autonomy against other states, it would be difficult to avoid expanding the set of poles to include almost all sovereign powers and perhaps some non-sovereign ones as well.

Our discussion of the problem of ‘why stop at five?’ leads to the second empirical problem of multipolarity theory, namely, ‘what difference does relative power make?’ Even if it is granted that the United States, the only superpower, is not able to dictate world politics, nevertheless relative power is of great importance in international relations. The valid point of multipolarity is that relative power is not equal to absolute power; however, this truth falls short of being a theory of relative power. The formulation of ‘one superpower and four big powers’ [yi chao si qiang], or, more generally, ‘one superpower and several big powers’ yi chao duo qiang, acknowledges that there is a difference between the position of the United States and that of the other four, but it does not specify the difference. The point of the formulation is that the other four count as well, but it does not analyze the multi-stage structure of power that ‘one plus four’ suggests. And yet if the five-pole scheme is to have any meaning, then the problem of relative power in international relations must be addressed. Even if relative power does not equal absolute power, larger powers can do things that smaller powers cannot do. Multipolarity theory focuses on expanding the circle of powers, but it does not reflect on why or how power is important.

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3. Normative problems of multipolarity

The normative dimension of multipolarity theory includes both positive and critical elements. First, it is an ethic of how to behave as one of several polar powers. This is necessarily a cooperative ethic, and thus as a normative theory it is an advance over unipolarity’s egotistical solipsism. At its best, unipolarity reduces ethical questions of international leadership to internal moral matters of the leading power; the others simply must comply. At its worst, unipolarity is unconcerned about any moral question beyond retaining its power advantage against potential rivals. From a multipolar perspective, however, not even the superpower can act effectively alone, therefore cooperation is necessary, and therefore cooperation is good. However, multipolarity’s empirical problem of how to draw the circle of power has normative consequences as well. Secondly, multipolarity theory provides a critique of the arrogance of unipolar power and of the injustice of the imposition of the will of the powerful on the less powerful. Again, such an ethic is an improvement on unipolar thinking, but ultimately it is a non-polar ethic rather than a multipolar one. The problem of how to cope with the reality of unequal power remains unacknowledged.

If empirically one power cannot control the world, then the problem of how best to manage the world requires an ethic of cooperation. In contrast to American neo-realist theories that concentrate on how to maintain a power advantage, and in contrast to American theories on a ‘democratic peace’ that argue for the spread of democracy in order to prevent war, Chinese foreign policy emphasizes cooperation and peaceful coexistence between countries with different political systems. In 1993 Chen Qimao summarized the post-Cold War directions of Chinese foreign policy in three points: first, good-neighbor relations with surrounding countries; second, omnidirectional pursuit of better relations; and third, a more active role in the international community. Each of these is a natural outcome of multipolar thinking, and China has been successful in pursuing these objectives in the ensuing decade.

However, there is an implicit ambiguity in the multipolar ethic. Is it an ethic within the club of polar powers, or is it a general ethic of international relations? From the standpoint of China the potential conflict is not obvious. Because it cannot dominate the ‘club’ and it is also not in a unilateral relationship to those outside the club, a consistent posture of cooperation is rational. Hence, President Jiang Zemin on his visit to Thailand could talk about the virtues of multipolarity and the necessity of respect for national autonomy even though Thailand would not be one of the poles in the five-pole scheme. But from the perspective of a country

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outside the club, the ambiguity is important. Is the cooperative ethic a matter of negotiation among equals within the club, but only a matter of the graciousness of the powerful outside the club? The rhetoric might be the same, but the reality could be different. And because those outside the club are by definition less powerful, they feel more vulnerable to the possibility of arbitrary or hypocritical behavior on the part of the powerful.

As an ethic critical of unipolarity, multipolarity theory has the great advantage of being able to emphasize the autonomous accomplishments of individual countries, the arrogance of power of the United States and historically of the West in general, and the injustice of using force to impose policies on weaker nations. These critiques are not only useful rhetorically for China, they also express values of respect for sovereignty, cooperation, and peaceful resolution of conflict that help shape Chinese foreign policy. The success that China has had in improving its foreign relations, especially with neighbors, while at the same time increasing its relative economic capacity is testimony to its sensitivity in managing relations with less powerful countries.

However, multipolarity theory as an ethical critique of unipolarity tends to ignore the real complications caused by disparities of power. If we take multipolarity as a general theory of the rights and interests of the less powerful vis-à-vis the more powerful, then it becomes a theory of non-polarity rather than multipolarity. In multipolarity’s ‘best possible world’, countries relate to one another as if power made no difference. This might be a more attractive position in terms of ethics, but again it fails to recognize the reality of relative power. To say that ‘relative power is nothing’ is better than to say that ‘relative power is everything’, but it is still not completely true. Although the ethical critique of unipolarity creates a level playing field among nations, it does not provide guidelines for coping with the actual hills and valleys of power upon which the real game of international relations is played.


Before proceeding to consider the contribution that asymmetry theory might make, it might be useful to summarize the achievements of multipolarity theory. First, multipolarity theory is excellent as an articulation of China’s outlook on the late Cold War and post-Cold War international situations. Second, it is also a good critique of bipolarity and unipolarity. Lastly, it needs improvement as a general and consistent theory of international relations.

First, multipolarity is a remarkably useful concept for articulating China’s viewpoint and posture in the reform era. By reducing emphasis on the superpower struggle, it created more international political space for China to develop a diversity of international relations and an emphasis on economic development rather than on preparation for global conflict. In the post-Cold War era, it provides a foundation for a foreign policy that is global in structure but sensitive to neighboring countries and to other intermediate powers. It revives and strengthens some of the best cooperative traditions of Chinese foreign policy, such as the Five Principles. All in all, it expresses a confidence in China’s world position but it is at the same time alert to a very complex international situation.
Second, it provides a good critique of bipolarity and unipolarity. It could be argued that bipolarity was always an inadequate framework for understanding the Cold War, but its inadequacies were certainly clear after the United States failed to impose its will in Vietnam and then the Soviet Union failed in Afghanistan. Competing hegemonies provided an empty ethic of power in which, regardless of rhetoric, the superpowers each moved to maximize their advantages vis-à-vis the other. In the post-Cold War era, the United States is running an arms race against itself, and this will be at the expense of its own economic growth. Multipolarity theory stresses the autonomy of intermediate powers and an ethic of cooperation, both of which are attractive counterweights to unipolarity.

Lastly, however, because multipolarity emerged as a critique, it has not fully developed an independent logic. For most purposes it is sufficient that it expresses China’s global viewpoint and is better than unipolarity. However, it does not adequately address the problem of the ‘multi’ in multipolarity. Why this set of poles, and not more or less? How does the new set of poles relate to non-poles? Moreover, although multipolarity criticizes the pretensions of relative power, it does not cope with the realities of relative power. How does and should the ‘yi chao’ [one superpower] relate to the ‘si qiang’ [four powers]? All countries should treat each other as equal sovereignties, but do not the differences in capacities between countries affect their relations, even if the strong cannot dominate the weak?

In my opinion, the problems raised regarding multipolarity theory do not reveal a fatal flaw in the theory, but rather a theoretical blind spot that can be corrected. The blind spot is the absence of an acknowledgement of the importance of relative power in international relations. While an asymmetry of power between two countries—or between a superpower and the rest of the world—does not automatically create a situation of domination and submission, it does create a difference in risk and perception. Asymmetry theory explores the non-absolute but still significant difference created by disparities in relative capacity and power.

5. Asymmetry theory

In contrast to multipolar theories, a theory of asymmetry acknowledges that a disparity of capacity and power between states creates real differences of perception and relative interest. The basic ideas of the theory will be sketched here, concentrating on two major points. The first is that, contrary to multipolarity theory, the disparities between states can create fundamental differences of perspective between the more powerful and the less powerful. The differences of perspective produce structural misperceptions of the other’s intentions, and can lead to a vicious circle of misunderstandings that can culminate in conflict. The second major point is that, contrary to unipolarity theory, and in general contrary to

Western theories of realism and neo-realism, more powerful countries usually cannot impose their will on less powerful countries. There is instead a relatively stable matrix of international relationships in which exchanges may not be equal, but they are usually negotiated on the basis of autonomy of both sides. As even Kenneth Waltz admits, ‘the death rate among states is remarkably low’. Stronger powers have opportunities and responsibilities for leadership in these matrices, but if they dominate the international order for the sake of their narrow interests, they will put at risk their long-term prominence.

We begin with a basic analysis of an asymmetrical relationship between two countries. In any relationship between countries that differ greatly in population, economy and military, the opportunities and risks of the relationship will be different for each side. For A, the larger side, the relationship will represent less of a share of its overall international interests, and in any case its domestic interests will command a larger share of its attention. For B, the smaller side, international relations in general are more important because there is a smaller domestic mass, and the relationship with A is much more important to B than vice versa. Even in the case of a transaction of equal value for both sides, such as trade, the transaction will be proportionally much more important for B than for A. Because B’s exposure to both risk and opportunity in the relationship is much greater, it will pay closer attention to the relationship than A. In fact, the relationship between A and B is not one relationship, but rather two distinct sub-relations: that of A to B, and that of B to A. The effects of asymmetry are more acute for neighboring states because closeness increases the importance of asymmetry by increasing the general importance of the relationship. This is true even for the most peaceful asymmetric relations.

Misperception is possible in any relationship, but the difference in attention between A and B in an asymmetric relationship creates a possibility for systemic misperception. The larger side is likely to commit errors of under-attention. Policy toward B will be less coordinated, and attention will be intermittent and crisis-oriented. When conflicts arise, A will be slow to change its overall policy, but it will be tempted to use its superior capacity to push B into line. The smaller side is likely to commit errors of over-attention. Because B is anxious concerning A’s behavior, B will tend to interpret A’s actions as coordinated and sinister. Meanwhile B’s own behavior toward A will be coordinated, because the entire leadership of B will be watching A carefully. If A tries to push B into line, B is likely to assume that this hostile action is the beginning of a malevolent strategy because B thinks that it is vulnerable to such a strategy. So while A might be tempted to act like an inconsistent, inattentive bully, B would be tempted to act like an allergic paranoiac. Of course, good leadership on either or both sides would try to avoid

26. For the purposes of this basic analysis it will be assumed that the larger side greatly exceeds the smaller side in all major respects. Some asymmetric relations are more complex, but there are many that fit this simple model.
these misperceptions, but if misperceptions occur, they are likely to fit this pattern. It would be quite unusual if the smaller side were inattentive and the larger side overly attentive.

Since A and B are in an interactive relationship, one might expect that their misperceptions would correct themselves. In fact, however, it is more likely that a vicious circle will result in which the bullying behavior of A reinforces the paranoia of B, and B then desperately opposes A because B feels in mortal danger. For instance, B might ally itself with a third country larger than A in order to balance the relationship. However, such an alliance is likely to produce an even sharper crisis, because A now sees the opposition of B magnified by the strength of the third country. Hence in 1978 Vietnam’s alliance with the Soviet Union was a major reason for China’s hostility.

Of course, asymmetric bilateral relations do not have to degenerate into war. Most relations between neighbors are shaped by history. Usually it is only new situations—like that of Indochina in the 1970s or the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s—where misperceptions lead to serious conflict. However, in every asymmetric situation the stronger state needs to be confident of the deference of the weaker state. By ‘deference’ I do not mean that the weaker state obeys the stronger, but that the weaker state acts in accordance with the reality of the disparity between them. On the other side, the weaker state needs to be confident that the stronger state respects its autonomy. In a normal, peaceful relationship, autonomy and deference can coexist, but if misperceptions sour the relationship, then B will view A’s demands for deference as threats to its autonomy, and A will view B’s attempts to protect itself as threats to the real distribution of power. But whether at peace or at war, the asymmetric relations of A to B and of B to A are different.

The second major point is that, despite the disparities in asymmetric relations and the resulting differences of perspective, in fact it is rare that a stronger state can simply coerce or eliminate a weaker one. Moreover, although modern technology has increased the force disparity among nations, the interconnectedness of the world economy and the destructiveness of atomic weapons have made it more difficult to use force to overcome a weaker opponent. In the last few years there are even examples of the reversal of such attempts, for instance the Indonesian withdrawal from East Timor. Therefore the current order of nations in the world—as asymmetric as their capacities may be—is in reality quite stable.

The best example of the defensive strength of weaker states is that of Vietnam in the past 50 years. The fact that Vietnam frustrated the attempts of France, the United States and China to control it is the most obvious evidence that relative power does not equal absolute power. And if we look more carefully at the conflict between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and France in 1945–1954, it is clear that the ultimate power of resistance is based in the people of a country, not in its government. France, rather than the Viet Minh, was in formal control of the territory and state apparatus of Vietnam, and the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was not recognized by any country until China recognized it in January 1950. Nevertheless, Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh persisted and ultimately prevailed.

The major reasons that the weaker country’s capacity to resist usually exceeds
the stronger country’s capacity to coerce are that the conflict takes place in the weaker country, the stronger country is pursuing limited objectives, and the people of the weaker country are faced with a mortal threat. The conflict takes place in B because A is trying to coerce and because it is confident of its relative strength. Even if A presents its activities in B as a national emergency, in fact whatever threat B might pose to A is not immediately present to A’s population, and so the people of A will tire of the effort. By contrast, A’s presence in B is a constant, vivid threat to the population of B. Indeed, the strength of A magnifies the sense of threat instead of reducing resistance. Just as it is unwise to corner an enemy army on the battlefield because its lack of options increases its solidarity and resistance, it is unwise to corner a people. The best current example of this in 2002 is Israel’s aggressive policy toward the Palestinians.

If misperceptions can lead to a vicious circle and yet war is unlikely to resolve the conflict, then asymmetric bilateral relationships should be managed in order to maximize mutual benefit. There are two basic management techniques. The first is to minimize potentially hot issues, and the second is to control the escalation of misperceptions. Hot issues can be neutralized by using a rhetoric that emphasizes common interests and by creating expert commissions to manage specific problem areas. A good example of the latter is the creation of a border commission to handle the small but sensitive issues of sovereignty that occur at boundaries. The extrapolation of misperceptions can be controlled through diplomatic ritual based on mutual respect, membership in multilateral institutions, and simply by the common sense of well-established relations. The credibility of all of these measures—and the realization of their necessity—is enhanced by time, and therefore the most dangerous moment for asymmetric relations is when they are new and their natural limits are unproven.

The basic formulation of asymmetry theory has been in terms of bilateral relations, but the global concerns of multipolarity require an extension of asymmetry theory from individual relations to structures of relations. The picture of the world order that emerges from asymmetry theory is that of a matrix of countries of various capacities that is relatively stable overall, but one that is composed of individual relations of relative strength and relative vulnerability that can create tensions and misunderstandings. Here ‘world order’ does not mean subordination of all countries to either a global organization or to a hegemon, but rather a robust expectation of most states most of the time that the international playing field—as uneven as it is—will persist. Within world and regional orders most countries are intermediate powers that have some relations in which they are the vulnerable, anxious party and others in which they have nothing to fear and not much to gain. Some countries will be the weaker country in every significant relationship. Some relationships involve contradictory asymmetries, in which one country’s population or military advantage is offset by the other country’s economy. The relationship between China and Japan would be an example. Even more complex is a triangular situation such as that of China, Taiwan and the United States. Often a regional complex of relationships becomes the most important international reality, especially for the smaller countries, because the greatest contact—and the most acute potential threats—come from neighbors.
Only one country, the United States, is vastly superior to the rest of the world militarily and wealthier as well. It is not surprising therefore that the United States is tempted to be insensitive to the concerns and vulnerabilities of other states, and that it ignores or misinterprets the anxieties that its disparity of power causes. However, it is also true that the United States is not all-powerful, and thus it would be to everyone’s mutual benefit—including its own—if its asymmetric relations were better managed.

6. Asymmetry and multipolarity

The major utility of asymmetry theory for China’s concept of multipolarity is that its attention to the effects of disparity on international relations addresses multipolarity’s blind spot concerning relative power. Asymmetry theory does not challenge the appropriateness of multipolarity theory for China’s international situation, and it would agree with the critique of unipolarity. Asymmetry’s solutions to the empirical and normative problems of multipolarity theory should contribute to its refinement and consistency.

If we return to multipolarity’s empirical problems, both the problem of who is in the ‘pole club’ and the problem of how the club relates to the non-club states can now be answered. Both of these questions are related to the problem of relative power, and asymmetry theory says that differences in relative power produce relational structures in which the ‘A position’ and the ‘B position’ have quite different perspectives. Nevertheless, in almost all cases asymmetric relations have to be negotiated rather than resolved through force. Hence, although there is a difference in vulnerability between A and B, the relationship itself can be fairly stable, and it can be part of a larger structure of regional and global relationships.

If asymmetry theory is correct, then the five-pole version of multipolarity makes a great deal of sense for China. The five poles include all of China’s relations in which it is in the B position (with the United States) or in which it is in either complex or relatively symmetric relations (Russia, Europe, Japan). Of course, the relationship with the United States is quite different from the other relationships, and this is acknowledged in the yi chao si qiang formula, but this cluster of relationships is also different from China’s other relationships. Moreover, given China’s situation of vulnerability vis-à-vis the United States, it is useful for China to view itself as shoulder-to-shoulder with three other strong powers.

The reason why the five-pole version works is that it is appropriate from the perspective of China’s relative power. From the perspective of India, six poles would be more appropriate. If relative power is important for defining national perspectives, then the global power matrix will look different from different places. However, the flexibility in the number and order of poles is not arbitrary. It does not mean that from one point of view Zimbabwe looks like a superpower and the United States looks weak, but rather that the positions in the world matrix of power, although real, are not interchangeable, and therefore the whole looks different from the perspective of each of its various parts. Although the differences in capacities are objective facts, the subjective standpoints that asymmetry creates are individualized. Therefore we can say that China’s process of arriving at its
The five-pole model is generalizable, even if it would yield a different number of poles if applied to other places.

The relationship of pole states to non-pole states is also clarified by asymmetry. Except for the superpower, every state is in the B position in some relationship, and so there is not a great chasm between the ‘pole club’ and the rest. No collection of poles, however broad, can simply dominate the non-poles. Moreover, there will be asymmetric relations within any collection of poles. The larger the collection of poles, the less likely it is that coordinated action by all the poles could occur. On the other hand, the relative power positions expressed in the pole rankings are quite important. Any state will be tempted to pay too much anxious attention to its ‘A partners’, and too little attention to its ‘B partners’. The reality of relative power creates the possibility of systemic misperceptions.

With regards to the normative problems of multipolarity theory, asymmetry theory creates a more solid foundation for China’s policy of general cooperation, and it suggests an idea of leadership that replaces the critique of power with a critique of domination. Even without an asymmetry theory, China could justify a general policy of peaceful coexistence because by itself China controls neither the ‘pole club’ nor the states outside the club. However, the question that would certainly occur to states vulnerable to China is whether China’s cooperative policy towards them was dictated by China’s own interests or was merely a rhetorical commitment. Asymmetry theory would provide the confirmation that even in relations of disparity it is prudent for the stronger power to negotiate rather than to coerce solutions because coercion is likely to be misperceived as a broader threat and thus escalate the problem at hand. Relative power is a reality, but the exercise of superior power is rarely the best solution even for the stronger state. Since weaker states are extremely sensitive to their vulnerability, stronger states—for their own interests in achieving the best possible resolution of problems—must be very careful to respect autonomy.

As a critical normative theory, multipolarity is eloquent against unipolarity, but its arguments suggest a non-polar, ultra-egalitarian attitude toward relative power. Asymmetry theory can be just as critical of unilateral behavior by strong states, but it suggests an ethic of sustainable leadership in a matrix of relations. In an asymmetric relationship, or in a regional complex of asymmetric relations, the greater power is in a position of leadership not because it can force compliance, but because its actions have the full attention of lesser powers. It is difficult, though not impossible, for a weaker country to provide leadership—regardless of the quality of its ideas or statesmen—because it may not have the full attention of the larger powers. For example, in the early 1980s the Contadora group of Central American nations came up with a treaty arrangement for peace in Nicaragua, but it was not taken seriously by the United States, which was deeply engaged in opposing Nicaragua. An example of the largest country in a region ignoring the responsibilities of sustainable leadership and suffering the consequences might be Serbia.

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29. The Contadora group was formed in January 1983 and included a core membership of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama. It proposed a draft treaty in 1984 that was acceptable to Nicaragua but not to other, American-supported combatants.
which could have been the potential core state of the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s.

When larger states are prudent, consultative, and cooperative, then smaller states are less likely to be anxious about their vulnerability. They will tend to accept the international order led by the larger state because it is inclusive of their interests. An international order built on appropriate leadership relies on authority rather than on power. While power is an expendable resource, authority is a renewable resource. By contrast, if the most powerful country is constantly trying to maximize its advantages vis-à-vis other countries, does not consult them and is not bound by multilateral agreements, and acts as if power required no consideration of the interests of others, then other countries will feel that their interests are alienated from the most powerful, that they are endangered by its arbitrariness, and that its power must somehow be constrained or counterbalanced. In the long run, the resilience of the global matrix of nations and the unforeseen consequences of the exercise of power will lead to the frustration or even downfall of a dominant power that does not provide inclusive leadership.

The general lesson that can be applied to all nations in asymmetric relations with others is that the temptation to exploit the disparity of power is usually counterproductive in the long run and may lead to undesirable consequences even in the short run. Of course, the weaker and more vulnerable partners in relationships should not presume on their autonomy by pushing for more than their fair share, and they should not jump to the conclusion that every negative action by a stronger power is a threat. But the hierarchy of power provides the presumptive hierarchy of leadership, and therefore the responsibility for maintaining peace rests more heavily on the more powerful.

7. Conclusion: asymmetric multipolarity and the post-Cold War era

If novelty and complexity in asymmetric relations increase the likelihood of misperceptions, then the beginning decades of the post-Cold War era are a particularly dangerous time. Not only did the relaxation of bilateral tensions lead to the collapse of some governments and the increase of some regional tensions, but the most general questions of world order remain to be answered convincingly. What are the prerogatives of American superpower status? How can its leadership be inclusive of the interests of the rest of the world? How vulnerable is the rest of the world to American decisions? To what extent does world economic and informational integration preclude coercion, and to what extent does integration increase the levers of asymmetric influence? How can autonomy be maintained without self-isolation? These are not really questions, but rather are interrelated challenges that all countries will struggle with for the foreseeable future. In time, lessons will be learned from successes and failures, and general patterns will become clearer.

The current world order has been rendered both more simple and more complex by the United States. It is more simple because there is no other country with comparable military or economic power, so the competition for global hegemony is over for the foreseeable future. Also, the fact that the United States was the
successful leader through the Cold War gave it a global authority to match its unrivaled power. If the post-Cold War situation had indeed been composed of five equal poles, with no power stronger than the rest, the situation might have led to greater uncertainty, greater militarization, and less globalization. Instead, the post-Cold War world has a central power and a central leader, and this has given it a structure that has encouraged global trends of economic, informational and scientific integration.

On the other hand, the leadership provided by the United States has often been unsettling rather than reassuring. It should be noted that no country in a central leadership role could completely reassure others, because the anxieties of weaker states are rooted in the asymmetry of the relationship. But even if we make allowances for the novelty of the task, American international relations have seemed to derive from domestic politics rather than from inclusive statesmanship, and it has seemed increasingly unilateral and aggressive. The impending invasion of Iraq is the most obvious example. Of course, the tragedy of 9–11 was deeply traumatic for the United States and for the world, but it has only accentuated an earlier trend. One must ask: if the proverb is correct that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, then what is to become of the world’s only superpower?

Asymmetry’s answer is twofold. First, it should be remembered that the disparity of power between the United States and the rest of the world and the novelty of the situation will magnify the perception of risk. The United States is subjectively less aggressive than it would appear to be from an outside, vulnerable position, and objectively it is less capable of enforcing its will than its preponderance of economic and military power might suggest. The extrapolation of unilateral acts into a grand picture of malevolence seems plausible because it gives free rein to anxieties, but in fact each step in a malevolent strategy requires geometrically greater commitments from the stronger power, and is therefore less and less likely. The surest way to encourage a stronger power to act more hostililey is for weaker powers to anticipate hostility and to behave desperately. Second, multipolarity is correct in affirming that relative power does not equal absolute power. To return to the proverb, because the United States is not an absolute power (however it might think of itself), it cannot become absolutely corrupt, but can only become relatively corrupt. It will discover that there are things that it cannot do, states that it cannot coerce, and interests that can frustrate its preferences. The United States will have to negotiate not only with Europe, Japan, China and Russia, but also with many other states and with multilateral institutions. If it chooses not to cooperate, the United States will find that bearing the burden of unilateral commitments is not easy, and that unilateral actions in one direction inhibit the choice of actions and the availability of cooperation in other directions. This may be an unfortunate but necessary part of the American learning process in the post-Cold War era. In any case, it would be better for the world as well as for the United States if it learns from its mistakes rather than simply failing, and, thanks to the resilient matrix of world power, learning is more likely than failure.