Jennifer Lind

Interview By Brian Kot

In February, STAIR's Managing Editor spoke with Jennifer Lind, associate professor of government at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, a faculty associate at the Reischauer Institute for Japanese Studies at Harvard University, and a fellow at Chatham House. An expert on the international relations of East Asia and US foreign policy toward the region, she spoke about her International Security article, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," in which she argues that the current international system is bipolar, with the United States and China as the leading superpowers. This interview explores the concept of polarity in greater depth, along with the similarities and differences between the Cold War and today's international system. Read in dialogue with the interview with Professor Barry Buzan in this issue, Professor Lind presents the case against drawing simplistic comparisons between contemporary international politics and the Cold War, and instead prefers analytic concepts like polarity. This conversation was edited for clarity.

What's the research motivation behind your recent International Security article? Why is it important to study polarity? Why did you choose to research this topic at this particular moment?

Political scientists believe that polarity is important for driving the nature or character of international politics. To understand the nature of international politics, it's important to know what sort of system we are in—unipolar, multipolar, or bipolar.

There's been a big debate about whether the international system is changing. I felt it was important to have better tools for that debate, since much of it seemed overly impressionistic. One person might define a great power using one set of metrics, while someone else might propose entirely different criteria. In policy and media circles, there's hardly any systematic conversation on this issue. Among scholars, the discussion is more structured, but still lacks consensus. Debates often center on which metrics to use, and the conversation frequently becomes more philosophical rather than focusing on practical applications.

What I saw was that the U.S.-led unipolar system we had had for the past few decades seemed to be shifting—especially as other powers, like China, became more influential—but people in academia, the media, and the policy world were debating about what exactly was happening. Some argued that we're in a multipolar world now. Others—like a prominent school of thought led by some of my Dartmouth colleagues—said no, the U.S. is still the dominant, unipolar power. And then others argued we're in a bipolar

system. So basically, people were looking at the same system and coming to completely different conclusions—unipolar, multipolar, or bipolar. That's not a helpful conclusion.

This matters because each system brings different risks and points to different policy directions. I wanted to contribute by creating a method to measure and compare national power—something that could offer more clarity about the kind of system we're in.

STAIR: Can you summarise your method for measuring polarity? How does it differ from previous approaches? And why is it more accurate for measuring capabilities in the international system?

There's a huge debate among scholars about what power is and what defines a great power. There are so many books and articles on this topic. Typically, somebody will write an article saying, "here's a new dimension of power everyone's missed," and so we just keep adding more and more dimensions to the definition of power.

I went a completely different direction. I used an inductive method. I didn't even offer a definition of power or great power. There's this surprising phenomenon in our field: on the one hand, people do not agree on what power is or how to measure it. But on the other hand, if you look at historical systems, there's actually tremendous consensus on who the great powers were at a given time. That's striking because it suggests that maybe we do know what power and great power are, even if we don't have a consensus on a formal definition.

I took the views of scholars as a kind of "ground truth". This approach was first pursued by J. David Singer and his colleagues in the Correlates of War dataset. They asked scholars and historians, "Who were the great powers across these given historical systems?" They found that, firstly, scholars delineated the historical systems in a similar way. The Cold War, for example, is generally considered to have spanned from 1950 to 1990. Secondly, although these scholars probably held different definitions of power, they came to similar conclusions about what the great powers were during those given systems.

I took that list as ground truth and used it as a baseline. I then applied a set of common metrics that IR scholars use to measure power and assess how much power each great power had relative to the leading state at a given time. For example, how did Australia's GDP in the 19th century compare to Great Britain's, which was the leading state on a variety of these metrics?

This inductive method allows me to establish a rough threshold for how much power a state needs, relative to the leading state, to be considered a great power. This is really important because in academic and policy circles, we've been debating, "Is China a great power?" or "Is China declining or still rising?" You can't answer these questions unless you have a threshold for great power.

In your view, how, if at all, does the concept of polarity relate to how we understand the Cold War? To what extent is the Cold War equivalent to bipolarity between the United States and the Soviet Union?

I think people assign different meanings to the term "Cold War". For clarity, I prefer the term "bipolarity". The Cold War was a bipolar superpower competition, particularly in military terms. The data I provide in my article shows that, according to economic metrics, many countries were above the threshold for being considered great powers. But only the U.S. and the Soviet Union had both the economic and military capabilities that put them in the range of superpowers. That made it a bipolar system.

China, for example, amassed significant military power at that time, but it was incredibly weak economically. European powers like Britain, France, and West Germany had the economic side, but they didn't mobilise their wealth to become great military powers. So, using my method, we can see that the Cold War was a bipolar system, which jibes with what scholars have said all along.

Now, when we look at the system today, we see something similar. A handful of countries have significant economic power, but only two—the U.S. and China—have both sufficient economic and military power. So, we're no longer in a unipolar world. We've entered a new bipolar system.

A lot of people resist calling today's system a new Cold War because the phrase "Cold War" evokes things beyond just polarity. That's why I don't find it a useful term because the type of superpower that we're facing today is very different than the superpower the U.S. faced during the late 20th century. A lot of those conditions don't apply anymore.

For example, the U.S. faced a superpower competitor that was outside the global economic system built by the U.S. and its partners after World War II. The Soviets had their own bloc, while today, China is integrated into that system and is a major trading partner for the U.S. and its allies. This creates a unique challenge—how do you contain or isolate a great power that's also your major trading partner and that of your partners and allies?

Another key difference is in technology. Many people think the Soviet Union was technologically weak, but that's not true. In the 1950s, the Soviets were cutting-edge in many areas—think Sputnik, Nobel Prizes, and major scientific advances. But the Soviets squandered all that amazing human capital with a highly dysfunctional economic system that concentrated technological capabilities in the military rather than the commercial sector. The problem was that their economic system stifled the diffusion of these innovations. They focused their technological capabilities on military applications, rather than the commercial sector, which limited their economic potential. Jeffrey Ding, one of your program's alumni, who's now at George Washington University, explores this theme in depth in his excellent book.

In sum, I think the phrase "New Cold War" is a bit problematic, because we're not really returning to anything. Although we are indeed returning to bipolarity, the superpower competition we face today is so different.

Focusing on the role of technology, you recently co-authored a paper with Professor Michael Mastandunno on the lessons of the Cold War-era Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls

(COCOM). What are the key insights emerging from that research, and how does that inform our current thinking about U.S. technological competition with China?

In this study with Professor Mastanduno, we wanted to revisit the COCOM regime—the technology control system that the U.S. and its partners used to restrict tech exports to the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. Our goal was to see whether we could apply lessons from that experience to today's efforts.

So when the Biden administration announced sweeping export controls against China, I immediately thought of Professor Mastanduno—he literally wrote the book on COCOM, which was a similar initiative.

Now, of course, the context is different. The current regime is less formalised, and today's geopolitical environment is not the Cold War. But there are still meaningful parallels: in both cases, the U.S. is trying to limit the flow of critical technologies to a strategic competitor due to concerns about their military applications.

The U.S. is also trying to bring key partners on board—like Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Taiwan—who are all critical players in the semiconductor supply chain. So I roped Professor Mastanduno into this project because of his expertise, and together we looked at the challenges COCOM faced and asked: Are today's efforts vulnerable to similar issues? And are there new challenges that might be even more serious?

We found three key lessons. First, the export control strategy was described as a "small yard, high fence." That means restricting only a narrow set of cutting-edge technologies (the small yard), while enforcing those restrictions rigorously (the high fence).

There's a clear benefit to keeping the yard small: the more focused the controls, the more likely U.S. allies will stay on board. Many of these countries—like the Netherlands, Japan, and South Korea—are major trading partners of China. They don't want to fully decouple. The gap in threat perception further hinders the coalition's cohesion. The U.S. is far more alarmed by China, even anticipating a potential military conflict. Other countries—particularly in Europe, but also South Korea—don't share that same level of concern. And because trade makes up a larger share of their GDP compared to the U.S., they're also more exposed economically.

However, while the policy was framed as a "small yard," in practice, we saw in the COCOM era that the yard tends to expand over time, due to political pressure, shifting priorities, and bureaucratic dynamics. Washington is deeply concerned about China's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which deliberately blurs the lines between commercial and military sectors. This makes it very difficult to separate civilian technologies from potential military applications. When members of Congress grilled the Biden administration, they often asked: "Isn't this commercial technology going to end up in China's military? What happens if we go to war?" So, the line between commercial and military use is increasingly hard to define.

There's also a tendency for U.S. leaders to reach for export controls to address issues beyond military competition. While the administration has framed the policy as a "small yard, high fence"—meaning only narrowly defined, cutting-edge technologies are restricted—we've seen export controls used in other areas, too, like human rights or domestic repression. That's a problem, because this is a multilateral effort. U.S. allies may not share the same priorities. They might agree with concerns about China's military rise, but not with using export controls as a tool for human rights advocacy. That disagreement can strain coordination.

So our first major finding is that even if you start with a small yard, it tends to grow, due to domestic political pressure, blurred lines between civilian and military uses, and the temptation to use export controls for multiple policy goals.

Our second finding has to do with the "high fence." In theory, the fence is supposed to be strong enough to keep sensitive technologies out of China. But just like the Soviets in the past, China has found creative and effective ways to acquire what it wants.

They're not always getting things in the quantities they'd prefer, and some items—like massive extreme ultraviolet lithography (EUV) machines, which are the size of a building—are simply not smuggleable. But overall, they're still able to get a lot. And the Chinese—unlike the Soviets—are able to do a lot with it, and (as the case of DeepSeek showed) to innovate in response to scarcity. So the fence is not as high as U.S. policymakers might hope, and China is a more adaptable adversary than was the USSR.

Our third and final point relates to alliance management. During the COCOM era, coordinating with allies on what to control, which firms to blacklist, and how to enforce those rules was a major challenge. Even back then, when the Soviet threat was very clear and immediate, there were serious disagreements about how far to go with controls.

The situation now is even more difficult. China is deeply embedded in the global economy. Many allies don't view it as an imminent military threat and aren't willing to make big sacrifices to contain it. So disagreements about the scope and enforcement of export controls are already straining U.S. relations with allies, and that's happening at a time when those relationships are crucial and already under stress.

> ***East Asian security is another area of your expertise. How did the Cold War shape the security dynamics in the region? What are the benefits and drawbacks of viewing East Asia through a Cold War framing?***

I think the best way to frame this is by talking about superpower competition and what that means for politics and economics in the region. We're entering a new era of intense rivalry, what we'd call bipolarity, where two major powers are extremely jealous of each other's gains.

Think about the Cold War: the U.S. and the Soviet Union competed for influence all over the world—Latin America, Africa, the Middle East. That competition wasn't just about politics; it often led to military entrenchment, like bases and alliances, which amplified power projection.

We're starting to see that same pattern emerge today in places like the Pacific Islands. If you're wondering why there's suddenly so much interest in that region, it's because it's becoming a new arena for U.S.-China competition. It's all about strategic geography—air bases, naval access, and the ability to project power across the Indo-Pacific.

Another key region is Southeast Asia. With the exception of a few countries—like the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, or Cambodia, which leans strongly toward China—most of these countries are hedging. They're caught between the two superpowers, trying to balance relations with both powers and avoid choosing sides.

But here's the thing: in a bipolar world, that balancing act gets harder. When you talk to officials from these countries, they often say, "Please don't make us choose." But history suggests that during great power rivalry, countries are often forced to choose whether they want to or not. And unfortunately, it can be a very destabilising process—sometimes even violent.

We hope that this new era of U.S.-China competition won't follow that same path. It's actually a great research question for students at your university and others: What might make today's bipolarity different? Could China avoid using force or political interference in the ways the superpowers did during the Cold War? I certainly hope things will be different. But what we do know is that this new era is going to be highly competitive.