
THE RISE OF MULTIPOLARITY: IS THE UNIPOLAR WORLD ORDER OFFICIALLY OVER?

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ABSTRACT

The global structure after the Cold War was felt to be mainly dominated by the U.S. in terms of military, economic, technological and institutional control; this is to say that the U.S. was exceptional in its domination of all four aforementioned areas. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and according to Charles Krauthammer (who termed it the "unipolar moment"), the U.S. was thought to have established itself in a way that felt as if it exercised an unrivaled/global dominance. However, the last twenty years have caused many to question whether American hegemony is durable, and whether or not a multipolar world will emerge as a result of continuous structural changes in the global distribution of power (e.g. China's rapid economic/military rise; Russia's resurgence as an international strategic power; the expansion of BRICS; the emergence of middle powers; and indicators of de-dollarization and potential institutional reforms). This paper addresses whether the unipolar order has indeed ended or if the international system remains transitional. To answer this question, the author draws on realist, hegemonic stability and power transition theories and looks at the availability of global economic/military/industrial/technological indicators that imply systemic change. The author finds that while many areas of American primacy remain true, the widespread diffusion of power among several centres implies that a multipolar order is developing gradually rather than abruptly discontinuing the unipolar order.

The paper concludes that the international system is undergoing a structural transition characterized by contested leadership, fragmented governance, and strategic balancing among major and middle powers.

Keywords: Multipolarity; Unipolarity; Hegemony; United States; China; BRICS; Power Transition Theory; Balance of Power; Global Governance; International Relations.

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Introduction: The Post-Cold War Order and the Question of Systemic Transition

The Cold War ended in 1991. This change was important to the world because it made it impossible for the Soviet Union and the USA to fight over who controlled the world. The fall of the USSR meant that the USA was now a superpower and capable of projecting its power worldwide. There was no longer a cold war; the United States became a unipolar superpower with enough military might to dominate other countries. There was no Other Group or Anything to Stop this from happening.

From 1991 through around 2002, it was difficult to see any potential way that American power might not continue to grow. During this time period, the United States created NATO for the purpose of expanding it, established international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, developed international trading systems through the World Trade Organization (WTO), and developed military capabilities that no other state could match. The continued development of leading-edge technologies in information technology combined with the U.S. dollar made the United States the most powerful nation on earth. Scholars at that time used the term "hegemonic stability theory" to refer to the idea that the U.S. was the dominant state in the eyes of other states and that U.S. leadership was responsible for maintaining relative stability among the world's countries and creating a stable environment for countries to engage in trade, develop security relationships, and establish cooperation among themselves.

The longevity of unipolarity is now under increasing challenge. The 2008 global financial crisis revealed weaknesses in the American economic system. At the same time, the rapid economic growth of China made it the second-largest economy in the world and a major player in global supply chains. Russia has renewed its assertive foreign policies, beginning with the war in Georgia in 2008 and continuing with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, leading to increased geopolitical competition. In addition, multilateral coalitions like BRICS are trying to displace the current system of Western-dominated financial and political governance.

At present, the debate centers on whether these developments are the end of unipolarity, or simply a relative decline in the global position of the United States. Some scholars and analysts maintain that the United States remains dominant despite the challenges to its power as it continues to be able to spend significantly on its military; has a highly developed system of

alliances; is a leader in technological innovation; and has significant sources of soft power. On the other hand, some contend that power has begun to diffuse through structural means leading to the emergence of a multipolar system with multiple significant power centers.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evidence for systemic transition in an academic fashion. The analysis will include an examination of economic redistribution; military modernization; institutional reform efforts; financial restructuring; and geopolitical balancing. This paper will examine the evidence through a non-deterministic lens which situates it within broader theoretical paradigms of international relations. The primary question remains whether the current international system represents the end of unipolarity, or whether it represents a complicated transition to a multipolar system.

Theoretical Framework: Realism, Hegemonic Stability, and Power Transitions

To understand systemic change you need to understand the foundational theories behind international relations. Kenneth Waltz's structural realist theory argues that the international system is defined by the distribution of material power across states. The way states interact politically will depend upon how many powerful states exist, as indicated by the nature of the distribution of power in an international system. There are three types of great power distributions or polarities within the international system - unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. The polarity of the world impacts how states create alliances, how likely states are to engage in wars, and how stable the international system will be.

When viewed through a realist lens, a unipolar international system is an unstable system because secondary countries will attempt to balance their relative power against the dominant state. However, there are differing opinions among scholars as to how fast and how inevitable balance will occur. Some will argue that geographic distance, treaty commitments, and trade interdependence will slow counterbalancing and extend unipolarity.

Hegemonic stability theory is another way of looking at the systematic transformation of an international system from a complementary perspective to Waltz's theory. It maintains that a hegemonic power must exist that has both the willingness and ability to provide public goods in an international system for both global economic and institutional order to exist. Hegemonic stability theorists assert that systemic instability in an international system can occur when a hegemon's influence declines and other powers begin to emerge. Therefore, an erosion of US

hegemony will lead to fragmentation of trade regimes, weakened institutional structures, and contested processes for rule-making.

The power transition theory provides additional evidence for the original debate by explicating contradictions through emphasizing hierarchy and the impact of transition-based conflict. Where there is an approaching parity with an existing hegemon or dominant state there is an increased likelihood of conflict on a global level. In analyzing contemporary geopolitical developments, war between the U.S. and China is indicative of the types of changes being brought about in the context of a global system.

Realism anticipates some sort of balancing act leading to the rise of a multipolar world. Hegemonic stability theory warns that the willful and continued disengagement by a global leading power may lead to the breakdown of established institutions. Power transition theory examines the level of risk involved in a simultaneous emergence of parity between large-scale states and transitions based on that emerging parity.

This paper utilizes all three of these theoretical lenses as a means of evaluation rather than as clearly different sources for an explanation. By using, among other things, an examination of various metrics (e.g., economic distribution, military modernization, alliances, etc.) it can determine whether contemporary examples support either a persistent unipolar world, transitional multipolarism, or a new type of overload (i.e., Hypsiliteralism).

Economic Redistribution of Power: Measuring Structural Shifts

The redistribution of Global Economic Power is widely regarded as one of the most significant measurements of global systemic transition in international relations and has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. In fact, after the Cold War there was a period when America had a "dominant" position in relation to global GDP (Global Domestic Product); and influence over global financial institutions (banks), trade regimes (international agreements on how to conduct international business) and capital markets (money markets used for investment). The US had own dominant position in these areas and was able to use its GDP superiority as well more broadly to establish and maintain the "unipolar world" by using its military superiority, leading the world in technological innovations (e.g., internet), creating international institutions (e.g., International Monetary Fund), etc. However, in the last 30 years, the global economic system has changed as significantly as during the early phases of global

systemic change (e.g., post World War II).

The most significant contributing factor to this shift is the emergence of China's economic development. In 1978, China began implementing free-market reforms that have supported unprecedented economic growth rates and have led to China's deepening integration into global supply chains and as the world's manufacturer. By the 2010s, China had surpassed Japan as the world's second largest economy in nominal terms and is equal to or greater than the United States in purchasing power parity (PPP) by some measures. Thus China represents not only an increase within the existing system, but has resulted in a new structural shift in productive capacity and the geographic centre of economic production / trade. Emerging markets outside of China have grown economically, including nations in Europe like India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey. In terms of global output, the Global South now accounts for more than half of the total economy today as opposed to a little over 10% in the 1990s. Part of this growth can be seen through the expansion of the BRICS membership as it exemplifies the desire to move past Western dominance in financial policy and be represented more adequately in the global economy.

The 2008 recession only helped to further cement the idea that the United States is declining. It began when the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis led to a financial meltdown across the world and were followed with discussions about whether or not liberal economic leadership practises could be maintained or not due to the structure of the U.S. economy. At the same time, China launched a huge amount of stimulus into its economy which would help China not only grow domestically but invest globally such as through infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

That being said, redistribution alone does not mean the system is going to transition from one country to another. The United States has retained many advantages over all other countries: there is no other currency in circulation that can compare to the U.S. dollar; American capital markets are considerably deeper than those of any other country; and U.S.-based companies have consistently led in innovation, especially in high-tech industries. Furthermore, economic interdependence also makes it more challenging to replace current systems. China's economy has always depended on Western markets for export driven growth, while U.S. companies are integrated into production processes around the world. As a result, there is evidence of partial diffusion occurring instead of total displacement. The international economy is becoming more

and more multi-polar regarding aggregate output; however, the financial center of the world and the leverage of institutions remain significantly impacted by the United States. This duality suggests that although there has been some progress towards multipolarity in the economy, there has not yet been a final result in terms of structural parity.

Military Capabilities and Strategic Balancing

The ability to use military force is one of the primary factors for evaluating the polarity of a system. During the period of unipolarity the U.S. had an extremely great advantage in military power. The amount of money spent by the U.S. on defense was greater than that spent by all other nations combined and the global alliances as well as the number of military bases that were established by the U.S. were larger than any other nation in the world.

In addition, in the unipolar period, there were many instances when the U.S. was able to use its military superiority to intervene in conflicts in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq which helped validate perceptions of uncontested dominance.

Over the last twenty years, however, the major powers have all made significant investments in modernizing their militaries. For example, over the last decade, China has made significant reforms to its military force as well as expanding its naval capabilities through investments in creating A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) capabilities and modernizing its missile forces. The rapidly expanding capabilities of the People's Liberation Army Navy reflect China's strategic focus on developing capabilities to ensure its national interests in maritime security and regional dominion in the Indo-Pacific. As a result, the actions of China are making it more difficult for the U.S. to maintain the ability to operate freely in the East Asian region and they are indicative of a transition toward regional balancing.

Russia has demonstrated that it has significant military resilience and modernization compared to the size of its economy. Russia's military interventions in Syria and Ukraine show its willingness to use military force to protect its perceived strategic interests. The deployment of the advanced missile systems and the development of cyber capabilities demonstrate that the conduct of war now involves many domains of warfare besides conventional forces. Although these changes have taken place, the United States continues to hold significant superiorities over its competitors in the area of global power projection (force), intelligence capabilities, technological integration, and alliance systems. NATO is a cohesive and capable defense

mechanism, while the security partnerships forged by the United States with Asian nations, especially Japan, South Korea, and Australia to support the deterrent capacity of the region as well. The creation of additional security agreements (e.g., AUKUS) shows that the U.S. is innovative and can create new types of alliances to respond to emerging threats.

The way military power has been used in competition has also changed. Current rivalries are more often exhibited through hybrid warfare, cyber operations, and gray zone operations rather than face-to-face equal adversaries. This would make traditional ways of measuring polarity even more difficult to accomplish given there are now many avenues for states to exert influence without a direct military confrontation.

Also, the patterns regarding balancing activities are uneven. Many countries exhibit strategic hedging as opposed to outright opposition to the U.S. India is a good example of this, as they cooperate with the United States on security measures while at the same time, retain strategic autonomy from the U.S. in other areas. This is indicative of a state of counter-balancing, but not yet a fully formed anti-hegemonic coalition.

In conclusion, there is evidence of partial balancing based on military capabilities; however, complete parity cannot yet be established. The United States continues to have significant structural advantages but as distance decreases in areas such as the Indo-Pacific region, it is evident there is movement toward a more competitive multipolar environment. Although these changes have taken place, the United States continues to hold significant superiorities over its competitors in the area of global power projection (force), intelligence capabilities, technological integration, and alliance systems.

Russia's Resurgence and the Politics of Revisionism

Since the 1990s, Russia has re-emerged as an important player on the global stage, and this re-emergence is a significant factor in the breakdown of the post-Cold War unipolar system. In the 1990s, Russia was both politically fragmented and economically weak, which limited its ability to have any substantial impact on global events. However, since Vladimir Putin became president, the Russian state has reunited its authority, refreshed its military capabilities, and become much more assertive in its use of foreign policy. The increase in energy revenues throughout the early part of the 2000s allowed the Russian government to modernize its military and enhance its confidence in its strategic position.

Russia's actions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022) illustrate Russia's tenacity in resisting NATO's expansion and trying to reclaim its influence over its near abroad. Realist theory often interprets these actions as examples of balancing behavior in response to what Russia considers to be encroachment from the West. Russia believes that the NATO expansion into eastern Europe presents a clear threat to its security and to its sphere of influence. Thus, Russia has taken a revisionist approach in order to change the balance of power in the region.

Russia's resurgence, however, does not mean that it has achieved systemic parity with the U.S. Russia's economy is still relatively small and heavily reliant on energy exports. European and North American nations have placed sanctions on Russia, further limiting Russia's access to advanced technology and financial markets.

Russia's military capabilities still consist of a large number of nuclear weapons and missiles that play an important role in maintaining their status as a military power and the global role of Russia in providing global security. However, Russia seems to be acting more as a disruptor to the current unipolar order than the alternative builder of a new worldwide order (hegemony). By attempting to undermine the dominance of the West and to preserve autonomy in the regions around Russia, Russia is creating conditions for the unipolar system to continue to erode without developing a stable multipolar system that will provide stability for all involved. Russia is, therefore, increasing the rates of systemic fragmentation and international competition.

BRICS and the Emergence of Institutional Pluralism

The evolution of BRICS from a loose economic grouping into a more structured political forum represents a significant development in debates on multipolarity. Originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the bloc has expanded to include additional members, reflecting growing dissatisfaction among developing nations with Western-dominated governance institutions. BRICS advocates for reform of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and United Nations Security Council to better reflect contemporary economic realities.

A major institutional achievement of BRICS has been the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB), which provides infrastructure financing without the policy conditionalities typically associated with Western institutions. The Contingent Reserve

Arrangement further enhances financial cooperation among members. These mechanisms symbolize attempts to diversify sources of development finance and reduce dependence on the Bretton Woods system.

However, BRICS faces structural limitations. Member states differ in political systems, strategic priorities, and economic capacities. India's border tensions with China, Brazil's shifting domestic politics, and varying geopolitical alignments limit the bloc's cohesion. Unlike NATO or the European Union, BRICS lacks a binding security framework or integrated economic union.

Nonetheless, BRICS has considerable symbolic importance as an institutionalized representation of Global South agency and as an indication that global governance is no longer singularly controlled by Western powers. Although BRICS does not supplant any of the current institutions of international governance, it provides an avenue for the establishment of competitive pluralism in terms of global financial and political governance. Through the process of establishing competitive parallel platforms for coordination and negotiation, BRICS advances the development of multipolarity divisions by reinforcing the existence of multipolar tendencies. Furthermore, BRICS' ongoing growth provides evidence that multipolarity will exist not only with respect to material resources but also through the establishment of diverse institutions and contestation over normative standards.

De-Dollarization and the Resilience of Financial Hegemony

For a long period of time, financial supremacy has supported the United States' position of global dominance. The dollar is the world's primary reserve currency which facilitates international trade, international investment, and international monetary stability. Consequently, the dollar's role as a dominant global currency confers upon the United States a structural advantage (e.g., ability to impose financial sanctions, maintain global demand for U.S. Treasury securities) that supports global economic leverage, thereby reaffirming unipolarity through economic power.

In recent years, geopolitical tensions (e.g., sanctions placed on Russia, increasing competition between the U.S. and China) have intensified calls for de-dollarization. Several countries have launched initiatives to coordinate the use of their local currencies in bilateral trade; diversify their foreign exchange reserves; and create payment systems that are not reliant on Western-

controlled financial networks. China has promoted the use of its currency (the renminbi) as a means to conduct business with the rest of the world; while the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have investigated settlement methods that do not rely on Western-controlled financial networks.

Despite these efforts, various structural impediments limit the possibility of a rapid transition away from the dollar as the world's primary reserve currency. For example, the U.S. dollar's dominance stems in part from well-developed, liquid, transparent financial markets, credible legal institutions, and a high level of global confidence in U.S. regulatory systems. As a result, the inherent costs and complexities of switching currencies create significant barriers to entry for potential competitors. No candidate currency has demonstrated the ability to provide the level of liquidity and certainty required to replace the dollar as the premier reserve currency of the world at this time.

Despite this, incremental diversification is evident in the financial systems. Regional efforts to forge financial arrangements and create currency swap arrangements are evidence of a growing desire among countries to hedge against geopolitical uncertainty. Although dollar-centered exclusivity may continue to exist, over time diversification may cause it to diminish.

As demonstrated by the financial dynamics in the global economy, the transition between systems will be both incremental and unevenly distributed across all of the countries involved. The United States will continue to hold a great deal of monetary power; however, the appearance of alternatives indicates an overall shift toward a more evenly distributed worldwide financial system. If multipolarity becomes a reality in finance, it will develop over an extended period rather than through sudden systemic breakage.

Middle Powers and the Logic of Strategic Autonomy

Today we see that states are acting as a deterrent force to the growing power of big states like Russia and China. These countries (India, Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia) tend to be more self-reliant and look for many different partnerships with big powers in order to achieve the greatest amount of autonomy from the larger and more powerful states. This is making it harder for established global powers to assert their dominance over the smaller countries.

India is a great example of this new multi-polarity. For example, India works closely with US in terms of security through the Quad but they also buy weapons from Russia and trade heavily with China. This is a clear strategy for India to protect itself from future changes in the balance of power in the world as well as the uncertainty over whether the world will remain stable over the long term.

Similarly, middle powers provide support for the advent of multi-polarity by resisting hierarchical alignment and advocating issue-based coalitions. In fact, the foreign policy of middle powers tends to be more pragmatic than an ideological. Middle powers do not seek alliances simply based on the countries' ideologies; they seek alliances based on common goals such as economic development, increasing their influence within their geographic regions, and protecting their sovereignty, which is why so many middle powers have been able to create flexible policies that weaken the ability of larger countries to create rigid alliances.

While middle powers do not have the military-industrial capability to change the global order on their own, their collective actions create a pluralistic system. Because middle powers engage in multiple forms of diplomacy and join multiple institutions, they are preventing the emergence of a single hegemon among the global powers. Middle powers' Strategic Autonomy is both a cause and effect of Systemic Transition. It is a reflection of an acknowledgment that there is a contestation of an unipolar world while also accelerating the formation of a multifunctional, multipolar world that is marked by a higher degree of interdependence and a more selective process of alignment between states.

Technological Rivalry and the Transformation of Power Hierarchies

In the 21st century, technology is increasingly becoming a key driver of national power. Leadership in A.I., semiconductor manufacturing, quantum computing, cybersecurity, and space technology will influence both military and economic competitiveness. The United States has remained the global leader in high-end innovation ecosystems throughout history due to its established technology infrastructure and its robust private-sector dynamic.

The United States' dominance is being challenged by China's rapid growth in technology; the Chinese government has dedicated substantial funding towards R&D, digital infrastructure, and domestic innovation, allowing China to become a leader in 5G networks, digital payment systems, etc. As evinced by the export restrictions imposed against Chinese companies on

semiconductors, technology is now considered a strategic domain of competition.

Technological competition is different from traditional military equilibrium in that it includes the need for supply chain reconfiguration, the resolution of Intellectual Property rights disputes, and significant variations between the regulatory systems. Due to simultaneous growth of parallel technological ecosystems, particularly regarding digital governance and data regulations, we could see a move toward the institutionalization of multipolarity within the innovation networks. Although the United States has continued to maintain advantages relative to other nations with regard to leading-edge semiconductor design processes, international collaborations for R&D have also seen a narrowing technological divide between American companies and those based outside the U.S. Technology therefore acts as a source of information about systemic change while facilitating systems changes by providing an argument that the previous hegemony of the U.S. is becoming increasingly challenged in the areas of emerging power.

Conclusion: From Unipolar Dominance to Competitive Multipolarity

The combined evidence indicates that while the unipolar order hasn't disappeared completely, it has clearly declined. Across all sectors, we see evidence of the diffusion of power through economic redistribution, military modernization, institutional pluralism, financial diversification and technological competition.

The US will hold many beneficial structural advantages relative to the competitive multipolar world including: 1) alliance networks, 2) the centre of the financial system, and 3) a strong innovation capacity.

The current global order is transitional caught between the decline of unipolarity and the emergence of multipolarity. Rather than a state of stable equilibrium, we see competitive multipolarity characterized by rivalry for leadership among multiple states, fragmented governance, and strategic hedging among competitors.

As such, the unipolar world is not “officially” over in terms of formal structure; however, the unchallenged nature of the unipolar world has ended. The new global order will reflect pluralistic, dynamic perspectives, shaped by shifting coalitions rather than hierarchical stability.

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