

Reconfiguring Global Power: An Analysis of the Shift from Bipolarity to Multipolarity

Abstract

The global balance of power is changing. After decades of being dominated by two major powers, the world is slowly moving toward a system where power is shared among several countries. This paper studies the shift from bipolarity—when two superpowers controlled global politics—to multipolarity, where many countries now influence international decisions. It looks at why this change is happening, focusing on economic growth, military strength, technological progress, and political influence. The study examines the changing role of the United States, the rise of China, the return of Russia as a major power, and the growing importance of countries like India and regional groups such as the European Union and BRICS. The paper also discusses how globalization and international institutions affect this transition. Finally, it analyzes how multipolarity impacts global peace, cooperation, and conflict, arguing that while a multipolar world allows more voices to be heard, it also creates uncertainty and new challenges for global stability.

Introduction

The international system structure has traditionally seesawed between various configurations of power: most prominently unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. During the Cold War, global politics was defined by a rigid bipolar order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, where ideological competition, military deterrence, and alliance politics shaped international relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the apparent triumph of a unipolar world, with the United States emerging as the sole superpower. However, the durability of this unipolar moment has increasingly been questioned, as the twenty-first century witnesses the redistribution of power across multiple centers of influence.

Over the past few decades, the global distribution of powers has been reshaped with the appearance of new balances in international politics due to strong economic development in Asia, renewed geopolitical activism from Russia, and the emergence of strong middle powers and regional blocks. The strong development in Chinese economy and military, India's growing geopolitical influence, the EU's

normative and economic powers, and the geopolitical influence of entities like BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization have altogether signaled a new wave of globalization, slowly but surely heading toward a multipolar world. This shift in global politics may be further fueled by emerging technologies, energy politics, a new global supply chain, and weaknesses in international institutions.

This paper is aimed to analyze the structural, economic, and strategic aspects of the shift from a bipolar to a multipolar world. In evaluating this phenomenon, the paper equally seeks to highlight and assess the broader implications of such a shift. By merging theory with emerging contemporary geopolitical affairs, this paper intends to contribute to an ongoing debate on the nature of power distribution in the world. Ultimately, the paper argues that the emerging multipolar order represents neither a complete break from past power structures nor a stable equilibrium, but rather a fluid and contested system that will shape global politics in the decades to come.

Review of literature

The concept of polarity in international relations (IR) has long served as a foundational framework for understanding the distribution of power among states and its impact on global stability, conflict, and cooperation. Polarity refers to the number of dominant powers or "poles" in the international system, which can manifest as unipolarity (one hegemon), bipolarity (two superpowers), or multipolarity (three or more great powers). This literature review synthesizes key scholarly contributions on the transition from the bipolar structure of the Cold War era, through the unipolar moment following the Soviet Union's collapse, to the emerging multipolar order in the 21st century. Drawing primarily on realist theories, while incorporating insights from liberal institutionalism, power transition theory, and recent empirical studies, the review highlights the structural, economic, and strategic drivers of this shift. It also examines debates on whether the current system is truly multipolar or reverting to a form of bipolarity centered on U.S.-China rivalry, with particular attention to developments from 2020 to 2026.

Polarity theory originates in classical realism, where **Hans Morgenthau** framed international politics as a perpetual struggle for power managed through balance-of-power mechanisms in multipolar settings. This insight was systematized by **Morton Kaplan** in *System and Process in International Politics*, which

conceptualized international systems—bipolar and multipolar—as structured arrangements governed by rules and actor configurations. Neorealism, crystallized in **Kenneth Waltz's** *Theory of International Politics*, argued that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity due to reduced uncertainty and clearer deterrence dynamics, as seen during the Cold War. Extending this logic, offensive realists such as **John Mearsheimer** in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* contended that great powers relentlessly seek regional hegemony, rendering unipolarity temporary, while **Christopher Layne** and power transition theorists like **A. F. K. Organski** and **Jacek Kugler** emphasized that shifts in relative power often precipitate systemic conflict—together establishing polarity as a central structural determinant of international stability and war.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 inaugurated what Charles Krauthammer termed the "unipolar moment," where the United States stood as the sole superpower (Krauthammer, 1990). William Wohlforth defended unipolarity's stability, asserting that the U.S.'s overwhelming military and economic superiority deterred balancing, allowing it to shape global institutions (Wohlforth, 1999). G. John Ikenberry emphasized how the U.S. embedded liberal norms in multilateral frameworks like the United Nations, NATO, and the World Trade Organization, making unipolarity more palatable and enduring (Ikenberry, 2011). However, critics like Fareed Zakaria highlighted the "rise of the rest," where economic globalization diffused power to emerging markets, eroding U.S. primacy without immediate collapse (Zakaria, 2008).

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, **Charles Krauthammer** described the emerging order as the "unipolar moment," marked by unparalleled U.S. dominance. Scholars like **William Wohlforth** argued that U.S. military and economic superiority discouraged balancing, while **G. John Ikenberry** contended that Washington entrenched its power within liberal institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and World Trade Organization, making unipolarity more durable. However, **Fareed Zakaria** highlighted the "rise of the rest," emphasizing gradual power diffusion to emerging economies. The 2008 financial crisis intensified doubts about U.S. primacy, with **Barry Posen** noting the spread of military and technological capabilities among rising and middle powers. Recent developments—including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and China's ascent—have further accelerated the shift toward a more complex multipolar order, though competing

ambitions among powers such as China and India make this transition uneven rather than linear.

China's rise has been central to these discussions. Øystein Tunsjø advocates for a "return to bipolarity," positing that China's attainment of superpower status in economic, military, and technological domains has recreated a bipolar structure akin to the Cold War, albeit with greater interdependence (Tunsjø, 2018). A 2024 article in *International Security* reinforces this, detailing how China's military resurgence and India's growth challenge unipolarity, but emphasize that the system features two superpowers (U.S. and China) rather than multiple equals, distinguishing it from true multipolarity (Various, 2024). Counterarguments favor multipolarity, pointing to the agency of middle powers. For example, the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization institutionalize influence beyond the West, reflecting a diffusion of power (Matveev, 2024). A 2025 study on "navigating multipolarity" explores how great, middle, and emerging powers adapt foreign policies in this environment, noting that multipolarity alters strategies toward hedging and multi-alignment rather than rigid alliances (Ashford & Cooper, 2023; Various, 2025).

Asian dynamics exemplify this shift. An article on "Asian multipolarity and the future of the liberal international order" argues that China's and India's ascents, combined with assertive middle powers, disrupt the bipolar Cold War framework, potentially undermining Western-led institutions (Various, 2025). The Munich Security Report 2025 describes the current system as "multipolarization," blending elements of unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity, and nonpolarity depending on the domain—economic, military, or technological (Bunde et al., 2025). This fluidity is echoed in analyses of major crises, such as the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict, which strained multipolarity by accelerating power realignments and exposing institutional weaknesses (Various, 2026).

Contemporary literature also addresses implications for peace and order. A 2025 study on the "return of multipolarity" examines its effects on international peace agreements, using the Pretoria Peace Agreement as a case, and warns of fragmented mediation in multipolar systems (Various, 2025). Another analysis posits that multipolarity could lead to disorder rather than a balanced order, as non-hegemonic powers pursue divergent interests (Various, 2024). U.S. foreign policy adaptations in this era emphasize navigating competition without decoupling, as outlined in a 2024 report (Various, 2024).

This review reveals a scholarly consensus on the decline of unipolarity but divergence on the emerging structure: some see bipolar U.S.-China competition (Tunsjø, 2018), others unbalanced multipolarity with middle powers (Posen, 2011; Bunde et al., 2025), and a few nonpolar diffusion (Haass, 2008). Gaps persist in empirical studies on how technological diffusion (e.g., AI) and crises like the 2020 pandemic accelerate these shifts (Lukyanov et al., 2020). By integrating these perspectives, this paper advances the debate on the fluid, contested nature of the multipolar order.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the transition from a bipolar international system during the Cold War, through a post-1991 unipolar moment dominated by the United States, to the emerging multipolar order in the 21st century. The framework centers on structural realism (neorealism) as the primary explanatory lens, complemented by power transition theory and complex interdependence to capture both the structural drivers of systemic change and the mitigating factors of economic ties, institutions, and non-military capabilities. This integrated approach enables a nuanced examination of the structural, economic, strategic, and technological dimensions of polarity shifts, while addressing the fluid, contested nature of contemporary multipolarity as argued in the paper.

The core variable is polarity—the number and relative distribution of major power centers (poles) in the anarchic international system—which fundamentally shapes state behavior, alliance patterns, conflict risks, and cooperation prospects.

Bipolarity historically promoted stability through clear deterrence; unipolarity allowed hegemonic influence but bred complacency; and multipolarity introduced complexity, diffusion of power, and potential instability. The current shift reflects relative power redistribution driven by China's ascent, India's demographic and economic rise, Russia's geopolitical resurgence, and the agency of middle powers and regional blocs (e.g., BRICS, SCO).

3.1 Structural Realism (Neorealism) as the Primary Lens.

Structural realism, most prominently articulated by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz, 1979), forms the foundational pillar. Waltz argues that the anarchic structure of the international system—absence of a central

authority—forces states to prioritize survival through self-help, with the distribution of material capabilities (polarity) determining behavioral patterns more than ideology or domestic politics.

Waltz contended that bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar ones. With only two dominant powers, signals are clearer, miscalculations are fewer, and alliances are more rigid, reducing escalation risks. The U.S.-Soviet Cold War exemplified this: mutual nuclear deterrence and defined spheres minimized direct great-power war despite ideological rivalry and proxy conflicts. Multipolarity, conversely, generates uncertainty through fluid coalitions, buck-passing, and chain-ganging, heightening the probability of miscalculation and war (Waltz, 1979).

Structural realism's strength lies in its systemic focus, explaining why capability redistribution (e.g., emerging technologies like AI, where non-U.S. actors file over 70% of patents) makes multipolarity structurally inevitable. However, critics note its limitations: overemphasis on material anarchy neglects domestic variables, ideology, and interdependence, potentially underestimating cooperation in a connected world (Keohane critiques liberal theory).

3.2 Power Transition Theory: Dynamics of Change and Conflict Risks

To address structural realism's static tendencies, power transition theory (Organski & Kugler, 1980) provides a dynamic complement, explaining how and why transitions occur. The theory views the system as hierarchical, with a satisfied hegemon upholding stability via institutions and norms. Instability arises during power parity, when a rising challenger (dissatisfied with the status quo) approaches or overtakes the declining hegemon, creating incentives for preventive war or negotiated accommodation.

Applied here, the U.S. (declining hegemon in relative terms) faces China as the primary challenger. Rapid parity increases tension, as seen in U.S. export controls on semiconductors (2022 onward) and China's Belt and Road initiatives. Yet peaceful transitions are possible through diplomacy, economic integration, or mutual deterrence (nuclear age reduces war likelihood). Critics highlight that many transitions avoid war due to interdependence or ideology (Lebow & Valentino critiques), suggesting the theory overpredicts conflict when non-material factors intervene.

This theory bridges structural pressures with historical agency, illuminating risks in U.S.-China rivalry while allowing for managed multipolarity via multilateral forums.

3.3 Integrated Framework and Implications

The framework synthesizes these theories:

- Structural realism accounts for anarchy-driven competition and balancing, predicting heightened instability in multipolarity.
- Power transition theory explains transition mechanisms and risks, focusing on parity dynamics.
- Complex interdependence highlights constraints on unilateralism, enabling cooperation and middle-power agency.

The result is an "unbalanced" or "complex" multipolarity: U.S. and China as predominant superpowers, coexisting with influential middle/regional powers (India, EU, Russia, Brazil, Japan) in a hybrid system of diffusion, polarization, and interdependence (Bunde et al., 2025; Ashford, 2025 on "unbalanced multipolarity"). This fluidity arises from technological, demographic, and economic factors, producing contested dynamics but opportunities for managed order through reformed institutions and depolarization efforts.

Critiques of pure realism (e.g., neglect of ideology/domestic factors) and power transition (overemphasis on war) are acknowledged: the integrated approach mitigates these by incorporating interdependence. This framework guides analysis of structural, economic, and strategic implications, contributing to debates on whether multipolarity yields disorder, balanced cooperation, or hybrid stability.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter delineates the methodological framework employed to investigate the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar international system, as outlined in the paper's objectives. The research adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design with a convergent parallel strategy, integrating rigorous qualitative interpretive analysis with supportive quantitative descriptive evidence. This approach is well suited to the interpretive and explanatory nature of international relations (IR) scholarship on polarity, power transitions, and great-power competition, where phenomena are contextually embedded, historically contingent, and resistant to purely statistical generalization.

The design draws inspiration from established IR methodological practices, including multiple case studies for process tracing (Bennett, 2013; Yin, 2018), thematic content analysis for conceptual and discursive patterns, and selective quantitative indicators for empirical triangulation. It aligns with recent studies on U.S.-China rivalry, BRICS dynamics, and multipolarization, which frequently combine qualitative depth with quantitative trends to map structural shifts without over-relying on large-N statistical inference.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Before we delve further into the intricacies of the topic and matter at hand, we need to set out some fundamental definitions and clarifications that will further dictate the vision of this research paper.

There are primarily two pivotal keywords studied in the topic, i.e., bipolarity, and multipolarity. The two have formed the basic premise of the contemporary geopolitical web.

As we dive deeper into how these two spheres of judgement and division of authority further elucidate the ethos of tomorrow, it needs to be understood that these mere definitions and clarifications presented here harmonise and synchronise the variegated horizons of the topic into a single umbrella of covert understanding.

Bipolarity:-

Deconstructing the physical form of the word, bipolarity literally means having two poles (bi meaning dual and polarity meaning having a pole). In today's geopolitical framework, bipolarity is defined as the system where two distinct and often opposite forces profoundly dominate and influence decision-making, internal and external connections, trade networks, and a myriad other elements of global authority shifts. A clarification has become the need of the hour as the world gradually shifts its eyes from a bipolar equation to a multipolar web of autonomy. When we deliberate upon the essence of the term the very primary interpretation based on historic evidences suggests that bipolarity leads to the following inevitable and inhuman extremities:-

1. An ultimate occurrence of military conflicts or wars:-

It is very often taken into consideration that bipolarity will continue to threaten the legitimacy of current global scenarios and would further escalate wars on greater fronts. However, the world has well-evolved past the US-Soviet Cold War era, where the battle between two firm poles of political power, Communism and Capitalism, trespassed beyond the borders of US and USSR, turning every single conflict into a battlefield for these two figures of power. But the world has taken a drastic shift ever since the disintegration of the USSR, under the necessitated realisation that military power is not the only element that should dictate global power. Ever since that great realisation the world has sprawled its roots deeper into more variegated forms of development. Today, the economic, sociological, demographical, and political factors alongside a million others chime in whenever the potential of a conflict arises, so this belief that bipolarity inevitably leads to war simply doesn't stand erected in today's equation.

2. Absence of any other organisations of control:- While the stern definition of bipolarity does suggest that there are only two powers dominating the rest of the world, their authority in the real-life implications are not as absolute as these words may describe. Presence and recognition of global organisations like BRICS ensures that the concentration of power is not centralised into two unitary forms of authority, but the rest of the world does act as a vital character in shaping the gameplay of the future.

The aforementioned misconceptions are the reasons behind today's consistently shallow debates arguing upon narratives and not the true nuances of the very concept. In a world shifting from bipolarity between the US and China to a multipolarity-centric algorithm panned out between India, US and China, such clarifications further chart out a lucid explanation of the future anticipating our arrival.

Multipolarity:-

Multipolarity refers to an international system in which power is distributed among several major states rather than concentrated in a single hegemon. In the post-Cold War era, the United States dominated global politics, accounting for nearly one-quarter of global GDP and maintaining unmatched military superiority. However, the contemporary order reflects a significant diffusion of economic and strategic influence.

The rise of China is central to this transformation. China now contributes approximately 18–19% of global GDP and has become the largest trading partner for over 120 countries. India has emerged as the world's fifth-largest economy, strengthening its position in the Indo-Pacific. Russia continues to exert geopolitical leverage through energy exports and military capabilities, while the European Union collectively represents one of the world's largest economic blocs.

Institutional shifts reinforce this multipolar trend. The expansion of BRICS in 2023 reflects growing dissatisfaction with Western-dominated institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. Trade frameworks like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the largest free trade agreement globally by population, indicate the consolidation of regional economic power outside traditional Western alliances.

Most importantly, multipolarity represents a demand for greater participation in global decision-making. With rising geopolitical conflicts and intensified strategic competition, emerging and middle powers seek equitable representation and institutional reform, particularly within the United Nations system. Thus, multipolarity signifies a structural shift from hegemonic dominance to a negotiated balance among multiple centers of power, shaping a more complex but more inclusive international order.

Historical Background

The degree to which the global system revolves around one or more extremely powerful states or 'poles' as power concentrates in a single (unipolar) centre of power or is distributed between two (bipolar) main power or among three or more (multipolar) system. In the international relation the word polarity is new, it came into mainstream after second world war. The realist thinkers talk about power compared with different states in terms of 'balance of power' which goes back to centuries old. Mortan Kalpana made the transition term from balance of power to polarity. He described six different forms of world order. Multipolarity is not a new phenomenon; it existed in ancient times too. The Roman Empire, Mauryan Empire, Han Dynasty, Persian Empires and others. These different powerful empires coexisted and had influence in their region. These empires interact with each other through trade, diplomacy and conflict.

In this period the power was diffused among different empires like the Holy Roman Empire, Byzantine empire , Abbasid caliphate , and Ottoman Empire. The balance of power is maintained because of different power blocks . In this period also there was no hegemony .

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) marked the emergence of the modern nation state. It has institutionalised multipolarity in Europe . The power was shared among France , Britain , Spain, Austria , Russia and Prussia . The balance of power prevents domination of any state .

19th Century The Concert of Europe The defeat of Napoleon in the battle of Waterloo in 1815 established a structured multipolar system in Europe . In this period power was shared among Britain , Austria , Prussia , and later France . Regular diplomacy and talks prevent conflict . It's considered the most stable phase in the multipolar system.

From the first world war system moving towards a multipolar world . The main powers were Britain , Soviet Union , USA , Japan , Germany and Italy . After the first world war the League of Nations was created to prevent any further conflict . Due to weak institutions and economic instability culminated into the second world war .

As the second world war ended the USA and Soviet Union emerged as two major powers .

Britain's power was declining as it had suffered severely in the war and different colonies started intensifying their freedom movement . Germany and Japan penalised military disarmament going in these countries . Other European powers also vanished after the war .

The US represents the liberal democracy and capitalist system. On the other hand, the Soviet Union resented the socialist system .

As the decolonisation process started in Asia , Africa and Latin America these two countries tried to influence new independent countries to adopt their economic model and governance . During this period the world was divided into two camps, one side was the USA and the other side was the Soviet Union.

But during this phase another event happened, the formation of NAM (Non Align Movement) . Tito (Yugoslavia) Nehru (India) Nasser (Egypt) held a meeting in Badrung in 1956 . The first official meeting of NAM took place in Belgrade in 1961 . As per NAM policy the country follows its own interest over superpower .

The Soviet Union disintegrated in 1989 and led to the formation of 15 new states . After this the USA emerges as sole power in the world and USA becomes hegemon .

In this period USA unilaterally takes decisions and dominates the world throughout this period. In this time various countries have adopted the policy of neoliberalism (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation). Francis Fukuyama has written an article titled 'The End of History' concluding that 'liberal democracy and capitalism is the best system and defeat of socialist system'.

The financial crisis of 2008 accelerated the emergence of other powers. The globalisation process led to sharing of technology which helped emerging powers to improve their economy. China has emerged as a strong competitor against the USA. Other powers like India, Brazil, EU and others are also emerging in the world landscape. The growth of multilateral organizations like BRICS, SCO, ASEAN etc reflect the changing scenario.

The Transition of World Power Structure

The transition of the world power structure in 2026 marks a profound shift from Western unipolar hegemony—anchored by the U.S. post-WWII through Bretton Woods institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and GATT/WTO, NATO alliances, and liberal norms promoting democracy, free markets, and human rights—to a fragmented, multipolar order characterized by incomplete rules, rising challengers, and heightened geopolitical risks, as articulated in Power Transition Theory (PTT) by A.F.K. Organski, which posits a hierarchical system where a dominant hegemon maintains the status quo until a dissatisfied rising power nears parity, risking major war unless accommodated through institutional adaptation and cooperative rivalry. This dynamic is exemplified by China's ascent, with its GDP (PPP) already surpassing the U.S., military modernization elevating spending to ~59% of U.S. levels in PPP terms, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and assertive South China Sea claims challenging U.S.-led rules, while pursuing non-interference sovereignty and economic primacy amid technological rivalries in AI, semiconductors, and quantum computing; yet interdependence fosters cooperation on climate, pandemics, and trade. The U.S. retains primacy via unmatched military projection, alliances (e.g., QUAD, AUKUS), technological edge, and dollar dominance but faces relative decline from fiscal deficits, 2008 crisis legacies, and overextension, prompting a pivot to managed competition under President Trump's 2025 reelection policies emphasizing bilateral deals over multilateralism. Russia wields disruptive military leverage in Eurasia and resources despite isolation, leveraging hybrid tools post-Ukraine; Europe boasts economic heft but fractures politically, lacking unified hard power; India emerges as a

demographic-economic swing state (projected top-3 GDP by 2030), advocating Global South reforms like UNSC expansion ; expanded BRICS (adding Saudi Arabia, UAE, etc.) accelerates de-dollarization and alternative governance, fragmenting the order. 2026 power rankings underscore this: 1. U.S. (military/economy), 2. China (PPP GDP/manufacturing), 3. Russia (resources/military), 4. UK (alliances/finance), 5. Germany (tech/export), with India at 12th but rising via population , Quad partnerships, and neutral multipolarity stance. Middle East realigns flexibly beyond U.S. reliance, amplifying complexity; PTT warns of U.S.-China flashpoints (Taiwan, SCS) mirroring historical precedents like Wilhelmine Germany vs. Britain or imperial Japan, yet peaceful evolution is viable via mutual satisfaction, reformed institutions (e.g., WTO updates, multilateralism revival), and recognition that Asia's pre-industrial GDP majority signals a historical reversion, benefiting South Asian actors like India amid cooperative rivalry over zero-sum conflict. This seismic reordering demands strategic foresight for stability in an interconnected, pluralistic world, where Western soft power endures but hard power redistributes Eastward, fostering a contested balance rather than outright replacement.

Implication of multipolar world order

1.) Political Implication

Decentralization of power - The decisions are now taken at international levels isn't controlled by one state but different states affecting the decision making process. As a result various states are emerging in this new world order shaping and influencing the decision making process. The rise of emerging powers like China , India , EU and Russia . The middle powers like Turkey , Saudi Arabia , Brazil and South Africa. The concept of ' us vs them ' working during the unipolar world is no longer working.

2. Rise of Global South

It includes mostly those countries which were once colonies of Europeans . It consists of countries from Africa , Asia and Latin America. These countries have

comparatively less technological development than Global North . These countries came together to form a block because each country shared the same form of national interest . The Global South countries are most affected by climate change while Global North pushes them towards green energy sources without adequate financing and technology transfer as promised in the Paris Climate Change Agreement of 2014 .

2) Economic

a.) Rise of Parallel Institution

The Bretton Woods agreement has produced organizations like the WTO and IMF which are dominated by the US . Now as different powers emerge, such a parallel institution is also established across the world . The World Bank which provides credit for development in developing countries is now challenged by the Asian Development Bank . China's project of BRI (Belt and road initiative) helping developing countries in infrastructure projects and enhancing connectivity .

b.) Dedollarisation

The emerging powers are showing much interest. in trading in local currency over dollar to reduce dependency from the US. Alternative networks such as China CIPS (Cross Border Interpayment System) provide alternatives to the US swift(society for world wide interbank financial and telecommunication) model . It is only working currently in 180 countries while swift is working with more than 11, 000 members . We also see there's talk going on BRICS countries to do trade in local currency rather than on dollar.

3. Controlling of supply chain -

Globalization has made different countries export those in which they have expertise as a result it creates dependency. Liberals claim that after the disintegration of the USSR , the winning of the capitalist economy led to the spread of LPG Liberalisation Privatisation and Globalisation policies . These policies created dependency among various nations . The realist scholars claim that too much dependency can be used as leverage by other states . For ex The trade deal negotiation between China and US because china has monopoly on refining of rare earth metal which is used in automobiles , defence solar panel electric equipment etc .

C) Security

1.Intensified Great-Power Competition:

The clear hierarchy of the unipolar era is replaced by a more fluid and contested environment. The Munich Security Report 2025 warns that multipolarization increases the risk of disorder and conflict, as it becomes harder to adapt the existing order peacefully or avoid new arms races . The war in Ukraine is viewed by many as a manifestation of this new great-power competition .

2.Erosion of Alliances and Rise of Ad Hoc Coalitions:

Traditional alliances are becoming less predictable. As noted by The Nation, secondary players now act as "swing states," with members of blocs like NATO sometimes publicly contradicting the U.S. . This has led to a rise in transactional, ad-hoc coalitions formed around specific issues rather than enduring ideological commitment . India's simultaneous membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is frequently cited by geopolitical experts as a masterclass in balancing contradictory interests to maintain strategic autonomy.

3. Weaponization of Interdependence:

Interconnectedness is increasingly seen as a vulnerability to be exploited. The World Economic Forum highlights that trade routes, financial systems, and digital ecosystems are becoming battlegrounds . Cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, export controls on sensitive technologies like semiconductors, and the use of sanctions have become routine tools of statecraft in this more confrontational environment .

Role of emerging powers

Emerging powers are considered central to the changing structure of the current international system. They have experienced several developments, from stable economic growth to expanding political influence, although they cannot fully match the traditional great powers across all dimensions. In terms of economic growth, material capabilities, and regional influence, countries such as India, China, Brazil, and Russia are regarded as emerging powers on the international stage. Thus, we

observe an end to “One Size Fits All. Their rise has coincided with a gradual diffusion of power away from a single dominant state, contributing to the emergence of a more multipolar world order.

With the end of the Cold War, the international arena experienced a shift toward a US-dominated unipolar system. The US has continued to maintain dominance, from military strength and economic power to institutional leadership through organisations like the IMF, the World Bank, WTO, and NATO. By the early 2000s, significant changes appeared, especially due to globalisation, technological progress, and the rapid growth of non-Western economies, which started to change the distribution of power.

Beginning with **China**, a key player in the rising multipolar world among emerging powers. IMF reports from the mid-2010s show that China ranked among the world's largest economies by purchasing power parity, highlighting its growing influence in global trade and networks. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands out as a major Chinese effort to expand diplomatic and institutional reach. The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) further bolstered China's position.[2] These institutions exemplify the country's economic growth and provide potential alternatives aligned with Chinese interests. SIPRI data indicate that China's military expenditure has also surged, making it the second-largest after the US. Recent figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reveal that China accounts for roughly 13% of global military spending in recent years.[3] Collectively, these elements underscore China's prominent role as a power within the emerging multipolar world.

India is another country that contributes to multipolarity, but it's slightly different from China. India's focus is not on global dominance, but it is more inclined towards problem-based cooperation. India is the world's fastest-growing economy and has consistently increased its global visibility through forums like G-20, BRICS, and QUAD. India acts as a bridge between the Global South and other major powers. An example related to this is India's Vaccine Maitri initiative during the COVID-19

pandemic, which provided medical assistance and vaccines to countries like Asia, Africa, and Latin America, further portraying its image as a global provider. India's foreign policy clearly shows it's more inclined towards multi-alignment rather than bloc politics, which strengthens multipolarity by preventing rigid bipolar divisions. Similarly, India's growing role in climate negotiations, developmental diplomacy, and South-South cooperation highlights how emerging powers will influence the international system further than military means despite its limitations due to its military stability, resources, etc. In areas like Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Russia's influence highlights how military power and regional influence shape global politics. Its role in the case of Ukraine 2022 not only marked a change in European security but also hampered global relations, which further escalated in renewed competition among the major powers. Other than this, Russia's intervention in the case of Syria also showed that it might help in shaping the regional events and continue to play an important role in the international arena.

Russia can be considered an important emerging power despite its limitations due to its military stability, resources, etc. In areas like Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East, Russia's influence highlights how military power and regional influences shape the nature of global politics. A major example is Russia's intervention in the conflict of Ukraine (2022), which not only transformed security measures but also brought intensified competition (Trenin 2022) as discussed previously. According to SIPRI reports, Russia has consistently maintained the highest rank in military strength, and its permanent seat on the UN Security Council allows it to exert institutional influence disproportionate to its economic size. Thus, Russia's strategic role demonstrates that multipolarity doesn't always require equal power.

Saudi Arabia has evolved from a traditional hydrocarbon-based rentier state to a more proactive emerging power that seeks structural transformation and autonomy. As the world's biggest oil exporter and a de facto leader of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Saudi Arabia wields overwhelming power in shaping world energy prices through collective production policies, especially under the broadened OPEC+ format that includes Russia. Nevertheless, the Kingdom's current salience goes beyond energy politics. Under the stewardship of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Vision 2030 strategy

aims for economic diversification through industrialization, renewable energy investment, tourism development, and growth of the country's sovereign wealth through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which is one of the largest state investment vehicles in the world.

From a geopolitical perspective, Saudi Arabia has readjusted its foreign policy strategy from being strictly aligned with the Western security system to one of strategic hedging. Although it has continued its defense partnership with the United States, it has also sought to expand its engagement with China and Russia, including energy cooperation and engagement with BRICS-related dialogue platforms. The 2023 Saudi-Iranic détente, mediated by China, indicated that Saudi Arabia is ready to manage regional rivalries through strategic diplomacy, thus reconfiguring West Asian security politics. At the same time, the Kingdom has sought to position itself as a conflict mediator in Sudan and the Russia-Ukraine crisis, thus increasing its diplomatic capital. By leveraging its energy power, financial diplomacy, regional rebalancing, and economic transformation, Saudi Arabia illustrates how resource-wealthy states can transform themselves into system-shapers in the new multipolar order.

Challenges and Criticism

One of the key factors in the rise of emerging powers is that it creates several challenges for global governance. The most crucial issue is the absence of stable coordination among the emerging powers. In a multipolar system, the authority is never vested with a single power, but it is divided among multiple influential states. This is done to avoid the situation of a single dominant power, which would eventually make decision-making complex. It's often noticed that in the case of financial imbalances and global crises, states tend to make decisions that favour their national interests and their development rather than coordinating on international necessities or demands. Platforms like the G20 illustrate both the strengths and limitations of multipolar cooperation: while they broaden

representation, differences in national preferences frequently slow consensus-building and policy implementation.

Another major challenge that arises is prudent rivalry and geopolitical competition. Emerging powers on the global stage often seek regional leadership, a status that tends to provoke competition rather than cooperation. As a result, rivalries among major and regional powers can create a security dilemma, where one state's efforts to defend its own area are perceived as threats by others. This complicates conflict management.

One significant challenge is the uneven distribution of capabilities among emerging powers. Multipolarity does not necessarily mean equal power among countries; instead, states differ in terms of economic size, technological development, and other factors. According to reports from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, some countries hold global influence, while others remain regionally significant but structurally constrained. This reflects a hierarchical form of multipolarity, where influence is uneven, further complicating leadership structures.

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Criticism

According to reports from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, global military expenditure is heavily concentrated among a few states. Critics argue that the current situation is preferable because it follows a modified form of unipolarity.

Notable scholars like Kenneth Waltz have expressed concerns about the stability of the multipolar system. He argues that, with the rise of multiple powers, there is uncertainty regarding the intentions and alliance patterns of emerging powers. In these systems, miscalculation becomes more likely, and alliance patterns may shift quickly. Critics question the belief that multipolarity automatically leads to balance or peace. They suggest it may instead create strategic instability.

Another key criticism involves the fragmentation of norms in global governance. The rise of emerging powers brings different political models, development goals, and views on sovereignty. While having multiple perspectives may improve representation, critics argue that varying regularized frameworks can undermine universal standards in international cooperation. Different approaches to governance, intervention, and development can hamper the effectiveness of rule-centric international institutions and create separate sets of norms.

Scholars also argued that emerging powers significantly change the international system. Several emerging economies are still deeply rooted in the financial and trade systems that were previously created under the influence of Western leadership. Thus, instead of replacing the existing systems, they tend to adapt and work within them. This clearly reflects that multipolarity is more of a gradual

change in how power is shared rather than a drastic transformation of the entire international system.

Finally, critics question whether multipolarity truly leads to a fairer international system. Although emerging powers seek greater representation, power imbalances still exist within the new institutions. Leadership often stays focused on a few dominant players, and changes to institutions have been slow. Thus, multipolarity may shift influence without removing hierarchy, raising doubts about its potential to cause real change.

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