



Evolving Dynamics of Global Power: Assessing the Shift from Unipolarity to Multipolarity in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed a profound transformation in the global power structure, marked by a gradual transition from the unipolar dominance of the United States to an increasingly multipolar international order. This study critically examines the evolving dynamics of global power by analyzing political, economic, and strategic shifts that have redefined international relations in the post-Cold War era. Through a qualitative and comparative analysis of major power centers including China, the European Union, Russia, and emerging regional actors such as India and Brazil, this research investigates the factors contributing to the diffusion of power and the erosion of Unipolarity. The paper further explores the implications of this transition for global governance, security architectures, and geopolitical stability. Findings suggest that while multipolarity offers opportunities for greater balance and inclusivity, it also introduces complex challenges of competition, alliance fluidity, and systemic uncertainty in global affairs.

Keywords: Global power shift, Unipolarity, multipolarity, international order, great power politics, 21st century.

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Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century is undergoing a profound transformation. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the international system entered a period widely described as the “unipolar moment,” during which the United States emerged as the unrivaled global hegemon. Its unmatched military capabilities, economic clout, and ideological influence positioned it at the apex of global affairs, shaping the contours of international institutions, global governance norms, and strategic alignments. However, the permanence of Uni-polarity has been increasingly called into question as emerging powers have risen, global economic centers have diversified, and technological advancements have altered the foundations of state power. The 21st century is therefore marked by a dynamic reconfiguration of power that suggests an ongoing transition from uni-polarity toward a more distributed, multipolar global order. This transition is not abrupt or linear; rather, it is shaped by competing interests, asymmetric development, regional rivalries, and evolving global challenges that collectively reshape the structure of international relations (Ali, 2024).

In the current era the several structural shifts underpin this transition. The rapid economic ascent of China, which has become the world's second-largest economy and a central actor in global trade networks, represents the most significant challenge to U.S. primacy. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has expanded its influence across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, transforming global infrastructure connectivity and altering the geopolitical landscape. Russia's resurgence manifested in its assertive foreign policy, energy diplomacy, and military interventions in regions such as Eastern Europe and the Middle East signals its renewed ambition to reclaim great-power status. India's growing economy, demographic advantage, technological potential, and expanding role in regional and global affairs further contribute to the diffusion of power. Alongside these major players, middle powers such as Brazil, Turkey, Iran, and South Africa are asserting influence in their respective regions, diversifying the sources of global leadership. These developments collectively indicate that the concentration of power in one state has gradually become untenable (Muzaffar, 2017).

Another critical dimension in this evolving global order is the shifting nature of power itself. Traditional metrics such as military strength and territorial control remain important, yet they are increasingly complemented by new forms of power, including technological innovation, digital influence, economic interdependence, and control over global supply chains. Cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, telecommunications infrastructure, and digital platforms have become essential determinants of national strength. The strategic competition between the United States and China in fields such as 5G technology, robotics, and advanced manufacturing reflects the centrality of technological supremacy in shaping global influence. Additionally, soft power, defined as the ability to shape outcomes through culture, values, diplomacy, and governance models has gained new relevance. The competition to define global norms, particularly in areas such as data governance, climate policy, and human rights, highlights the multidimensional character of power in the 21st century (Aslam, 2025).

Moreover, the restructuring of global institutions and alliances reflects the broader shift in the international system. The post-World War II global governance architecture centered on institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization was largely shaped by Western powers and aligned with U.S. preferences. However, emerging powers have increasingly sought to reform these institutions to better represent their interests, or have established parallel frameworks

such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These institutions signal a growing dissatisfaction with traditional Western-led models and an attempt to redistribute decision-making authority. At the same time, Western alliance's themselves are experiencing internal challenges. Tensions within NATO, shifting priorities within the European Union, and divergences in transatlantic relations have weakened the coherence of traditional power blocs. As alliances evolve and new coalitions emerge, the international system becomes more fragmented, further weakening the foundations of Unipolarity (Dickson, 2019).

The rise of multipolarity is also closely linked to broader global trends such as economic globalization, the diffusion of information, and the interdependence of regional security dynamics. Globalization has expanded economic opportunities but has also decentralized power by enabling emerging economies to integrate into global markets and accumulate wealth. The availability of information through digital platforms has empowered non-state actors, social movements, and transnational networks, limiting the ability of any single state to monopolize global narratives. Regional conflicts and security architectures whether in the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, Africa, or Eastern Europe reflect the growing autonomy of regional powers in shaping security outcomes. For example, the Indo-Pacific region has become a central theater of strategic competition, involving the United States, China, India, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN states. Similarly, the Middle East remains a contested region where multiple actors Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and global powers vie for influence. Such regional multipolarity contributes to a broader global shift in power structures (Khan, 2025).

The evolving dynamics of global power reflect a multidimensional and ongoing transition shaped by the rise of new powers, the diversification of global leadership, the transformation of technological and economic structures, and the emergence of new global challenges. As the world navigates this transition, understanding the forces that have weakened uni-polarity and facilitated multipolarity is essential for analyzing future patterns of cooperation, competition, and conflict. The study of these transformations offers valuable insights into the nature of contemporary international relations and the future trajectory of global governance. Through examining the structural, regional, and technological factors that underpin this shift, scholars and policymakers can better assess the opportunities and risks inherent in an increasingly multipolar world order.

Literature Review

The debate surrounding global power transitions has been central to international relations scholarship for decades. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many scholars described the global system as unipolar, with the United States exercising unparalleled influence across political, economic, and military domains. Wolfforth (1999) argued that U.S. dominance was historically unique due to its comprehensive superiority, which reduced the likelihood of traditional balancing by other states. This "unipolar moment," as Krauthammer (1990) famously described it, shaped post-Cold War global governance, alliance structures, and security dynamics. However, scholars increasingly note that Uni-polarity was not destined to persist indefinitely, as structural and systemic forces have contributed to a gradual redistribution of power.

A major strand of literature focuses on the rise of China as the most significant challenge to U.S. hegemony. According to Ikenberry (2011), China's economic ascent and integration into global markets have gradually transformed the international order. Scholars such as Shambaugh (2013) emphasize China's global outreach through trade, diplomacy, and

soft power initiatives, arguing that Beijing seeks to reshape not dismantle the liberal order. Meanwhile, Allison (2017) highlights the risk of conflict inherent in power transitions, framing U.S.–China rivalry within the “Thucydides Trap” framework. These works collectively underscore China’s central role in shifting the world toward multipolarity. In parallel, Russia’s resurgence has garnered significant scholarly attention. Trenin (2016) notes that Russia aims to reassert itself as a great power through military modernization, strategic interventions, and energy diplomacy. Its actions in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria have been analyzed as demonstrations of Moscow’s desire to challenge U.S. dominance and reshape regional orders (Mankoff, 2014). Despite economic constraints, Russia’s assertive foreign policy signals a re-emergence of competitive multipolarity in Europe and Asia.

India’s growing strategic and economic significance is another critical factor in the literature. According to Pant (2019), India’s demographic advantages, expanding economy, and increasing global engagement position it as a key pole in the emerging global order. Scholars argue that India seeks strategic autonomy rather than alignment with any major power bloc, thereby contributing to a more fluid and decentralized system (Mohan, 2003). The Indo-Pacific region is frequently highlighted as a central arena where India’s rise intersects with U.S. and Chinese ambitions. Beyond major powers, the literature also highlights the role of middle powers such as Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and Indonesia. According to Hurrell (2006), these states increasingly shape regional governance, global economic negotiations, and multilateral forums, thereby diffusing global power. Their participation in groupings such as BRICS, G20, and regional organizations indicates a shift from U.S.-centric governance to more pluralistic decision-making structures (Cooper & Flesmes, 2013). This diffusion is seen as a hallmark of multipolarity. Another prominent theme in scholarship concerns the transformation of power itself. Nye (2021) argues that power in the 21st century is multidimensional, encompassing military, economic, technological, and soft-power components. Scholars highlight technological competition particularly in AI, cyber capabilities, and telecommunications as central to contemporary power dynamics. The rise of digital platforms and global information flows has empowered both states and non-state actors, complicating traditional conceptions of polarity (Castells, 2009).

The literature also emphasizes the growing fragmentation of global institutions. According to Acharya (2017), the postwar liberal order faces crises of legitimacy, representation, and effectiveness. Emerging powers increasingly challenge Western dominance in institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, leading to the formation of parallel bodies like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB). These institutional shifts reflect broader efforts to redistribute global governance authority in line with changing power realities. At the same time, alliances among Western states are undergoing stress. Scholars such as Walt (2018) argue that transatlantic relations have weakened due to divergent threat perceptions, shifting domestic politics, and strategic recalibration by the United States. The European Union’s internal challenges including Brexit, populism, and economic instability further complicate the coherence of Western coalitions (Kupchan, 2012). Such fragmentation contributes to the erosion of Uni-polarity.

The role of economic globalization in reshaping global power dynamics has been widely debated. Friedman (2005) argues that globalization initially strengthened U.S. dominance by reinforcing liberal economic norms. However, Stiglitz (2017) and Rodrick (2011) contend that globalization also enabled emerging economies to rise rapidly, thereby decentralizing global economic power. The redistribution of global manufacturing, financial flows, and trade networks has accelerated multipolarity. Another body of literature focuses on regional security

architectures. Buzan and Wæver (2003) emphasize that regional dynamics increasingly shape global outcomes as states assert their influence within their immediate geographic environment. The Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Eurasia have emerged as contested regions where great and regional powers intersect, creating complex security patterns. This regionalization of power contributes to a multilayered global system rather than a rigid unipolar or bipolar structure.

The contemporary scholarly debates explore whether the world is truly multipolar or moving toward alternative configurations. Some argue for a bipolar U.S.–China structure (Beckley, 2018), while others propose “polycentric” or “minilateral” models with multiple centers of influence (Acharya, 2014). These debates reveal that global power is in flux, with no consensus on the final configuration of the international system.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, policy documents, and empirical analyses related to global power transitions. Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed journals, books, international relations reports, and institutional publications to examine the structural, economic, political, and technological factors influencing the shift from Unipolarity to multipolarity in the 21st century. A thematic content analysis approach was used to identify recurring patterns, theoretical debates, and competing interpretations of global power dynamics. This method enables a holistic understanding of the evolving international system by synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives rather than relying on quantitative measurements. The study’s interpretivist orientation allows for a nuanced exploration of how major powers, institutions, and global processes collectively reshape the emerging multipolar order.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three major international relations theories, Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism to explain the contemporary shift in global power. Realism, particularly structural realism, argues that global power transitions are driven by the distribution of material capabilities among states; as rising powers accumulate economic and military strength, they inevitably challenge the hegemon, leading to a multipolar configuration. Liberal Institutionalism offers a contrasting perspective, suggesting that global power diffusion occurs through economic interdependence, international institutions, and cooperative frameworks that constrain unilateral dominance and empower emerging states. Meanwhile, Constructivism highlights the role of identities, norms, and ideational factors, arguing that shifts in global governance norms, regional aspirations, and national self-perceptions influence how states behave within the evolving system. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional lens through which to interpret the transition from uni-polarity to multipolarity, acknowledging both material and ideational drivers of global change (Walton, 2007).

Discussion

The transition from uni-polarity to multipolarity has generated complex geopolitical, economic, and institutional transformations. The rise of China stands at the center of contemporary debates, as its rapid economic growth, technological ambitions, and assertive foreign policy challenge long-standing U.S. dominance. The United States, while retaining significant military and economic advantages, faces constraints from domestic polarization, economic competition, and evolving global expectations, complicating its ability to preserve hegemony. Russia’s resurgence further contributes to the erosion of uni-polarity, as its actions in Eastern Europe and the Middle East illustrate a renewed desire to contest Western influence.

Meanwhile, the emergence of India as a demographic and economic powerhouse, along with the increasing assertiveness of middle powers such as Brazil, Turkey, and South Africa, demonstrates the widening distribution of global influence (Sahil, 2024).

The changing nature of power driven by technological innovation, digital connectivity, and global economic networks has accelerated multipolarity. Technological competition in areas such as AI, cyber capabilities, semiconductors, and telecommunications has created new arenas of rivalry that extend beyond traditional military competition. Global governance institutions, originally designed under Western leadership, are increasingly challenged by calls for reform, giving rise to alternative institutions such as the AIIB and BRICS-led NDB. Regional security dynamics further illustrate the layering of global power: the Indo-Pacific has become a critical theater of U.S.–China competition; the Middle East features multiple power centers; and Eurasia has transformed into a zone of overlapping strategic interests (Muhammad, 2023).

At the same time, transnational challenges climate change, pandemics, economic instability, and cybersecurity threats highlight the limitations of unilateral leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant weaknesses in global cooperation, reinforcing arguments that effective governance requires shared responsibility among multiple states. Thus, multipolarity is characterized not only by the rise of several powerful states but also by an increasingly interdependent and contested global environment.

The study's findings reveal several key dynamics shaping the shift toward multipolarity. First, power is no longer concentrated in a single state; instead, multiple actors across regions have gained influence due to economic growth, military modernization, and strategic autonomy. Second, the diffusion of technological capabilities has democratized power, enabling states with advanced cyber, space, and digital capacities to challenge traditional hierarchies. Third, global institutions are undergoing decentralization, with emerging powers creating parallel governance structures that reduce Western institutional dominance. Fourth, alliance systems are becoming more flexible and interest-driven, leading to shifting strategic alignments in regions such as the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, and Africa. Fifth, rising powers are not necessarily seeking to overthrow the existing international order but are instead reshaping it to reflect multipolar realities. Finally, transnational challenges are accelerating the decline of unipolar leadership by exposing the necessity of shared global responsibility. Collectively, these findings suggest that the world is moving not toward rigid multipolarity but toward a fluid, complex, and multi-layered global system (Ullah, 2025).

Results & Findings

The analysis reveals that the structure of global power has undergone a measurable transformation, moving away from the post–Cold War unipolar system dominated by the United States toward an increasingly multipolar and competitive geopolitical landscape. Findings indicate that while the United States remains a preeminent military, economic, and technological actor, its relative dominance has diminished due to the accelerated rise of other major powers—particularly China, India, and Russia—as well as the strengthening of regional blocs such as the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union. Economic indicators show that China's rapid GDP growth, expanding Belt and Road Initiative, and increasing technological competitiveness—especially in artificial intelligence, digital finance, and manufacturing have substantially impacted global balance-of-power equations. Similarly, Russia's military modernization and assertive foreign policy posture, particularly in Eastern Europe, West Asia, and the Arctic, reinforce emerging multipolar dynamics despite its economic constraints (Mic, 2021).

The findings also demonstrate that economic interdependence and geo-economic rivalries are now as influential as traditional military power. Trade disputes, technological decoupling between the U.S. and China, and competition over critical minerals and supply chains have become central determinants of global influence. Evidence further shows that the shift is not uniform or linear: U.S. dominance in military alliances such as NATO, leadership in global financial institutions, and cultural soft power remains robust, suggesting a hybrid power structure where unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar elements coexist simultaneously across different domains.

Regionally, the results highlight intensified competition in the Indo-Pacific, which has emerged as the primary arena of strategic rivalry. Multilateral frameworks such as the Quad, AUKUS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and BRICS demonstrate that states are increasingly diversifying their security and economic partnerships. Meanwhile, the Global South has become more assertive in global governance debates, demanding reforms in international institutions and displaying greater autonomy in foreign policy alignment (Yusuf, et.al, 2027).

Importantly, findings suggest that multipolarity is characterized less by stability and more by fluid alignments, strategic hedging, and issue-based coalitions rather than fixed ideological blocs. Middle powers—including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Brazil, and South Africa have expanded their diplomatic agency, capitalizing on major power rivalries to enhance their strategic leverage. Collectively, the evidence indicates that the international system is transitioning toward a complex, polycentric order shaped by multidimensional power capabilities, economic contestation, technological transformation, and evolving geopolitical aspirations of both established and emerging states (Cooper, 2023).

Conclusion

The 21st-century global order is undergoing a significant transformation characterized by the decline of uni-polarity and the rise of diverse centers of power. The redistribution of economic and technological capabilities, coupled with shifting regional dynamics and global institutional reforms, indicates an irreversible movement toward multipolarity. This emerging order presents both opportunities for cooperation and risks of heightened geopolitical competition. Rising powers are reshaping global norms, institutions, and security architectures, while traditional powers face growing challenges in maintaining dominance. The complexities of technological rivalry, economic interdependence, and transnational threats further influence the nature of contemporary power transitions.

To strengthen global stability in this evolving environment, several recommendations are offered. First, major powers must prioritize diplomatic engagement and avoid zero-sum strategies that amplify conflict risks. Second, global institutions should undergo reform to enhance representation and legitimacy for emerging economies. Third, multilateral cooperation must be strengthened to address transnational challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity, and global health. Fourth, states should invest in technological innovation and regulatory frameworks to manage the geopolitical implications of AI, cybersecurity, and digital governance. Finally, regional organizations and middle powers should play a more active role in shaping cooperative security architectures that promote stability within a multipolar world. By embracing inclusive and forward-looking strategies, the international community can navigate the complexities of global power transformations and work toward a more balanced and stable global order.

The global political landscape of the 21st century is marked by an undeniable shift from the dominance of a single superpower to the emergence of multiple influential actors, signaling

the transformation from Unipolarity to multipolarity. While the United States continues to maintain significant military, economic, and technological advantages, its unchallenged supremacy has been gradually eroded by the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, the growing influence of India, and the assertive roles of middle powers across various regions. This redistribution of power reflects broader structural changes driven by economic globalization, technological innovation, institutional diversification, and shifting regional dynamics. Multipolarity, therefore, is not only a result of material capabilities but also of evolving geopolitical strategies, normative contestations, and increased state autonomy within international institutions.

The emerging multipolar order is complex and fluid, presenting both opportunities and risks for global stability. On one hand, it offers a more pluralistic system in which multiple states contribute to global governance and regional leadership. On the other hand, it increases the potential for strategic competition, ideological tensions, and regional conflicts, particularly in contested zones such as the Indo-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. The rise of transnational threats—climate change, pandemics, cyber insecurity, and economic volatility—further complicates the ability of states to navigate global challenges unilaterally. The decline of unipolarity thus underscores the necessity for enhanced cooperation, institutional reform, and shared responsibility among global powers.

In essence, the world is moving toward a more interconnected yet contested international system. Recognizing and adapting to this shift is essential for policymakers, scholars, and global institutions seeking to maintain international peace, stability, and development. A multipolar world does not inherently guarantee conflict; rather, its stability will depend on the ability of states to manage competition through diplomacy, institutional innovation, and cooperative frameworks. As global power continues to evolve, fostering inclusive governance and strengthening multilateralism will be crucial steps toward building a balanced and resilient world order.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation and Inclusive Governance

States should prioritize strengthening multilateral institutions and promoting inclusive decision-making processes that reflect the realities of a multipolar world. Reforming bodies such as the UN Security Council, IMF, and World Bank to enhance representation of emerging powers will improve legitimacy, reduce power asymmetries, and foster shared global responsibility.

Develop Confidence-Building Measures among Major Powers

To prevent escalating rivalry especially between the United States, China, and Russia—states should adopt confidence-building measures such as strategic communication channels, arms control agreements, crisis hotlines, and transparency in military activities. These mechanisms reduce misperceptions and minimize the risk of unintended conflict.

Promote Regional Security Architectures

Regional organizations in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe should be empowered to manage local conflicts and foster dialogue. Strengthening platforms such as ASEAN, the African Union, GCC, and the SCO can encourage burden-sharing and reduce the likelihood of major-power interventions in regional disputes.

Enhance Global Economic Coordination

As economic interdependence intensifies, major economies must coordinate policies on trade, supply chains, and financial stability. Strengthening frameworks such as the G20 and

establishing joint mechanisms to handle disruptions—such as pandemics, sanctions, or global recessions—will reduce vulnerability and prevent economic coercion.

Strengthen Global Health Security Mechanisms

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the weaknesses of unilateral crisis responses. Strengthening the World Health Organization, increasing funding for pandemic preparedness, and enhancing global data-sharing protocols will improve coordination during future global health emergencies

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