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Emerging Forms of Multipolarity

RETHINKING GLOBAL
STABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

Arunoday Bajpai & Preeti Sharma

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Abstract

Amid intensifying debates over great-power rivalry, institutional fragmentation, and the future of global governance, this article investigates two interrelated questions: (1) Is multipolarity becoming a defining feature of the contemporary international order, and (2) if so, what form is it taking—and with what implications for global stability and governance? The study adopts a literature-based research design and conducts a critical review of major scholarly and policy debates on polarity. It evaluates competing diagnoses of the current system—claims of persistent U.S. unipolarity, emergent U.S.–China bipolarity, and the diffusion of power toward multiple poles—by examining their empirical foundations and analytical limitations. It then surveys leading interpretations of contemporary multipolarity, including unbalanced, complex, polycentric, and multiplex accounts, and assesses how each conceptualization frames the relationship between power distribution and international order. The analysis argues that contemporary multipolarity should not be treated as a

simple revival of nineteenth-century balance-of-power politics but as a qualitatively distinct phase marked by strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, institutional pluralism, and transactional diplomacy under conditions of deep interdependence.

Keywords

global governance; global stability; multipolarity; polarity; strategic autonomy

Introduction

The issue of multipolarity is related to the broad patterns of international order as displayed in the distribution of power among states. From a neorealist perspective, any international order rests on at least four foundational elements: the anarchic character of the system, in which sovereign states constitute the primary actors; the existence of norms that regulate interactions among states; the distribution of power within the system; and the degree and nature of interdependence among actors. First, the defining feature of the contemporary international order has been its anarchic structure. Since the treaty of Westphalia, 1648, the sovereign states have been recognized as the primary actors in the international order, though, at present non-state actors and international organizations also play important role in the world order. Second, the existence of shared norms—and a degree of consensus around them—is essential to international order, given the absence of a central authority capable of regulating state behavior. Third, all states do not have equal power. Hence, the distribution of power among the states shapes the operation and nature of international order. Power as a capability to influence the behavior of other actors is the outcome of number of elements-economic, political and military and other such factors which add to the capability of states. The fourth element of international order is related to the nature of interaction and interdependence among states in the world order. It is mediated by a number of key variables like technological and economic development. Ultimately, the international order is shaped by the above four

interrelated elements. The material and normative changes in the environment of the international order are reflected in these four foundational elements.

Within this realist framework, the tendency of polarity can be seen as an outcome of the distribution of power among states, which corresponds to the third foundational element of international order. One could distinguish three main types of polarity: unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. If a single state has preponderance power in the world order, it is termed as unipolar world order. If this preponderant power is shared by two states, it is called bipolar world order. On the other hand, if this preponderant power is distributed between three or more states, it is termed as multipolar world order.

While the practice of polarity has been in existence for long time in world order, the concept of polarity was systematically articulated as an analytical tool by neo-realist thinker Kenneth Waltz in 1979, who was among the first to use it to describe the structure of Cold War politics. He contended that the bipolar system (the US-led alliance vs. the USSR-led alliance) was best suited for stability in world order because it was simple and the behavior of two poles was more predictable (Waltz, 1979, pp. 170-171). Thus, the very idea of polarity assumes that there is no equal distribution of power among states, and that there is/are always some state/states, which have more influence in the functioning and management of world order. Thus, polarity implies some degree of hierarchy among states with respect to power, which is invoked by neorealists as contributing factor to stability and peace in an anarchic world order. However, this neorealist version of polarity and its implications have always been debated by scholars of international politics. After the disintegration of USSR in 1991, the US remained the only superpower and the world order was termed as “unipolar” by many in the field. Charles Krauthammer (1990) famously described this period as the “unipolar moment,” a condition in which the United States stood as the sole superpower, enjoying unmatched economic, military, and cultural influence. This phase of unipolarity persisted into the 2000s, albeit with minor adjustments. The neorealist thinkers like

Mearsheimer (2001, pp. 44-45, 77) found unipolarity more suitable for a stable world order in the environment of anarchy.

Unipolarity gradually gave way to multipolarity as the new powers like China, Russia, India, Brazil and other emerged on the horizon of world, challenging the preeminent position of US power in global affairs (Gürcan, 2019b). Indeed, the process of globalization also facilitated the rise of these powers. In 2001, the Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill noticed the growth potential of four economies and termed them BRIC (Brazil, Russia India and China). In a 2003 report by Goldman Sachs, *Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050*, Wilson and Purushothaman (2003) projected that by 2050 the BRIC economies could surpass the G6 (France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom), fundamentally reshaping the hierarchy of the world's largest economies. This projection, commonly known as the BRIC thesis, led to the formalization of BRIC in 2006, which later became BRICS with the inclusion of South Africa in 2010. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the G20 was elevated to the summit level in 2009, granting emerging economies a greater voice in the management of the global economy. These economies also channeled their surplus wealth into military modernization, narrowing the capability gap between the United States and emerging powers—most notably China. Together, these developments contributed to the rise of multipolarity as a dominant narrative in the global order.

A multipolar world order essentially involves the existence of multiple great powers. This is not the first time that in world order power is shared by more than two great powers. Many scholars have identified the Congress of Vienna, 1815 and Concert of Europe as the examples of multipolarity, though it was confined to Europe only. This European multipolarity continued by the end of World War I. In the wake of World War II, scholars like Hans Morgenthau and EH Carr discussed the balance of power system involving multiple great powers, albeit without using the term multipolar world order. However, in the context of multiple great powers, the term “multipolar” was for the first time used in 1964 in an article *Multipolar World Systems and International Stability*, written jointly by

Karl W. Deutsch and David Singer (1964). Contrary to the neorealist argument, they concluded that multipolarity is more suitable for stability in the international system. Later, the term became part of international discourse as a new stage of world order succeeding the bipolar and unipolar world orders in the latter half of the last century.

However, the debate about the myth and reality of multipolarity as well as its implications for the stability in the global order goes on unabated among scholars and policy makers. If multipolarity has potential for greater inclusion flexibility and cooperation in the world order, it is also said to be fraught with instability and regional conflicts. This article aims to contribute to this debate by analyzing the emerging nature of multipolarity and its possible impact on the world order. For this purpose, this study addresses the following two questions: Is multipolarity bound to become a defining feature of contemporary international order? If so, what shape it will take? What would be the implications of multipolarity for the stability and governance of international order?

This study is built on a literature-based research design and follows a critical review approach. Rather than offering a descriptive summary of existing work, a critical review interrogates the literature from an interpretive standpoint by identifying its key arguments and underlying assumptions, while also highlighting points of convergence and divergence, conceptual weaknesses, internal inconsistencies, and unresolved controversies in a given field; its purpose is to synthesize what is known and, equally important, to clarify what remains contested so as to provide clearer analytical direction for subsequent research (Otero & Gürcan, 2024, p. 8). In line with this approach, the article critically maps competing positions on whether the contemporary system is moving toward multipolarity (versus persistent unipolarity or emergent U.S.–China bipolarity), evaluates the evidentiary bases and limits of these claims, and contrasts major conceptualizations of multipolarity's emerging forms (e.g., unbalanced, complex, polycentric, and multiplex accounts). On that basis, it develops an analytically grounded assessment of how different configurations of multipolarity are likely to shape prospects for

global stability and governance, focusing on mechanisms such as strategic autonomy, issue-based alignments, institutional pluralism, and transactional diplomacy.

This article is organized into two main sections. The first section reviews and critically assesses competing arguments on the emergence of multipolarity, evaluating claims of persistent unipolarity and renewed bipolarity against evidence of power diffusion. The second section examines the implications of multipolarity for international order by advancing an analytically grounded assessment of its consequences for stability, governance, and cooperation in a more pluralistic global system.

The Emergence of Multipolarity: Competing Claims, Conceptual Debates, and Empirical Assessment

One could identify two broad sets of arguments regarding the emergence of the multipolar world order in future. The first set of arguments relates to whether multipolarity is an emerging phenomenon or not? This question is debated due to subjectivity involved in measuring the capabilities of nations to be included under the rubric of new poles. There are still scholars (Oystein Tunsjo, 2018; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2023; Jo Inge Bekkevold, 2023) who deny the emergence of multipolarity either on the ground of persisting unipolarity or emerging Cold War bipolarity between the US and China. Tunsjo (2018) claims that the world is moving towards Cold War bipolarity between the US and China, hence denying the emergence of multipolarity in the near future. According to Tunsjo, no other state in the foreseeable future will be in a position to develop a capability comparable to the US and China. In a similar vein, Jo Inge Bekkevold (2023) argues that the contemporary international system is bipolar rather than multipolar, on the grounds that only two countries—the United States and China—possess the economic scale, military capabilities, and global influence necessary to constitute a pole. Moreover, Brooks and Wohlforth (2023) declare multipolarity as a *myth* as the world will remain

unipolar due to “American power’s staying power”. They focus primarily on the global reach of U.S. defense capabilities and the strength of the U.S. dollar. On this basis, they conclude that the international system is neither bipolar nor multipolar, nor is it on the verge of becoming either. Recent challenges to U.S. hegemony are therefore interpreted as an era of partial unipolarity rather than a transition toward multipolarity. However, the scholars who deny emergence of multipolarity are in minority. Moreover, they largely focus on economic and military capabilities and ignore the rising voice of emerging economies and Global South in shaping the new world order. Furthermore, military capabilities do not necessarily translate into effective global control or reliable deterrence as the US with large number of military bases throughout the world could not tame Taliban in Afghanistan, deter Russia from invading Ukraine or prevent China’s overtures in Taiwan or deter smaller states like Iran and North Korea from pursuing nuclear ambitions. These events cast doubt on claims of unipolarity or bipolarity.

By contrast, a predominant view among scholars (Barry Posen, 2009; Dugin, 2021; Ashford and Cooper, 2023; Santis, 2024) and policymakers—including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—holds that the world is moving toward multipolarity. This view suggests that a multipolar order is the next stage of the world system after the bipolar era (1945-1991) and the unipolar world order of the post-Cold War era. The evidence cited in support of this argument is the economic and military rise of new powers such as China, Brazil, and India, as well as the re-emergence of Russia, resulting in the redistribution of power among nations and the decline in US hegemonic power, not to mention a retrenchment from its traditional global commitments (Gürçan, 2019b).

Barry Posen (2009), taking into account the emergence of multiple centers of power, the broader shift of economic power from West to East, and the growing role of non-state actors, argues that the international system is likely to experience a prolonged period of multipolarity before any transition toward bipolarity. Russian political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin (2021, pp. 17-48)

highlights the philosophical foundations of multipolarity as a radical alternative to the unipolar world. Taking the cue from the Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis, he identifies multiple centers of power in the world, based on their respective civilizational ethos. These power centers would not be obliged to follow the Western norms and values in their organization and functioning. Moreover, these centers of power are becoming materially self-sufficient to defend their sovereignty in the face of adversary. Another scholar, Santis (2024), identifies declines in U.S. military power, economic primacy, and political authority, and argues that these developments indicate a shift toward a multipolar world. The comparative *military might* of the US displays signs of decline as Russia is not deterred from attacking Ukraine and China is rapidly modernizing its defense capabilities; America's *economic primacy* is challenged by the economic rise of China, India and others; and U.S. political authority has been weakened to the extent that many countries have defied U.S. sanctions against Russia and have declined to align with Washington in formally designating Russia as the aggressor in the Ukraine war.

Leaders from emerging economies like Putin, Modi and Da Silva have endorsed the emergence of multipolarity in their statements. During the Brazil Summit, July, 2025, the Indian Prime Minister has called for a "inclusive global order" with greater say for the countries of the Global South (Anadolu Agency, 2025). A year back during the extended BRICS Summit in 2024, the Russian President Putin claimed that the BRICS Summit shows that a "multipolar world" is a reality now (Bloomberg, 2024). Brazilian President Lula has long sought a multipolar global order and now "pledges to have relations with everyone". In 2021, Lula said, "Brazil does not US to lead the world. It needs the US to find a new place at the table (Adler and Long: 2023)." Other world leaders like UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, French President Emmanuel Macron and European Union's Foreign policy representative Josep Borrell have also supported the idea of rising multipolarity in the contemporary world order (Pandya, 2024).

The second Trump administration since January 2025 has

further strengthened this argument by its policies and statements. It has exhibited signs of U.S. retrenchment from global commitments, including withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, a reduced willingness to shoulder responsibilities for European security through NATO, exits from organizations such as the WHO and UNESCO, a more confrontational stance toward the WTO, and the unilateral imposition of reciprocal tariffs on multiple trade partners. These developments may be part of the MAGA (Make America Great Again) strategy, but they also underline US retrenchment from the management of the global order which was shaped under its leadership and which still predominantly reflects liberal values and norms. However, while these U.S. policy initiatives and actions may initially appear fragmented or inconsistent, they can also be interpreted as part of a broader strategic adjustment to the emerging reality of multipolarity—one that avoids explicit acknowledgment due to the domestic political costs such recognition may entail. In this vein, some American scholars (e.g., Ashford and Cooper, 2023) have urged U.S. policymakers to move beyond a bipolar framework and to recognize the rise of multipolarity, advocating a reduction in global defense burdens alongside more flexible and selective alliance arrangements. Taken together, these dynamics underscore the emergence of multipolarity as a defining feature of the contemporary international order.

The second set of arguments concerns the form that the emerging multipolar order is likely to take. Is it a replication of the European great-power balance exemplified by the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or merely an extension of the bipolar system through the inclusion of additional poles? Alternatively, does it represent a qualitatively distinct configuration unlike any previously observed? The answers to these questions have important implications for global stability.

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the shape of emerging multipolarity. The situation resembles the parable of the blind men and the elephant, in which each observer reaches a different conclusion by grasping only a part of the whole. Similarly,

even among scholars who agree that the international order is moving toward multipolarity, interpretations vary widely as to what form this new configuration will take. Ashford and Cooper (2023) focus on level of emerging redistribution of power among nations and describe it as “unbalanced multipolarity” because power is not evenly distributed among various power centers like US, China, India, Russia, Brazil, UK and France. The power distribution is more skewed in favor of two powers (US and China). Turkish scholar Unal Cervikoz (2024) prefers to describe the emerging world order by reference to *polycentrism* rather than multipolarity, because the latter concept historically involves the equal distribution of power among main actors (Concert of Europe, 1815), whereas the present reality is best captured by polycentrism in which major powers have unequal distribution of powers. In other terms, the current world order does not have multiple poles but multiple centers of power. Josep Borrell, the former Vice President of the European Commission, in 2021, describes the emerging global order as “complex multipolarity”. Borrell argues that there has been a rapid transformation in the distribution of power around the world over the last three decades. The world order went from a bipolar configuration between 1945 and 1989 to a unipolar configuration between 1989 and 2008, before entering what is now commonly described as a condition of complex multipolarity (Peters, 2022). The complexity of multipolarity emerges from the mismatch between the dislocation of economic powers and centers of geopolitical influence. While there are three major centers of economic power—the United States, China, and the European Union—mid-level powers such as Russia and Turkey exercise disproportionate geopolitical influence, resulting in a mismatch between the EU’s substantial economic weight and its more limited geopolitical power.

Indian scholar Amitav Acharya (2014, pp. 108-113; 2017) describes the emerging international order as “multiplex world order,” resembling a multiplex cinema complex where multiple films are screened simultaneously. He argues that the US-led liberal world order rested on four fundamental elements: free trade, post-war

multilateral institutions, liberal democracy, and liberal values. Citing examples from each domain, he concludes that these elements are in decline. The US-led liberal order will not be eliminated but will be joined other powers and perspectives represented by states like Russia, China, India, international and regional institutions, multinational corporations and non-state actors, resulting in a multiplex world order. Additionally, he finds it misleading to term the present world order as return of the multipolarity of pre-World War I Europe. Acharya lists several differences between the old multipolarity and the present emerging order. Unlike the present order, the past multipolarity was dominated by European colonial powers and entire Global South was excluded. In present order, economic interdependence among nations is more dense and global. Similarly, regional and international institutions in present order are also dense and durable. Finally, challenges to peace and stability in the present order are more complex due to intrastate conflicts and involvement of non-state actors.

Similarly, Gürcan's (2019a, 2019b, 2020) post-hegemonic multipolarity thesis interprets the rise of multipolarity not merely as a geopolitical redistribution of power but as a historically grounded crisis of neoliberal hegemony within global capitalism, unfolding across three interrelated dimensions: a political-economic layer rooted in the contradictions of US-led capitalism, a geopolitical layer marked both by renewed rivalries and conflicts among major powers alongside emerging cooperation dynamics such as South–South cooperation, and a political-sociological and cultural layer shaped by phenomena including right-wing populism and alter-globalization social movements, while emphasizing that the current conjuncture represents an early and potentially reversible phase of multipolarity characterized by significant uncertainty (Gürcan & Otero, 2024).

The reason for this divergence in interpretations of contemporary multipolarity lies in the tendency to anchor current developments to the historical concept of polarity and to situate multipolarity within a linear succession from bipolarity and unipolarity. This approach obscures the distinctiveness of the present

international order. Rather than being treated as a mere extension or revival of earlier configurations, the contemporary system should be understood as a new evolutionary phase of world order, marked by characteristics not previously observed—regardless of the labels assigned to it. Several features distinguish the current international order from its earlier incarnations. First, the contemporary international order is not defined by a merely numerical increase in the number of poles; rather, it reflects a qualitative transformation shaped by overlapping networks, fluid and issue-based alliances, and novel structural conditions under which global politics now operates. Second, the constellation of influential actors has expanded beyond traditional great powers to include an increasingly assertive Global South, emerging economies, and a wide range of non-state actors with growing relevance in international affairs. Third, the nature of power and capability has evolved significantly: state power is no longer determined solely by conventional military strength but increasingly by nuclear proliferation, control over global supply chains, access to critical minerals, and advanced technologies (Shapiro, 2021). In this context, nuclear capabilities are now dispersed among a broader set of actors—such as North Korea, Pakistan, India, Israel, and potentially Iran—extending beyond the five traditional nuclear powers. Fourth, new and emerging centers of power are more systematically organized through institutional groupings such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and ASEAN, indicating a level of coordination largely absent during the Cold War. Fifth, and paradoxically, these transformations have unfolded alongside deepening interdependence driven by globalization and advances in information and communication technologies, even as the liberal international order fragments and multilateralism weakens—a tension aptly captured by Josep Borrell’s (2023) observation that the world is becoming increasingly multipolar while multilateralism is simultaneously in retreat.

To conclude this section with a critical assessment, the arguments against multipolarity reveal important logical tensions and empirical shortcomings. First, they contend that the world is not multipolar because the international order continues to exhibit a

modified form of unipolarity: the United States remains the world's largest economy and retains preeminent military capabilities, including a global military presence and an extensive network of alliances. From this perspective, unipolarity persists, albeit in a more accommodative form. Second, they argue that the international order is not multipolar because it displays tendencies toward bipolarity, with the United States and China emerging as the two principal poles of the system, while other states lag significantly behind in terms of economic and military capabilities.

Logically, these positions acknowledge that U.S.-dominated unipolarity has undergone significant change over the past two decades. Once change is conceded, the critical question becomes the direction of that change. The trajectory points toward multipolarity rather than toward renewed unipolarity or a consolidated bipolar order, given the presence of multiple potential great powers—including Russia, India, Brazil, the European Union, and a rising China. Moreover, the movement toward multipolarity has not stalled; it continues to unfold.

Empirically, there are four compelling reasons demonstrating that the international order is moving toward multipolarity. First, in nominal terms, the GDP of the United States, China, and India in 1990 stood at \$5,963 billion, \$360 billion, and \$320 billion, respectively, meaning that U.S. GDP was sixteen times larger than China's and eighteen times larger than India's. At that time, neither China nor India ranked among the world's top ten economies. This situation has since changed markedly. The current nominal GDP figures for the United States, China, and India are approximately \$30 trillion, \$19 trillion, and \$4.2 trillion, respectively, indicating that the gap has narrowed considerably (Macrotrends, 2025). China and India are now among the world's leading economies. As a result, there has been a substantial shift in the global balance of economic power from the West toward Asia, driven by the worldwide redistribution of wealth. China's share of global GDP has risen from 1.6 percent to nearly 18 percent, while the West's share has declined from roughly 67 percent to less than 40 percent since 1990, reflecting a significant

economic shift toward Asia and other emerging markets (Policy Stability, 2024).

Second, the gap in military capabilities has also narrowed, as reflected in patterns of military expenditure. In 2000, military spending by the United States, China, and India amounted to \$295 billion, \$23 billion, and \$15 billion, respectively (SIPRI, retrieved 2025). By 2023, these figures had increased to \$916 billion, \$296 billion, and \$83 billion, accounting for 37 percent, 12 percent, and 3.4 percent of total global defense expenditure, respectively (Statista, 2025). Although the United States continues to command the largest share of global military spending, the gap between the United States and emerging powers has narrowed significantly.

Third, the growing practice of strategic autonomy among states is incompatible with a strictly unipolar or bipolar system and instead signals the emergence of a multipolar order characterized by multi-alignment and issue-based partnerships. Governments across Eurasia and the Global South are increasingly asserting ideological and strategic autonomy. Rather than forming rigid, binary alliances reminiscent of the Cold War, countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, and India have adopted multi-alignment and regional hedging strategies. Even the European Union has begun to explore strategic autonomy vis-à-vis both the United States and China. EU strategic autonomy refers to the Union's capacity to act independently—without reliance on external powers—in strategically important policy domains. In this context, the European Parliament's think tank outlined a Strategic Autonomy Plan for the European Union covering the period 2013–2023 (European Parliament, 2022).

Fourth, the growing prevalence of transactional diplomacy is associated with neither unipolarity nor bipolarity but instead reflects the dynamics of multipolarity. The monolithic multilateralism that characterized the post-1945 international order has increasingly given way to transactional forms of diplomacy. States now pursue national interests through flexible, issue-based alliances and regional groupings—such as BRICS, the Quad, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—rather than relying exclusively on universal institutions like the United Nations or the World Trade Organiza-

tion (EEAS, 2023). These structural changes have produced a multipolar world in which power is more widely distributed, diplomacy is more pluralistic, and the international order is more fluid and contested.

Ultimately, the debate between unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity is increasingly being resolved in favor of the latter. A growing consensus among scholars and policymakers, supported by compelling empirical evidence, indicates that power is diffusing toward middle powers within the international system and that the world is moving toward multipolarity. Accordingly, international affairs are shifting from a unipolar order dominated by the United States to a multipolar system in which power is more widely distributed across states, corporations, and non-state actors (Mughah, 2024).

With respect to the shape of emerging multipolarity, two observations merit emphasis. First, contemporary multipolarity should not be understood as a replication of the nineteenth-century European system of multiple great powers, nor as a simple extension of unipolarity. Rather, it represents a distinct evolutionary phase of the international order, characterized by the presence of nuclear weapons and non-state actors, unprecedented levels of interdependence among states, and a transformed profile of state power shaped by critical technologies such as artificial intelligence and control over strategic supply chains and critical minerals. Second, it is neither analytically useful nor empirically accurate to reduce contemporary multipolarity to a single, fixed label, as it exhibits multiple, overlapping characteristics and remains highly fluid and adaptable. A more productive approach is to analyze emerging multipolarity through its constitutive features and to refine these analytical categories in light of evolving empirical realities. In this regard, Josep Borrell (2023) conceptualizes contemporary multipolarity as the outcome of three interrelated dynamics: the broader global redistribution of wealth, the growing willingness of states to assert strategic and ideological autonomy, and the rise of an increasingly transactional international system grounded in bilateral arrangements rather than universal rules. This framework not only

offers a parsimonious way of capturing the complexity of contemporary multipolarity but also provides a more effective basis for assessing its implications for stability and governance in the international order, a task to which the following section turns.

Multipolarity and International Order: Debates, Evidence, and Implications

Like the debate over the shape of emerging multipolarity, the question of its likely impact on international order remains highly contested. This debate is structured around two broad sets of arguments. The first holds that global peace and stability are better served when the number of poles in the international system is limited; from this perspective, multipolarity is associated with greater complexity, uncertainty, and a decline in stability. The second set of arguments contends that multipolarity does not necessarily undermine peace and stability and may, instead, foster a more inclusive and flexible framework for cooperation and conflict management. These competing perspectives must be examined in turn before any conclusion can be drawn.

The first position maintains that unipolarity or bipolarity is more conducive to global stability, whereas multipolarity is likely to generate conflict and instability. Proponents of this viewpoint to a range of risks associated with multipolar systems, including heightened instability, an increased likelihood of conflict, weakened global governance and cooperation, economic fragmentation and supply-chain disruptions, the proliferation of proxy wars, and the intensification of cultural and ideological rivalries. This line of argument draws heavily on neorealist theory, particularly the works of Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer (2001, pp. 44–45, 77), drawing on historical examples from nineteenth-century Europe, argues that great powers are inherently insecure and therefore constantly seek to maximize their power, a dynamic that produces intense competition and raises the risk of conflict in a multipolar environment.

Several scholars advance similar concerns (Varisco, 2013;

Stephens, 2015; Shapiro, 2021; Latham & Yu, 2024). Andrea Edoardo Varisco (2013), while acknowledging the emergence of a multipolar order, remains deeply skeptical of its capacity to sustain peace and stability. Referring to the failure of the Concert of Europe—a historical configuration often likened to a multipolar order—Varisco argues that multipolarity is inherently prone to instability and large-scale conflict, as evidenced by the outbreak of the First World War. Beyond the rise of new great powers such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil, critics further highlight the destabilizing role of middle powers and non-state actors possessing nuclear capabilities, which may exacerbate insecurity in an emerging multipolar system.

Shapiro (2021), while offering a more nuanced assessment, similarly cautions that multipolar environments have historically been associated with catastrophic conflicts, notably during the First and Second World Wars. Such conflicts, he argues, tend to arise when states project power beyond their immediate spheres of influence. Latham and Yu (2024) identify three principal challenges of multipolarity: its propensity for large-scale conflict, the inability of international institutions to adapt effectively to a fragmented distribution of power, and the intensification of cultural competition. From a more explicitly normative standpoint, American scholar Bret Stephens (2015) contends that a U.S.-led unipolar system provides the strongest guarantee of global order, warning that the alternative to *Pax Americana* is global disorder.

Second, proponents argue that multipolarity is more inclusive and opens new opportunities for cooperation. A growing body of scholarship (Lloyd & Dixon, 2012; Shapiro, 2021; Ashford & Cooper, 2023; Latham & Yu, 2024; Ferenczy, 2025) challenges the assumption that multipolarity is inherently conflict-prone, instead presenting it as an international order capable of accommodating diversity and fostering cooperation. Scholars advancing this view emphasize several potential advantages of multipolarity, including a more inclusive distribution of power, greater scope for strategic autonomy and cooperative choice, increased cultural and economic pluralism, expanded opportunities for democratic and plural forms

of global governance, a reduced likelihood of large-scale great power wars, enhanced strategic flexibility through practices such as buck-passing, and greater overall stability achieved through economic and political balancing.

Michael Lloyd and Chris Dixon (2012) argue that a unipolar order led by the United States and its allies is ill-suited to sustaining “peaceful stability” at the global level and may give way to a multipolar order better equipped to facilitate constructive and consensual approaches to conflict resolution while preserving essential political and cultural diversity. In a similar vein, Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (2025) highlights the growing agency of middle and small powers in shaping emerging multipolarity. She observes that such states are increasingly asserting themselves through debates on global governance reform and the restructuring of the international financial architecture, with countries of the Global South playing a more active role in shaping discussions on multilateralism and multipolarity. At the same time, Ferenczy cautions that a deliberate shift in perceptions is necessary to consolidate a form of multipolar order capable of sustaining cooperation for the collective benefit.

Ashford and Cooper (2023) further challenge neorealist assumptions by suggesting that multipolarity may, in some respects, be less dangerous than bipolarity. Drawing on Dale Copeland’s insights, they note that the presence of multiple power centers can increase great powers’ reluctance to initiate wars they are uncertain of winning. Shapiro (2021) similarly contends that interactions in a multipolar system are less likely to be governed by zero-sum logic, and that shifting alliances and short-term strategic calculations can help limit both the frequency and the scale of conflict. Latham and Yu (2024) reinforce this view by arguing that a modern “concert of powers” under multipolarity would encourage flexible alliance structures, allowing states to avoid rigid commitments and instead form partnerships that leave room for compromise and de-escalation. Despite the risks inherent in any complex system, they conclude that multipolarity offers a meaningful opportunity to construct a more balanced and resilient international order.

The implications of multipolarity for the international order

remain highly contested. Broadly speaking, the debate is structured around two competing viewpoints. The first, advanced by neorealist thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer as well as other scholars, holds that unipolarity or bipolarity is better suited to maintaining stability in the international system. From this perspective, multipolarity is seen as inherently destabilizing, as it introduces complex patterns of multiple alignments and increases uncertainty regarding state behavior. Proponents of this view place considerable emphasis on hierarchy as a stabilizing mechanism within an anarchic international order. The second viewpoint contends that a multipolar order is more inclusive and provides states with greater opportunities for cooperation, choice, and consensus-building, thereby enhancing both stability and the quality of global governance.

The neorealist arguments in favor of unipolarity or bipolarity are largely theoretical or draw heavily on the historical experience of European multipolarity—most notably the Concert of Europe—and its eventual failure in the lead-up to the First World War. However, conclusions derived from these theoretical premises and historical analogies suffer from several limitations. First, a number of scholars, including Hans Morgenthau and Karl Deutsch and David Singer (1964), have advanced theoretical arguments suggesting that multipolarity may, under certain conditions, be more conducive to stability than systems with fewer poles. Morgenthau, writing during the Second World War, emphasized the balance of power as a potential instrument for peace and stability in a multipolar context (Morgenthau, 1967, pp. 178–202). Deutsch and Singer (1964) similarly examined the relationship between the number of poles—that is, the diffusion of power—and systemic stability, concluding that multipolarity, through its balance-of-power mechanisms, may offer greater stability than bipolar or unipolar configurations. This conclusion directly challenges the neorealist assumption regarding the relationship between polarity and stability. From a systemic perspective, Deutsch and Singer defined stability as the condition in which the international system preserves its essential characteristics, prevents the dominance of any single state,

ensures the survival of most of its members, and avoids large-scale war.

In addition, the theory of Complex Interdependence, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in 1977, challenged the core assumptions of both classical realism and neorealism by emphasizing the growing density of interdependence among states. According to this perspective, increasing international transactions—encompassing flows of goods, capital, people, and information—expand the scope for cooperation among states and non-state actors through multiple channels (Rana, 2015).

Finally, arguments against multipolarity that rely on the European experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are of limited applicability to the contemporary international system, which differs fundamentally from earlier forms of multipolarity in terms of its global scope, inclusiveness, and far higher levels of interdependence among states.

Building on the preceding debates, the following analysis develops the article's own assessment by examining how multipolarity operates in practice and how it responds to the principal critiques identified in the literature through concrete mechanisms affecting stability and governance. By dispersing power among several poles, multipolarity can promote stability by preventing any single actor from attaining unrestrained dominance. This mechanism of mutual checking generates a dynamic equilibrium in which flexible and overlapping alliances function as constraints on powerful entities. A prominent illustration can be found in the Indo-Pacific region, where China's growing assertiveness has contributed to the formation and consolidation of strategic arrangements such as the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, the Quad (India, the United States, Japan, and Australia), and AUKUS. Rather than provoking direct confrontation, these alignments are designed to preserve the balance of power and discourage unilateral hegemony. According to *The Hindu* (2024), such interdependence-based deterrence enhances predictability and reduces the likelihood of miscalculation. When effectively managed, a multipolar system of this kind may prove more stable than unipolarity,

as multiple actors serve as reciprocal constraints (Polity Prober, 2025).

Beyond security dynamics, multipolarity also creates opportunities for global governance structures that are more representative and inclusive. Emerging forums such as the G20, BRICS+, and the New Development Bank increasingly amplify the voices of the Global South and middle-income countries, standing in contrast to the earlier G7-dominated architecture. India's G20 presidency in 2023, particularly its successful push for permanent African Union membership, marked a significant step toward more democratic multilateralism. Similarly, the 2024 expansion of BRICS to include Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia illustrates how emerging powers are reshaping international institutions to better reflect global diversity. These developments align with broader calls to adapt global governance to the multipolar realities of the twenty-first century rather than the bipolar structures inherited from the post-Second World War era.

In the context of international norm-setting and institutional transformation, multipolarity has further opened space for diverse perspectives. Rising powers have sought to address longstanding inequities in institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the United Nations. BRICS leaders, for example, have repeatedly called for reforms to the IMF quota system to enhance the representation of emerging economies, while South Africa, Brazil, and India have advocated permanent membership on the UN Security Council in line with evolving norms of equity and representation (Polity Prober, 2025). In contrast to Western liberal frameworks, organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have promoted region-specific approaches to issues such as digital sovereignty and artificial intelligence governance (ISDP, 2024), underscoring how multipolarity facilitates normative pluralism alongside the diffusion of power.

At the level of conflict management, a multipolar environment enables greater strategic flexibility among major powers, often through practices such as "buck-passing." In such contexts, powerful states rely on regional actors and institutions to manage localized

conflicts, thereby avoiding the political and material costs of direct intervention while maintaining strategic presence. The Syrian conflict offers a clear example: the United States' decision not to intervene decisively allowed Russia, Iran, and Türkiye to shape both the military trajectory and political outcomes of the conflict. This pattern illustrates how multipolarity can accommodate indirect forms of engagement that limit escalation while preserving broader systemic equilibrium (Policy Stability, 2024).

Multipolarity also expands the diplomatic maneuvering space available to middle powers such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia. Unlike in a bipolar system, these states are no longer compelled to align rigidly with a single bloc; instead, they can pursue issue-based coalitions, multi-alignment, and strategic hedging. India's simultaneous engagement with the Quad and BRICS exemplifies this flexibility. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized during the Voice of Global South Summit in January 2023, India seeks to amplify Global South priorities without being constrained by zero-sum bloc politics (MEA, 2023). Such practices highlight how multipolarity nurtures policy pluralism, reinforces sovereignty, and enables diversified global partnerships.

Finally, in the Global South, multipolarity has stimulated new forms of economic cooperation, reshaping patterns of development and integration (Gürçan, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Gürçan & Otero, 2024). Regional infrastructure initiatives, local-currency financing, and expanding South–South trade have become increasingly prominent. Institutions and projects such as the New Development Bank, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and China's Belt and Road Initiative exemplify intra-BRICS and South–South financial arrangements designed to promote self-reliant growth while reducing dependence on traditional Western-dominated institutions. CPEC, for instance, has enhanced connectivity and employment in Pakistan through more than \$60 billion in foreign direct investment, while the New Development Bank has sought to weaken the dollar-centric financial system by issuing loans in local currencies such as the South African rand and the Brazilian real (Reuters, 2023). The expansion of BRICS at the 2025 Rio de Janeiro Summit to include

Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and Iran further institutionalized multipolarity by broadening the group's geographic and developmental reach. This transformation signals a shift away from Western-centered governance models toward more inclusive and pluralistic frameworks, while also providing an alternative platform for advancing Global South priorities and strengthening South–South cooperation.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that multipolarity is no longer a myth. It is a reality of contemporary world order, even though scholars may differ about its shape and nature. Additionally, the contemporary multipolarity is distinct from its earlier avatars like the Concert of Europe (1815) in the sense that it is more inclusive and global in character, underlined by more pervasive and deeper interdependence among states and non-state actors, and enduring and extensive institutionalization of global order. Its operational features are strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, short-term, flexible and issue-based alliances, transactional diplomacy and orientation towards democratic inclusiveness in management of international order. Hence, contemporary multipolarity needs to be analyzed as a distinct evolution in international politics. There is no sound logic or evidence to prove that multipolarity is inherently prone to disorder and instability. The present multipolarity has potential for positive contribution to international order as it may limit the possibility of “great wars” and provides opportunity for inclusive and democratic governance and multiple networks for cooperation and consensus building to address the contemporary global challenges.

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