Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies
https://esaanz.org.au/anzjes/
Vol17(2)
ISSN 1837-2147 (Print)
ISSN 1836-1803 (Online)

From unipolarity to multipolarity: toward global order, or disorder?

Raymond Taras
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana
taras@tulane.edu

Abstract
Multipolarity is often viewed as the alternative to a hegemonic international political order managed since 1991 by the United States. With the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2025, the unipolar order has not been abandoned even if comments by his Secretary of State suggest that multipolarity is inevitable. Ongoing U.S. relations with the European Union, Russia, and China have differed and in some cases mutated. The relevance of a multipolar system is debated, polarising those in favour against those opposed. National sovereignty, the rules-based international order casting democratic practices over authoritarian ones, and the rise of multipolarity sparked by China, Russia and BRICS are assayed. Of significance is whether transformations in the state of international polarity have become a pathway to global order - or global disorder. Would multipolarity yield a more universal international system that respects difference but not sameness, and shared governance but not risky fragmentation? Or would a reshuffling of spheres of influence and vital interests in a persisting unipolar world nevertheless remain the outcome? In the mid-2020s and beyond when polarity questions face cross-examination, dismissing multipolarity as geopolitically irrelevant can be as pernicious as measuring its ever-expanding significance.

Introduction

For a number of years the existence of a unipolar world order based on the unmatched power of the United States in managing global politics has been challenged by the escalating voice of China as its economic strength has outpaced the American economy. Tariff wars between the two signal in 2025 which side has come out on top. In their company have appeared the temporarily sidelined political and military power of the Russian Federation, previously a bipolar state in Cold War days that shared its status with the U.S. The Soviet Union's total collapse in 1991 was a death knell for communism (Lane, 2024). The fleeting years of American unipolarity persisted until a series of forever wars exposed its military and economic weaknesses, roughly about the time Covid paralysed the world.

For the United States the period before Donald Trump took over the Presidency for a second time in January 2025 was still viewed by international relations theorists as a unipolar, if somewhat weakened, world system. But the combination of China's continuing rise and Russia's renewed strength – now framed as the globe's most critical nuclear power allowing it to fight a destructive war against Ukraine with NATO support – transformed geopolitics. The appearance of other countries sympathetic, in diverse ways, to China and Russia, including the rise of the Global South, made the question of constructing an altogether different multipolar order more plausible.

A different power?

In the rapidly shifting political climate of the mid-2020s, the question of unipolarity versus multipolarity was overshadowed by more embedded systemic issues. The venerable topic of democratic versus authoritarian rule took on greater importance, supported by battle-hardened Western states fearing the threat of newfound populism. This threat has been linked with the electoral strength of far right and even extremist anti-establishment movements. Sometimes described as the "collective" and other times as the "political" West," these states pointed to longstanding histories of democratic development and were quick to regard authoritarian systems as not just removed from the West but, additionally, those that were politically and culturally inferior to the West.

An exception, arguably, to macho-inspired Western leadership behind unipolarity came from a remote country located in the Pacific. Invited by the Lowy Institute, a leading think tank in Sydney, Australia, in 2022, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern tackled a variety of topics impinging on disruption in contemporary geopolitics. One was an often misunderstood and elusive subject – the renewed significance of national sovereignty in world affairs. Referencing politics in Australasia and the Pacific Islands in particular, she claimed how "rather than increased strategic competition in the region, we need instead to look for areas to build and cooperate, recognizing the sovereignty and independence of those for whom the region really is home" (Ardern, 2022). Analysis of the role played by national sovereignty is treated in a section below.

The ephemerous notion of an international rule-of-law supposedly in existence so that a state can qualify for the status of a Western country had become commonplace in Western thought. Often it was regarded as a replacement for the recognition of an international legal system that many countries had adopted, and not just those confined to the Western sphere. Deconstructing this central concept in Western-based political thought, Ardern ventured that "If a nation values the rules-based order, human rights, being a good and law-abiding neighbour as defined by the UN, sovereign rights no matter size, wealth or power, and a sense of shared responsibility, then it will pursue its interests accordingly, but more often than not in the company of others who share similar values and interests." Qualifying the understanding of what rule of law really means, including a sense of solidarity with other like-minded nations, was of key importance to Ardern.

Arguably her most contentious remark was her interpretation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that had escalated into full-scale war in February 2022. She advocated how "let us not otherwise characterise this as a war of the West vs Russia. Or democracy vs autocracy. It is not." Even as she condemned Russia's supposed "military operation" outright, she urged "an end to the black-and-white portrayal of complex issues in global conflicts." Moreover "The honest reality is that the world is bloody messy. And yet, amongst all the complexity, we still often see issues portrayed in a black and white way."

Ardern had set herself up for a backlash from the political West, disputing her contention that the world was "not black and white." Her views expressed at her first U.N. General Assembly in 2018 expressed this forcefully: "In the face of isolationism, protectionism, racism – the simple concept of looking outwardly and beyond ourselves, of kindness and collectivism, might just be as good a starting point as any"

(Ardern quoted by Miller, 2023). It was a preamble to views she underscored after leaving the New Zealand Parliament, in some ways opening up different pathways to the unipolar-versus-multipolar debate.

Further trigger points emerging in the 2020s included grave environmental threats to the globe, above all for the Pacific Islands threatened with complete destruction. It was about this time that fossil fuel lobbies came fully out of the closet and insisted that coal, oil, and natural gas – non-renewable sources of energy supplying 80% of the world's energy – were indispensable in making America and other energy-dependent states great again.

Terrorism too had been spreading across the world and five-million-strong New Zealand could not escape. In March 1919 fifty-one Muslims were killed in twin mosque attacks in Christchurch. White supremacist beliefs and anti-immigrant sentiment were among the causes of the terror and Ardern displayed a kindness to victims' families that was rarely seen. Covid was another crisis she had to face beginning in 2020 when New Zealand locked down like no other country in the world. While combating Covid was at times seen as bad for business especially for global trade, the lockdown in New Zealand saved over 20,000 lives; "And that person in front of me might just be one of them" (Ardern, 2025, p. 309).

A further trigger point, not often recognised as of pivotal importance, has been the ongoing spread of the "anglosphere" – countries whose *lingua franca* (spoken language) had been or were becoming English speaking; it appeared to be an unstoppable linguistic phenomenon. Inevitably, ethnic conflicts caused by these "externalities" were reaching new heights. "Crisis multicausality" was overwhelming the planet.

Ardern's talks, lectures, seminars, and tutorials after she left office in January 2023 earned her dual fellowships at Harvard University's Kennedy School and a third one at its Law School. However, the prospects of multipolarity did not figure as a major topic when discussing international affairs. Nor did other IR issues such as firewalls, tripwires, or collective action problems.

This article, therefore, provides an overview of major factors that can be treated as independent variables shaping the nature of global polarity. The fate of multipolarity remains the dependent variable. The first section addresses the notion of national sovereignty and how it has been applied. In recent years, states as different as Senegal, the Solomon Islands, Greenland and Canada faced differing hurdles shaping the nature of their sovereignty. Sovereignty is prized above all in former colonies and those today which confront neocolonialism.

The second part singles out a key instrument employed in the West's management of global politics – the so-called rules-based international order which has been under attack by Western-skeptical states. Questioning this alleged rules-based system, particularly in replacing international law as the *modus operandi,* merits our attention.

The third section analyses the recent emergence of multipolar aspirations in non-Western countries and how they are constructed. While compatible with sovereignty issues, dreams of multipolarity go further in creating wiggle room for individual

countries in the international arena. The Westphalia legacy and current multipolarity debate may complement each other,

The last part studies the empirical anatomy of multipolarity today. Assessing the makeup of international organisations such as BRICS and other Global-South institutions may explain why multipolarity is feasible and realistic, even as other multilateral organisations such as NATO promise to retain an American-centric system.

Sovereignty as supreme value

A stark manifestation of a world in transformation – one that had appeared to have been settled for good in the 1960s and, in some cases, even earlier when former colonies became independent countries – has been a return to national sovereignty. It is often endorsed by smaller-sized, less influential states which seek to make a mark in the international system. Despite views to the contrary, sovereignty and multipolarity have not necessarily been opposed to each other. Historically, sovereignty had been inherited from the Westphalian system formed in 1648 which asserted that each state had exclusive sovereignty over its own territory. Accordingly, "This regime entrenched a protean sovereign state system that consolidated in subsequent centuries." Its preeminence emerged two hundred years later in a classic multipolar order when five major European states ruled jointly, though not without competing with each other (Phillips, 2023, pp. 544-559).

Exercising individual sovereignty can occur even in a diffused world of multipolar states. In theory, however, multipolarity can be made up with a vast network of associated states and it is therefore likely to impinge on, or restrict, national sovereignty. State independence is commonly associated with sovereignty, but the difference lies in the fact that strategic alliances are made by independent countries whereas sovereignty is more flexible.

An essential issue shaping international relations is how the global order can be transformed into a multipolar system without major crises and without wrangling over which states subsequently become most influential. Multipolarity stems from a less centralised distribution of international power and by definition it should be promoted by a coterie of non-Western states seeking greater distance from the political West. The constricting rule-of-law principle managed by Washington and its overseas *doppelganger*, the European Union, seeks to increase their jurisdiction over the justice system, the separation of powers, press freedom, social media, *inter alia*.

Endorsing dependency comes into play when a country assigns priority to interactions with other countries that is focused primarily on trade deals. The reality of becoming dependent on other states is inescapable when countries become a part of international trading blocks that import and export commodities, and products and services. In the 1970s many Latin American scholars underscored their sense of *dependencía* structured on unconditional reliance on the U.S. juggernaut. Inevitably it carried over to political relations dominated by this *caudillo*. (Long & Schultz, 2022). While national sovereignty was not necessarily fully erased, it was limited to the legal power of a state to govern itself primarily in domestic areas.

Absolute national sovereignty was a rare commodity. Once the Cold War ended, through no choice of its own, Cuba had virtually no countries it was dependent on. Russia had cast it aside and, ineluctably, Cuba took on the mantra of a purely sovereign – and self-managed entity. The Cuban economy has floundered further, and absolute sovereignty has come to have little significance in both its foreign and domestic policy initiatives.

A recent African country that had been colonised but had become independent at the height of decolonisation in 1960, and now insists on full sovereignty, is Senegal. Its Prime Minister, Ousmane Sonko, charged in 2023 by neo-colonial authorities with fomenting insurrection until being released from custody and running successfully for political office, asserted in 2024 that Senegal is "an independent country, it is a sovereign country, and sovereignty does not accommodate the presence of foreign military bases" (Sonko, 2024). Above all former coloniser France, but also the European Union, were admonished and ordered to remove remaining military forces from the country. Several other states in the Sahel region have followed suit.

Similarly in the Pacific in 2022, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Manasseh Sogavare, stated how it had been "very insulting to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs or have other motives in pursuing our national interest" (Sogavare, 2022) His measure of sovereignty was to sign agreements with China so as to "diversify" the country's security partnerships. The reaction from Washington and Canberra – though not from Wellington while Ardern was Prime Minister – was to exaggerate the "China threat" and to maintain the political West's traditional dominance in the Pacific.

National sovereignty has even been raised in the case of Canada after a new administration in the White House had declared that increased tariffs were to be the future in order to make up for U.S. historical trade imbalances. Previous trade arrangements were treated as null and void and President Donald Trump imposed 25% tariffs on trade with Canada; in contrast, methods used to single out Russia's misbehaviour were an ongoing series of sanctions intending to undermine its economy. Trump's references to Canada as a 51st state and to Justin Trudeau as "Governor" rather than Prime Minister "created a perfect storm that challenges Canada's traditional positions of measured diplomacy and economic independence. This moment demands not just careful analysis but a fundamental reassessment of how Canada positions itself in an increasingly volatile global landscape." For international relations expert Habib Al Badawi, "Canadian sovereignty in the 21st century requires a nuanced understanding of what independence means in an interconnected world. Traditional concepts of sovereignty, focused primarily on territorial integrity and political autonomy, must evolve to encompass economic resilience, cultural distinctiveness, and technological self-sufficiency" (Badawi, 2024).

Canada's cultural distinctiveness has appeared to serve as an insurmountable buffer against economic and political pressure that originated from its southern neighbour. Thus, "sovereignty in the modern context is as much about cultural and social self-determination as it is about formal political independence" (Badawi, 2024). The example of Canada's newfound vulnerability exemplifies how "the West versus the Rest" may be disintegrating. A search for new trading partners may be its future. Over the long term the spread of multipolarity can result in a trickle-down effect.

International relations theorists stipulate that under an anarchic system there is no higher authority in sight for states, and they are obliged to follow self-help policies. Sovereignty is squeezed so that it only appears in a limited way. A state of anarchy may lead to an inability to resolve geopolitical disputes, enforce laws, or otherwise bring order to the international system. Consequently, most states opt for a self-help alliance strategy that is self-interested and, in theory, proclaims its own unique values. In the case of smaller states, national and local elections may suggest whether citizens support a transition to multipolarity or not. In the case of Greenland, coveted for a time by the U.S. President with little respect for its European coloniser Denmark, local elections can produce sovereignty if not yet multipolar inclinations. The multipolar pull by non-Western countries can resolve its future or, alternatively, create a crisis by and of itself.

Two academics focusing on the consequences of colonialism have argued that the birth of democracy owes much to the frightening years of colonial rule. Its structural features contributed further to postcolonial rule.

Why some countries are democracies has long intrigued political scientists. The enormous literature on this topic almost exclusively examines variation in democracy levels after independence. However, these theories overlook the profound institutional restructuring that occurred under Western colonialism. The overall practice of colonial governance was unmistakably authoritarian. However, by the mid-twentieth century, most colonies had adopted hybrid political institutions with electoral elements. For most contemporary countries, mass electoral competition originated under external rule (Lee and Paine, 2024, p. 1).

These scholars inquired to what extent the colonial era mattered for subsequent regime trajectories. Countries with lengthy episodes of colonial rule usually became, ironically, durable democracies. However, the most common sequel to shorter episodes of colonial pluralism was either the likelihood of the staging of military coups or of establishing electoral authoritarian regimes. In short, colonialism's impact on the likelihood of a country achieving a democratic system mainly depended on the colonial power's staying power. In an anarchic system sovereignty may often have produced a shaky outcome and the presence or absence of multipolar aspirations was not a relevant factor.

Rule of and by the West

In 2024 Nobel Prize Economics laureate Joseph Stiglitz had become convinced about the threats posed by neoliberalism, seen as an extreme, bundled version of individual liberalism and free trade. Its dominance in the global economy and its supposed promise to share prosperity with have-nots, led by a hegemonic America, appeared self-evident. But globalisation under neoliberalism had gone awry. The economic foundations of neoliberalism—the notion that free markets lead to economic efficiency and shared prosperity—had been questioned before the theory became fashionable. The failures of neoliberalism in all its dimensions encompassed slower, more unstable and unequal growth (Stiglitz, 2024).

It was not just neoliberalism but, at its heart, the remorseless power of the U.S. to do as it pleases, that was brought into question. Realist thinker John Mearsheimer (2018, p. 152) phrased it this way: "The costs of liberal hegemony begin with the endless wars

a liberal state ends up fighting to protect human rights and spread liberal democracy around the world. Once unleashed on the world stage, a liberal unipole soon becomes addicted to war" (2018, p. 152). More recently, Council on Foreign Relations theorist Stephen Heintz (2024) noted that "The United States is no longer *the* hegemon. We are engaged in a new cold war, to win the hearts and minds of those in the global south. And entering this office, you face global issues that require global cooperation: preventing climate change, addressing pandemics, maintaining fisheries, preventing sea pollution and space debris."

An even more profound question than mere criticism of neoliberalism or of American interests has lurked in the background. It questions a fundamental principle about the supposed international rule of law that Western states have constructed for their own use. Accordingly, Stiglitz raises a deeper and more philosophical question: "Is there really an international rule of law when the major countries—the hegemons—obey the rules only when it suits them and when there is no enforcement mechanism or punishment for such rogue behaviour, other than that arising from reputation loss (a loss that the United States clearly has decided is of second order importance relative to the benefits of acting as it pleases)?" (Stiglitz, 2024).

The rules-based international order has been viewed as the basis for supporting procedural democracy within the collective West, in addition to the one-sided set of trade rules benefiting its members. States deemed authoritarian by the West are excluded from taking part in this rules-based order, better characterised as "playing according to the rules." The history of the rule of law principle is ancient going back to Aristotle even if today's critiques have increasingly become vocal about how the concept has been recently interpreted (Von Leyden, 1967).

As a noteworthy example, "The rule of law applies not only within national polities but also increasingly between them, but in this arena its use remains under-theorized." For Jeremy Waldron writing in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The Rule of Law is one ideal in an array of values that dominates liberal political morality: others include democracy, human rights, social justice, and economic freedom. The plurality of these values seems to indicate that there are multiple ways in which social and political systems can be evaluated, and these do not necessarily fit tidily together." Indeed,

> The most important demand of the rule of law is that people in positions of authority should exercise their power within a constraining framework of well-established public norms rather than in an arbitrary, *ad hoc*, or purely discretionary manner on the basis of their own preferences or ideology. It insists that the government should operate within a framework of law in everything it does, and that it should be accountable through law when there is a suggestion of unauthorized action by those in power (Waldron, 2023).

The law's contestedness as a principle of exclusion can be regarded as the contrary of multipolarity. A leading critic has been Glenn Diesen, a Norwegian international relations expert, who links the rules-based order championed by the political West for exclusively Western institutions. In his view it has formed the philosophical cornerstone of liberal democracy, social justice, economic freedom, and human rights laws. All these devalue their use by authoritarian counterparts in former Soviet states, China and its allies, and the Global South (Diesen, 2024a).

For Diesen, "The so-called 'rules-based international order' aims to facilitate a hegemonic world, which entails displacing international law. While international law is based on equal sovereignty for all states, the rules-based international order upholds hegemony on the principle of sovereign inequality." In the hands of the West, it incorporates international human rights law which, though benign and progressive, allows for contradictory principles devoid of uniform rules. The consequences are that "The U.S. as the hegemonic state can then *choose* between human-centric security and state-centric security, while [autocratic] adversaries must abide strictly by state-centric security due to their alleged lack of liberal democratic credentials" (Diesen, 2023). He follows up:

> state-centric security as the foundation of international law insists on the territorial integrity of states, while human-centric security allows for secession under the principle of self-determination. The US will thus insist on territorial integrity in allied countries such as Ukraine, Georgia or Spain, while supporting self-determination within adversarial states such as Serbia, China, Russia and Syria. The U.S. can interfere in the domestic affairs of adversaries to promote liberal democratic values, yet the U.S. adversaries do not have the right to interfere in the domestic affairs of the U.S. To facilitate a hegemonic international order, there cannot be equal sovereignty for all states (Diesen, 2024b).

The rules-based international order, consequently, creates a two-tiered system of legitimate rule and unlawful proscription. The irony of liberal internationalism is that liberal democracies expect to govern international institutions so as to defend democratic values from the control of electoral voting majorities. Instead of resolving conflicts through diplomacy and genuine rules of the game, an incentive is created for the West to manipulate, moralise and propagandise such rules, in particular by social media.

Both China and Russia have denounced the rules-based international order as a dual system facilitating double standards. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng asserted that the rules-based international order introduces the "law of the jungle" insofar as universally recognised international law is replaced by unilateralism (Feng, 2021). Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov similarly criticised the rules-based international order for creating a parallel legal framework to legitimise unilateralism:

> The West has been coming up with multiple formats such as the French-German Alliance for Multilateralism, the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, the Global Partnership to Protect Media Freedom, the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, the Call for Action to Strengthen Respect for International Humanitarian Law—all these initiatives deal with subjects that are already on the agenda of the UN and its specialized agencies. These partnerships exist outside of the universally recognized structures so as to agree on what the West wants in a restricted circle without any opponents. After that they take their decisions to the UN and present them in a way that de facto amounts to an ultimatum. If the UN does not agree, since imposing anything on countries that do not share the same 'values' is never easy, they take unilateral action (Lavrov, 2024).

In sum, an assumed rules-based international order is not specific about which set of rules should be safeguarded and acted upon and which should not other than stigmatizing non-Western states. Such rules can incite new conflict rather than result in conflict resolution procedures. It is increasingly rejected by states in the international order, especially by the global, sometimes dubbed the "majority" South. As an illustration, the number of accusations of genocide raised by states in both the East and the West has increased sharply; charges of genocidal acts have outdone conflict resolution measures by a long shot.

Among multiple critiques of Western hegemony, the existence of a flawed and prejudicial rules-based system furnishes just one example. For Diesen, then, "The rules-based international order should be considered a failed experiment from the unipolar world order, which must be dismantled to restore international law as a requirement for stability and peace." The drive for a diversified multipolar order in place of unipolarity is well under way, many critiques of the West have suggested. But what is the probability that a multipolar system can become more effective, and perhaps more democratic than a hegemonic world order?

The crux of multipolarity

A plethora of literature appeared in the 1960s and after addressing the matter of polarity in the global order and its links to international security. Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer (1964), among others, focused on multipolarity, the less common of the three kinds, that broadened the scope of the analysis. Put simply, however, there are only three ways in which global politics can be defined by types of polarity: 1) accepting unipolarity with one centre; 2) returning to bipolarity with two global powers, for example, in the future replacing Russia with economic powerhouse China and with the U.S. maintaining its global status; or 3) promoting multipolarity with three or more powers. The consensus among international relations thinkers has been that from early times up to the seventeenth century far-flung empires were becoming transformed into unipolar actors. Classic examples would be the land-based Roman empire and, much later, the sea-based British one. In this way the centre of gravity of the international system underscored the importance of an imperial power *qua* unipolar state.

In 1648 the Peace of Westphalia ushered in multiple sovereignties based on the demographics of regions and states. With formal acknowledgment of state sovereignty, nations-in-the-making would lead to increased multipolarity in Europe. The motto emerged of *cuius regio, eius religio* – the prince of a principality determines the religion of his inhabitants, and therefore of its statehood (Croxton, 2013).

This variant of multipolarity resulted in a series of interchangeable actors constituting an international order that was anchored in Europe. Colonial possessions consolidated this process. By the nineteenth century, a classic balance-of-power system was formed that included England, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Russia (Sheehan, 1996). That period ended with World War I when the international system collapsed and individual states chose to make war on each other.

After World War II the United States emerged as one of two bipolar states confronting each other (Waltz, 1964). The other was the USSR which survived a series of dictatorships, purges, wars, terror and corruption until it disintegrated in 1991

(Bremmer & Taras, 1992). At that point, with the sudden though not spectacular collapse of the USSR, the international system reverted to unipolarity. A cherished unipolar moment had arrived for the U.S. - it had been transformed into an uncontested hegemonic power (Tierney, 2020).

Power does not tolerate a vacuum and by 2000 China joined Russia and several regional powers in challenging American dominance. Of significance was that in their rhetoric China and Russia insisted on a return not to bipolarity but to multipolarity. Can we assume, then, that a different international order – perhaps of *unbalanced* multipolarity – has developed? Neo-realist international relations thinker Mearsheimer claimed that an optimal level of multipolarity could reduce the threat of war. But, for the University of Chicago author, worse threats would be "multipolar systems which contain an especially powerful state – in other words, a potential hegemon – which make them especially prone to war" (Mearsheimer, 2001, 338).

Is multipolar pluralism on the uptick? For French anthropologist Emmanuel Todd, today's reigning "Americanosphere" focuses on how the international order has framed "The West against the Rest" not just in economic but also anthropological terms. The first subsumes exploitation by the political West of the colonised, the second constitutes a binary contrasting bilateral family life in the West (such as equality between the sexes) to a patrilineal one in Africa, Asia and Eurasia (the father rules the roost). For Todd, this distinction is increasing in recent years (Todd, 2024, p. 327).

China and Russia are foremost among countries seeking to build a multipolar world. What claims has China made in its imagining of a future multipolar system? The launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 was made up of a colossal infrastructure and economic development project whose aim was to connect Asia with Europe and Africa through a far-flung network of roads, railways, and ports. Aside from fostering economic development, many China scholars regard the project as a significant geopolitical move extending the PRC's influence globally, as well as in harmony rather than coercion with other states (Curtis & Klaus, 2024). But the actual shift from unipolarity to multipolarity entails an intricate and complex process and the BRI is one of many factors shaping China's global geopolitical landscape (Shi, 2025).

The PRC's influence in regions traditionally part of the West has expanded significantly. Through the BRI, China has engaged in diplomatic initiatives with faraway states and diversification of diplomatic relations has challenged the historical dominance of Western powers in shaping global affairs. It claims to have reduced dependency of participating countries on Western financing such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These shifts reduce the influence exerted by Western financial institutions, diminishing U.S. economic leverage.

Creating new trade routes is part and parcel of the BRI's objectives. The emphasis on creating connectivity among Asia, Europe, and Africa can bypass traditional maritime routes dominated by U.S. naval power. By diversifying trade routes, China weakens the strategic advantage held by the United States in controlling key maritime links. Shi contends that multipolarity is a multifaceted process influenced by geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors above and beyond the scope of a single initiative like the BRI.

There may be a negative side to the expansion of China's influence. Some countries participating in the BRI may face the risk of severe debt dependency on the PRC: "Even

as China provides loans for infrastructure projects, concerns have been raised about the ability of these countries to repay the loans, potentially leading to a situation where China gains excessive influence or control over these nations" (Shi, 2025). Moreover, some countries view the BRI as a unique tool for China to spread its strategic influence and military presence abroad, raising concerns about international security implications. For example, the development of ports and naval facilities under the BRI has sparked worries about its military intentions whether in territories in northern Iceland or the port in Darwin, Australia. Economic imbalances may be accentuated by benefiting Chinese companies and workers who are often transported to distant countries. Concerns emerge that Chinese labour sent to foreign regions could lead to unfair competition and sideline local businesses in recipient countries.

Geopolitical resistance has come on the heels of an expanded BRI plan and not all countries are receptive to its growing influence. The U.S. in particular views it with suspicion; the Trump presidency may even take this phobia to an extreme. Whether a multipolar system providing a choice of alternatives can evolve remains an open question.

In turn, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) forms a regional intergovernmental body founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined the SCO in 2017, thereby adding to multiple centres of influence and giving it additional geopolitical weight. While the SCO has primarily focused on regional security and economic cooperation, it has been regarded by some observers as contributing to a broader multipolar system helping slash U.S. dominance.

The SCO does not yet have the global reach of institutions like mission-creeping NATO. Its impact is primarily concentrated in Eurasia such as Central Asian 'stans. Member states also have different geopolitical priorities, in some cases maintaining and encouraging close relations with the United States. Dissimilarities among member states such as longstanding rivalries and differing strategic goals may limit the organisation's ability to present a united front.

One other pivotal organisation to which China belongs is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement among 15 Asia-Pacific countries. The pact, signed in 2020, includes ideologically diverse countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, as well as members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The RCEP boasts that it is one of the largest trade agreements in the world covering a significant portion of the global economy. Factors supporting a shift to multipolarity could include its far-flung economic integration measures. By contrast, factors mitigating a shift to multipolarity include the weight of more established institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other Western-led economic institutions.

Alongside the PRC, the Russian Federation also acts as a champion of a multipolar order but institutions it backs are limited. The Eurasian Economic Union is a preeminent Russian-endorsed organisation, as is the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The Commonwealth of Independent States set up after the USSR collapsed has not been influential, however.

What Russia lacks in international structural support, it more than makes up with its massive military power. It frequently boasts how it wields more nuclear weapons than

any other country in the world, from hypersonic missiles to tactical nuclear weapons. The war with Ukraine has mushroomed its military forces that may subsume about 1.5 million active soldiers. But it lags far behind China's economic growth. Over the last decade it is claimed that China contributed 31% percent to global economic growth compared to the U.S. contribution of nine percent. Reportedly Russia's GDP has increased by about four percent in each of the last two years. Even with Nord Stream having been knocked out of contention in supplying oil and gas to Europe, it has managed alternative ways to find new clients.

Receiving little support from the political West, Russia has turned to Third World countries for endorsing its foreign and economic policies. Chief among them is an organisation titled BRICS, largely a bloc of rapidly developing economies. In October 2024 President Putin closed a three-day BRICS summit in Kazan, Tatarstan, that was attended by leaders or representatives of 36 countries. These included United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Chinese president Xi Jinping, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa. An expanded group now includes Egypt, the United Arab Emirates. Ethiopia and Iran. New applicants (known as hedging states) that seek membership may include Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

In 2025 BRICS added new "partners" which take in Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan. Totalling nine member-states and nine partners, BRICS lays claim to making up nearly half of the world's population and more than 41 percent of global GDP. Other countries in Africa and Asia, even Mongolia at Putin's personal invitation, are on a waiting list.

BRICS had originally underscored investment opportunities for its members. But from being an intergovernmental organisation it has evolved into a geopolitical and geo-economic bloc with regular government meetings taking place, such as in Kazan. Relations among BRICS countries are conducted on the principles of non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit. Coordinating a passageway to multipolar initiatives is integral to its role. Indeed, when welcoming the President of BRICS' New Development Bank, Dilma Rousseff, President Putin argued that the use of local currencies instead of the dollar or euro "helps to keep economic development free from politics as far as possible in the context of today's world." De-dollarisation was hinted at. For the Russian President, BRICS now represents the global majority that will make up a key element of a coming new global order (Wintour, 2024). Multipolar-inclined political leaders share the belief that by 2050 their expanded transnational institution will dominate the global economy.

To be sure, the quest for multipolar pluralism may itself trigger global instability and insecurity. Samuel Huntington's notion that the future world order has the makings of world disorder is noteworthy (Huntington, 2011). Spreading multipolar initiatives across several regional powers can prevent a crisis in the transition to a new world order yet international crises, conflicts, and wars have only increased. The U.S. is still regarded as exercising political and economic dominance over major global institutions. The world's leaders, directors, and CEOs are regularly anointed by American preferences. The deployment of unprecedented military power in areas considered to be in America's national interest has multiplied manyfold; some 80 countries possess American military bases. The supposed rules-based order promotes democracy, the rule of law and human rights when American interests are at stake. Its

alliance systems extend to the G-7, the European Union, the European Political Community instantly funded in 2022, NATO, ASEAN, Five Eyes (an anglosphere intelligence alliance), and AUKUS (an anglospheric strategic alliance in which New Zealand is considering membership). Writing off America's role in global governance can lead to sheer folly and presuming a rigorous multipolar system may be years away.

Inferences

A framework built around multipolarity has highlighted how a country's national sovereignty can be a pathway leading to an expanded multipolar world system - but not necessarily. Emphasizing an international rules-based law exclusive to Western states is also in jeopardy. Dividing the world into democratic as opposed to authoritarian political systems appears to be senseless today; European political elites may be highjacking autocratic, anti-democratic methods. Scholars have pinpointed what a future world order may look like, the strategy needed to accomplish it, and the countries most likely to find a place in a re-made international system. Other independent variables promoting progress towards multipolarity can be added to this article.

Scholars have analysed how a comparative framework can explain transformation of polarity into a multiple world order. For example, "The contributions of the Global South, including Latin America, to institutions at the heart of today's world order are often forgotten. Treating such bodies only as the result of great power bargains distorts our understanding of their history and limits how we see them in the present. Smaller states often view international organisations as friendly environments that offer voice and vote (Long & Schulz, 2022).

Among academics tackling multipolarity is Heintz, CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund focusing on the United States' role in bring about change. A confluence of factors, termed polycrises, has induced debates about great power dominance. For this author, the U.S. is not *the* hegemon any more but *a* leader and power has already shifted to other states. The emergence of multipolar pluralism has taken place and dispersal of international power is viewed as a positive development. Free-riding on American power by other states, whether the EU, ASEAN, the African Union, or Mercosur, is coming to an end. But Heintz believes that the United States can benefit from the expansion of multilateral institutions (Heintz, 2024).

On the other hand, Heintz gives short shrift to the precariousness of a wobbly international order that is associated with multipolarity; it was initially an issue raised by Mearsheimer. The capricious and random announcements of different tariffs being applied to different countries may have elicited a sense of *anti-yanquismo* emerging. The counter-tariff wars that followed, increasing cyberattacks, de-dollarisation policies, "lone wolf" forays attacking Americans, and outright terrorist activity are products. Payback for American misbehaviour towards non-Western but also Western states is a possible outcome.

Robust empirical research on the part of scholars West and East may find evidence that a state's interests lie in promoting a multipolar order. Legislative and presidential elections can serve as proxy variables indicating support for such a transition. A government's candid, or perhaps sublime, policy choices in favour of a multipolar order can be exposed using a variety of ways and means. A sure measure to gauge

whether multipolarity emerges are shifts in a country's international trading partners; of special significance are changes in preferred trade relations which, in the past, were termed most favoured nation. Greater attention to trade relations with the Global South and not the political West or the anglosphere can signify telling indicators of multipolar preferences.

In addition, an increase in cultural diplomacy among specific countries can be salient, serving as a proxy variable of support for multipolarity. Other relevant questions follow: which discursive statements highlighted by political elites signal a change lessening dependence on the West? Do major political, cultural, and economic appointments involve groups of decision-making actors? Which other cues originating from among the political class, including economic elites, suggest less dependence on the U.S.? An indirect measure of detecting greater multipolar pluralism can be literary, cinematic and performance changes in the narratives and rhetoric embraced in writing, on the stage, in movies, on podcasts. Archaic narratives portraying cowboys and Indians begin to falter as the underdog arises.

Whether the pull of multipolarity merits a paradigm shift in studying world politics remains to be seen. But as the second part of Huntington's seminal book addressing the clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order suggests, "remaking" is happening all too quickly.

References

Ardern, J. (2022). An address by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. [Speech transcript]. *Lowy Institute*. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/address-new-zealand-prime-minister-jacinda-ardern

Ardern, J. (2025). *A Different Kind of Power: A Memoir*. Crown Publishing.

Badawi, H.A. (2024). Beyond the '51st State': Canadian Sovereignty in an Era of Trumpism Ambitions. *ISSF* (Indian Strategic Studies Forum). https://issf.org.in/2024/12/beyond-the-51st-state-canadian-sovereignty-in-an-era-of-trumpism-ambitions/

Bremmer, I., & Taras, R. (Eds). (1992). *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge University Press.

Croxton, D. (2013). *Westphalia: The Last Christian Peace*. Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1057/9781137333339

Curtis, S., & Klaus, I. (2024). *The Belt and Road City: Geopolitics, Urbanization, and China's Search for a New International Order*. Yale University Press.

Deutsch, K.W. & Singer, J.D. (1964). Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability. *World Politics,* 16(3), 390–406. doi:10.2307/2009578

Diesen, G. (2023). *Europe as the Western Peninsula of Greater Eurasia Geoeconomic Regions in a Multipolar World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Diesen, G. (2024). *The Ukrainian War and the Eurasian World Order*. Atlanta: Clarity Press.

Diesen, G. (2024, December 23). The Case for Dismantling the Rules-Based International Order. *braveneweurope.com*. https://braveneweurope.com/glenn-diesen-the-case-for-dismantling-the-rules-based-international-order

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China (2021, July 26). Xie Feng:"The U.S. side's so-called 'rules-based international order' is designed to benefit itself at others' expense, hold other countries back and introduce 'the law of the jungle'." https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/bmdyzs_664814/xwlb_664816/202406/t20240606_11402818.html

Heintz, S. (2024, August 20). A New U.S. Grand Strategy: The Case for Multipolar Pluralism. *Council for Foreign Relations*. https://www.cfr.org/podcasts/tpi/case-multipolar-pluralism-stephen-heintz

Huntington, S.P. (2011). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Schuster.

Kabutaulaka, T. (2022, March 3). Solomon Islands asserts its sovereignty – with China and the West. *The Interpreter*. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/solomon-islands-asserts-its-sovereignty-china-west

Lane, D. (2024). The Soviet federative state: its exceptional formation and dismemberment. In R. Taras (Ed.). *Exploring Russia's exceptionalism in International Politics*. Routledge.

Lee, A. & Paine, J. (2024). *Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*. Cambridge University Press.

Long, T., & Schulz, C.-A. (2022, November 10). Latin America and the Roots of Global Institutions. *Blogs*. *LSE*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2022/11/10/latin-americaand-the-roots-of-global-institution

Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton.

Mearsheimer, J.J. (2018). *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Yale University Press.

Miller, G. (2023, January 19). Jacinda Ardern's Outsized Foreign Policy Legacy. *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/jacinda-arderns-outsized-foreign-policy-legacy/

Phillips, A. (2023). The Peace of Westphalia. In M. Bukovansky et al. (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations. Oxford University Press. https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/46861

Sheehan, M (1996). *The Balance of Power: History and Theory*. Routledge.

Shi, J. (2025). The PRC: For and Against Multipolarity. [Working paper]. Tulane University (New Orleans).

Sonko, O. (2021). Senegalese PM Ousmane Sonko questions French military presence. *FRANCE 24*., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtP1imOhvr4

Stiglitz, J.E. (2024, September 9). Play by the Rules: No longer the sole hegemon, the United States faces global issues that require global cooperation. *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/09/us-global-order-wto-rules-trade-industrial-policy-technology/

Tierney Jr, J.J. (2020, August 31). Polarities We Have Known. *The Institute of World Politics*. https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2020/08/31/polarities-we-have-known/

Todd, E. (2024). *La Defaite de l'Occident* (ch. 11, carte 11.2: "Le taux de patrilinearite dans le monde"). Editions Gallimard.

Von Leyden, W. (1967). Aristotle and the Concept of Law. *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy,* XLII, no. 159 (January), 1–19.

Waldron, J. (2023). The Rule of Law. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/rule-of-law/

Waltz, K.N. (1964). The Stability of a Bipolar World. *Daedalus*, *93*(3), 881-909. https://www.rochelleterman.com/ir/sites/default/files/waltz%201964.pdf

Wintour, P. (2024, October 23). Putin returns to world stage hosting 36 leaders at Brics summit in Russia. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/oct/22/putin-brics-summit-russia-china-india-iran-kazan