

CURRENT HISTORY

November 2009

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Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?

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A report titled *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, issued last year by the US National Intelligence Council, advises us that a multipolar world—that is, a world characterized by multiple centers of power—is gradually emerging. The report attributes this to “the rise of emerging powers, a globalizing economy, an historic transfer of relative wealth and economic power from west to east, and the growing influence of non-state actors.” Given these trends, it seems appropriate to ask whether a diffusion of power is indeed occurring, why we should care if it is, and what the implications may be for international politics.

The description of the present structure of world power as “unipolar”—a characterization that emerged quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that has gained wide currency since—remains difficult to dispute, even now. The United States still enjoys a very comfortable margin of superiority over other nations in both military power and the economic underpinnings that make those capabilities possible. Additionally, America has the global diplomatic and military presence—and the diplomatic and military skills—necessary to manage and sustain a truly global foreign policy, if not always successfully. No other nation-state can do so at this time. It is difficult for the moment to envision a plausible combination of nation-states that could truly stand against the United States in a hot war (whatever that would look like under present conditions), or even sustain the costs of a cold war.

The *Global Trends 2025* finding that unipolarity is on the wane, to be slowly replaced by multipolarity, is premised on the notion that polarity matters. The notion of polarity as an important causal variable emerges from the realist school of international relations. Realist theory depicts international politics as a self-help system. With no sovereign to adjudicate disputes and impose settlements, each actor must look to its own interests relative to those of others. Each state can, if it has the power, despoil or conquer others. Thus each looks to its own capabilities relative to the others in order to defend itself.

Realists observe that the structure of world power has followed various patterns at various times and believe that these patterns naturally have consequences: Since security is the preeminent issue in an anarchic world, the distribution of capabilities to attack and defend should matter. Some base this belief on observation, others on deduction. Regardless, it is important to remember that structural realism is a theory of environmental constraints and incentives. Structures constrain. They push and they pull. The combination of global anarchy and the distribution of capabilities creates fields of force that *affect* all the states in the system but do not *determine* anything.

Different international structures do appear, however, to encourage different patterns of behavior. Modern international politics has mainly been a multipolar affair, featuring a handful of states with significant capabilities, all of them warily watching one another. During the cold war, we saw for the first time in modern history a bipolar structure of power, which lasted perhaps four decades.

The post-cold war world has seen an equally rare unipolar structure of power, which now

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seems unlikely to last longer than the cold war's bipolar order lasted. Current discourse seems to expect that the structure of power will, if anything, revert quickly to bipolarity with the rise of China. It seems plausible, however, that a prolonged period of multipolarity will occur before bipolarity reemerges, if indeed it ever does.

MEASURING POWER

Although political science strives for objective measures of power, they are elusive. In international politics it is the powerful who measure relative power, and their assessments, though not fully auditable, are the ones that matter. This is not to say that statesmen spend their days speculating on the polarity of the international system they inhabit. Rather, they respond to the constraints and possibilities they perceive. Over time their behaviors tell us which powers they believe matter, and why.

Two examples serve to demonstrate the disjunction between seemingly objective measures of polarity and statesmen's behaviors. The Soviet Union was only barely in the league of the United States for most of the cold war in terms of economic capacity, yet we think of the era as a bipolar order. Likewise, the United States was far and away the most economically capable state in the international system on the eve of World War II, yet we view that period as one of multipolarity.

Analysts typically measure polarity by the distribution of states' capabilities, but capabilities can be imminent or latent, and patterns of political behavior can deviate from seemingly objective measures. And polarity is not synonymous with equality. In any given historical period there seems to be a murky threshold that separates most nation-states from the handful that constitute the great powers. The great powers themselves vary in their capabilities.

Since the industrial revolution, military power has depended on the economic power from which it is distilled. Yet most states typically do not distill as much as, in extremis, they could. The Second World War showed what industrial powers can do when they really care, with the United States spending roughly 40 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on the war effort at its peak, and other combatants spending an even greater share. Peacetime expenditures seldom rise to this level. The United

States, the most powerful war machine of World War II, had distilled very little before the war.

Today the United States uses 4 to 5 percent of its GDP for military purposes. None of the other major powers allocates this much, though some could. America's high propensity to distill, compared to that of the rest of the world, contributes substantially to the current pattern of politics that we describe as unipolar. Yet it is plausible that fiscal imbalances will over the next 10 or 15 years require a significant reduction in the share of GDP that the United States devotes to military spending.

The existence of a bipolar world during the cold war was seldom questioned, but in retrospect one marvels a bit that the Soviet Union stayed in the game as long as it did. Its latent power—its GDP—only briefly surpassed half that of the United States. The Soviets simply distilled a greater percentage of their economic capacity into military power. This effort probably helped drive the Soviet economy into its ultimate downward spiral. By the early 1980s even Japan's economic output surpassed that of the Soviet Union. The world was bipolar, but the Soviet grip on its position was not very firm.

The last multipolar world also looks quite unequal

when economic power, which translates into latent war potential, is examined. Various measures of economic capability and war potential in the late 1930s show the United States to be wildly superior to other great powers. This world was multipolar because the United States spent a tiny percentage of its wealth on military power, and involved itself only haltingly and episodically in relations among the great powers in Europe and Asia. (We should also note that once the United States did mobilize for war, the capabilities of the "balancing" coalition—America, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union—dwarfed those of the Axis powers; yet the reversal of German and Japanese gains proved a difficult, costly, bloody, and time-consuming business.)

So history tells us that equal capabilities are not required for states and statesmen to treat each other as important strategic actors. Nor can we easily predict what ratios of material power will induce them to do so. All we can suggest is that the cold war, when it ended, left the world with a very skewed distribution of capabilities—unipo-

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larity, which does seem to have led to a distinct pattern of international politics. That distribution of power seems destined to change over the next several decades, and I suspect at some point we will begin to see a different, distinct pattern of international politics.

BIPOLAR AND UNIPOLAR

Putting aside real-world strategic factors such as geography and military technology, different systems of polarity should produce different patterns of behavior. Kenneth Waltz famously argued for the stability of the bipolar world, though some of that stability probably arose from matters beyond his abstract depiction of the system. The two major powers in a bipolar system face no security threats remotely as significant as each other. They can find no allies in the world that can consequentially alter the balance of power with the other. The prediction then is that they are obsessed with one another's behavior, internally and externally. Because allies do not add much, the superpowers focus on "internal balancing." They are obsessed with their relative economic and technical prowess, but more specifically they focus on the military balance.

Despite the arithmetical fact that, for the two powers in a bipolar system, allies do not add much capacity relative to the other major power, each power carefully watches the other's external behavior just in case an external move produces an improvement in the other's overall power position. Even gains that are not very cumulative are presumed to be cumulative, unless and until proven otherwise. Thus peripheries disappear.

Finally, because the two watch each other so carefully, one expects their understanding of the power balance, and of the costs of war, to be quite good at any given time. Since they do not depend much on allies for their power, miscalculations about relative power associated with the possible defection of allies are minimized. Although Waltz contended that all this made the bipolar world stable, its short duration suggests otherwise. In fact, bipolarity is a system of chronic overreaction, internal and external. In retrospect it seems that such a structure was destined to exhaust one or both of the players. That it did not erupt in war may be attributable to the fact that the structure of power provided limited scope for miscalculation of power and interest; or it may be a function of the nuclear balance, or a combination.

Although some predicted the demise of one or the other superpower, theorists did not anticipate the unipolar world. Scholars had to figure it out as it unfolded. The United States is the only "unipole" we have ever seen, and it is difficult when evaluating predictions regarding the unipolar world to distinguish between deductions from realist theory and observations of what has actually occurred.

Different schools of realism would offer different predictions for unipolarity. "Offensive realists" would expect the single pole to try to take advantage of its moment of superiority to consolidate that moment: In an anarchical world, permanent top-dog status provides as much security as one can reasonably expect. "Defensive realists" expected the United States to lose its interest in international politics, and simply do less. The structure of power offers no imminent threat, so why divert significant resources from consumption to foreign affairs, including war?

What has actually transpired deviates somewhat from the predictions of both schools. The unipole has thrown its weight around as the offensive realists would expect, and has tried to shape the system according to its perceived interests. On the other hand, lacking the discipline provided by an imminent threat, the United States has engaged abroad capriciously, and with limited energy, which the defensive realists might expect.

Other powers could not make heads or tails of the American orientation. Close and capable cold war allies—NATO, Europe, and Japan—feared that Washington would do too little or do too much, abandon them or drag them into adventures. Broadly speaking, they hugged the United States close and simultaneously hedged against its exit, even as they tried, however haltingly and unsuccessfully, to discipline US behavior. Other middle powers worried more about an excess of US energy, and have done what they could to throw monkey wrenches in the works. Their weakness, however, has constrained their efforts and induced caution.

These patterns of behavior make sense from a realist perspective. They are consistent with a unipole that finds many opportunities in the international system, but little necessity. Other powers are forced to focus on the unipole's real and potential behavior, but they have few options to address either. Nevertheless, they try.

THE MULTIPOLAR MOMENT

Theorists and historians know multipolarity better than they do the other two structures of

power, but there are no active statesmen today with experience of a multipolar system. The relatively equal distribution of capabilities in a multipolar world, with three or more consequential powers, produces one basic pattern of behavior: The arithmetic of coalitions influences matters great and small. The overall balance of capabilities, and the military balance in particular, are easily altered in a significant way depending on who sides with whom. Internal efforts cannot accomplish nearly as much change, at such a low cost, in such a short time.

Thus states are slower to react to others' internal military developments, because allies can be had to redress the balance. In a multipolar system, states should lack confidence that significant military buildups can help them much, because other states can combine against them. Autonomous military power does remain important, and states will look to their own military capabilities, but diminishing returns should set in sooner than they would in other structures of power.

Diplomacy becomes a respected career again under multipolarity. Hans Morgenthau, a great admirer of multipolarity, was also a great admirer of diplomacy. Isolation is perhaps the most dangerous situation in multipolarity, so states will pay close and constant attention to the game of coalition building. They will try to find and secure allies for themselves, and will eye warily the efforts of others to do the same. All will try to improve their own coalitions and erode those of others.

If indeed the distribution of capabilities among great powers is slowly evolving toward multipolarity, what behaviors might we predict? As we try to say something about real matters in a real world, a problem quickly emerges: Other facts of the case begin to complicate our analysis, even if we stick largely to security matters. The United States is buffered by oceans from much of the world's traditional security competition and remains well endowed with the human and material resources to go it alone. Indeed, many of the world's consequential powers are buffered by geography from one another. All but two of the consequential powers possess significant nuclear forces, which makes them difficult to conquer or even coerce. Japan and Germany are excluded from the nuclear club, but could enter it quickly.

Arguably, even among great powers, a close examination of conventional capabilities might show an emerging "defense dominant" world. It seems plausible that, among proximate techno-

logical, economic, and social equals, an ongoing revolution in military information technology—including surveillance and precision targeting—will make it harder to attack than to defend. It should be more difficult to take ground than to hold it, and more challenging to cross oceans with men and materiel and land them on a hostile shore than to prevent amphibious attack. All of these factors, added to a somewhat more equitable distribution of military power, should tend to mute great power military competition.

Some competition for power is to be expected, however. The experience of the United States as the unipole should be a cautionary one—an extremely secure state nevertheless reached out to expand its power and influence. A great deal of American behavior overseas was elicited by some combination of fear about the future and temptation presented by a power vacuum. We can expect national security establishments to worry about the future: So long as anarchy permits predation, they will ensure against the possibility.

Uncertainty about power relationships also will remain. States in normal times may distill economic power into military power at only a fraction of the level they could achieve under other conditions, and none can truly know the others' possible energy or efficiency to distill in the future. Thus, they will seek some comfort margin in the military capabilities that matter most to them, which will in turn discomfit others.

Moreover, some natural resources will seem scarce. Even if market-oriented states eschew direct control of foreign production, they will wish to maintain privileged influence over these producers, as we have seen in the case of energy supplies. States also will continue to worry about the strategic value of key geographic features, locally and globally. All members of the system likely will continue to compete, therefore, to improve their position and simultaneously undermine that of their brothers and sisters.

THE DIFFUSION OF POWER

The emerging era's great powers, beyond their direct concerns with one another, are likely to face a phenomenon that some are calling "the diffusion of power." This concept remains a bit airy but it encompasses several trends that appear to be real and meaningful. First, despite Western military-technological prowess, the gap appears to be narrowing between the great powers' military capabilities and those of middle powers, small

states, and non-state groups that choose to oppose them—at least when it comes to military forces pertinent to conquest and occupation.

One reason for this was the collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, which permitted a vast outflow of infantry weapons. At the same time, some of the former Soviet republics and East European Warsaw Pact states inherited arms production capabilities in search of markets. China will soon begin to produce and export moderately sophisticated military equipment. In addition, some new producers have entered the market, with Iran perhaps the most noteworthy. More states are able to make medium-quality military equipment than has previously been the case. This has the effect of making small states and non-state actors more independent of great power influence than they once were, and more able to inflict costs on great powers that attack them.

Military skill also seems to have diffused. The spread of literacy and the freer flow of people, goods, and information associated with globalization may permit states and non-state groups that are willing to fight larger powers to share lessons and improve their overall military expertise. Moreover, across the developing world, weapons and expertise can be combined with significant numbers of motivated young men. The upshot is that great powers may have to pay a higher premium to push the smaller ones around than has been true in the recent past.

Although comparison is tricky, it is striking that the Americans' effort in Iraq has been about as time-consuming and costly in dollar terms as their effort in Vietnam, and the adversary in Iraq did not have a superpower patron, or even a particularly good cross-border sanctuary. The United States did deploy many fewer people for the Iraq operation than it did in Vietnam, and suffered fewer deaths. A comparison of overall casualties, however, awaits clearer information about the range and duration of less visible physical and psychological injuries that US forces have suffered. The less visible human costs appear to be significant.

The diffusion of power has another meaning. Across much of the developing world, central governments weakened more or less as the cold war ended. Pakistan is only the scariest example. Weakening central governments may find them-

selves at war with domestic political factions, or as willing or unwilling hosts to violent non-state actors. Even before the Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the great powers were uneasy about these weak or failing states. They loathed the human rights violations that are a hallmark of civil war. And they feared the negative externalities of refugee flows and criminal enterprises. The 9/11 attacks added a concern that these poorly governed spaces would prove hospitable to terrorist groups. Most great power military intervention since the end of the cold war has been driven by the problem of weakened central governments.

Finally, there is particularly great concern about states that are capable enough to build advanced weapons, especially nuclear weapons, but nevertheless weak enough to risk collapse and the loss of control over said weapons. Pakistan is again the most troubling example. The diffusion of power in this case thus creates a strange combination—major threats to the safety of the strong emanating from the weak.

In such an environment, we can expect that the great powers will continue to view the developing world as a source of security threats, meriting intervention. But not all great powers in a multipolar system will agree on

any given project, so some will view the “defensive” projects of others as having ulterior motives. Some states will have an incentive to hinder the efforts of their peers to pacify ungoverned spaces. Their direct interest may be engaged, or the intervention may prove a tempting opportunity to “bleed” other great powers. Their capabilities to do so will improve, particularly given the growing military skill of the indigenous peoples they can assist. States organizing interventions will therefore be very concerned about costs. They will seek allies to spread the costs around, and will attempt to dissuade others from helping the locals.

PERSISTENT COMPETITION

What general patterns of great power behavior could emerge in a multipolar environment, based on the situation discussed above? First, the competition for power is likely to persist, though this is more a statement of general realist religious conviction than an inference from the multipolar structure of power. Second, because of “defense

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dominance,” the pattern of competition will look much like an endless series of games played for small stakes. States will want more, but will not wish to court disaster.

Third, and consequently, states will look for ways to “measure power” without war. The diplomacy of making and breaking coalitions, and counting allies, will present itself as an attractive, if complex, alternative. Fourth, competitors likely will believe that the safe way to improve one’s relative position is to pursue policies that weaken others. Increasing others’ costs when they undertake initiatives will seem wiser than undertaking one’s own adventures. John Mearsheimer’s “bait and bleed” strategies may become more common.

Fifth, the diffusion of power will continue to seduce great power adventures. Yet the capabilities of local actors, and the potential intervention, even if indirect, of other great powers, will raise the potential costs of those adventures. Therefore, these projects too will increase the importance of other powers. Diplomacy will be required to discourage opposition, encourage alliance, or at least elicit neutrality. Sixth, in general, geography may matter more. If capabilities are more equal, states will have to make harder choices about the kinds of military power they generate. Land powers will be land powers, and sea powers will be sea powers, and thus to tilt with each other they will require allies of the other type.

THE QUESTION OF STABILITY

The transition from bipolarity to unipolarity was marked by dramatic events. Perhaps the intense nature of the bipolar competition naturally led to a stark finish of one kind or another: a preventive war, or a national collapse. Unipolarity seems destined for a different kind of transition. The United States has many attributes that contribute to its power advantage and its security, and that have made the world unipolar. It seems unlikely that all of these advantages would suddenly disappear. Direct competition with the United States will appear daunting for quite some time to come.

The costs of US efforts to make the world over in its image, relative to the benefits of such efforts, will ultimately begin to tell, however. America will gradually be inclined to do less. At the same time, uneven growth will alter the basic balance of capabilities among the principal powers. The American capability advantage in economic power will diminish, and concomitantly its advantage in

military power will likely narrow. As this occurs, the other principal powers will find themselves better able to tilt with the United States, but also more dependent on themselves. A multipolar order may gradually creep up on us, rather than emerge with a crash.

Many theorists have debated whether one kind of power structure is more “stable” than another. But definitions of stability are fluid. Some mean peace, others mean only the absence of great war, and still others merely mean persistence. Some believe multipolarity is more stable, while others assert the stability of bipolar worlds.

We have experienced long periods of relative peace in multipolar systems. Some scholars refer to the period between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the outbreak of the First World War as the “hundred years’ peace.” In that time crises erupted and major powers fought limited wars, but no truly great war took place. That period was, of course, followed by a bloodbath.

The bipolar era lasted a little less than half a century, and no superpower war occurred. But the cold war was characterized by vast military spending, numerous dangerous crises, horrendous proxy wars, and a nuclear arms race that left tens of thousands of warheads on both sides, an absurd accumulation of destructive power. It also probably exhausted the Soviet Union.

The National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2025* report warns that multipolar systems are “more unstable than bipolar or unipolar systems.” This sentence is difficult to decode. I find it more accurate to speak simply of the differences among these systems. Bipolarity is a tightly coupled, simple, and intensely competitive system. Opportunities for creative expansionists are few, but life is very tense. Multipolarity is complex, flexible, and full of options, and these very qualities seduce the creative expansionist into a search for opportunities, which occasionally exist.

Unipolarity is still the least understood structure of power. Leadership by a single very great power with an incentive to manage the system limits competition among the others through a combination of deterrence and reassurance, but we do not have a good sense of just how superior that power needs to be to sustain this happy outcome. If multipolarity is indeed on the horizon, all I can suggest is that the pattern of international politics ahead will likely be quite different from that of the past 65 years. ■