WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT MULTIPOLARITY?

Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI)



COMEXI
Consejo Mexicano
de Asuntos Internacionales

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« Pour qu'on ne puisse abuser du pouvoir, il faut que, par la disposition des choses, le pouvoir arrête le pouvoir. »

To prevent the abuse of power, it is necessary that by the very disposition of things power should be a check to power.

— Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Book XI, chapter 4

« Et ainsi ne pouvant faire que ce qui est juste fût fort, on a fait que ce qui est fort fût juste. »

So, not being able to make what is just powerful, we have made what is powerful just.

— Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, fragment 298, Brunschvicg numbering

A world with more centers of power may still leave most countries with little power over their future. The rise of additional powers can widen the choice of partners without improving the terms on which others must deal with them. It can restrain a dominant state while weakening the institutions that restrain everyone. It can thwart the political objectives of a superpower, without creating the conditions for effective cooperation to achieve shared goals. These possibilities give the debate over multipolarity its urgency. What matters is how the redistribution of power changes the prospects for a workable order, and whose freedom of action that order protects.

COMEXI convened this volume to examine what different observers mean when they invoke multipolarity and where and why they disagree. Read together, the contributions expose a series of connected challenges that run through those meanings: how greater capabilities become effective autonomy, how influence acquires legitimate authority, and how states cooperate when they disagree about the rules. These conversions are uncertain. Economic growth does not confer an equivalent voice in international institutions. Recognition as a sovereign state offers no guarantee against coercion. A shared interest in avoiding disaster may prove insufficient to organize a common response.

The question of how order emerges in the global setting therefore must include the conditions of its stability. An arrangement may endure because it accommodates competing interests, or because the costs of challenging it are prohibitive. Distribution of power may remain broadly unchanged while repeated crises make everyday cooperation precarious. We should ask whether an emerging order can absorb disputes in one area without allowing them to disable cooperation elsewhere. The space for such cooperation depends partly on whether governments can negotiate over a particular problem without making agreement conditional on the settlement of every other grievance. These are some of the key questions our authors address.

From the perspective of a Mexican institution like COMEXI, gaining a deeper and more clear-eyed understanding of multipolarity today is congruent with Mexico's history of engagement with power. It hasn't always gone well. The nineteenth century was formative of Mexico's foreign policy outlook. From its moment of independence, the country's foreign policy had to embrace the complexity and risk of dealing with great powers. Some preeminent (Britain), others in steep decline (Spain), and others that contested the world order (France, and later Germany). It also had to deal with a northern neighbor that embraced a manifest destiny that would transform it first into a great continental power, and by the turn of the century into a global power. Situated as it was on the outskirts of the Pax Britannica, Mexico experienced something very close to multipolarity in its first century of independent life. The lessons learned by its leaders of that era proved valuable, and costly. Even before much of international law was codified, Mexican foreign policy saw in it a measure of protection. It formulated a series of doctrines (Juárez, Carranza, Estrada) that established the basis of foreign policy on legal principles, later codified in the constitution. In practice, Mexico also sought a diversified engagement with the world. Investment came from Britain, France, Germany, and of course the United States. Diplomatic links were established far and wide. Mexico's traditional foreign policy is not of neutrality —it fought in WWII on the side of the allies, nor is it strictly of nonalignment— although it did belong to the group of 77 from 1964 to 1994, it rejoined in 2023. During the cold war it was very clearly on the side of the West. Yet on many occasions Mexico

opposed US foreign policy actions —especially in Latin America— and maintained close dialogue with the Soviet Union and its allies. Today, a better way of characterizing it is as a foreign policy of multiple belongings: North America, Latin America, OECD, APEC, but also Global South; a foreign policy anchored in principles, pragmatic enough to interpret them flexibly, ready to dissent when dissent is warranted; and a foreign policy that is very clearheaded about its "reach and limitations" as Ojeda (1976) put it.

For such a country, understanding what multipolarity means today, its associated risks and opportunities, and the limits to the benefits that countries can create, seems important.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?

Let's start at the very beginning with the question of how much the international system has changed. The authors disagree. Their differences are valuable because they reveal distinct understandings of power and the evidence needed to assess it. The introduction provides a guide to those arguments. This preface considers what follows when they confront one another.

Miguel Ruiz Cabañas Izquierdo establishes a necessary starting point: the rise of other powers can constrain the United States even as American capabilities remain formidable. Relative redistribution is compatible with continued growth and innovation in the strongest state. His comparison of the major powers also shows why aggregate rankings can mislead. Russia's military reach and Europe's regulatory influence rest on very different foundations. Their strengths cannot simply be added up as though an arsenal and a reserve currency were interchangeable assets.

Ivan Timofeev, Alexandra Terzi, and Anna Korzun sharpen this problem through their account of asynchronous multipolarity. Military power, finance, and other domains change at different speeds. In their assessment, credible deterrence and resistance to intervention already preclude military hegemony, whereas dollar-centered finance preserves a much more concentrated hierarchy. Ruiz Cabañas emphasizes America's unmatched global military projection. Timofeev and his colleagues emphasize the limits on what that projection can achieve. The two assessments direct attention to different tests: the capacity to deploy force and the capacity to secure political results. This is a particularly important distinction as we witness the limits of military superiority to achieve political goals in the Middle East.

This distinction reaches beyond military affairs. Preventing another state from imposing its preferences is a form of power. Organizing a durable alternative requires something more. A coalition may block an agreement without being able to write one that its own members will accept. The proliferation

of actors with the means to resist can consequently advance faster than the ability to govern together. That gap helps explain why greater plurality may coincide with institutional paralysis.

M. Javad Zarif and Sasan Karimi challenge the assumption that these changes must culminate in another polar system. They argue that corporations and transnational networks have acquired sufficient independent agency to undermine the state-centered foundations of polarity. Their post-polar order represents a relatively durable configuration, rather than an unfinished passage toward a new balance among great powers. This is a disagreement about the architecture of international politics, not merely its timetable.

The conceptual grounds deserve scrutiny. How much control must states exercise over economic and technological resources for those resources to count as national power? Does corporate autonomy weaken the state, or can governments turn private networks into instruments of influence? Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman (2019) show how states with jurisdiction over central nodes in global networks can exploit those positions for coercion, provided they possess the domestic institutions to do so. Networked power can strengthen particular states even as it redistributes agency beyond governments. Their argument complicates any inference from more private actors to less state power.

Camilo Jaimes Poveda brings this tension into focus through digital infrastructure. His account of competing technological systems connects firms to national strategies while tracing the dependencies they create abroad. Read alongside Zarif and Karimi, it suggests a research question with practical consequences: when do governments direct the networks on which they depend, and when must they bargain with their owners? Answering it requires examining actual decisions over access, investment, and regulation. Counting companies or countries will not settle the issue.

Competing projects of multipolarity – sovereignty, development, and legitimate difference

Disagreement about the location of power leads to a second question: what purposes should a more plural distribution serve? Han Hua places development at the center of her account. China's modernization experience informs a conception of order in which productive capacity supports security and gives countries greater room to choose their future. Her idea of structured coexistence extends this argument to different political and civilizational traditions sharing international institutions. The claim is consequential: material redistribution cannot exhaust the meaning of plurality if one historical path to modernity retains an exclusive claim to legitimacy.

Han's argument intersects with the emphasis that Timofeev and his colleagues place on sovereignty and a distinctive conception of world order. Yet recognizing the autonomy of a major power does not establish how it will treat the autonomy of its neighbors. Abdessalam Jaldi's account from the Global South makes this tension difficult to overlook. His critical assessment of Russian territorial ambition sits uneasily beside RIAC's presentation of a decentralized Eurasian security framework. These contributions cannot be reconciled simply by observing that both favor a more plural world. They raise a dispute over whose sovereignty the proposed order would secure.

Jaldi also complicates the equation of sovereignty with freedom from external constraint. His discussion of Europe explains how governments can acquire influence by exercising certain powers jointly. Shared rules may limit unilateral action while increasing the capacity to achieve national objectives. This matters especially for weaker states, whose formal independence can coexist with very limited bargaining power. Their assessment of an institution may depend less on how much discretion it demands than on whether it gives them an effective means of contesting decisions made by stronger actors.

The normative dispute extends to the relationship between diversity and accountability. Han acknowledges that civilizational pluralism cannot provide a blanket defense against scrutiny. Jaldi connects reform to human rights and more inclusive development. Jaimes Poveda anchors his analysis in democratic institutions while examining digital sovereignty's uses for information control. Together, these arguments invite a distinction between a government's ability to resist foreign pressure and a society's ability to hold its own authorities accountable. Greater state autonomy does not settle the second question. A credible account of legitimate order must address both.

Marianna Albuquerque explains why these competing claims cannot be separated from institutional strategy. Multipolarity is also a political narrative through which governments seek recognition and renegotiate authority. Her legitimacy gap identifies a mismatch between inherited governance structures and the actors whose participation has become increasingly important. That gap can motivate reform, although dissatisfaction with existing arrangements supplies no common blueprint. Brazil's purposes within BRICS differ from Russia's; neither can be inferred from a generalized Southern position.

Antonio Villafranca and Giovanni Maria Della Gatta show how institutional design gives these disputes practical force. Their examination of the IMF and World Bank traces the difficulty of revising arrangements whose beneficiaries can resist losing influence. The WTO presents a different problem: formal equality and consensus procedures can coexist with obstruction. The comparison is instructive. Broader representation may address one source of illegitimacy while leaving the capacity to reach and enforce decisions unresolved.

Albuquerque makes the trade-off visible in her treatment of the G7 and G20. A smaller group may coordinate effectively while lacking a convincing claim to represent others. A broader forum may possess that claim yet struggle to act. Villafranca and Della Gatta add that institutions must be judged by the ambition of their commitments as well as compliance with them. Agreement becomes easier when little is promised. An institution can survive on paper while its capacity to solve problems contracts.

From greater representation to workable governance

The contributors offer different expectations about whether new arrangements can close the effectiveness gaps that plague our current international arrangements. Han stresses the scope for development banks and overlapping partnerships to supplement existing institutions. Timofeev and his colleagues see advantages in flexible groups that avoid the demands of comprehensive alignment. Villafranca and Della Gatta are more skeptical: smaller forums can reproduce the conflicts that disable larger ones. Albuquerque's analysis suggests that overlapping institutions will remain a contested feature of governance, with no single format resolving the tension between inclusion and effectiveness.

These differences call for empirical work. Development banks should be compared by the additional financing they mobilize and the capabilities their projects leave behind. Coalition performance should be assessed against implementation, including whether cooperation survives a dispute among important members. Researchers also need to distinguish institutions that enable agreement from those that attract states already disposed to agree. Membership growth or a succession of summit declarations cannot establish that a new forum has improved the prospects for cooperation.

Robert Keohane's (1984) account of cooperation after hegemony remains useful here. Institutions can help self-interested governments cooperate even when a dominant power's position has weakened. His argument leaves room for arrangements that make decentralized cooperation worthwhile. The chapters assembled here press us to examine whether that room is expanding or shrinking in particular fields. A government might accept cooperation on a shared infrastructure problem while rejecting the broader political commitments sought by its partner. Such limited agreements can matter, provided they remain credible when relations deteriorate.

There is a danger, however, in making flexibility the answer to every institutional failure. Governments with ample resources can choose among forums, sustain several negotiations at once, and withdraw when the terms become inconvenient. Smaller states may lack that capacity. Villafranca and

Della Gatta's warning about unequal freedom is therefore central: the erosion of common rules can free the strongest actors while removing the weaker ones' means of defense. The effects of fragmentation must be assessed from both positions.

For Latin America, this shifts the discussion toward the conditions under which additional external options become usable. Jaimes Poveda argues that access to technology can deepen dependence when a country remains a consumer of systems designed and controlled elsewhere. Han, by contrast, emphasizes the opportunities that diversified partnerships can create, while expressly recognizing the danger of replacing one dependency with another. The practical question connecting their accounts is whether outside investment increases local capability enough to improve future choices.

Infrastructure makes that question concrete. An additional supplier may improve bargaining conditions today. If its systems cannot be replaced at an affordable cost, the initial gain can diminish over time. A government must understand contractual obligations and the technical requirements of switching providers before it can judge the value of diversification. Jaimes Poveda's selective approach to technological autonomy is persuasive precisely because it requires choices about where scarce resources can make a consequential difference.

These considerations are at the forefront of dilemmas faced by Global South countries today as they negotiate their relationships with the West and the East. But perhaps they also extend to Europe and the Indo-Pacific. They lead to an implementation agenda that the volume suggests as a critical element for understanding the concrete implications of multipolarity in practice. A foreign ministry may negotiate a promising partnership, yet its value will depend on decisions taken elsewhere in government. Procurement officials need the expertise to assess long-term costs. Regulators must be able to enforce conditions against powerful suppliers. Finance ministries must sustain investments whose returns extend beyond an electoral term. Without coordination, one agency's effort to reduce dependence can be undone by another's purchasing decision.

Subnational institutions also shape the outcome. A municipality procuring a digital service can enter commitments that affect the security and portability of public data. Universities need stable support if technology agreements are to produce domestic expertise. Public authorities must cooperate with firms while retaining the ability to judge their performance and resist demands for permanent protection. Extending Jaimes Poveda's argument, strategic autonomy requires administrative competence and mechanisms through which failed policies can be corrected. Announcing a national ambition supplies neither.

Elinor Ostrom's (2010) work on polycentric governance offers a useful point of comparison. Her research examines how multiple centers of

decision-making can govern complex problems through institutional arrangements suited to different scales. Its relevance here lies in the possibility of coordinating authority without concentrating every decision in one organization. Applied to the questions raised by this volume, that perspective directs attention to the connections between domestic agencies and international cooperation. It does not establish that a multipolar world will govern itself successfully.

For states with very limited resources, even a selective national strategy may exceed available capacity. Regional cooperation could make specialist regulatory expertise affordable or strengthen bargaining over shared infrastructure. Such arrangements would need agreed funding and workable procedures for resolving disputes. They would also need to prevent the largest regional member from appropriating the benefits. Pooling capacity can widen effective autonomy, but its distribution within the group matters as much as the group's position abroad.

Albuquerque's analysis of Brazil adds a diplomatic qualification. A bridging role depends on whether others regard the prospective intermediary as credible. Participation in several forums creates access; it does not guarantee trust. This insight applies beyond Brazil. Governments seeking greater influence must be able to explain their positions consistently and carry out the commitments they make. Domestic institutions that preserve competence across political changes can thus become a source of external influence. Diplomatic flexibility loses value if partners cannot distinguish it from unreliability.

These capabilities are themselves distributed unequally. Countries better equipped to negotiate complex agreements may capture more of the gains from a wider choice of partners. The result could be greater differentiation among developing countries, even as their collective economic weight rises. Jaldi's emphasis on development and the concerns of Villafranca and Della Gatta converge here. A more inclusive order must be assessed partly by what it does for countries that cannot readily turn new opportunities into influence. Representation without the resources to participate can remain largely formal.

The value of reading these chapters together lies in the questions they make harder to evade. Ruiz Cabañas and the RIAC authors require a more precise account of what different capabilities can accomplish. Zarif and Karimi challenge the assumption that those capabilities remain adequately understood through states. Han asks how different paths of development can coexist within a shared order. The institutional and regional contributions expose the conditions under which those ambitions can be sustained. None of these inquiries can substitute for the others.

Several conclusions follow without requiring agreement on a final label for the system. Greater plurality can coexist with entrenched hierarchy. The ability to frustrate another actor's designs can spread faster than the ability to organize cooperation. New partners can expand opportunities while creating

dependencies that narrow later choices. These possibilities make the quality of institutions and governing capabilities central to the consequences of redistribution.

They also leave a demanding research agenda. We need to know when private networks constrain governments and when they extend state power. We need evidence that institutional alternatives improve outcomes for their members, especially the less powerful ones. Claims for sovereign equality must be tested against the treatment of states that lack the means to enforce them. The authors provide different starting points for that work; their disagreements help identify what would count as a convincing answer.

For COMEXI, bringing these perspectives together is an invitation to examine international change from a position that includes those living with decisions made elsewhere. Mexico and other countries seeking greater room for action have an interest in an order that permits disagreement without making cooperation exceptional. Their prospects depend on the constraints stronger powers accept and on the capabilities they themselves build. The promise of multipolarity should ultimately be judged by whether countries with limited power gain a durable ability to shape the decisions that affect their societies.

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Introduction

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Multipolarity as a question

The word multipolarity can make agreement seem easier than it is. Governments that use it to describe the international system may hold quite different views about who should exercise power and how that power should be constrained. Scholars, too, can agree that the world has changed while disagreeing about the nature of the change. For some, the term identifies a redistribution of capabilities among states. Others hear a demand for recognition, a defense of sovereignty, or an aspiration to a more representative international order. These meanings frequently accompany one another in diplomatic language, where the distinction between describing the world and expressing a preference for its future is often left unresolved.

The project *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Multipolarity?* began with that ambiguity in mind. The Mexican Council on Foreign Relations invited scholars, analysts, and practitioners to examine a concept whose growing prominence had produced little agreement about its implications. The call for papers asked whether multipolarity describes a structural condition, serves as a strategic discourse, or captures some combination of hegemonic decline and institutional adaptation. It sought regionally grounded perspectives while leaving contributors free to question the assumptions embedded in the term. Among its guiding questions was the possibility that changes in technology, non-state power, and regional cooperation might eventually make other concepts more useful. The inquiry was open from the outset.

The responses reveal disagreements that reach well beyond the number of great powers. Contributors differ over the relationship between material resources and political influence, the durability of hierarchy, and the capacity of states to control the networks on which their power increasingly depends. Several describe a process of multipolarization, qualified as asymmetric, incomplete, or asynchronous. Other chapters devote more attention

to the institutions and political projects associated with that process. Zarif and Karimi challenge the organizing concept itself by arguing that the contemporary system has acquired a post-polar character. An editorial definition imposed across these contributions would obscure much of what makes them worth reading together. The volume therefore leaves their differences visible and asks what can be learned from them. A claim about the diffusion of military power may sit uneasily beside an account of financial concentration. An argument for greater sovereign autonomy may encounter another that emphasizes dependence on transnational networks. Such tensions allow readers to examine the assumptions behind each interpretation and to consider how those assumptions affect judgments about international order. The purpose is to clarify the terms of a consequential debate while preserving the possibility that its central question has several defensible answers.

A world of redistributed power

The experience of the post-Cold War period provides a common point of departure. During the 1990s, the United States combined military reach, economic scale, technological capacity, and institutional influence to an extent that no other state could match. The language of a unipolar moment captured that concentration. It also belonged to a wider expectation that expanding markets and Western-led institutions would encourage convergence across the international system. The subsequent erosion of that expectation provides the setting for the debate examined here. China's rise occupies a central place in every serious account of this transformation, although the contributors assign different significance to its industrial, technological, military, and institutional dimensions. Their discussions also give considerable weight to India, Russia, the European Union, and regional powers whose influence is more selective. Coalitions such as BRICS provide additional settings for cooperation, while regional organizations and development institutions have enlarged the range of relationships through which states pursue their interests. Alongside these developments, technological firms, financial actors, and research networks possess capabilities that complicate the familiar practice of locating international power primarily within states. The resulting picture contains several kinds of redistribution occurring at once.

Miguel Ruiz Cabañas's opening chapter cautions against interpreting these changes as evidence of inexorable American decline. His argument places greater emphasis on the rise of other actors and the resulting constraints on U.S. predominance. Washington retains an exceptional combination of financial centrality, military projection, technological capacity, and alliances, even as it encounters more consequential resistance to its preferences.

The distinction between relative change and absolute decline is essential to the volume. A country can continue to grow and innovate while losing some of its share of global capabilities. It can also remain the strongest individual actor without enjoying the latitude it once possessed in particular regions or fields of policy.[1]

The difficulty lies in deciding what those changes add up to. Military superiority does not ensure that force will secure a desired political outcome. A dominant currency may retain its position while industrial production becomes more dispersed. Technological leadership looks different depending on whether one examines research, advanced manufacturing, platforms, infrastructure, or the ability to establish standards. These variations suggest that the question of multipolarity requires attention to the location and operation of power, as well as to its aggregate distribution. They also explain why contributors looking at the same international environment can arrive at different assessments of its structure.

Three different conversations hidden inside one word

At its most familiar, multipolarity describes a distribution of capabilities among the principal actors in an international system. The structural tradition associated with Kenneth Waltz treats the number and relative strength of great powers as consequential for alliance behavior, strategic calculation, and the risks of conflict. Ruiz Cabañas works within this broad understanding when he distinguishes a systemic pole from a country that is influential in a particular field. A pole must possess a sufficiently extensive combination of resources to affect the calculations of other major powers. This approach gives readers a recognizable starting point, although the chapters disagree about how those resources should be assessed and whether they can still be combined into a coherent measure of national power.

Political language introduces a different set of considerations. When states invoke multipolarity, they often make claims about their place in the system and the treatment they believe they deserve. The term can lend coherence to demands for institutional representation, greater freedom of decision, or recognition of different development experiences. Marianna Albuquerque's account of multipolarity as structure, narrative, and institutional strategy is particularly useful here. She examines the interaction between changes in capabilities and the political work performed by descriptions of those changes. A government's preference for a multipolar world can influence its choice

[1] Miguel Ruiz Cabañas Izquierdo, "¿Hacia un mundo multipolar?", Chapter 1 in this volume.

of partners and institutions even while the structural character of that world remains disputed.[2]

Institutional arrangements give these arguments practical significance. Voting shares, membership rules, procedures, and established privileges rarely adjust automatically to shifts in economic or geopolitical weight. States that acquire greater capacity may continue to exercise limited authority within organizations whose governing structures reflect earlier distributions of power. This lag is a recurrent concern in the book. Albuquerque approaches it through legitimacy, while the ISPI authors examine the difficulties of adaptation within the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization. Han Hua considers newer development banks as expressions of institutional diversification. The PCNS contribution places United Nations reform and development cooperation at the center of its discussion. Across these discussions, the distribution of resources leads back to the question of who can help shape the rules under which they are used. Keeping these meanings distinct makes their interaction easier to understand. Structural weight can increase without an equivalent gain in institutional authority. A narrative of multipolarity can become influential before the capabilities needed to sustain it have fully developed. Institutions may broaden the choices available to their members while remaining dependent on financial or technological systems controlled elsewhere. None of these situations is adequately captured by identifying a few powerful states and assuming that the character of the wider order follows from their presence.

The distinction between multipolarity and multilateralism is especially important because the chapters frequently discuss them together. Polarity concerns the distribution of power. Multilateralism concerns arrangements for interaction and cooperation among multiple participants, commonly through agreed rules and institutions. More centers of power can coexist with stronger cooperation, growing confrontation, or increasingly bilateral relations. In its discussion of Russian scholarship, the RIAC chapter separates these possibilities and considers how different modes of interaction could emerge from a more dispersed structure. Readers should therefore avoid treating institutional paralysis as sufficient evidence of multipolarity, or assuming that the emergence of additional poles will make governance more inclusive.

Hegemony raises a further question about how an order is sustained. Its meaning includes leadership, the capacity to establish rules, the provision of public goods, and a degree of acceptance by other actors. Material predominance supports these functions, yet does not fully account for them. This helps explain why discussions of American decline can reach apparently incompatible conclusions. A judgment about the legitimacy of U.S. leadership

[2] Marianna Albuquerque, "Multipolarity as Structure, Narrative, and Institutional Strategy", Chapter 6 in this volume.

addresses something different from a judgment about the reach of its military or the position of its currency. Within the book, these distinctions provide a way to locate disagreements more precisely and to ask whether authors are assessing the same aspect of power.

Asynchronous change

The concept of asynchronous multipolarity, developed in the Russian International Affairs Council contribution, brings the unevenness of change into sharper focus. Ivan Timofeev, Alexandra Terzi, and Anna Korzun argue that different domains of international order have developed at different speeds. Their account describes military power as already multipolar, while finance remains strongly concentrated around the dollar and American-centered institutions. Technology and institutional governance display further combinations of concentration, competition, and diversification. The implication is that a single label applied to the entire system may conceal more than it reveals unless the analysis specifies which forms of power are being considered.[3]

Ruiz Cabañas's account brings a useful contrast into view. Both contributions recognize that capabilities are unevenly distributed, although they reach different judgments about the significance of military predominance and the criteria for pole status. Ruiz Cabañas emphasizes the breadth of American advantages and the incomplete character of other powers' capabilities. RIAC places greater weight on the constraints that countervailing power imposes on the use of force. Reading the chapters together makes it possible to distinguish the capacity to project power from the ability to translate it into control over outcomes.

Differences of this kind should not all be reconciled by assigning each author a separate domain. Some are genuine divergences about what constitutes power and what would count as evidence of a change in the system. The importance of asynchrony is that it gives readers a more precise place to begin that comparison. An account of reserve currencies and financial infrastructure may reveal a durable hierarchy. Research into industrial capacity may identify substantial redistribution. Regulatory authority may give an actor influence that its military resources would not predict. As the chapters demonstrate, the same country can occupy markedly different positions across these fields. Such unevenness also complicates the idea of a straightforward succession between hegemons. The future described by several contributors allows different actors to remain indispensable in different arenas. Their influence would depend partly on the relationships through which capabilities are mobilized and on the vulnerabilities created by those relationships. A transition

[3] Ivan Timofeev, Alexandra Terzi, and Anna Korzun, "Multipolarity and the Quest for Sovereignty in an Asymmetric World Order", Chapter 2 in this volume.

understood in these terms has no obvious moment of completion. Its consequences must be examined as they develop, including the possibility that concentration in one domain reinforces dispersion in another.

When polarity itself becomes uncertain

Zarif and Karimi extend this challenge to the foundations of the concept. In their account, the diversification of power has altered the conditions under which international politics can be understood through a limited number of state-centered poles. Corporations, technological platforms, financial institutions, media organizations, research networks, and non-state security actors exercise influence across borders with varying degrees of autonomy from governments. The authors argue that these developments have produced a relatively stable post-polar order, characterized by dispersed authority and issue-specific cooperation. Their claim goes beyond an adjustment to the number or composition of major powers and questions whether the search for a successor polar configuration remains analytically useful.[4]

Including this argument is consistent with the inquiry that COMEXI set out to encourage. Our outreach to contributors explicitly invited consideration of polycentricity, networked power, and complex interdependence as possible alternatives to multipolarity. A book organized around the meaning of the term needs to take its limits seriously. Readers may accept the authors' description of dispersed agency while remaining unconvinced that state-based polarity has become obsolete. That disagreement is productive because it requires a closer account of how public authority and private capabilities relate to one another. Artificial intelligence offers an illustration already present across the contributions. Governments treat technological capacity as strategically important, although companies and research institutions control much of the knowledge, investment, and infrastructure involved. Comparable relationships appear in telecommunications, financial networks, cloud services, and digital platforms. State-centered analyses can help explain competition over these capabilities, while networked approaches direct attention to the actors and connections through which they are produced. The chapters leave open how far the two perspectives can be combined and where they generate competing explanations of international outcomes.

Technology and the changing geography of power

Camilo Jaimes Poveda's contribution for CORI examines these relationships through the history and contemporary organization of digital power. Beginning

[4] M. Javad Zarif and Sasan Karimi, "Beyond Polarity", Chapter 3 in this volume.

with technology's strategic role during the Cold War, it follows the development of digital infrastructure into an arena of competition over data, connectivity, regulation, and innovation. The chapter considers Chinese, Russian, and European approaches alongside the enduring influence of the United States, then asks what their interaction means for Latin America. Technology connects the broad discussion of world order to decisions about infrastructure and productive capacity whose consequences may endure well beyond the diplomatic circumstances in which they are made.[5] Dependencies in this field can be difficult to disentangle. Access to a platform or a network may bring substantial economic benefits while also creating reliance on standards, providers, and infrastructures that users do not control. Undersea cables, data centers, payment systems, cloud services, and advanced computing all enter the analysis because they help determine where influence can be exercised. Jaimes Poveda's account asks readers to consider how such arrangements affect the capacity of governments to make choices. Aggregate trade or investment figures remain relevant, yet they cannot by themselves explain who controls critical functions within the digital economy.

The practical meaning of technological sovereignty becomes clearer when these dependencies are taken into account. Even major powers rely on international markets, specialized inputs, and research connections. For countries with fewer resources, the pursuit of complete independence would be especially demanding. The CORI chapter concentrates on selective investments that can expand decision-making capacity, including human capital, critical infrastructure, state competence, and participation in higher-value activities. Its emphasis falls on identifying where additional capability can reduce vulnerability and improve the terms of integration.

Elsewhere in the book, technological autonomy appears within discussions of Chinese development, Russian security, European regulation, and the growing role of private actors. These approaches differ in their assumptions about the state and the purposes of sovereignty. They nevertheless make the final chapter integral to the volume's larger inquiry. A discussion of multipolarity that attends to technological systems can show how influence persists through interdependence, even where governments have access to a wider choice of diplomatic partners.

Perspective matters

The composition of this collection follows from the process through which it was assembled. Its chapters were contributed by authors and institutions that welcomed the reflection put forth by COMEXI. The call sought perspectives

[5] Camilo Jaimes Poveda, "Multipolarity, Technology, and Latin America's Strategic Autonomy", Chapter 8 in this volume.

from Latin America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Africa, and the Middle East, with the aim of exploring how understandings of multipolarity differ across contexts. The volume reflects the responses received. Its geographic reach should therefore be understood in relation to that invitation process, without attributing comprehensive representation to any single contribution or assuming that the collection covers every significant debate.

The absence of contributions from think tanks in the United States merits its particular clarification. COMEXI sought participation from institutions in that country, but no responses led to chapter contributions. This gap reflects that, not a decision to exclude American points of view. The collection's coverage is consequently uneven, a limitation that readers should retain when assessing the range of positions represented.

American power and American scholarship nonetheless occupy a substantial place in the chapters. Contributors repeatedly engage with U.S. strategy, Western institutions, NATO, and theories developed within American intellectual traditions. These discussions offer perspectives on those subjects from the locations and analytical commitments of the participating authors. Acknowledging that distinction helps define the book's scope and preserves the openness of the original undertaking.

The perspectives that are present also resist easy geographic classification. Han Hua's account connects multipolarity to development, sovereign equality, civilizational diversity, and structured coexistence.[6] RIAC concentrates on sovereignty and uneven power diffusion, while Zarif and Karimi question the continued utility of polarity. PCNS considers representation and institutional reform from a Global South perspective, and Albuquerque examines legitimacy and the contingent agency of middle powers. Even where these authors share concerns about hierarchy, their explanations and expectations differ. Each contribution develops an argument from its own intellectual commitments, giving the reader several grounds for comparison within what might otherwise be mistaken for a single non-Western view.

The "Global South" and the problem of aggregation

The expression "Global South" requires similar care. It can identify shared concerns about underrepresentation, unequal development, and the distribution of authority within international institutions. Its breadth also encompasses countries with markedly different security interests, economic structures, political systems, and relationships with major powers. The PCNS chapter makes this tension central to its discussion of emerging economies and what it describes as the New South. It examines the additional influence associated

[6] Han Hua, "What Do We Mean When We Talk About Multipolarity? A Chinese Perspective on an Evolving Process", Chapter 4 in this volume.

with BRICS, development institutions, and wider participation in governance, while acknowledging that common dissatisfaction has not produced a unified geopolitical actor.[7] Villafranca and Della Gatta approach the problem through the limits of broad groupings such as North and South or West and Rest. Their analysis emphasizes internal differences within BRICS and ASEAN and questions whether smaller or regional organizations necessarily make international coordination easier. Interests that diverge at the global level can remain divergent within a more restricted forum. This observation matters for claims that institutional diversification will strengthen the collective influence of developing countries. The presence of additional platforms creates possibilities, although their value depends on how members use them and on the extent to which their priorities can be brought together.[8]

Flexible participation offers one response to this diversity. The contributions describe states that maintain relationships across several institutional and geopolitical settings, including India's engagement with the United States, Russia, BRICS, and Indo-Pacific frameworks, Brazil's participation in both established and newer forums, and the varied partnerships of ASEAN members. Such arrangements can preserve choices that exclusive alignments would restrict. They also require governments to manage differences among partners and to decide where cooperation remains feasible. Throughout the volume, Global South is therefore most useful as a category through which claims to agency and representation are articulated, with the understanding that its members pursue those claims in different ways.

Middle powers and the search for room to maneuver

Agency below the level of the greatest powers is a recurrent concern because the redistribution of influence creates openings as well as pressures. A state may convene a coalition, connect institutions, supply a critical resource, or acquire influence through diplomatic credibility and technological specialization. These capacities can matter without making the country a global pole. The distinction allows the volume to examine the significance of middle powers without assuming that every consequential actor must occupy the same structural position. Albuquerque's discussion of Brazil provides a particularly clear illustration. Participation in the G20, BRICS, and traditional multilateral institutions gives Brazilian diplomacy access to several settings in which authority and legitimacy are contested. The possibility of acting as a bridge follows partly from this range of engagements. Albuquerque nevertheless

[7] PCNS contribution, "Multipolarity Viewed from the Global South", Chapter 5 in this volume.

[8] Antonio Villafranca and Giovanni Maria Della Gatta, "Growing Unequal. International Institutions in Today's Multipolar System", Chapter 7 in this volume.

treats bridging as a conditional function. It depends on how other participants perceive Brazil's positions and on whether it has sufficient credibility in the issue under discussion. A government cannot establish such a role through its own description alone, and opportunities to facilitate cooperation may coexist with distrust elsewhere.

The same caution applies to strategic autonomy. Rivalries among larger powers can increase the range of available partners, yet pressure to choose sides may narrow the practical freedom to use those relationships. Diversification helps only when governments possess the capacity to sustain it. The CORI chapter develops this point through technology and productive capability, while PCNS addresses the institutional and developmental conditions of a stronger Southern role. Han Hua's discussion of strategic flexibility places greater emphasis on the legitimacy of maintaining multiple partnerships. These different approaches make autonomy a question of what states can actually do under conditions of interdependence.

For smaller and medium-sized states, the quality of the surrounding rules also matters. ISPI's warning about unequal freedom of action challenges the assumption that weaker international constraints will benefit everyone. A more powerful actor may gain latitude as institutions lose authority, while a more vulnerable state loses a means of contesting decisions that affect it. The practical significance of multipolarity therefore depends in part on whether additional centers of influence expand meaningful choice for those with fewer resources.

Institutions under strain

The mismatch between changing capabilities and inherited institutional authority gives much of the book its policy relevance. The United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization enter the discussion because each embodies a different way of organizing representation and decision-making. The contributors examine persistent privileges in some institutions, politically negotiated adjustments in others, and difficulties of cooperation even where members enjoy formal equality. These distinctions matter. Institutional strain cannot be explained through a single model of exclusion or resolved simply by increasing the number of participants.

Villafranca and Della Gatta's analysis shows how the preferences of incumbents and challengers shape the possibilities for adaptation. States that benefit from existing arrangements have reasons to resist changes that would dilute their influence. Those seeking greater representation may disagree among themselves about the purposes an institution should serve. Their chapter connects these tensions to declining multilateral ambition and the

growth of regional and plurilateral formats. It also examines why the World Trade Organization's consensus procedures have failed to ensure cooperation in the absence of agreement among consequential members. Representation, procedure, and political commitment emerge as related problems that still require separate attention. Legitimacy adds another dimension. Albuquerque argues that an institution can continue to perform useful functions while facing stronger challenges to its authority or representativeness. Enlarging participation may address some of those objections without making collective decisions easier. Smaller groups can preserve coordination among members, although their capacity to speak for a wider community remains open to question. The G7, G20, and BRICS illustrate different arrangements for managing these tensions, and none provides a complete solution to the problem of cooperation across divergent interests.

The contributions assess institutional proliferation differently. Han Hua emphasizes the possibility that newer banks and platforms can complement existing organizations and widen access to cooperation. PCNS links reform to development and a more inclusive conception of global governance. RIAC examines the appeal of flexible arrangements while also recognizing the importance of preserving channels among major powers. ISPI is more skeptical that multiplying forums will overcome divisions that already frustrate larger institutions. Placing these arguments together directs attention to the conditions under which new arrangements help cooperation and those under which they carry fragmentation into additional settings. Their ability to work across political difference and deliver outcomes that participants regard as legitimate remains an open question throughout the book.

Preserving disagreement

The chapters have retained their conceptual language, analytical choices, and individual arguments. They were not rewritten to conform to a common theoretical model. Readers will encounter material assessments alongside discussions of narratives, historical experience, legitimacy, and networks, as well as differences between academic and policy-oriented approaches. Terms such as Global South, World Majority, New South, middle power, and strategic autonomy belong to the vocabularies of particular contributors. The editorial framework identifies points of contact among them without requiring identical definitions or evidentiary standards.

This matters when similar subjects recur. The United States, China, BRICS, the G20, and the United Nations appear repeatedly because they provide ways of examining several different questions. BRICS can serve as evidence of institutional diversification, a setting for the pursuit of autonomy, or an example of the difficulties of sustaining cooperation among states with divergent

interests. Its significance changes with the question being asked. Some background discussions necessarily overlap across independently written chapters, and readers may find the most useful comparison in the conclusions authors draw from apparently familiar material. The collection's comparative value rests on making those differences available for examination. Agreement about a redistribution of capabilities does not establish agreement about its direction, extent, or consequences. Nor does recognition of institutional weakness settle which alternatives would be preferable. The introduction offers distinctions through which to read these debates, while leaving the arguments open to scrutiny on their own terms.

The architecture of the book

The sequence of chapters follows the inquiry from the character of the emerging system, through the meanings attached to multipolarity, to the problems of governing and navigating it. Each of the three parts emphasizes a different question, although the contributions reach across those boundaries. The arrangement brings analytical contrasts into view and allows readers to follow an argument across perspectives that a strictly geographic organization would place farther apart.

Part I — Diagnosing the redistribution of power

Miguel Ruiz Cabañas opens the volume with *¿Hacia un mundo multipolar? Estados Unidos, China, Rusia, India, Japón, la Unión Europea y otros en la redistribución del poder en el siglo XXI*. His assessment provides a historical and conceptual foundation before examining the capabilities of major and middle powers. It distinguishes polarity from hegemony and multilateralism and develops an account of multipolarization in which American advantages remain substantial. China emerges as the most consequential multidimensional competitor, while India, Russia, Japan, and the European Union possess different combinations of strength and limitation. By comparing these configurations, the chapter gives readers a basis for evaluating both the extent of redistribution and the continued significance of asymmetry.

The Russian International Affairs Council contribution, *Multipolarity and the Quest for Sovereignty in an Asymmetric World Order*, then examines the problem through asynchronous change. Timofeev, Terzi, and Korzun propose criteria for identifying genuine poles that include political independence, economic sustainability, internal integration, geography, development projects, and a conception of international order. Their analysis locates the United States and China in the broadest category of systemic power, while treating other actors' positions as dependent on the domain under examination. The

discussion connects these distinctions to financial diversification and technological sovereignty, then turns to Eurasia. Economic integration and security cooperation develop there through different arrangements, providing a regional illustration of the chapter's central argument about unevenness.

In *Beyond Polarity*, M. Javad Zarif and Sasan Karimi challenge the expectation that these transformations must eventually produce another polar configuration. Their analysis follows changes in the elements of power, the actors capable of exercising it, and the networks through which influence operates. They argue that the dispersion of agency beyond states has become structural and that conventional polarity cannot adequately describe the resulting order. Issue-specific coalitions and overlapping networks occupy a central place in their proposed post-polar framework. The chapter thus invites readers to reconsider the assumptions underlying the assessments that precede it, including the possibility of aggregating diverse resources into national poles.

Taken in sequence, these contributions establish the volume's central conceptual dispute. Readers move from a qualified account of multipolarization to an analysis of its uneven development and then to a challenge to the category itself. The ordering gives the challenge a clear context without presenting it as the necessary conclusion of the preceding chapters.

Part II — Competing meanings and projects of multipolarity

Han Hua begins the second part with *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Multipolarity? A Chinese Perspective on an Evolving Process*. Her chapter relates changes in international order to China's modernization experience and to an understanding of development as a source of security and international agency. It considers the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, and Global Governance Initiative together with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, New Development Bank, BRICS, and Belt and Road cooperation. Through these discussions, Han develops the idea of structured coexistence, in which multiple centers of influence interact through overlapping institutions and diversified partnerships. The chapter also considers tensions within this vision, including the relationship between sovereignty and common rules and the risk that institutional diversification could become fragmentation.

The PCNS contribution, *Multipolarity Viewed from the Global South*, broadens the discussion of development and representation. It describes a de facto multipolar configuration while recognizing the continuing politico-military predominance of the United States. The analysis considers China's and India's growing weight, Russian hard-power ambitions, Europe's distinctive normative orientation, and the possibilities associated with the New South. A

substantial part of the chapter addresses the United Nations, examining security, human rights, and development alongside the future of international cooperation. Its argument connects institutional reform to a wider reconsideration of the normative foundations of global governance, while retaining an awareness of differences within the Global South.

Marianna Albuquerque's *Multipolarity as Structure, Narrative, and Institutional Strategy* brings these concerns into an explicit analytical framework. The chapter examines how changes in capabilities interact with political narratives and efforts to renegotiate institutional authority. Its account of a legitimacy gap develops through comparisons of the G7, G20, BRICS, and more flexible forms of cooperation. Albuquerque then considers Brazil's potential bridging role, asking how diplomatic credibility and external recognition condition the influence of a middle power. This discussion connects the political meanings explored in Part II to the institutional questions taken up in the final section. It also makes clear why aspirations to a more plural order need to be examined through the strategies and relationships that might give them effect.

Part III — Governing and navigating the emerging order

Antonio Villafranca and Giovanni Maria Della Gatta examine the consequences of institutional strain in *Growing Unequal. International Institutions in Today's Multipolar System*. Their chapter follows the difficulties of adapting established governance arrangements to changes in economic and political power. It considers the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization alongside regional and plurilateral forums, questioning whether smaller arrangements can overcome the divisions that weaken broader cooperation. Particular attention is given to small and middle powers, whose freedom of action may diminish when institutional protections erode. The authors explore pragmatic and adaptive multilateralism as a means of sustaining cooperation under these conditions, with flexible coalitions operating alongside institutions that retain wider functions.

Camilo Jaimes Poveda closes the substantive sequence with *Multipolarity, Technology, and Latin America's Strategic Autonomy*. His chapter traces the relationship between technology and geopolitics before comparing approaches to digital governance and assessing Latin America's exposure to competing centers of influence. It shows how infrastructure, information networks, standards, and technological capabilities enter decisions about autonomy. Drawing on Respice Omnia and Peripheral Realism, the argument emphasizes selective investment, institutional capacity, and cooperation among the state, private sector, and academia. Latin America's options depend on its ability to participate more actively in the digital economy and improve the conditions under which it relies on external partners. The final chapter returns the reader

to the question of agency with which much of the volume is concerned. Its regional focus gives practical expression to problems that first appeared in the discussion of systemic order. Countries connected simultaneously to several centers of power must decide how to use those relationships, where to build capabilities, and which dependencies they can afford. Closing here allows the book's conceptual disagreements to inform a question of strategic choice that remains important across the different interpretations.

What this volume contributes

Read together, the chapters offer a differentiated account of redistribution. They show why a greater number of influential actors can coexist with persistent hierarchy and why changes in material resources cannot alone explain the organization of international order. Financial systems, technological infrastructures, political narratives, and institutions affect how capabilities become influence. Non-state actors complicate that relationship further. Although the contributors disagree about the extent of these transformations, reading them together helps identify the assumptions on which their judgments depend. It also brings into focus the difference between possessing greater capabilities and acquiring the authority to organize their use. Political uses of multipolarity bring further questions into view. Claims to autonomy and recognition can motivate institutional reform, although the existence of those claims does not establish agreement about the order that should follow. Wider representation must be considered alongside the ability to coordinate and implement decisions. For countries seeking additional room for maneuver, a greater choice of partners offers possibilities that their own capabilities will partly determine. The book repeatedly returns to the risk that diversification without sufficient institutional or productive capacity will leave underlying vulnerabilities intact.

Its contribution is therefore a way of comparing interpretations without arranging them into an inevitable historical sequence. Asymmetric multipolarity, asynchronous change, structured coexistence, institutional pluralization, unequal multipolarity, and post-polarity draw attention to different features of the international environment. Some can be brought into conversation through distinctions of scale or domain. Others contain competing claims that should remain open to debate. Seeing where these explanations meet, and where they resist reconciliation, helps readers evaluate what the language of multipolarity can illuminate and what it may leave out.

An open-ended order

The international environment described in these chapters combines persistent interdependence with efforts to reduce vulnerability. Governments

seek greater control over strategically important capabilities while continuing to rely on markets, institutions, and technologies beyond their borders. Established organizations retain significant functions as newer coalitions develop around them. Within this setting, the durability of American advantages, China's growing influence, and the differentiated roles of other powers produce a landscape that resists a single, settled description. The additional agency of private and transnational actors makes the relationship between capability and authority still more difficult to assess. Cooperation remains necessary across that landscape. The contributions refer to climate change, financial instability, public health, technological governance, and other challenges whose consequences extend beyond any country's control. They also show how disagreements over representation and legitimacy complicate the institutions expected to address them. The practical question is how actors with different interests can sustain enough common ground to act together. For states seeking autonomy, this includes deciding which shared rules make independent choice more secure and which forms of dependence leave them exposed.

The answers offered here vary because the authors understand both the sources of power and the possibilities for order differently. Multipolarity may remain useful as a description of redistribution while requiring careful qualification in particular domains. For some contributors, its importance also lies in the political projects it makes imaginable. Others would give greater explanatory weight to networks and dispersed agency. Readers can assess the reach of each argument through the chapters that follow, including where an explanation travels convincingly across domains and where its limits become apparent.

What holds the inquiry together is an interest in the conditions under which greater plurality can support workable coexistence. That requires attention to whose choices are expanding, how institutions respond, and whether actors with different capabilities can exercise meaningful influence over the arrangements that govern their relations. Asking what we mean when we talk about multipolarity brings those questions into view. This conversation assembled by COMEXI offers a starting point for pursuing them across the differences that already shape international life.

PART I

DIAGNOSING THE REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Chapter 1

Toward a Multipolar World? The United States, China, Russia, India, Japan, the European Union, and Others in the Redistribution of Power in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract. This article examines whether the international system that emerged from the Second World War and was transformed by the end of the Cold War is evolving toward a more multipolar structure. Its central argument is that this transition is under way, but should not be confused with a presumed collapse or linear decline of the United States. Washington remains the only power capable of projecting military force on a truly global scale and retains an exceptional position in the international financial system, owing, among other factors, to the centrality of the dollar, the depth of its capital markets, and an unparalleled network of alliances. The transformation stems primarily from the relative rise of other actors: China as a multidimensional systemic competitor; India as an emerging great power; the European Union as an economic, trade, regulatory, and monetary pole; Russia as a military, nuclear, and energy power; and Japan and other Asian economies as technological and production centers. From a historical perspective, multipolarity appears less as an anomaly than as a recurrent configuration of the system of states. The contemporary question, therefore, is whether the redistribution of capabilities can be managed through shared institutions and rules, or whether it will lead to more intense and potentially violent strategic competition.

Introduction: a power transition, not necessarily U.S. decline

Since 1945, and far more clearly since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has occupied a unique position in the international system. Its economic weight, military supremacy, the centrality of the dollar, the innovative capacity of its companies and universities, and the network of alliances it built in Europe and Asia enabled it to exercise influence that no other power could match. This gave rise, during the 1990s, to the widespread notion of a "unipolar moment": a distribution of power in which the United States had no competitor of comparable systemic reach (Krauthammer, 1990–1991; Wohlforth, 1999).

The hypothesis of this article is therefore twofold. First, the contemporary order is undergoing a process of multipolarization: a growing number of actors can shape international outcomes and prevent the United States from unilaterally imposing its preferences in important domains. Second, this multipolarization does not imply that the United States has entered a period of inexorable decline. In 2025, it still accounted for approximately one-third of global military expenditure, far more than any other country; the dollar was involved in 89.2% of transactions in the global foreign exchange market in April 2025 and accounted for approximately 57% of reported international reserves at the end of that year. In other words, U.S. primacy endures because the country retains deeply rooted structural advantages, even as other powers continue to rise (Bank for International Settlements [BIS], 2025; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2026a; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2026b).[1]

What does "multipolarity" mean in international relations?

In the international relations literature, polarity describes how material capabilities are distributed among the principal actors in the system. Kenneth Waltz (1979) made this distribution a central element of his neorealist theory: the number of great powers and the distribution of power among them shape strategic choices, alliance patterns, and the risks of conflict. Multipolarity exists, in its most basic sense, when several centers of power possess sufficient resources to influence the overall balance independently, and none can single-handedly determine the order of the entire system.

This definition requires two clarifications. First, a "pole" is not simply an important country. To constitute a systemic pole, an actor must accumulate

[1] In 2025, the United States accounted for 33% of global military expenditure; the dollar was involved in 89.2% of foreign exchange transactions in April 2025 (the shares of all currencies sum to 200%, because each transaction involves two currencies) and, at year-end, accounted for 56.77% of foreign exchange reserves reported to the IMF (BIS, 2025; IMF, 2026a; SIPRI, 2026b). See also Maurice Obstfeld (2025).

a sufficiently broad range of economic, military, technological, demographic, financial, and diplomatic capabilities to influence the calculations of other great powers. Second, multipolarity is not synonymous with multilateralism. Multilateralism is a form of cooperation through rules and institutions; multipolarity is a configuration of power. A multipolar world can be highly institutionalized or deeply conflictual.

The realist tradition has generally viewed multipolarity with caution. Hans Morgenthau (1948) placed the balance of power at the center of international politics, regarding it as an inherent consequence of competition among sovereign states. Writing within the English School tradition, Hedley Bull (1977) argued that even in an international society governed by norms and institutions, great powers perform special functions in maintaining and managing international order. John J. Mearsheimer (2014) goes further: he argues that under conditions of anarchy, great powers seek to maximize their relative power to ensure their survival and, when conditions permit, achieve regional hegemony. He also considers multipolar systems, particularly those in which a potential hegemon emerges, more prone to competition and conflict than bipolar systems.

Unipolarity, bipolarity, and hegemony: related but distinct concepts

The contrast with Cold War bipolarity helps clarify the concept. Between 1945 and 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union concentrated strategic military capabilities, led rival alliance systems, organized distinct economic and political spheres, and competed ideologically on a global scale. Yet even that bipolarity was never absolute. China broke with the USSR. France developed a strategy of autonomy. Western Europe and Japan became economic giants, and numerous powers in the so-called "Third World" retained varying degrees of freedom of action. Bipolarity described, above all, the strategic-military structure between the two superpowers.

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union produced a historically exceptional situation. Early on, Charles Krauthammer (1990-1991) coined the phrase "unipolar moment" to describe an international system in which the United States had become the sole remaining superpower. William C. Wohlforth (1999) subsequently developed a more systematic interpretation of unipolarity, arguing that the concentration of capabilities in the United States was much greater than many analysts acknowledged: no other state approached its economic, military, and technological power simultaneously. The scale of this advantage made it unlikely that an individual power or a coalition of states could build an effective counterweight to U.S. primacy in the short term.

Yet unipolarity and hegemony are also distinct. The former refers to the concentration of capabilities. The latter entails the capacity to lead, to establish rules, and to secure at least partial acceptance of a given order by other states. Postwar U.S. hegemony rested on more than aircraft carriers and GDP. It drew on Bretton Woods, the GATT and later the WTO, NATO, alliances with Asian nations, relatively open markets, global financial institutions, and a political narrative that presented the system as a provider of international public goods. G. John Ikenberry (2001) has emphasized that U.S. power proved more durable precisely because it "bound" itself to institutions that offered allies predictability and a voice in deliberations.

Five hundred years of competition: has multipolarity been the historical norm?

From a historical perspective, multipolarity appears more frequently than unipolarity. Beginning with European maritime expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the world system incorporated regions that had previously been largely disconnected, creating a more global form of competition among European monarchies and states. Portugal and Spain opened ocean routes, the Netherlands built a trading empire, and France repeatedly sought continental primacy, while Great Britain combined naval, financial, and industrial power. Austria, Russia, and Prussia played decisive roles in the European balance of power. None of these powers achieved lasting dominance over the international system.

Rise, decline, and "overstretch": Kennedy, Gilpin, and the dynamics of systemic change

Paul Kennedy (1987) and Robert Gilpin (1981) offer two classic frameworks for understanding why hegemonic predominance is never permanent. In *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Kennedy linked the international standing of great powers to their productive and financial foundations. His argument about "imperial overstretch" does not hold that every foreign commitment causes decline, but that there is a point at which military and strategic obligations can grow faster than the economic resources that sustain them. A great power that seeks to defend too many interests, in too many regions, for too long risks eroding the fiscal and productive foundations of its power.

Gilpin (1981) developed a robust theory of change in the international system. Orders are created by states that, following major wars or transformations, establish rules consistent with the prevailing distribution of capabilities. Over time, uneven growth alters that distribution. Some rising powers perceive that the benefits they derive from the order no longer reflect their

increased weight and press for changes to its rules. If the dominant power cannot accommodate these demands, or if revisionist actors regard the adjustments as insufficient, the risk of hegemonic crisis increases.

These theories remain useful, but should be applied cautiously to the United States. No historical law dictates that the United States will follow the trajectory of Spain or Great Britain, since it possesses extraordinary geographical, demographic, energy, financial, technological, and military advantages. Its economy remains highly innovative. The IMF (2026b, 2026c) projected U.S. growth in 2026 to exceed that of most advanced economies, while U.S. firms and finance continue to play a major role in the artificial intelligence revolution. The concept of "overstretch" is therefore better understood as a warning about costs and priorities than as an automatic diagnosis of decline.[2]

The decisive variable may be relative rather than absolute. The United States can continue to grow, innovate, and maintain the world's most powerful military while other actors expand their capabilities more rapidly. A declining share of global GDP does not necessarily imply impoverishment, since it reflects the development of societies that were previously much poorer. This is precisely the most useful interpretation of Fareed Zakaria's (2011) phrase "The rise of the rest": the historically significant phenomenon may be less the fall of the United States than the entry of other countries into the upper ranks of economic and political power.

The rise of the rest and the shift in the center of gravity toward Asia

China is at the heart of this shift, but it is not the only actor. Japan remains an advanced industrial, technological, and financial power. South Korea occupies critical positions in semiconductors, shipbuilding, batteries, and electronics. India has become one of the fastest-growing economies among the great powers and possesses a vast digital services sector, space capabilities, and nuclear weapons. Indonesia combines a population of more than 280 million, strategic mineral resources, and a leadership role in Southeast Asia. Vietnam is rapidly integrating into global manufacturing chains. WIPO's Global Innovation Index 2025 ranked South Korea fourth, China tenth —its first appearance in the top ten— and Japan twelfth. India, Türkiye, Vietnam, and Indonesia are among the middle-income countries making sustained progress (World Intellectual Property Organization [WIPO], 2025).[3]

Artificial intelligence illustrates this new distribution with particular clarity. Stanford University's AI Index 2026 concludes that China leads in the volume

[2] In its July update, the IMF projected U.S. growth of 2.3% in 2026, compared with 0.9% for the euro area and 0.6% for Japan (IMF, 2026c).

[3] South Korea ranked fourth; China, tenth; and Japan, twelfth (WIPO, 2025).

of AI publications, citations, and patents, while the United States retains the lead in developing notable models and higher-impact patents. Moreover, the performance gap between U.S. and Chinese models has narrowed markedly. There is thus neither a U.S. technological monopoly nor complete Chinese supremacy. The field exhibits a form of technological bipolarity embedded in a broader ecosystem that includes South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Europe, and India (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, 2026, "Research and Development" chapter).[4]

China: from manufacturing power to systemic competition

No actor better embodies multipolarization than China. Its transformation over the past four decades is historically unparalleled in speed and scale. In 2025, Chinese merchandise exports reached approximately US$3.77 trillion, accounting for around 14.4% of the value of global merchandise exports that year, according to WTO data. This trade capacity rests on an integrated manufacturing ecosystem spanning consumer goods, machinery, electric vehicles, solar panels, batteries, telecommunications, and high-technology products (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2026).[5]

China's international strategy extends this material base. The "Belt and Road Initiative" has financed roads, railways, energy infrastructure, and ports in dozens of countries. An AidData study published in 2026 identified nearly US$24 billion in loans and grants from Chinese state entities for 363 projects involving 168 ports in 90 countries between 2000 and 2025. Most of these investments serve commercial and logistical objectives, and the available evidence does not justify automatically reducing them to a military strategy. Nevertheless, the network improves China's connectivity, facilitates access to raw materials, and creates economic ties that can translate into diplomatic influence and, in some cases, dual-use access for commercial and military purposes (Wooley et al., 2026).[6]

In the military domain, the gap with the United States remains substantial. SIPRI estimated China's military expenditure in 2025 at US$336 billion, compared with US$954 billion for the United States. The United States possesses a global network of facilities, allies, and bases, together with strategic

[4] According to the report, the performance gap between the best U.S. model and the best Chinese model was just 2.7% in March 2026 (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, 2026, "Research and Development" chapter).

[5] The WTO reported Chinese merchandise exports of US$3.77 trillion in 2025. The 14.4% share is calculated by dividing that figure by the value of global merchandise exports in 2025, approximately US$26.3 trillion (WTO, 2026).

[6] The accompanying dataset (CPORTS 2.0) records 363 projects worth US$23.9 billion across 168 ports in 90 countries (Wooley et al., 2026).

lift capabilities, submarines, long-range aviation, and operational experience that China has yet to replicate. The Asian giant has nevertheless built the world's largest navy by number of ships, is rapidly modernizing its nuclear and missile forces, and is concentrating capabilities designed to complicate U.S. military intervention in the Western Pacific. Its immediate objective appears to be less to replicate the United States on a global scale than to alter the regional balance in East Asia and ensure that any intervention against Chinese interests incurs very high and rising costs (Liang et al., 2026; SIPRI, 2026a, Chapter 5).[7]

BRICS and the pursuit of autonomy from the Western order

The growth of BRICS is another indication of the distribution of power. In 2026, the grouping comprises eleven members: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia, according to its Indian presidency. Its expansion reflects the desire of various emerging powers to increase their influence and reform the international financial institutions, the IMF and the World Bank, because they consider the "Global South" underrepresented relative to its economic and demographic weight (Press Information Bureau, 2026).[8]

BRICS, however, is neither a military alliance comparable to NATO nor a supranational organization comparable to the European Union. The grouping itself has no founding treaty, budget of its own, or permanent secretariat. Its members have profound differences and strategic rivalries: China and India compete for influence in Asia and have unresolved border disputes. Egypt and Ethiopia have clashed over the waters of the Nile. Iran and the Arab Gulf states have long-standing rivalries. Brazil, India, and South Africa share neither Russia's position on Ukraine nor China's vision of the Asian regional order (BRICS Brasil, n.d.).[9]

The so-called "de-dollarization" promoted by BRICS illustrates both the ambitions and the limits of this process. China and Russia have expanded the use of their national currencies in bilateral trade; several countries seek to reduce their exposure to sanctions and develop alternative payment systems. Nevertheless, the dollar continues to occupy an exceptional position: it was involved in 89.2% of foreign exchange transactions in April 2025, compared

[7] For 2025, SIPRI estimated US$336 billion for China and US$954 billion for the United States (Liang et al., 2026; SIPRI, 2026a, Chapter 5).

[8] According to the same source, the eleven members account for 49.5% of the world's population, 40% of global GDP, and 26% of world trade (Press Information Bureau, 2026).

[9] The grouping has no founding treaty, budget of its own, or permanent secretariat (BRICS Brasil, n.d.).

with 8.5% for the renminbi; and at the end of 2025, it accounted for approximately 57% of reported global reserves, compared with around one-fifth for the euro and less than 2% for the renminbi. The international financial system is diversifying at the margins, but no currency can yet match the depth, liquidity, and openness of dollar-denominated markets (BIS, 2025; IMF, 2026a; Nagel, 2026).[10]

The European Union, Russia, India, and Japan: partial poles in a heterogeneous system

Europe is seeking to reduce its security dependence on the United States. At the 2025 Hague Summit, NATO allies committed to raising defense —and security— related spending to 5 percent of GDP by 2035, including at least 3.5 percent for core defense requirements. SIPRI estimated that military expenditure in Europe, including Russia and Ukraine, rose by 14 percent in real terms in 2025, to US$864 billion. Over time, these changes could produce a much stronger European pillar, but industrial fragmentation, divergent strategic interests, and the absence of a single political authority continue to limit Europe's ability to act as a fully autonomous military power (NATO, 2025, 2026; SIPRI, 2026b).

Russia presents almost the reverse picture. Its economy and trade weight are far smaller than those of the United States, China, or the EU, and the Global Innovation Index 2025 ranked it sixtieth. Yet it retains an enormous nuclear arsenal, a military industry, energy resources, space capabilities, and a demonstrated willingness to use force to reshape its regional environment. Russia is thus a military and nuclear great power whose coercive instruments considerably exceed its economic weight (WIPO, 2025).[11]

India brings together a different combination. Its GDP is growing faster than that of the major advanced economies; in April, the IMF (2026b, 2026c) projected growth of 6.5 percent for fiscal year 2026–27, revising this slightly downward to 6.4 percent in July. India possesses nuclear weapons, space capabilities, an enormous domestic market, a substantial pharmaceutical industry, and a digital sector of global scale. Yet its per capita income, infrastructure, manufacturing base, and military resources remain well below U.S. or Chinese levels. Its strategy of autonomy —cooperating with the United States in the Indo-Pacific, maintaining ties with Russia, and participating in BRICS— illustrates the behavior of a power that does not wish to join any bloc permanently.[12]

[10] IMF (2026a), COFER, fourth quarter of 2025 (dollar: 56.77%; euro: 20.25%; renminbi: 1.95% of reserves); Joachim Nagel (2026), president of the Deutsche Bundesbank.

[11] The Russian Federation ranked sixtieth (WIPO, 2025).

[12] In April, the IMF projected growth of 6.5% for India in fiscal year 2026–27; in July, it revised this slightly downward to 6.4% because of rising energy prices (IMF, 2026b, 2026c).

Japan, for its part, remains a leading economic, financial, and technological power. The yen remains among the most widely traded currencies internationally: it was involved in 16.8 percent of foreign exchange transactions in April 2025. Driven by concerns about China and North Korea, Tokyo has increased its defense spending and deepened its alliance with the United States. Its constraint lies not in a lack of technological sophistication or wealth, but in a much lower degree of strategic-military autonomy than that of the United States, China, Russia, or India (BIS, 2025).[13]

The United States under Trump: strategic adjustment and strains on the alliance system

Donald Trump's second administration poses a central contradiction for the U.S.-led order. Several of its priorities address genuine problems of burden-sharing and great-power competition. Demanding higher defense spending from European allies can reduce U.S. overstretch; concentrating resources in the Indo-Pacific recognizes that China presents the largest strategic challenge; protecting sensitive supply chains seeks to reduce external dependencies; and devoting greater attention to the Western Hemisphere reflects a regional security logic. NATO's agreement to raise defense spending substantially shows that U.S. pressure has produced tangible results (NATO, 2025).[14]

The problem arises when these objectives are pursued through instruments that erode the strategic asset most difficult for any U.S. rival to replicate: its network of allies. Tariff disputes with partners, doubts about security commitments, and President Trump's repeated demands for full U.S. control over Greenland have generated friction with allies, including within NATO. At the NATO summit in Ankara in July 2026, Trump publicly reiterated that Greenland should be under U.S. control, while Denmark and the Greenlandic authorities reaffirmed that any decision must rest with its people and respect its sovereignty. On September 18, Trump announced an agreement with Denmark and Greenland, signed in New York on September 22, which he claimed grants the United States "permanent control" over the island's security. The agreement expands a U.S. military presence that has existed for decades, although Copenhagen and Nuuk emphasized that it recognizes Danish sovereignty and the Greenlanders' right to self-determination (Al Jazeera, 2026; NPR, 2026; Reuters, 2026a).

At the same time, reductions in the U.S. military presence in parts of Eastern Europe have raised concerns among allies about the continuity of U.S.

[13] The Japanese yen was involved in 16.8% of global foreign exchange transactions (BIS, 2025).

[14] The allies agreed on a target of 5% of GDP for defense and security by 2035 (NATO, 2025).

commitments. In Asia, Japan and South Korea remain tied to the United States through formal alliances and a shared perception of risks posed by China and North Korea, but trade frictions, and above all uncertainty about the extent of U.S. commitment, create incentives to strengthen their own capabilities. It would be incorrect to claim that these alliances have disappeared: they continue to provide the United States with access, interoperability, intelligence, and strategic legitimacy. Their value, however, depends on accumulated trust and the expectation that commitments will be honored (Apps, 2026).

Iran and the limits of coercive power

The war that began in late February 2026 between the United States, Israel, and Iran poses a particularly demanding test for any theory of the contemporary distribution of power. By mid-September, the conflict had lasted approximately six months and had imposed substantial direct costs on the United States. According to Reuters (2026c), the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the cost to the Department of Defense had reached US$38 billion as of August 1 and could rise by approximately US$3 billion per month; the conflict had also strained stocks of precision munitions.[15]

The energy repercussions have been more consequential for the international system. Attacks and disruptions involving the Strait of Hormuz reduced oil and gas flows, drove up prices, and transmitted inflationary pressures to numerous economies. In September 2026, Brent again rose above US$100 per barrel on several occasions; the U.S. Energy Information Administration raised its price forecasts, estimating that the war had caused a very substantial drawdown in global inventories of approximately 400 million barrels over the year to date (Khan, 2026; Reuters, 2026b).[16]

Comparing capabilities: uneven multipolarity

The following table summarizes the contemporary distribution of capabilities using comparable indicators and descriptive assessments. It does not attempt to produce an overall ranking of "power," because its components are not interchangeable: a reserve currency, a nuclear arsenal, a continental market, and an innovation ecosystem generate different forms of influence. Military figures refer primarily to 2025; innovation data draw on WIPO's Global Innovation Index 2025 and Stanford University's AI Index 2026; and financial and trade variables reflect the latest observations available for 2025–2026.

[15] The CBO estimate refers to the cost to the Department of Defense as of August 1, 2026 (Reuters, 2026c).

[16] That day, Brent closed at US$105.83 per barrel (Khan, 2026).

Table 1. Comparative capabilities of the principal powers and selected middle powers, 2025–2026

Actor	Military spending 2025 (US$ bn)	GII rank 2025	Economy and trade	Finance and currency	Military and strategic capabilities	Technology, energy, and resources	Structural characteristic
United States	954	3	Largest economy at current prices; major exporter and importer; leader in services	Dollar: 56.8% of reserves (end-2025) and 89.2% of foreign exchange turnover (Apr. 2025)	Global power projection; alliances in Europe and Asia; nuclear power	Leader in AI models, software, venture capital, and universities; major hydrocarbon producer	Only power with global military, financial, technological, and alliance capabilities
China	336*	10	Second-largest economy; leading manufacturing power; US$3.77 trillion in goods exports (2025)	Renminbi: 8.5% of foreign exchange transactions and ~2% of reserves; capital controls	Largest navy by ship count; nuclear power; regional anti-access capabilities	Leader in AI patents and publications, electric vehicles, batteries, solar, and 5G; energy importer	Principal multidimensional U.S. competitor; growing global reach
European Union	—**	Various (Sweden 2nd)	Single market; €2.64 trillion (~US$3 trillion) in extra-EU exports in 2025; regulatory power	Euro: second-leading international currency; 20.3% of reserves	High but fragmented aggregate spending; reliance on key U.S. capabilities	Strong science and industry; net energy importer; advanced renewable energy transition	Economic, regulatory, and monetary pole; incomplete military autonomy
Russia	190*	60	Economy much smaller than the U.S., China, or the EU; trade constrained by sanctions	Ruble has a limited international role	Top-tier nuclear arsenal; substantial missile and land capabilities	Defense, nuclear energy, and space; major hydrocarbon exporter	Military-nuclear and energy pole, rather than an economic-financial pole
India	92.1	38	Large, fast-growing economy; continental-scale market	Rupee has limited international use	Nuclear power; expanding navy and space program	Digital services, pharmaceuticals, and software; dependence on imported oil	Rising power with strategic autonomy and substantial demographic weight

Actor	Military spending 2025 (US$ bn)	GII rank 2025	Economy and trade	Finance and currency	Military and strategic capabilities	Technology, energy, and resources	Structural characteristic
BRICS (11)	—	—	≈40% of global GDP and 26% of world trade (Indian presidency, 2026); heterogeneous	Promotes local currencies and the New Development Bank; no common currency	Three nuclear powers (China, India, Russia); no military alliance	Technology concentrated in China and India; major energy producers and consumers	Global South forum; substantial aggregate weight, limited strategic cohesion
Japan	62.2	12	Major industrial and exporting economy; high-value chains	Yen: 16.8% of foreign exchange transactions (Apr. 2025)	U.S. alliance; advanced naval and air capabilities	Robotics, materials, automotive, and electronics; dependence on imported energy	Technological-financial pole with limited military autonomy
Indonesia	15.0	55	Largest economy in Southeast Asia; BRICS member	Rupiah has regional reach	Strategic maritime position	Expanding digital economy; nickel, coal, and gas	Rising middle power; Indo-Pacific pivot
Brazil	23.9	52	Largest Latin American economy; agriculture, mining, and industry	Real has no global reserve role	Regional capabilities, without global power projection	Agribusiness and aeronautics; oil, minerals, and hydropower	Regional power and global diplomatic actor
Saudi Arabia	83.2*	46	Major energy exporter; global sovereign investment	Riyal pegged to the dollar; large sovereign assets	Major arms importer	Rapid investment in technology and AI; substantial spare oil production capacity	Energy-financial power with regional influence
United Arab Emirates	—***	30	Regional logistics, financial, and trade hub	Dirham pegged to the dollar; large sovereign wealth funds	Modern armed forces; limited expeditionary capabilities	AI, space, and logistics; oil and gas	Middle power with extensive financial and diplomatic connectivity

Actor	Military spending 2025 (US$ bn)	GII rank 2025	Economy and trade	Finance and currency	Military and strategic capabilities	Technology, energy, and resources	Structural characteristic
Türkiye	30.0	43	Diversified industrial economy; bridge between Europe and Asia	Lira has no significant international role	NATO's second-largest army by personnel; drone industry	Defense, drones, and automotive; energy-importing hub	Regional power with growing strategic autonomy
Israel	48.3	14	Advanced high-tech economy	Shekel used primarily domestically	Regional military power; undeclared nuclear arsenal	Cybersecurity, defense, AI, and biotechnology; offshore gas	Very high technological-military power relative to its size
Pakistan	11.9	99	Economy with a large population and low productivity	Rupee has no international role	Nuclear power; large army	Limited technological ecosystem; energy dependence	Regional nuclear power facing economic constraints
Canada	37.5	17	Advanced economy integrated with the U.S.; major resource exporter	Canadian dollar: secondary reserve currency	NATO and NORAD member	Universities and AI; oil, gas, uranium, and critical minerals	Advanced middle power with strategic resources
Mexico	13.6	58	Manufacturing economy integrated into North America; major industrial exporter	Peso: liquid emerging-market currency, not a reserve currency	Territorial focus, without global power projection	Automotive, aerospace, and electronics; oil, silver; renewable energy potential	Regional middle power; limited military and financial capabilities

Sources: International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c); World Trade Organization (WTO, 2026); Eurostat (2026); Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, n.d.); Liang et al. (2026); Bank for International Settlements (BIS, 2025); World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO, 2025); Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (2026); Press Information Bureau (2026).

Multipolarity and paralysis in the UN Security Council

The United Nations Security Council still reflects the distribution of power in 1945. Its five permanent members —China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia— retain the right of veto, and the body's only expansion, agreed in 1963 and effective from 1965, was limited to increasing the number of non-permanent members from six to ten. Since 1994, when the Open-ended Working Group established by the General Assembly began meeting, member states have sought to agree on a formula to make the Council more representative, without success to date; since 2009, the debate has continued through the Assembly's intergovernmental negotiations.

The principal obstacle is the resistance of some permanent members, and many other countries, to granting permanent membership —with the same privileges and prerogatives, including the veto— to the countries seeking that status, particularly Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan, which make up the so-called G4. Numerous states, brought together in the Uniting for Consensus group, oppose creating new permanent seats and propose expanding only the non-permanent membership category. African countries, for their part, seek two permanent seats and additional non-permanent seats for their region, in accordance with the Ezulwini Consensus adopted by the African Union in 2005, but no agreement has been reached on this proposal either. Under these conditions, progress toward a concrete formula for enlarging the Security Council with additional permanent and non-permanent members appears difficult (African Union, 2005; United Nations General Assembly, 1993, 2008).[17]

The problem extends beyond representativeness. When the vital interests of permanent members collide, the veto paralyzes collective action. The war in Ukraine placed Russia, a party to the conflict, in a position to block substantive decisions. In the case of Gaza, the United States vetoed a resolution in June 2025 calling for an immediate, unconditional, and permanent ceasefire, despite the affirmative votes of the Council's other fourteen members. These episodes do not mean that the UN is irrelevant: its humanitarian, technical, and development agencies remain indispensable. Rather, they reveal the structural limits of an organization designed to function when the great powers can reach a minimum degree of agreement (United Nations, 2025).

Conclusions: toward an asymmetric and unstable multipolarity

The available evidence supports the argument that the international system is moving toward a more multipolar configuration, but this transition must be described precisely. We do not yet live in a world in which several equivalent

[17] United Nations General Assembly (2008), Decision 62/557, which initiated the intergovernmental negotiations that began in 2009.

poles balance one another. The United States retains attributes that no other power possesses simultaneously: global military reach, formal alliances in the most important strategic regions, the leading international currency, exceptionally deep financial markets, corporate leadership in technological sectors, and a capacity for scientific innovation. Treating U.S. decline as an established fact confuses a reduction in its relative predominance with an absolute loss of power that the data do not substantiate.

The transformation stems primarily from the rise of other powers. China is the most significant case because it has accumulated sufficient economic, industrial, trade, technological, and military capabilities to contest U.S. influence over regional and global outcomes. India is advancing, although it remains far from possessing the combination of capabilities held by the two largest powers. The European Union retains enormous economic, trade, normative, and monetary influence, but lacks commensurate military autonomy. Russia remains a leading military, nuclear, and energy power, although its economic weight is much smaller. Japan remains among the system's technological and financial centers. Middle powers such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Indonesia, Canada, and Mexico possess significant resources that increase their room for maneuver, although they do not constitute major global poles.

In sum, multipolarity is not a destination the international system has already reached, but a process still taking shape. Its consolidation will depend on China's economic trajectory, India's ability to translate growth into comprehensive power, Europe's cohesion and the decision of its members to consolidate it as a global power, Russia's evolution, and, above all, the choices made by the United States. If the United States preserves its economic and technological foundations, prudently manages its commitments, and maintains the trust of its allies, it will remain the single most powerful actor in the system. But it will have to do so in a world where possessing more power than any other actor is no longer enough: it will have to coexist, negotiate, and compete with a growing number of states capable of saying no.

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Chapter 2

Multipolarity and the Quest for Sovereignty in an Asymmetric World Order: Russian View

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Abstract. The U.S. intervention in Venezuela and Iran serves as a stark reminder of the persistent asymmetry in international relations. The global architecture remains hierarchical, with only a few poles of power capable of independently determining their political destiny. In response, the concept of a multipolar world has evolved into a central tenet of Russian and Global South political philosophy, understood as an objective process of diffusing global development potential.

Yet the transition to multipolarity is neither uniform nor linear. This study introduces the concept of asynchronous multipolarity—a mismatch in the development pace of different domains. In military security, multipolarity is already a fait accompli. In global finance, however, the U.S. dollar remains dominant, and American-centric institutions continue to shape the rules of the game.

Drawing on Russian scholarship, the study proposes six criteria for identifying genuine poles—political, economic, integrating, geographical, project-based, and conceptual. Measured against these standards, only the United States and China qualify as superpowers, possessing both material capability and a coherent political philosophy. Russia, India, Brazil, and the European Union occupy a middle stratum as great powers, exercising significant influence but lacking full pole status across all domains.

The crisis of multilateralism further complicates the picture. As the G20's communiques grow emptier, minilateral formats like BRICS and the G7 prove more productive, bringing together like-minded actors on the same value wavelength. Flexibility, not rigidity, increasingly defines effective cooperation.

The chapter then turns to financial diversification and technological sovereignty. Within BRICS, Russia has an existential interest in constructing alternatives to dollar-centric systems, while others remain more cautious. Technological sovereignty, understood not as autarky but as capacity for independent innovation through strategic cooperation, represents a practical pathway toward reducing vulnerability and strengthening multipolarity from within.

Finally, the chapter examines Eurasia as a case study. Economically, integration proceeds through frameworks like the Eurasian Economic Union, which builds ties with ASEAN, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and India. Five economic poles can coexist on the continent. In security, however, states remain deeply cautious, fearing blocs and hierarchies. Russia's approach recognizes this asynchrony as a potential advantage: economic poles can develop while security cooperation follows a flexible, decentralized, network-based model.

As the world enters the second quarter of the 21st century, the transformational processes reshaping the international order are undeniable. However, the parameters of this shift—and indeed, the very definition of multipolarity—remain subjects of intense debate and divergent interpretation among global actors. With rising international tensions, deepening conflicts, and instruments of stability like arms control regimes eroding, scholars and policymakers are urgently seeking frameworks to explain—and forecast—the trajectory of global politics. The Doomsday Clock standing at 85 seconds to midnight, the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, and the weaponization of economic tools through sanctions and tariffs all pose fundamental questions: Is the world multipolar yet? How does the current order work? How do different actors interpret its rules? This chapter answers these questions from the perspective of Russian experts and the intellectual traditions that shape Moscow's view of the emerging world. The key answer is that today we see the world through the lens of asynchronous multipolarity. This concept implies that multipolarity is not a single condition but an uneven process.

This contemporary uncertainty stands in stark contrast to the dominant paradigm of the early 1990s. In the wake of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis epitomized a widespread belief in the uncontested victory of the Western liberal model. A Western-centric international system, it was assumed, would become permanent and universal. Yet, even during this period of unipolar momentum (which remains controversial in the Russian academic debate), alternative visions were being articulated. As early as 1996, then-Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov identified the transition to a multipolar world as a central trend in international affairs (Primakov, 1996). By 1998, as Prime Minister, he proposed a strategic Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral format as a practical mechanism to foster this very multipolarity. While the RIC mechanism itself did not evolve into a dominant institution, its underlying logic prefigured the rise of non-Western coalitions. Today, the strategic relationships between Moscow, Beijing and New Delhi remain crucial, finding renewed

expression and amplified impact within the expanded BRICS framework (Kashin, 2026).

For years, the paradigms of globalization and multipolarity coexisted, their tension managed through differing interpretations. Balance was achieved by shifting "semantic accents" (Drobinin & Piskunov, 2025). For the "World Majority," globalization signified unprecedented interconnectedness and the benefits of open exchange. Concurrently, the concept of multipolarity was formally codified in the 1997 Russo-Chinese declaration "On a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International Order". It defined multipolarity not as a policy preference but as an objective, structural process: the dispersion of global development potential and the consolidation of new, independent centers of economic and political influence. This nuanced, multidimensional worldview allowed Russia and other non-Western states to conceptually prepare for the current systemic inflection point (Drobinin & Piskunov, 2025).

Interestingly, on the eve of the transformational events of 2022 —most notably the commencement of Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine and the imposition of unprecedented sanctions— researcher, member of RIAC Andrey Kortunov offered a notably moderate interpretation. He suggested viewing multipolarity not as a full-fledged alternative to the existing world order, but primarily as a corrective mechanism for its weakest and most vulnerable elements (Kortunov, 2018). This perspective framed multipolarity as a reforming, rather than revolutionary, force within a still-functioning system. The cataclysms of 2022, however, rendered this corrective model largely obsolete, demonstrating that the systemic pressures had moved beyond mere adjustment to active disintegration.

The globalization of the late 20th and early 21st century has now definitively ended, giving way to a period of fragmentation and disintegration. This process, however, remains in its initial stages. To date, disintegration has most acutely affected a specific set of institutions and regimes where Russia is a key stakeholder—from the UN Security Council and bilateral arms control with the U.S. to the Arctic Council and the OSCE (Kortunov, Zhao, 2024). It has also ruptured global energy, raw materials, and food markets. Introducing the technological dimension further complicates the picture, as the world bifurcates into competing ecosystems of standards and regulation led by Washington and Beijing, forcing other nations into difficult choices.

Asynchronous Multipolarity

To accurately describe this complex, uneven transition, PhD and CEO of RIAC Ivan Timofeev has proposed the concept of **"**Asynchronous Multipolarity" (Timofeev, 2025). This term captures the current state of international relations, characterized by a mismatch in the development pace of various pillars of the world order. In some realms, like military security, new poles have already crystallized. In others, such as finance or institutional governance, power remains concentrated or contested. This asynchrony highlights a critical

lesson from the Soviet collapse, as the author implies: analyzing international power requires a multi-domain approach that looks beyond mere military capability to encompass technological, economic, and institutional factors. The emerging order is not taking shape uniformly, but in fits and starts across different spheres of global interaction.

Nowhere is the reality of asynchronous multipolarity more evident than in the military-strategic domain. The recent military engagements involving the United States and Israel against Iran—in June 2025 and February 2026 respectively—underscore a fundamental constraint on contemporary power projection. The inability to secure a decisive victory in these campaigns confirms that U.S. military power is not unlimited. Similarly, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea remains effectively deterred from full-scale invasion precisely because of its nuclear deterrent; the same logic of mutual assured destruction applies to any hypothetical direct confrontation between Russia and NATO. Meanwhile, despite growing military capabilities, there is no certainty that China could resolve the Taiwan issue through force, given the credible deterrence posture maintained by the United States and its regional allies (Timofeev, 2025).

These observations point to a critical conclusion about the contemporary international system: in a world where military power is increasingly employed as an instrument of politics, genuine military hegemony is absent. No single actor—not the United States, not China, not any coalition—can project force globally without encountering credible countervailing power, nuclear deterrents, or the risk of protracted conflict. This diffusion of military capability across multiple centers constitutes the most advanced manifestation of multipolarity, even as other domains lag behind in their transition.

The financial domain presents a starkly contrasting picture, epitomizing the "asynchronous" nature of the current transition. Here, the structural legacy of unipolarity remains deeply entrenched. The U.S. dollar continues to dominate global finance: among the reserve currencies held by 155 developing countries, the Chinese yuan accounts for a mere 2.12 percent, while the U.S. dollar commands 57.74 percent (IMF, 2025). Another telling indicator is the dominance of dollar-pegged stablecoins—particularly USDT (Tether) and USDC (USD Coin)—which have become the de facto medium of exchange in the rapidly expanding global cryptocurrency ecosystem (Chainalysis, 2025). This persistent imbalance is not merely a statistical fact but reflects deeper structural deficiencies in the international monetary system, which remains anchored to the American national currency. As scholars have recognized since the 1960s, this arrangement generates an inherent contradiction —known as the Triffin dilemma— whereby the United States must run persistent trade deficits to supply global dollar liquidity, yet excessive emission of that liquidity erodes the dollar's long-term purchasing power as a global price benchmark (Kuznetsov, 2025).

These structural contradictions are compounded by the monopolization of global financial infrastructure by American-centric institutions, which systematically impede the internationalization of currencies from dynamically developing economies. What was originally conceived as a neutral mechanism for facilitating cross-border financial flows has increasingly been weaponized: the international monetary system has transformed from a connective tissue linking economies into a lever of U.S. pressure on competitors from emerging markets. The tariff policies pursued by the Trump Administration further incentivize the most dynamic developing countries to accelerate the creation of regional monetary and financial systems as alternatives to dollar-centric architecture.

Poles' criteria and actors

This contrast between military multipolarity and financial unipolarity raises a foundational question: by what criteria can we objectively identify a pole in the international system? According to Drobinin and Piskunov (2025), a genuine pole must satisfy six interconnected conditions:

- Political criterion: genuine sovereignty and independence in making political decisions of regional and global importance;
- Economic criterion: a high level of self-sufficiency and economic sustainability, secured by reliable access to a broad range of resources and the technologies required to utilize them;
- Integrating criterion: a high degree of internal consolidation and stability, sustained by unifying factors such as an integrated economic contour, a homogeneous political culture, shared spiritual and moral values, and other elements of civilizational identity;
- Geographical criterion: relative geographical connectivity among the constituent elements of the pole;
- Project criterion: the successful implementation of its own model of development, along with a closely related interstate integration project—particularly essential for "collective poles" such as the European Union or Eurasian Economic Union;
- Conceptual criterion: a distinctive vision of global development prospects, actively promoted on the international stage, supported by the capacity and political will to share resources and technologies with other states and to act as a supplier of globally significant public goods.

Measured against these standards, today the United States and China clearly qualify as poles, while the status of Russia, India, Brazil, the European Union, and other aspirants remains contingent on the domain under

examination and the specific criteria applied. Russia, for instance, satisfies the political, integrating, and conceptual criteria with relative ease but faces structural challenges on the economic and project dimensions. The European Union, as a collective pole, meets the economic and project criteria but struggles with political sovereignty and integrating coherence. This differentiation across criteria resonates deeply with Timofeev's concept of asynchronous multipolarity: poles are not monolithic entities but assemblages of capabilities that develop unevenly across domains.

Depending on the metrics employed—whether military capacity, economic weight, demographic scale, or institutional reach—Russia, India, Brazil, and the European Union are widely categorized among the great powers, occupying a stratum below the two dominant poles yet exercising significant influence within their respective regions and domains. This multidimensional assessment finds further refinement in Timofeev's (2025) exploration of the conceptual criterion, where he introduces a crucial distinction between political philosophy and ideology. A superpower, he argues, must possess its own political philosophy—a coherent interpretation of how the world works, what rules should govern its development, and what goals drive the international system. Such a philosophy, rooted in deep intellectual tradition and historical experience, provides the normative foundation for the state's claim to legitimate superpower status, accepted as such by others. This, Timofeev insists, should not be conflated with ideology, which often implies rigid dogmatism or universalist pretensions. A political philosophy, by contrast, offers a framework for understanding and engaging with a pluralistic world.

Yet Timofeev is careful to anchor this ideational dimension in material reality. However convincing a political philosophy may be, it hardly can sustain itself without a robust material basis. Measured against this dual standard, only two states currently qualify as genuine superpowers: the United States and China. Both possess not only the material capabilities commensurate with global leadership but also the intellectual and philosophical resources to articulate a vision of world order and mobilize support for it. Other aspirants, whatever their material assets or civilizational traditions, have yet to synthesize these dimensions into a coherent and globally resonant project.

The paradigm of poles' uneven development finds an intriguing counterpart in Western scholarship. Renowned American theorist Stephen M. Walt, author of the influential "balance of threat" theory, describes the emerging configuration as "managed" or "limited multipolarity" (Walt, 2023). He posits a move away from U.S. unipolarity toward a system with several identifiable power centers, including China, Russia, the EU, India, and Brazil. Crucially, he argues this shift is not inherently destabilizing but necessitates a fundamental strategic recalibration by the United States: a move from primacy and domination to a strategy of balancing and alliance management to contain perceived threats.

Empirical evidence of this strategic recalibration is already visible in current U.S. policy. The approach of the second Trump Administration, for instance, appears to operationalize a version of this logic. Its policy in Latin America, explicitly aimed at countering Chinese influence and capital in the region, demonstrates a pragmatic recognition of Washington's limited global influence compared to its unipolar dominance in the 1990s—a shift from enforcing hegemony to contesting a rival's sphere of influence (Goliney, 2026). Similarly, the renewed focus on U.S. economic and technological policy, centered on reshoring industrial capacity and securing supply chains, reflects a defensive turn inward to rebuild national power bases, a clear departure from the confident, globalization-driven posture of the past (Tolstukhina, 2025). These actions substantiate the notion that U.S. strategy is evolving from one of undisputed primacy to one of managed competition within an acknowledged multipolar landscape.

However, Walt's perspective, while acknowledging the diffusion of power, remains firmly anchored in a U.S.-centric framework of managing a competitive system, contrasting with the Russian and "World Majority" vision of multipolarity as an intrinsic structural correction and a foundation for a more equitable order.

While comparing Russian approaches to Western theories —particularly those embedded in the realist paradigm— it is instructive to examine Organski's power transition theory. This framework offers a structural explanation for the current systemic shift and provides quantifiable parameters for understanding when a transition to multipolarity might be considered complete. According to a group of Russian scholars, the period of 2010-2020 marked the onset of a global power transition, which they project will conclude only when Beijing reaches approximately 120 percent of U.S. power (Degterev, Ramich & Tsvyk, 2021). This threshold is significant: it suggests that parity alone is insufficient for a stable transition. Rather, China must consolidate its leadership by a measurable margin—moving beyond the 95-105 percent range of rough equivalence—for the new configuration to crystallize definitively.

This conclusion finds indirect corroboration in earlier scholarship. Y.-H. Lim (2014) challenged prevailing assessments of China's satisfaction with the international status quo, arguing persuasively that the Asian power harbored deep grievances regarding its position within the existing order. Lim's analysis anticipated the revisionist trajectory that has since become more pronounced in Chinese foreign policy, lending credence to the view that Beijing's rise is not merely a quantitative accretion of power but a qualitative challenge to the system's foundational arrangements.

If such a transition is indeed inevitable —and if, as structural realists argue, bipolar configurations offer greater stability than their multipolar alternatives— a strategic paradox emerges. For other great and middle powers,

including Russia, a multipolar order may actually be more conducive to their national interests than a renewed bipolar competition. A system with multiple poles distributes pressure, offers greater strategic flexibility, and reduces the existential stakes of alignment choices. In this sense, the advocacy for multipolarity is not merely a normative preference but a rational response to the structural imperatives of the ongoing power transition.

Institutions and multilateralism

This structural preference for multipolarity among middle powers helps explain why institutions like BRICS have gained renewed traction: they offer platforms for coordinating interests within an increasingly diffuse distribution of power. Such organizations become even more relevant as the crisis of multilateral diplomacy deepens and the United Nations system confronts mounting challenges to its authority and effectiveness. Timofeev (2025) attributes this institutional crisis to two interconnected factors. The first is U.S. ambitions: even while professing support for multilateral diplomacy, Washington has consistently sought to preserve an exceptional role for itself within multilateral frameworks, undermining the principle of sovereign equality. The second is the emergence of Cold War 2.0 —a more complex confrontation than its twentieth-century predecessor, encompassing not only the U.S.-China rivalry but also the deepening antagonism between the West and Russia across multiple domains.

Yet Timofeev cautions that criticism of the UN and its institutions, however warranted, should not be mistaken for a prescription to dismantle them. The elimination of existing multilateral mechanisms would not solve the underlying problems of global governance; it would merely remove the arenas within which tensions can be managed. The UN, and particularly the Security Council, remains an indispensable forum for communication among great powers —a mechanism capable, at minimum, of attenuating conflict and preventing miscalculation. In a world hurtling toward deeper fragmentation, preserving these channels of dialogue becomes not an act of nostalgia but a strategic imperative.

Kortunov (2024) offers a further refinement of this institutional discussion by drawing a crucial distinction between multipolarity as structure and multilateralism as a model of interaction. He observes that the mere presence of multiple autonomous decision-making centers reveals nothing about the nature of their engagement. Four possible configurations emerge:

- Fragmentation: poles may scarcely interact at all, causing the global system to dissolve into disconnected regional subsystems;

- Confrontation: interaction may be defined by antagonism —for instance, between the historical West and the Global South— in which case a formally multipolar system tends to collapse back toward bipolarity;
- Cooperation: interaction may be predominantly cooperative, enabling the reintegration of fragmented subsystems into a cohesive global order;
- Bilateralism or unilateralism: poles may interact primarily through bilateral ties or unilateral actions, bypassing multilateral frameworks entirely.

The stability of any future world order, Kortunov argues, will depend fundamentally on which of these modes prevails. A poorly governed system —characterized by resource scarcity, climate change, uncontrolled migration, and rapid technological development— cannot long remain stable. In such an environment, where universal norms are absent and common goods remain undefined, an increase in the number of active actors may exacerbate rather than ameliorate global and regional problems.

This leads Kortunov to propose a two-dimensional matrix for conceptualizing the future order. The first axis captures the distribution of power (unipolarity-multipolarity-polycentrism); the second captures the mode of interaction (unilateralism-bilateralism-multilateralism). Without multipolarity multilateralism cannot emerge, as unipolar or rigidly bipolar systems lack sufficient subjects for genuine multilateral engagement. Yet multipolarity does not guarantee multilateralism: relations within a multipolar system may reduce to a collection of bilateral ties or unilateral actions. The task of constructing a stable order thus requires not merely the diffusion of power but the cultivation of cooperative norms and institutions capable of governing a pluralistic world.

Even in the era of asynchronous multipolarity, the multilateral model of communication appears to have failed. It would not be correct to speak of fragmentation into disconnected regional subsystems, but one must acknowledge the growing role of regionalism and minilateralism. The G20, for example, has become a forum where the West and non-West meet primarily to register their disagreements. G20 communiques have grown progressively emptier compared to the outputs of both BRICS and the Group of Seven. Both BRICS and the G7 bring together participants who are, broadly speaking, on the same value and political wavelength. Their discussions, despite internal tensions, proceed from common premises and yield productive outcomes. The G20, by contrast, assembles actors whose worldviews diverge fundamentally —and in the absence of consensus, communiques are reduced to the lowest common denominator, drained of substantive content (Barabanov, 2024).

This divergence carries significant implications for the future of global governance. If minilateral formats (BRICS, G7) prove capable of generating meaningful outcomes while broader multilateral forums (G20, UN General Assembly) stagnate, the center of gravity in international politics may shift toward these smaller, more coherent groupings. Yet this trend also carries risks: the proliferation of like-minded clubs could reinforce the very fragmentation that Kortunov identifies as one possible trajectory for a poorly managed multipolar system.

Another reason for the preference of minilateral formats is their flexibility. On one hand, of course, it has negative effect. Weak institutional frameworks mean low probability of decision-making and their embodiment, the results of their work and summits get more declarative. On the other, it gives an opportunity to work together in spite of differences. When there are no commitments, actors tend to be more active and cooperative. As Lukyanov (2024) argues about BRICS and SCO, the interests of States do not necessarily contradict each other, they are simply completely different, and flexible approaches are required to implement them. And flexibility does not really match the rigidity of classical institutions, especially when it comes to bloc structures bound by obligations and discipline. At some point, situational groups of States that need to solve a specific problem together began to appear as the best way to organize interstate organizations.

The growing preference for minilateral formats is driven not only by the value alignment observed in BRICS and the G7, but also by a more practical consideration: flexibility. On one hand, weak institutional frameworks carry obvious liabilities: they reduce the probability of binding decisions and their subsequent implementation, rendering summit outcomes increasingly declarative in nature. The absence of enforcement mechanisms means that commitments, however ambitious, may remain rhetorical gestures rather than operational realities.

On the other hand, as Fyodor Lukyanov (2024) observes, flexibility offers a distinct advantage: it enables cooperation across difference. When states are not bound by rigid commitments or institutional discipline, they tend to engage more actively and cooperatively —precisely because the stakes of participation remain limited. Lukyanov illustrates this dynamic with reference to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The interests of member states in these groupings, he argues, do not necessarily contradict one another; they are, more accurately, simply different. Implementing such diverse interests requires adaptable approaches that can accommodate heterogeneity without demanding convergence. This flexibility sits uneasily with the rigidity of classical institutions —particularly bloc structures bound by formal obligations and hierarchical discipline.

The implication is significant: at some point in the evolution of international governance, situational groupings of states —coalitions assembled to

address specific problems— began to emerge as the most effective organizational form. These ad hoc arrangements prioritize functionality over permanence, allowing states to collaborate on discrete issues without committing to comprehensive alignment. In a world characterized by asynchronous multipolarity, where poles possess different configurations of capability and face different strategic imperatives, this logic of flexible, issue-specific cooperation may prove increasingly attractive. The challenge, however, lies in preventing such pragmatism from devolving into pure opportunism, eroding the normative foundations upon which any durable order must ultimately rest.

Diversification in finances and technology

Connecting the discussion of BRICS to the persistence of financial unipolarity reveals an important nuance: the interests of member states in diversifying global finance are far from uniform. For some, the issue is existential. Russia, subjected to unprecedented financial and trade sanctions by the United States and its allies, has an urgent and direct interest in constructing alternatives to the dollar-centric system. Financial diversification for Moscow is not a matter of convenience but of national security.

Other BRICS members occupy a different position. India, Brazil, South Africa, and the newer entrants —Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates— remain closely integrated into the existing American-centric settlement architecture. For them, diversification is not an immediate imperative. Yet their calculus could shift under certain scenarios: further escalation of U.S.-China competition, a systemic collapse of the current financial order, or a deterioration of their bilateral relations with Washington (Timofeev, 2025). In such contingencies, the existence of alternative mechanisms would become a strategic asset rather than a theoretical abstraction.

This differentiated interest structure operates against the backdrop of a deeper structural problem: the systematic underrepresentation of non-Western countries in global economic governance. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, as Barabanov (2024) notes, lack even formal equality among members. The principle is not "one country, one vote" but a weighted system determined by economic strength —a metric that, in practice, entrenches Western dominance in decision-making processes. This institutional architecture has proven remarkably resilient even as the underlying distribution of economic power has shifted.

Within the BRICS context, Timofeev (2025) outlines a pragmatic, incremental path forward —one whose logic may hold broader relevance for middle powers seeking to assert agency in this turbulent environment. The first step involves developing settlement systems for transactions in sectors untouched by sanctions —creating parallel mechanisms in uncontested spaces.

The second is the gradual approbation of settlements in national currencies, building practical experience in bilateral and multilateral contexts. The New Development Bank, with its accumulated experience in investment, fundraising, and regulatory coordination among member states, offers a natural platform for testing such mechanisms. By starting with limited, low-stakes applications, BRICS countries can construct the infrastructure of financial multipolarity without precipitating the kind of confrontation that might deter more cautious members.

The imperative to diversify financial mechanisms finds its parallel in the technological domain, where calls for technological sovereignty have intensified as a matter of national security and strategic autonomy. The collapse of globalization in its previous form, coupled with the bifurcation of the world into competing techno-economic blocs, has generated a long-term trend toward technological sovereignty and a high probability of an exhausting race for leadership (Tolstukhina, 2022). Yet from an economic perspective, full-fledged technological sovereignty remains unattainable for any but the largest powers in the current environment. The real question, therefore, is not how to achieve complete autonomy but how to protect national technological development from external risks —a challenge that grows more urgent under the shadow of a potential artificial intelligence bubble and the profound disruptions it may unleash.

Not all assessments are pessimistic. Dynkin (2024) offers a more hopeful outlook, suggesting that the accelerated development of AI technologies could catalyze a new industrial revolution, potentially outpacing the fragmentary effects of geopolitical competition. In this view, technological progress itself may serve as a unifying force, even as states compete for primacy within specific domains.

Whatever the balance of risks and opportunities, steps toward greater technological autonomy bring actors closer to the establishment of new poles —at minimum by providing the material base necessary to project influence and promote a nation's vision globally. Researchers have identified two critical issues that will shape this trajectory in the coming years (Bezrukov, Mamonov, Suchkov & Sushentsov, 2021). The first concerns the viability of critical information infrastructure in an era of cyber warfare and escalating online piracy. Cyber-attacks on digital infrastructure or systemic network failures, they argue, can prove no less destructive than nuclear or biological weapons —a sobering assessment of the stakes involved. The second involves data security and governance: how well governments understand the principles of protecting personal data, and how the circulation of depersonalized big data will be regulated. Mastery of such data by another state enables it to construct detailed pictures of economic development, industrial vulnerabilities, agricultural capacity, epidemiological conditions, and consumption patterns — information asymmetries that can be exploited for strategic advantage. The

accelerated development of national legislation in this sphere, combined with interstate negotiations to establish common norms, constitutes an imperative of the near future.

None of this should invite illusions about the constraints that persist. Structural limitations, emanating principally from the United States as the world's technological leader, remain formidable. Yet this reality does not diminish the relevance of the sovereignty agenda. For a growing number of actors, technological sovereignty represents a strategic objective requiring sustained, consolidated national effort. At the same time, the very nature of the demands exchange of experience and cooperation among like-minded states. The task, in technology as in finance, is to navigate between the aspiration for autonomy and the necessity of interdependence, building resilience without succumbing to the illusion of autarky.

Great Eurasia

The preceding discussion of poles, institutions, and asynchronous development finds its most concrete expression in Russia's approach to Eurasia —a continent that spans more than a third of the planet's landmass and contains dozens of states with no single leader or hegemon. Russia's conception of multipolarity as a principle of the international order can be reflected in the Eurasian dimension of its foreign policy.

Russian experts disagree on whether Eurasia can even be considered a unified space, especially given the deterioration of dialogue between Russia and European countries. However, the absence of a clear understanding of Eurasia does not negate the need to organize this space on the basis of multipolarity with harmonized interests of all regional actors. Rhetorically, Russia perceives Eurasia as a single continent where states can create a safe and nurturing environment.

Russia's Eurasian policy implies two dimensions: development of economic integration and creation of a Eurasian security system.

As part of economic integration efforts in the mid-2010s, the Russian leadership proposed the Greater Eurasian Partnership as a mechanism for strengthening integration, expanding trade, and launching joint projects in strategically important industries. The initiative has not been formalized as a doctrine yet, but has been embodied in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as an institution. The EAEU provides free movement of goods, services, capital and labor, and pursues a coordinated, harmonized and single policy in the sectors of five member-states: the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation.

Russia is undoubtedly the largest economy of the union and the driving force of the EAEU's development. This leadership and the resulting hierarchy carry some risks but at the same time offer the opportunity to consider the EAEU one of Eurasia's economic poles. The EAEU has operated successfully for a decade. From 2015 to 2024, the Union's total GDP grew by 17.8%, or by almost $1 trillion in absolute terms. The EAEU's share in the global economy increased from 3.7% to 4.1% (EEC, 2025). In 2025, EAEU GDP increased by 1.7% even in the face of unprecedented pressure on Russia and its partners (Izvestia, 2026). But from the perspective of Eurasia's development as a multipolar continent, the priority for the EAEU is the development of horizontal ties rather than economic growth alone.

The Eurasian Economic Union builds network interaction with states from different parts of Eurasia such as Iran, Serbia, Mongolia, and the UAE. The Union establishes and develops relations with other centers of economic power, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both at the institutional level and with individual regional states. For example, the EAEU signed a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN member-states Vietnam and Indonesia (EEC, 2018; Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2025).

Moreover, the Union has an Economic and Trade Cooperation Agreement with China, another economic pole of Eurasia. As the world's largest economy, China is implementing the large-scale "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) both on the continent and beyond (IMF, 2025). The EAEU and BRI projects do not contradict each other and should not be seen as competitors. It is theoretically possible to link them; however, in practice, such a prospect seems far-reaching. But the fact remains that the coexistence of such poles is possible within the Eurasian space.

The EAEU is also expanding cooperation with India, an emerging economic power with high logistical potential, and is taking steps toward an India-EAEU FTA. It is worth mentioning that in the case of a normalization of Russia-EU relations, the European Union could also serve as another economic pole in Eurasia. Thus, at least five centers of economic power can coexist in the multipolar space of Eurasia: the EAEU, ASEAN, the BRI, the EU, and India.

From a security perspective, multipolarity appears to be the only viable solution for Eurasia. The continent has a high conflict potential: 35–40% of all conflicts worldwide over the past 30 years have occurred in the non-Western part of Eurasia. External forces are often involved in resolving such situations: 11 countries have been targets of intervention, and 19 have been subjects of intervention over the past 30 years (RIAC, 2025). There are currently 25 ongoing strategic rivalries in the non-Western part of Eurasia; only two of these involve external powers (China-United States and Russia-United States), while the rest are between countries of the continent. Thus, two-thirds of the non-Western states in Eurasia are involved in conflicts in one way or another.

Under these circumstances, the creation of a collective security architecture is not only logical but also a necessary condition for the coexistence of such diverse powers on the continent.

From Russia's perspective, a multipolar security system in the Eurasian space could serve as a conceptual framework for the further development of relations between states. This concept could be put into practice through both a network of bilateral treaties between states and multilateral formats —for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes ten countries with such centers of power as Russia, China, and India. The development of a foundational doctrinal document, for example a Eurasian Security Charter, with a view to accession by all interested parties, holds great promise.

The concept of Eurasian security is not equivalent to blocs or alliances. It is a different framework based on the following principles. First, the strengthening of some should not threaten the security of others, and dialogue should be the only way to resolve disputes. Second, the proposed security architecture includes all states geographically located within the Eurasian space, regardless of their political systems and relations with the initiative's participants or Western countries. Third, security is multidimensional and is not limited to the military sphere. Fourth, various formats of interstate cooperation and dialogue should exist within the framework of the Russian initiative. Potentially, Eurasian security could be strengthened, for example, by the Chinese initiative. Fifth, it establishes neither leadership nor hierarchy; Eurasian security should be decentralized in nature. Sixth, the initiative is not directed against the West or any other group of countries. The idea is to maintain peace and security on the continent, not to start Cold War II or counter NATO. Seventh, Russia respects the diversity of political and economic systems and preserves diversity in all its initiatives. Every country should have an opportunity to choose its own path. Eighth, all decisions made should be based on the UN Charter principles (Timofeev, 2025).

The asynchronous multipolarity has a particular impact on the situation in Eurasia. In order to become more economically independent and strong, Eurasian centers of power are ready to develop ties with regional partners and are open to new agreements. But in the security sphere, they are much more cautious. Concepts of collective security architecture are often perceived as an attempt to create blocs or military alliances reminiscent of the Cold War era. Having learned the lessons of U.S. security guarantees, many states strive to maintain neutrality and ensure their own security. Moreover, some states fear China's growing power and express concerns about a possible military alliance between Moscow and Beijing. Russia would therefore have to make a special effort to explain both its initiative for a Eurasian security architecture and its desire to foster multipolarity as a way of ensuring peace.

A distinctive feature of Russia's approach is the recognition that multipolarity in Eurasia is developing asynchronously. While economic dynamics show a trend toward institutionalization both logistically and ideologically, the security dimension remains fragmented and requires a different logic. In the economic sphere, Russia prioritizes the creation of poles that can interact with each other on an equal footing. The goal here is to build a framework of interdependence through trade agreements and network diplomacy. In contrast, the security sphere cannot be structured around exclusive poles or blocs without risking a new Cold War-style confrontation. Therefore, Russia advocates for a decentralized and inclusive architecture that explicitly rejects leadership and hierarchy. This asynchronous approach allows Russia to promote both regional economic integration and a non-hegemonic security model that accommodates the interests of all major powers, including China, India, and even potentially the EU, without forcing them into a single rigid structure.

Looking at the current state of Eurasia, it can be said that the asynchronous nature of multipolarity may be its advantage. While economic integration develops within a system of poles, security cooperation can be built on a flexible network model, taking into account the strategic autonomy of all Eurasian states. In this sense, Russia's approach does not create a single roadmap for the entire continent. It offers a framework for economic and security multipolarity, allowing them to develop at their own pace and reinforce one another.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the contemporary transition to multipolarity is neither uniform nor linear. The concept of asynchronous multipolarity, as developed by Timofeev and applied throughout this analysis, captures a fundamental feature of the current international order: different domains evolve at different paces, and what holds true in military affairs does not necessarily hold true in finance, technology, or institutional governance. The world is not moving from unipolarity to multipolarity along a single axis. It is fragmenting and reconfiguring unevenly, creating a landscape where military power is widely diffused, financial power remains concentrated, and institutional authority is contested.

Nowhere is this asynchrony more visible than in Eurasia. The continent presents a paradoxical picture: economic integration proceeds through institutional frameworks like the Eurasian Economic Union, which builds ties with ASEAN, China's Belt and Road Initiative, India, and potentially even the European Union. In the economic sphere, Russia actively promotes the creation of poles that interact on an equal footing, seeing interdependence through

trade agreements and network diplomacy as a pathway to stability. Yet in the security sphere, the same states that eagerly pursue economic cooperation remain deeply cautious. Concepts of collective security architecture are often met with suspicion, perceived as attempts to recreate Cold War-style blocs. The legacy of external intervention, the fear of Chinese dominance, and concerns about a Moscow-Beijing alignment all contribute to a fragmented security landscape where states prefer neutrality over commitment.

This asynchronous dynamic, however, is not necessarily a weakness. As this study has suggested, it may be an advantage. Economic integration can develop within a system of poles, building material foundations for cooperation, while security cooperation can proceed on a flexible, decentralized, network-based model that respects the strategic autonomy of all Eurasian states. The two tracks do not need to move in lockstep. Russia's approach recognizes this: it advances economic integration through institutional frameworks like the EAEU while simultaneously promoting a non-hegemonic security model that accommodates the interests of all major powers —China, India, and potentially even the European Union— without forcing them into a single rigid structure.

More broadly, Russia's conception of multipolarity differs fundamentally from Western frameworks such as Walt's "managed multipolarity." Where Walt prescribes a U.S.-centric strategy of balancing and alliance management, Russia —along with much of the "World Majority"— sees multipolarity not as a system to be managed from above but as an intrinsic structural correction toward a more equitable order. This vision is not merely normative. It is rooted in material realities: the diffusion of military capability, the limits of U.S. power projection, the persistence of dollar dominance despite its contradictions, and the growing technological assertiveness of non-Western states.

Yet the path toward multipolarity is fraught with obstacles. The crisis of multilateralism, vividly illustrated by the G20's empty communiques compared to the productive outputs of BRICS and the G7, suggests that like-minded groupings are increasingly replacing universal forums. The structural underrepresentation of non-Western countries in global financial institutions remains largely unaddressed. Technological sovereignty, while a strategic objective for many, remains constrained by the United States' continued leadership in key domains. And the power transition between the United States and China, projected by some scholars to require Beijing reaching 120 percent of American power, carries inherent risks of confrontation.

None of this, however, diminishes the significance of the shift already underway. Asynchronous multipolarity is not a future prediction; it is a description of the present. Military power is already multipolar. Financial power, while still unipolar, faces growing pressures from sanctions-driven diversification, national currency settlements, and the infrastructure being built within BRICS.

Institutional authority is increasingly contested, and minilateral formats are gaining ground over universal ones. Eurasia is being reorganized around multiple economic poles, even as its security architecture remains fragmented.

The world is not returning to the bipolar stability of the Cold War, nor is it settling into the unipolar complacency of the 1990s. It is entering something messier: an asynchronous, uneven, and contested transition whose final shape remains uncertain. Whether that transition leads to fragmentation and confrontation or to a more equitable and stable order will depend not on abstract theories but on the practical choices made by states navigating this turbulence.

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Chapter 3

Beyond Polarity: Power, Agency, and Order in the Contemporary Global System

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Abstract. This chapter examines the transformation of the global order in the post-Cold War era and argues that the contemporary international environment is best understood not as a transitional phase leading toward a new polarized system, but as the emergence of a relatively stable post-polar order. Foundational changes —most notably the diversification of power elements, the proliferation of influential non-state actors, the erosion of the state's monopoly over transnational action, and the shifting geography of power —are structural and largely irreversible rather than temporary.

The analysis highlights the decline of exclusive state-centered authority as multinational corporations, financial institutions, media networks, private security actors, and technology-driven entities increasingly shape global economic, security, informational, and political dynamics. As a result, international interactions are no longer organized around fixed blocs, permanent alliances, or comprehensive political loyalties, but instead take the form of issue-specific, temporary, and networked patterns of cooperation and competition.

While certain states retain relative advantages in particular domains - most notably military power - no state or coalition of states is capable of exercising hegemonic dominance across the global system. Power is dispersed across multiple layers, including military, economic, and technological-digital spheres, many of which are decisively influenced by non-state actors. The chapter concludes that traditional unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar frameworks are

inadequate for explaining contemporary global dynamics, which are better captured by the concept of a post-polar order characterized by fluidity, fragmented authority, and the absence of guaranteed hierarchies.

Introduction: Interpreting global order beyond polarity

Events in the global environment possess a largely concrete character, yet their interpretation depends on analytical frameworks that subsequently shape action and, in turn, future realities. Theoretical perspectives —whether realist, liberal, constructivist, or otherwise— do not merely describe the world; they function as interpretive lenses through which external realities are classified, understood, and acted upon.

Understanding global phenomena emerges from a reciprocal interaction between empirical experience and value–conceptual frameworks. Neither the external world can be meaningfully separated from the actions and assumptions of agents, nor can cognition be viewed as independent from lived experience. Global order, the focus of this chapter, follows a similar logic: interpretation informs action, and action contributes to the construction of subsequent global realities.

In foundational matters such as global order, analysis carries decisive implications for both policy and outcomes. Conceptions of power and its constituent elements shape understandings of strong states, hegemony, and the possibility of global polarization, just as other core concepts —such as order, diplomacy, and alliance— are conditioned by the analyst's theoretical orientation. This chapter therefore examines key conceptual and empirical transformations in the global environment and reviews major post-Cold War perspectives on international order, while advancing an alternative framework that moves beyond classical polar models.

A central assumption underlying this argument is that neither global order nor its constituent concepts possess fixed or trans-historical meanings. Throughout modern history, shifts in the distribution of capabilities, the emergence of new actors, and changes in the dominant modes of interaction have repeatedly altered the content of concepts such as sovereignty, security, influence, and authority. Consequently, any attempt to understand contemporary international relations must remain attentive not only to observable developments but also to the changing conceptual foundations through which those developments are interpreted. The end of the Cold War, in particular, generated a context in which many inherited analytical categories became increasingly difficult to reconcile with empirical reality, creating a growing gap between prevailing theories and evolving global dynamics.

This challenge was amplified by the unprecedented breadth of transformations that unfolded after 1989. Political, economic, technological, and social changes occurred simultaneously, producing a global environment that

differed substantially from the conditions under which most classical theories of international order had been formulated. Cross-border flows of information, capital, goods, and people expanded dramatically, while new forms of connectivity reduced the capacity of governments to exercise exclusive control over many processes that had previously remained within the domain of state authority. As James Rosenau observed, the post-Cold War environment no longer conformed to familiar patterns of international politics, since interactions increasingly extended beyond the traditional framework of interstate relations and involved a growing number of autonomous actors operating across borders.

These developments raised fundamental questions concerning the continued adequacy of polarity as the principal framework for understanding global order. The concept of polarity emerged from a historical context in which states exercised overwhelming control over the principal resources of power and served as the dominant agents of international politics. If power elements, actors, and arenas of interaction have undergone significant transformation, however, then the analytical utility of polar models must also be reconsidered. Rather than assuming that the international system necessarily evolves toward a new unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar equilibrium, it becomes necessary to examine whether the structural conditions that once sustained such orders continue to exist.

The argument advanced in this chapter proceeds from precisely this concern. It suggests that many contemporary analyses remain influenced by expectations derived from earlier state-centric eras and therefore interpret ongoing transformations primarily as indicators of an incomplete transition toward a future polar arrangement. An alternative interpretation is that the transition itself has already produced a qualitatively different form of order. From this perspective, the most important question is not which actor will emerge as the next pole, but whether the diffusion of power, agency, and authority has fundamentally altered the organizing logic of global politics. It is this possibility that forms the basis of the post-polar framework explored in the pages that follow.

Competing post-Cold War frameworks

Explaining or anticipating global order has long been a central task of international relations theory and state policy-making, particularly during periods of systemic transition. While Cold War bipolarity left little ambiguity about the structure of international politics, the collapse of that system generated a proliferation of competing interpretations, reflecting the absence of a single dominant analytical framework in the post-Cold War era. (Hansen , 2000)

Early analyses were shaped by the historical moment. Samuel Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations" emphasized culture as the primary

determinant of post-Cold War conflict, portraying global politics as increasingly structured around civilizational identities rather than states or ideologies. Huntington viewed this shift as part of a broader historical pattern in which the scale of conflict expanded from rulers to nation-states, ideological blocs, and ultimately civilizations. His framework implied a plural and quasi-multipolar order defined by civilizational spheres. (Olin, 2010)

In contrast, Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" advanced a liberal interpretation, portraying the post-Cold War order as the triumph of liberal democracy under U.S. leadership. From this perspective, the spread of liberalism signaled not merely geopolitical dominance but ideological convergence and the definitive victory of one political model over all alternatives. (Sørensen, 2001)

Politically, U.S. leaders proclaimed the advent of a "new world order," and the 1990s appeared to mark the emergence of American unipolarity. (Bush, 1990, p. 1219) Yet this assumption underestimated the complexity of power. Power has never been exclusively material, and post-Cold War systemic fluidity produced uncertainty rather than a stable unipolar order. What emerged was not genuine unipolarity, but a temporary "unipolar moment" or, more accurately, a "unipolar illusion." (Krauthammer, 1990/1, p. 129)

Even classical international relations theory had long acknowledged the multidimensional nature of power, encompassing both material and non-material elements. (Nye, 2011, p. 52) Contemporary debates over the post-bipolar order therefore reflect enduring theoretical concerns regarding the interaction among diverse sources of power. (Zarif & Karimi, 2024) As in other sciences, international relations relies on provisional and falsifiable models that seek to explain reality without claiming final certainty. (Waltz, 1979, p. 18)

The persistence of these competing interpretations revealed the absence of consensus not only regarding the future distribution of power but also regarding the nature of the transformation itself. Whereas previous systemic changes generally produced a relatively clear successor order, the post-Cold War period generated a far more ambiguous environment. Scholars disagreed over whether the international system was moving toward uni-polarity, multipolarity, non-polarity, civilizational fragmentation, or some entirely new configuration. The diversity of these perspectives reflected the growing difficulty of applying traditional analytical categories to a rapidly changing global context. (Ruggie, 1993, p. 149)

Within the realist tradition, debates increasingly focused on the durability of American predominance and the likelihood of balancing behavior by other major powers. Some analysts anticipated the eventual emergence of a multipolar order driven by the economic rise of China, the consolidation of the European Union, and the recovery of Russia. Others argued that the unprecedented concentration of military capabilities in the hands of the United States would delay or prevent a return to traditional balance-of-power dynamics. Yet

despite their differences, these approaches generally shared a common assumption: that the structure of international order could still be understood primarily through the distribution of capabilities among states. (Waltz, Structural Realism after the Cold War, 2000, p. 34)

Alternative perspectives questioned this assumption by emphasizing transformations that extended beyond interstate power relations. James Rosenau, for example, argued that global politics was increasingly shaped by a bifurcated world composed not only of states but also of a growing sphere of actors operating beyond traditional governmental control. In this "post-international" environment, authority and influence became dispersed across multiple levels of interaction, reducing the explanatory power of exclusively state-centric approaches. Such arguments suggested that the most significant consequence of the Cold War's end might not be the redistribution of power among states, but the gradual transformation of the very arena within which power is exercised. (Rosenau, 1997, p. 55)

These debates also exposed a deeper methodological issue. Many post-Cold War theories sought to identify a new equilibrium by extrapolating from historical patterns associated with earlier international systems. However, if the underlying elements of power were themselves changing, then conclusions based solely on previous distributions of military or economic capabilities risked overlooking more fundamental structural developments. The emergence of new technologies, transnational networks, multinational corporations, global media systems, and increasingly autonomous financial actors pointed toward a broader reconfiguration of power than traditional polarity-based analyses typically acknowledged. (Strange, 1996, p. 107)

Consequently, the central analytical challenge shifted from identifying the next dominant pole to understanding whether the conditions necessary for polarity continued to exist. If power had become more diffuse, multidimensional, and distributed among a wider range of actors, then the search for a successor polar arrangement might itself rest on an increasingly questionable premise. The debate over post-Cold War order therefore evolved beyond competing predictions about future great-power relations and toward a more fundamental reconsideration of how global order should be conceptualized in an era of expanding complexity and dispersed authority. (Zarif & Karimi, Beyond Polarity, 2026)

Power as a composite and contextual phenomenon

Scholars across disciplines aspire to develop models that hold across time and space, yet even in the natural sciences such generalizability is often assumed rather than definitively proven. In the social sciences —and particularly in the study of global order— analytical models are inherently shaped

by geography, historical context, and structural change. As a result, both the relevance of explanatory variables and the weight assigned to them require continual reassessment. (Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1979, p. 17)

National power illustrates this challenge with particular clarity. Its elements do not combine linearly, nor do they exert equal influence across contexts. Both the relative weight of individual components and the emergence of new factors vary across time and place. While military power has remained relevant across centuries, its relative significance has shifted, and newer elements —such as media influence, narrative capacity, public opinion, and consensus-building— have assumed growing importance. National power is therefore best understood as a composite of diverse elements whose coefficients are contingent rather than fixed. (Nye J. S., 2011)

The post-Cold War era initially appeared as a prolonged transitional phase rather than a stabilized order. This period was marked by transformations across politics, economics, law, and security, driven first by conceptual change and later by shifts in power elements, actors, and the geography of power. Central to this transition was the redefinition of core concepts such as sovereignty, power, national interest, and security, alongside increasing recognition of the non-neutrality of language and media in shaping international realities. (Rosenau J. , 1990, p. 44)

The extended nature of this transitional period stemmed largely from the assumption that stabilization required the emergence of a new polar order. Yet the transition appears to have ended without producing such an outcome. The contemporary global environment instead reflects a stabilized non-polar —or post-polar— order characterized by dispersed authority and power beyond states alone. Because polarization depends on state-centric balance-of-power logic, and because states no longer monopolize power or global agency, the structural conditions necessary for a polar international order no longer exist. (Zarif & Karimi, Beyond Polarity, 2026)

This transformation was accompanied by a gradual relocation of power from exclusively territorial foundations toward increasingly networked and functional forms of influence. In earlier historical periods, geography, population, natural resources, and military capacity constituted the principal determinants of state strength. While these factors remain important, their relative significance has become conditioned by an actor's ability to access, manage, and mobilize flows of information, capital, technology, and knowledge. Consequently, the effectiveness of power depends less on the possession of isolated resources than on the capacity to integrate diverse resources into broader systems of influence. (Castells, 2000, p. 502)

The changing composition of power also complicates attempts to measure it through conventional indicators. Aggregate economic output, military expenditures, territorial size, and demographic weight continue to provide valuable information, yet they capture only part of the contemporary distribution

of capabilities. Technological innovation, control of data, participation in global networks, educational capacity, cultural influence, and the ability to shape norms and narratives increasingly affect international outcomes. These elements often interact with one another in ways that amplify or diminish their individual impact, making power a relational and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a fixed quantity that can be measured independently of its environment. (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 133)

Equally significant has been the transformation of the actors capable of possessing and exercising power. Traditional analyses generally assumed that states controlled the overwhelming majority of meaningful resources and therefore served as the primary units of international politics. The post-Cold War period, however, witnessed the growing importance of corporations, financial institutions, media networks, universities, research centers, non-governmental organizations, and digital platforms whose influence frequently extends across multiple jurisdictions. The increasing autonomy of such actors has altered the distribution of capabilities within the global system and reduced the extent to which power can be understood exclusively through interstate relations. (Slaughter, 2004, p. 35)

These developments help explain why expectations of an eventual return to a stable polar configuration have remained unfulfilled. The concept of polarity presupposes that power can be aggregated, concentrated, and compared among a limited number of states. Yet as both the elements and holders of power become more diverse, the analytical foundations of polarity become progressively weaker. The issue is therefore not merely that power has shifted from one group of states to another, but that the structure through which power is generated and exercised has itself undergone substantial transformation. The emergence of a post-polar order reflects this deeper change in the composition, location, and operation of power within the contemporary global environment. (Zarif & Karimi, Beyond Polarity, 2026, p. 11)

The transformation of power elements in the post-Cold War era

Whether conceptualized as a transitional phase or as a fundamentally new configuration, the contemporary global environment is distinguished above all by changes in the elements of power. Historically, lower levels of trade, communication, and diplomacy privileged material and military capabilities, particularly during periods of fragmented authority. With the rise of the modern nation-state from the sixteenth century onward, territory, population, sovereignty, and centralized government became the core components of power, and competition increasingly revolved around tangible superiority. (Mann, 1986, p. 481)

The twentieth century —shaped by two world wars and the Cold War— further elevated military power, reinforced by rapid technological advances

in weaponry. Economic capacity gained prominence both as an independent source of influence and as a foundation for military competition. Over time, however, additional elements —such as media influence, narrative capacity, diplomacy, and institutional engagement— emerged as significant sources of relative advantage, underscoring the time-dependent nature of power coefficients. (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 101)

The end of the Cold War marked a decisive shift in the relative influence of these elements. Although the United States retained unmatched military capabilities and aggregate power, this superiority did not translate into uncontested dominance. Emerging powers —most notably China— have successfully defined alternative arenas of competition, demonstrating that military preponderance alone no longer guarantees systemic control. In the post-polar environment, war has increasingly lost its effectiveness as a reliable instrument for achieving political objectives. (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 170)

At the same time, the state's monopoly over organized violence has eroded. The rise of non-state security actors, private military companies, and proxy forces has complicated traditional understandings of warfare and security, further diminishing the centrality of military power as the defining determinant of global order —a role it played in earlier systems such as the Concert of Europe, balance-of-power arrangements, and Cold War bipolarity. (Kaldor, 2007, p. 111)

The declining centrality of military force does not imply the disappearance of coercion from international politics; rather, it reflects a broader transformation in the mechanisms through which influence is exercised. Military capabilities remain indispensable for deterrence, territorial defense, and strategic signaling, but their effectiveness increasingly depends on their integration with economic, technological, diplomatic, and informational resources. The ability to achieve political objectives now rests less on overwhelming force than on the capacity to combine multiple forms of power in ways that shape the behavior of diverse actors operating across interconnected domains. (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 222)

A parallel shift has occurred in the economic sphere. During much of the twentieth century, economic strength derived primarily from industrial production, resource control, and national wealth. In the contemporary environment, however, competitiveness increasingly depends on innovation, technological development, knowledge generation, and participation in global networks of production and finance. The most valuable economic assets are often intangible, including intellectual property, data, advanced research capabilities, and access to technological ecosystems. As a result, economic influence is becoming progressively linked to the production and control of knowledge rather than to material resources alone. (Drucker, 1993, p. 67)

The information revolution has further accelerated these changes by elevating communication and narrative formation to unprecedented levels of

strategic importance. The capacity to define issues, frame events, and influence perceptions now constitutes a significant source of political leverage. Governments, corporations, media organizations, and digital platforms compete not only for resources and markets but also for attention, legitimacy, and the ability to shape public understanding. In this environment, information itself becomes a strategic asset capable of affecting diplomatic outcomes, economic behavior, and even security calculations. (Castells, 2000, p. 76)

These developments have collectively altered the relationship among the various components of power. Military strength, economic capacity, technological innovation, institutional influence, and ideational resources increasingly reinforce one another in complex ways, making it difficult to isolate any single element as the decisive determinant of international position. States and other actors that successfully adapt to this multidimensional environment are often able to compensate for weaknesses in one area through advantages in others. The resulting distribution of influence is therefore more fragmented and dynamic than in previous historical periods, reflecting the broader transformation of power that underlies the emergence of the post-polar order. (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 216)

The erosion of state monopoly and the rise of new actors

Economic power, while more consequential than ever, is no longer monopolized by states. Transnational corporations and private financial actors operate with increasing autonomy, constraining the ability of governments to mobilize economic resources exclusively for strategic purposes. Technological development —particularly in domains such as artificial intelligence— is likewise driven predominantly by non-state actors, further eroding state-centric control over critical sources of power. (Strange, 1996, p. 72)

Alongside these material shifts, ideational elements of power —legitimacy, identity, diplomacy, and consensus-building— have grown in importance as global structures have become more fluid. Most fundamentally, the state has lost its monopoly over agency. Sub-state, transnational, and non-state actors now shape global outcomes in ways that challenge the analytical foundations of polarity rooted in state-based balance-of-power thinking. (Rosenau J. N., 1997, p. 55)

Since 1989, the global system has not reverted to traditional patterns of international politics. States no longer exercise exclusive control over cross-border flows of people, goods, capital, or information. Instead, multinational corporations, technology firms, knowledge-based institutions, and digital financial instruments increasingly influence both economic and political outcomes. These developments have weakened the effectiveness of

state-centered international institutions and blurred the distinction between domestic and foreign policy. (Slaughter, 2004, p. 35)

The growing relevance of digital currencies and decentralized financial mechanisms has further undermined the traditional monopoly of central banks and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. More broadly, this transformation reflects a shift from modernist, state-centric governance toward a post-modern global order characterized by fragmented authority and declining state exclusivity. (Strange, 1996, p. 198)

Cultural and media actors, social networks, and transnational public figures now play a central role in shaping global narratives, reducing the dominance of state-controlled discourse. Universities, research institutions, and ideological actors operate with greater autonomy due to digital connectivity, further dispersing influence across non-governmental domains. (Castells, 2000, p. 323)

The diffusion of agency beyond the state has been particularly visible in sectors where knowledge, innovation, and connectivity constitute the principal sources of influence. Technological corporations now control critical digital infrastructures that facilitate communication, commerce, data storage, and information exchange on a global scale. Their decisions can affect economic activity, public discourse, and even national security in ways that transcend territorial boundaries. Unlike traditional state institutions, however, these actors often operate across multiple jurisdictions simultaneously, creating new challenges for regulation, accountability, and governance. (DeNardis, 2014, p. 145)

A similar pattern can be observed in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Universities, research centers, scientific communities, and specialized expert networks increasingly participate in the formation of global agendas by generating the ideas, technologies, and policy frameworks that shape international decision-making. Their influence derives not from sovereign authority but from expertise, innovation, and their integration into transnational communities of knowledge. As information becomes a more valuable strategic resource, actors capable of producing and managing knowledge acquire a level of significance that was previously reserved for governments and formal institutions. (Haas, 1992)

The growing role of these actors has also transformed the mechanisms through which global governance operates. Many contemporary issues —including technological standards, digital regulation, environmental sustainability, public health, and financial stability— cannot be effectively addressed by states acting independently. Instead, governance increasingly emerges through complex interactions among public authorities, private organizations, professional networks, and international institutions. Decision-making authority is therefore distributed across multiple centers rather than concentrated within a single hierarchical structure. This diffusion of governance functions

further weakens the assumption that states remain the exclusive architects of international order. (Slaughter, 2004, p. 28)

The cumulative effect of these developments is a reconfiguration of the relationship between authority and influence. Possession of formal sovereignty remains important, but it no longer guarantees control over the principal processes shaping global outcomes. Influence increasingly depends on access to networks, information, technology, expertise, and the capacity to coordinate action across institutional and geographical boundaries. As these resources become more widely distributed among diverse actors, the international system moves further away from the state-centric conditions that historically underpinned polar orders and toward a more decentralized and post-polar configuration. (Rosenau J. N., 1997, p. 55)

Networks, issue-based coalitions, and the decline of hegemony

The erosion of state monopoly has also enabled the rise of non-state security actors, making warfare and security increasingly outsourced and less controllable by governments. Technological advances —especially in artificial intelligence— have intensified this trend by granting private entities access to capabilities previously monopolized by states, including potentially destructive technologies. (Kaldor, 2007, p. 111)

As a result, power in the contemporary global order is redistributed rather than transferred. New economic centers have emerged outside the traditional Western core, while power relations have become less zero-sum and more contingent on issue-specific cooperation. Political loyalty —central to polarized and hegemonic systems— has become fluid and conditional, as states increasingly engage multiple power centers simultaneously.

These dynamics indicate that the post-Cold War era has culminated not in renewed polarity but in a relatively stable post-polar order that demands more flexible and adaptive policy frameworks. Alliances are no longer permanent or comprehensive; instead, they are replaced by provisional and/or issue-based coalitions. (Zarif & Karimi, Beyond Polarity, 2026)

Although the United States retains substantial military superiority and remains preeminent in the aggregate distribution of power, neither it nor any other actor has achieved hegemonic control. The erosion of the state's monopoly on global agency —driven by the rise of corporations, financial institutions, and other non-state actors— has rendered hegemonic dominance not only impractical but conceptually obsolete. (Strange, 1996, p. 198)

Contemporary global power is therefore better characterized by fluidity than polarity. While the United States, the European Union, and China dominate significant portions of the global economy, their influence is constrained by actor diversity and interdependence. As Ian Bremmer has suggested, the

global order operates across multiple layers: a militarily U.S.-dominated layer; an economically interdependent, quasi-multipolar layer; and a technological-digital layer largely shaped by corporations rather than states. Together, these layers undermine traditional polarized models and reinforce the stabilization of a post-polar order resistant to hegemonic consolidation. (Bremmer, 2012, p. 188)

The growing importance of issue-based coalitions reflects a fundamental change in the logic of international cooperation. In polarized systems, alliances were generally expected to encompass a broad range of political, economic, and security commitments, often requiring long-term alignment with a particular bloc. In the contemporary environment, by contrast, cooperation is increasingly selective and functional. States frequently collaborate with different partners across different issue areas, pursuing overlapping and sometimes seemingly contradictory relationships without abandoning strategic autonomy. This pattern is particularly evident in areas such as trade, energy, technology, infrastructure development, and environmental governance, where interests are often defined by specific objectives rather than by comprehensive geopolitical loyalty. (Acharya, 2018, p. 122)

The rise of networked interactions has reinforced this tendency. Global influence is increasingly exercised through interconnected webs of states, corporations, financial institutions, research organizations, technological platforms, and international institutions. Within such networks, influence derives not only from the possession of resources but also from the ability to occupy strategic positions that facilitate coordination, information exchange, and agenda-setting. Actors capable of linking otherwise separate networks often acquire leverage disproportionate to their material capabilities, illustrating the growing significance of connectivity as a source of power in the post-polar environment. (Castells, 2000, p. 514)

These developments also help explain the diminishing viability of hegemony as an organizing principle of global order. Historically, hegemonic systems depended upon a concentration of power sufficient to establish and maintain relatively stable hierarchies. Contemporary conditions, however, make such concentration increasingly difficult to achieve and sustain. Economic interdependence, technological diffusion, informational pluralism, and the proliferation of influential non-state actors create structural constraints on the ability of any single actor to translate superiority in one domain into comprehensive dominance across all others. Even where asymmetries remain substantial, they are rarely sufficient to produce uncontested control over the broader international system. (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 170)

As a consequence, contemporary leadership is increasingly exercised through coordination rather than command. The ability to construct coalitions, establish standards, shape institutional agendas, and facilitate collective action often proves more consequential than the capacity to impose outcomes

unilaterally. Influence therefore becomes more situational and context-dependent, varying across sectors and issue areas rather than flowing from a single hierarchical center. This pattern further reinforces the distinction between a post-polar order and earlier international systems organized around fixed balances or dominant poles.

The resulting structure is neither anarchic nor devoid of power concentrations. Rather, it is characterized by a plurality of actors exercising influence through overlapping networks and shifting coalitions. Stability emerges not from the existence of a universally recognized hegemon but from the continuous adaptation of relationships among participants possessing different capabilities, interests, and forms of authority. Such a configuration represents a significant departure from the assumptions that informed traditional theories of polarity and provides further evidence that the contemporary global order operates according to a distinct post-polar logic.

Conclusion: the logic and limits of a post-polar order

The transformations examined in this chapter —ranging from the diversification of power elements and actors to shifts in the geography and scope of global issues— were initially interpreted as features of a post-Cold War transition. Closer analysis suggests, however, that these changes are neither temporary nor oriented toward the re-emergence of a polarized global system. Their structural and irreversible character points instead to the consolidation of a post-polar order.

This emerging order is defined by the absence of fixed hierarchies, permanent alliances, and guaranteed dominance. Power positions are determined across a broad constellation of actors rather than among states alone. Although states retain significant sovereign authority and policymaking capacity, their role as exclusive or dominant actors is increasingly constrained, particularly in environments with robust civil institutions and private sectors.

In the post-polar era, global interactions are structured as flexible networks rather than cohesive blocs. Major powers compete within domains of relative advantage —the United States emphasizing military security, China prioritizing economic capacity, Europe maintaining normative influence, and some states leveraging institutional authority— yet the aggregate of global power extends well beyond these actors.

Ultimately, power has become too diversified and dispersed across domains and entities to support renewed state-centric or polarized configurations. In the absence of decisive superiority across the full spectrum of power resources, traditional models of unipolarity, bipolarity, or multipolarity no longer provide an adequate description of the contemporary international system. Recognizing the logic of post-polarity is therefore essential not only for

analytical clarity but also for effective policy formulation in an increasingly complex global environment.

At the same time, recognizing the emergence of a post-polar order should not be interpreted as suggesting the end of competition, conflict, or hierarchy in international affairs. Major powers continue to pursue influence, strategic rivalries persist, and significant asymmetries of capability remain. What has changed is the context within which these dynamics unfold. Competition increasingly takes place across multiple domains simultaneously and involves a wider range of participants than traditional models of international politics assume. Consequently, the capacity to shape outcomes depends not only on the possession of resources but also on the ability to operate effectively within complex networks of interdependence and interaction.

The post-polar framework also highlights an important distinction between the distribution of power and the organization of order. The existence of powerful states does not necessarily imply the existence of a polar system. Historically, polarity emerged under conditions in which states monopolized the principal instruments of power and exercised predominant control over cross-border interactions. Contemporary circumstances differ substantially. Although major powers continue to occupy privileged positions within the international system, they do so alongside corporations, financial institutions, technological platforms, research networks, media actors, and other entities capable of independently influencing global outcomes. The resulting structure cannot be adequately reduced to relations among states alone.

Furthermore, the persistence of global challenges that transcend territorial boundaries reinforces the limitations of traditional polar thinking. Issues such as technological governance, cyber security, climate change, migration, financial instability, and public health increasingly require forms of cooperation that cannot be organized through rigid blocs or hierarchical command structures. Effective responses depend upon coordination among diverse actors possessing different capabilities, sources of authority, and institutional roles. This reality further strengthens the tendency toward flexible coalitions, networked governance, and context-specific partnerships that characterize the post-polar environment.

The concept of post-polarity should therefore be understood less as a prediction than as an analytical framework designed to capture the structural implications of contemporary transformations. Its value lies in drawing attention to changes that conventional models often treat as secondary or temporary: the diversification of power resources, the proliferation of influential actors, the fragmentation of authority, and the growing importance of networks as mechanisms of coordination and influence. Together, these developments suggest that the central challenge of twenty-first-century international relations is not the management of rivalry among a limited number of poles,

but the governance of an increasingly interconnected system in which power, agency, and influence are distributed across multiple levels and domains.

Viewed in this light, the contemporary global order represents neither a transitional anomaly nor a precursor to a future polarized equilibrium. Rather, it reflects the emergence of a distinct historical configuration whose defining features are dispersion, flexibility, and multidimensionality. Understanding these characteristics is essential for developing theoretical frameworks capable of explaining contemporary realities and for formulating policies suited to an environment in which authority is shared, influence is networked, and no single actor possesses the capacity to determine global outcomes unilaterally.

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PART II

COMPETING MEANINGS AND PROJECTS OF MULTIPOLARITY

Chapter 4

What Do We Mean When We Talk About Multipolarity? A Chinese Perspective on an Evolving Process

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Abstract. Multipolarity has become one of the most widely used yet least precisely defined concepts in contemporary international discourse. It is often treated as a descriptive label for a world in which power is distributed among several major states, but this definition misses the deeper transformation now underway. This chapter argues that multipolarity should be understood as an evolving process involving the redistribution of material capabilities, the diversification of institutions, the growing strategic autonomy of states and regions, and the pluralization of normative and civilizational perspectives. From a Chinese perspective, the significance of this process lies not simply in the relative rise of China or the diffusion of power away from the United States. It lies in the emergence of a world in which different development paths, regional priorities, and institutional preferences increasingly have to coexist within a shared international system.

The chapter develops the Chinese perspective through observing four interconnected dimensions: development, security, civilization, and governance. It examines the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and Global Governance Initiative (GGI) as an architecture through which China seeks to continuously respond to deficits in the existing international order. It also observes the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank (NDB), Belt and Road cooperation, BRICS, and regional mechanisms as empirical expressions of institutional diversification. The argument is not that these mechanisms constitute a coherent Chinese-designed replacement for the post-1945 order. Rather, they

illustrate a Chinese preference for complementing existing multilateral institutions, expanding the voice and policy space of developing countries —Global South— and creating additional channels for cooperation where existing arrangements are perceived as inadequate. As a Chinese saying goes, rather than tear everything down and start anew, we keep patching and mending what already exists —five years, then another five, and yet another five, a formulation that resonates with China's five-year planning tradition. The chapter further argues that Chinese discussions of multipolarity cannot be separated from China's own modernization experience. Development, in this view, is not merely an economic variable but a foundation for political stability, social welfare, technological innovation, and international collaboration. Security is therefore understood as interconnected with development; governance is linked to representation and sovereignty; and civilizational diversity is treated as a source of multiple modernization pathways. Multipolarity's most consequential outcome may instead be a more complex form of structured coexistence accordingly, in which multiple centers of influence interact through overlapping institutions and flexible partnerships. The policy challenge is to manage this complexity without allowing competition to become the only organizing principle of the entire system.

Introduction

Multipolarity has returned to the center of global debate at precisely the moment when the international system is becoming more difficult to describe through the categories that dominated the post-Cold War era. For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, unipolarity appeared to be the only concept of world politics: the United States possessed an unusual concentration of military, financial, technological, and institutional power. Yet the international environment of the 2020s is increasingly characterized by overlapping forms of power and influence. China has become a major economic and technological center; India's strategic and economic weight has expanded; regional organizations and middle powers have acquired greater room for maneuver; and countries across the Global South have shown a stronger preference for diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alignment with any one major power. At the same time, global production networks, digital platforms, multinational firms, financial institutions, and transnational challenges have complicated the traditional state-centered conception of polarity.

The result is a conceptual problem. If multipolarity simply means that there are several powerful states, then the term tells us relatively little about the nature of the emerging order. A more useful question is: what happens to international institutions, development strategies, security arrangements, and political legitimacy when power becomes more widely distributed? Multipolarity should be treated as a process rather than a static end-state, involving the redistribution of capabilities, institutional reconfiguration, and normative

diversification. The purpose here is to deepen that argument by examining how these changes appear from a Chinese perspective and, more importantly, why and how China interprets them in the way it does.

The Chinese perspective matters for two reasons. First, China is not merely an external observer of multipolarity. Its economic transformation, technological development, diplomatic activism, and institutional initiatives are the results of globalization and the forces changing the distribution of global power. Second, Chinese policy discourse attaches meanings to multipolarity that are not identical to the conventional Western strategic interpretation. In much Western strategic literature, multipolarity is often approached through the problem of rivalry: how many poles exist, how they compare in material capabilities, how alliances shift, and whether instability increases as the number of major powers rises (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). These questions remain important. Yet Chinese official and policy discourse places greater emphasis on people, development State Council 2016sovereign equality, non-interference, peaceful coexistence, and the reform of international institutions. The central question is consequently less "which pole will dominate?" than "how can a world with multiple centers of influence be organized so that competition does not destroy cooperation?"

This Chinese perspective is not anticipated to be romanticized. Chinese foreign policy, like that of every major power, combines normative claims with national interests. China seeks greater voice, strategic space, market access, technological capacity, and security. Its initiatives therefore have geopolitical consequences even when they are presented as public goods. Nor should Chinese proposals be treated as self-validating alternatives to existing institutions. They need to be assessed empirically: Which institutions have they created? What problems do they solve? Who participates? How are decisions made? What evidence exists that partner countries regard these arrangements as useful? Such questions allow a Chinese perspective to be taken seriously without simply adopting official rhetoric as analytical fact.

This chapter therefore makes three related claims. First, multipolarity is best understood as multidimensional. Economic, technological, financial, military, institutional, regional, and normative distributions of influence matter. Second, from a Chinese perspective, the emerging order is not primarily a choice between an American-led order and a Chinese-led order. China's preferred vocabulary emphasizes a "community with a shared future for mankind," which implies that national development, security, and civilization are interconnected and that no single country should monopolize the definition of legitimate development or global governance. Third, the practical manifestation of this vision is institutional pluralization: existing organizations remain important, while new banks, regional platforms, development partnerships, and issue-based coalitions add layers to the international system rather than necessarily replacing the old ones.

The analytical distinction between replacement and supplementation is crucial. The creation of the AIIB and NDB, the expansion of BRICS, and the growth of Belt and Road cooperation can be interpreted as attempts to build parallel institutions. But they can also be understood as efforts to fill gaps in financing, representation, connectivity, and policy coordination. The evidence points to both dynamics. AIIB, for example, operates as a multilateral development bank with a broad membership, AAA ratings, co-financing partnerships, and formal cooperation with existing institutions. Its trajectory suggests institutional diversification rather than simple decoupling from the established financial system. By 2025, AIIB had more than 111 approved members and had invested nearly US$70 billion across 40 members, while in 2025 alone it approved US$10.6 billion for 57 projects (AIIB, 2026a, 2026b). These facts complicate the idea that Chinese-led institutions necessarily represent an anti-Western bloc.

The same point applies to the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, and Global Governance Initiative. These initiatives are best understood not as four disconnected slogans but as an emerging Chinese conceptual framework. Development addresses the material foundations of stability; security addresses the conditions under which development can continue; civilization addresses the rationality of different historical and cultural pathways; and governance addresses the institutional mechanisms through which these interests are coordinated. Chinese officials increasingly describe the four initiatives in precisely this interconnected way (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFA], 2025a). The analytical significance is that China is attempting to articulate a theory of order in which the legitimacy of international governance depends not only on rules, but also on representation, development, security, and cultural pluralism.

The argument proceeds thematically. First it visits polarity as a process of structural transformation. It then examines development and the Chinese modernization experience; security and the GSI; institutional diversification through AIIB, NDB, BRICS, and Belt and Road cooperation; regionalism and strategic flexibility; technology and the emerging distribution of capabilities; and finally the normative and civilizational dimension of multipolarity. Case studies from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the wider Global South illustrate how these changes interact. The chapter concludes by considering what an inclusive multipolar order would require in practice and what policy implications follow for China, other major powers, middle powers, and international institutions.

From polarity to process: reconstructing the concept

Classical international relations theory treats polarity as a property of the international system. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, for example, distinguishes

unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems according to the distribution of capabilities among major units (Waltz, 1979). This framework remains useful because material capabilities continue to shape strategic behavior. Yet contemporary globalization makes it increasingly difficult to locate all relevant power in a small number of states. Economic influence can be distributed through production networks; technological power can reside in firms and research ecosystems; financial influence can operate through currencies and payment systems; and institutional influence can be exercised through development banks, regional organizations, and standard-setting bodies.

A Chinese perspective adds another layer to this transformation. China's own experience demonstrates that power is not a single variable. The country's rise involved economic scale, industrial capacity, infrastructure, human capital, technological learning, state capacity, and integration into global markets. Reform and opening-up did not produce a withdrawal from international institutions; on the contrary, China joined and used many of them while maintaining substantial domestic policy autonomy. The resulting experience shapes an understanding of development in which openness and sovereignty are not necessarily opposites. A country can participate in globalization while seeking to retain the policy space to determine its own development priorities.

This is one reason Chinese discourse is skeptical of equating modernization with Westernization. The argument is not that China rejects international norms or institutions. Rather, it distinguishes between universal principles and particular institutional forms. Sovereign equality, peaceful coexistence, international law, and cooperation can be treated as broadly applicable principles without assuming that every society must reproduce one political or economic model. The Global Civilization Initiative makes this point explicitly by emphasizing respect for civilizational diversity, common human values, the inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and people-to-people exchange (MFA, 2024a). The underlying proposition is that universality should emerge through interaction rather than through the unilateral extension of one historical model.

From this angle, multipolarity is not simply "many poles." It is a transition in which multiple forms of agency become visible. A country may have limited military capabilities but substantial diplomatic influence; a regional organization may have little coercive power but strong legitimacy and rationality; a development bank may have modest capital compared with the World Bank but nevertheless broaden financing choices; a middle power may preserve autonomy by maintaining relationships with several major powers. Multipolarity therefore creates a layered system of influence rather than a simple hierarchy.

This also explains why China frequently emphasizes the Global South. The term is not merely geographic. It refers to countries whose institutional voice

and economic weight have historically been underrepresented relative to their population and development needs. The expansion of BRICS illustrates this shift. The group that began with Brazil, Russia, India, and China and later added South Africa, then it has expanded further to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia, while partner-country status has widened the network further (BRICS Brazil, 2025). The significance is less that BRICS will become a single political bloc —it is unlikely to do so given its internal diversity— than that a larger number of states now have a platform through which they can coordinate positions and explore alternatives in finance, development, trade, and global governance.

Development as the foundation of multipolarity

The Chinese perspective begins from a proposition that is easy to overlook in strategic debates: development is power, but it is also human rights, security and legitimacy. China's own modernization experience is central to this worldview. Over several decades, poverty reduction, economic growth, infrastructure expansion, industrialization, urbanization, and technological upgrading transformed China's domestic capabilities and, consequently, its international position. The lesson drawn in Chinese policy discourse is that political stability and international agency are difficult to sustain without economic and social development.

This perspective underpins the Global Development Initiative. The GDI places development at the center of international cooperation and identifies poverty reduction, food security, pandemic response, development finance, climate and green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity as priority areas (MFA, 2024b). Importantly, China presents the initiative as complementary to the United Nations 2030 Agenda rather than as a substitute for it. This matters analytically because it demonstrates a broader Chinese approach to institutional change: reform and supplementation within multilateralism rather than wholesale rejection of multilateral institutions.

The Chinese interpretation of the development deficit also differs in emphasis from approaches that prioritize governance reform before economic transformation. Chinese development discourse tends to stress sequencing: productive capacity, infrastructure, education, industrialization, connectivity, and poverty reduction create the material conditions under which institutional capacity can improve. This does not mean that governance is irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that governance arrangements should be assessed partly by their ability to deliver development outcomes.

The Belt and Road Initiative provides the largest empirical arena in which this approach can be observed. Since its launch in 2013, Belt and Road cooperation has expanded from infrastructure and trade connectivity to finance,

digital connectivity, green development, public health, and people-to-people cooperation. By 2023, more than 150 countries and more than 30 international organizations had signed cooperation documents, according to Chinese government data (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The evolution from large infrastructure projects toward what Chinese policy documents describe as "small yet smart" and people-centered projects is particularly significant. It reflects Chinese sincere efforts to respond to criticism about debt trap, environmental effects, and local participation by emphasizing more targeted and sustainable forms of cooperation.

The Chinese perspective becomes especially visible when comparing development finance institutions. The World Bank and regional development banks remain indispensable, but developing countries often face a financing gap that cannot be solved by existing institutions alone. AIIB was created in this context. Its membership has expanded far beyond Asia, and its operations increasingly resemble those of a conventional multilateral development bank in governance, financing standards, co-financing, and environmental and social safeguards. AIIB reports that it had more than 111 members across six continents by 2025 and had invested nearly US$70 billion in financing across 40 members; its 2025 financing approvals reached US$10.6 billion for 57 projects, with 71 percent of regular financing dedicated to climate-positive outcomes (AIIB, 2026a). This is evidence of institutional diversification that does not depend on abandoning the existing financial order.

The New Development Bank offers a second case. Created by BRICS members in 2015, the NDB was designed to mobilize resources for infrastructure and sustainable development in emerging economies. Its membership has expanded beyond the original five BRICS countries, with Bangladesh, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Algeria, and Uzbekistan among the newer members as of 2026 (NDB, 2026). The NDB's project portfolio likewise illustrates a pragmatic rather than purely ideological logic: projects include transport, clean energy, water, social infrastructure, and logistics across member countries. The bank therefore provides developing states with another financing channel while operating within the broader ecosystem of multilateral development finance.

From a Chinese perspective, the deeper meaning of these institutions is agency. A multipolar world is not genuinely multipolar if developing countries merely acquire symbolic representation while continuing to depend on a small number of financial and technological centers. Institutional diversification gives states greater choice. It can also create competitive pressure for existing institutions to improve. Yet this model has an important condition: diversification must not become fragmentation. If every major power creates closed financial, technological, and security systems, the result may be parallel worlds rather than a more inclusive order. China's own participation in

AIIB, NDB, the United Nations system, the G20, and other institutions suggests that it does not necessarily see new institutions as replacements for the old ones. The more plausible interpretation is layered multilateralism.

Security: from alliance logic to interdependence

The security dimension reveals perhaps the sharpest difference between competing interpretations of multipolarity. In much strategic thinking, a multipolar world is inherently difficult because several major powers may fear relative decline, misread one another's intentions, or form shifting alliances. Chinese policy discourse instead emphasizes common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. The Global Security Initiative explicitly calls for dialogue over confrontation, partnership over alliance, and win-win over zero-sum approaches (MFA, 2023).

This does not mean that China rejects power politics. China maintains extensive military capabilities and has clear national security interests. Nor does it mean that alliances have disappeared. Rather, the Chinese argument is that alliance-centered security can generate security dilemmas when one state's attempt to increase its security is perceived as another state's threat. In a highly interconnected world, this problem is magnified because economic, technological, energy, cyber, health, and environmental risks cross borders.

The GSI therefore places unusual emphasis on root causes. The Chinese argument is that conflict prevention cannot be separated from development and from the legitimacy of security concerns. The official concept paper identifies sovereignty and territorial integrity, common security, dialogue and consultation, and the role of the United Nations as core principles. It also proposes cooperation across traditional and non-traditional security areas (MFA, 2023). The theoretical implication is that security is relational rather than purely national: a state is not fully secure if its surrounding region remains unstable, if development opportunities collapse, or if international institutions cannot manage common risks.

The Saudi-Iran rapprochement announced in 2023 provides an important case for understanding this approach, although it should not be treated as proof that the GSI has replaced traditional diplomacy. China facilitated the restoration of diplomatic relations between two regional rivals after years of tension. The episode was significant because it illustrated a form of diplomacy centered on dialogue and de-escalation rather than alliance management. It also demonstrated the limits of simple geopolitical categorization: China could maintain relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran while presenting itself as a facilitator rather than an exclusive patron of either side.

More broadly, the Chinese approach to security emphasizes regional mechanisms. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN-centered frameworks, China-Arab cooperation, China-Africa mechanisms, and China-Latin America dialogue platforms all reflect a preference for overlapping networks rather than a single universal security bloc. This is consistent with multipolarity as structured coexistence: states can cooperate in one area while disagreeing in another, without requiring comprehensive ideological alignment. Yet this model faces real challenges. Dialogue cannot substitute for deterrence in every circumstance; sovereignty claims can conflict; and institutions with weak enforcement mechanisms may struggle during acute crises. A serious Chinese perspective therefore needs to confront the gap between normative principles and implementation. The credibility of cooperative security depends on whether states can translate principles into crisis-management mechanisms, confidence-building measures, humanitarian arrangements, and enforceable agreements. The GSI's future significance will depend less on the number of countries that endorse its language than on whether it can contribute to concrete conflict prevention and settlement.

Institutional diversification: complement, competition, or replacement?

One of the most consequential features of multipolarity is the proliferation of institutions. The post-1945 order remains anchored by the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and a dense network of regional and functional organizations. But alongside them are newer arrangements: AIIB, NDB, BRICS, the SCO, the Belt and Road cooperation framework, and numerous regional development and connectivity mechanisms.

It is tempting to interpret this proliferation as institutional competition. There is certainly an element of competition: institutions embody preferences, distribute resources, and confer agenda-setting power. Yet competition is not equivalent to replacement. AIIB's record is illustrative. The bank explicitly emphasizes co-financing, partnerships, and alignment with high standards. Its 2025 partnerships report describes co-financing as central to its operating approach and highlights resource mobilization, knowledge exchange, and capacity building (AIIB, 2025). The institution therefore operates through cooperation with other multilateral and national actors rather than through a closed Chinese sphere. The same logic applies to the NDB. Its original BRICS identity gave it symbolic significance as an institution of emerging economies, but its practical function is development finance. The NDB's expansion to countries outside the original BRICS five shows that institutional value can exceed the geopolitical identity of the founders. This is a useful indicator of whether multipolar institutions become durable: they must generate practical benefits for

members whose interests are not identical to those of the institution's founding powers.

BRICS itself is even more revealing. Its expanded membership encompasses countries with sharply different political systems, strategic interests, economic structures, and relationships with the United States and China. This diversity is precisely what makes BRICS distinctive —not as a conventional alliance, but as a flexible platform for dialogue, cooperation, and coordination among countries with diverse perspectives and interests. This is exactly its value: increasing the bargaining power of emerging economies, discussing reform of global governance, expanding development cooperation, and creating channels through which members can reduce excessive dependence on any single external actor. In this sense, BRICS is less a pole than a platform within a multipolar system. This distinction is central to the Chinese conception of institutional reform. The GGI, introduced in 2025, explicitly emphasizes sovereign equality, extensive consultation and joint contribution for shared benefit, and reform of global governance institutions to make them more representative, inclusive, and effective (MFA, 2025b). The initiative argues that the existing system should better reflect changes in the distribution of global population, economic weight, and political agency.

The underlying institutional philosophy is therefore evolutionary. China seeks greater representation for developing countries while retaining the UN Charter as a central normative foundation. This is important because it differentiates Chinese reformism from a revolutionary conception of order. The question is not whether the existing system should survive unchanged; the question is how it can adapt to a world that is no longer economically or politically organized in the same way as 1945.

Regionalism and strategic flexibility

Multipolarity is increasingly visible at the regional level. Rather than moving directly from a unipolar global system to a new global equilibrium, the world may be passing through an intermediate stage in which regional orders become more autonomous. Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Eurasia are developing distinctive combinations of institutions and strategic relationships. China's foreign policy reflects this regionalization through extensive bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

Asia is perhaps the clearest example. China's economic relations with ASEAN demonstrate how regional interdependence can grow even amid strategic competition. In 2025, China-ASEAN trade reached approximately RMB 7.55 trillion, or more than US$1 trillion, making ASEAN China's largest trading partner for the sixth consecutive year according to Chinese customs data (Ministry of

Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2026). ASEAN states simultaneously maintain security and economic relationships with China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and Europe. Their preference for strategic flexibility is itself an expression of multipolarity.

The Chinese perspective interprets such flexibility positively. Rather than seeing a refusal to choose sides as opportunism, Chinese policy discourse often treats it as a legitimate expression of sovereign autonomy. This resonates with the preferences of many middle and developing countries that do not wish to become subordinate to any major power. The language of "strategic autonomy," "multi-alignment," or "active non-alignment" used in different regions points toward the same structural phenomenon: states are trying to maximize options in a world where no single external partner can meet all their economic, security, technological, and diplomatic needs.

Regionalism therefore becomes a form of risk management. A country may depend on China for trade and technology, the United States for investment and security, Europe for markets, and regional institutions for political legitimacy. Such diversified dependence may reduce vulnerability to coercion by any single power. From the Chinese perspective, the most stable multipolar system may consequently be one in which states have room to maintain multiple partnerships without being forced into exclusive blocs.

The implication for China is that its influence increasingly depends on its ability to make partnerships attractive rather than merely strategic. Connectivity, market access, infrastructure, development finance, educational exchanges, technology cooperation, and diplomatic mediation all become instruments of influence. The most durable form of Chinese influence is therefore unlikely to come from demanding alignment. It is more likely to come from creating a dense network of mutually beneficial relationships in which partners retain agency.

Technology and the new geography of power

Technology complicates conventional polarity because technological capabilities can diffuse rapidly while remaining concentrated in critical nodes. Artificial intelligence, semiconductors, telecommunications, batteries, electric vehicles, renewable energy, cloud computing, and digital platforms are now simultaneously economic assets and strategic resources. The emerging technological order is therefore neither fully globalized nor fully nationalized. It is characterized by interdependence combined with attempts to control critical chokepoints.

From a Chinese perspective, this transformation reinforces the argument that development and security cannot be separated. Technological dependence can become a strategic vulnerability, while technological capacity can

expand a country's autonomy. China's emphasis on innovation-driven development, digital connectivity, and industrial upgrading is therefore not simply an economic strategy. It is also an attempt to ensure that multipolarity includes technological rather than merely diplomatic pluralism.

The Chinese experience is particularly relevant because technological development has been closely connected to industrial policy and large-scale domestic markets. China has built major capabilities in telecommunications, renewable energy, electric vehicles, batteries, drones, high-speed rail, and increasingly in artificial intelligence. At the same time, Chinese firms remain dependent on international markets, foreign technologies in some high-end segments, and global supply chains. The resulting structure is one of mutual dependence rather than complete autonomy.

This has two implications for multipolarity. First, technological decoupling is likely to be costly because the production of advanced technologies is geographically distributed. Second, attempts to weaponize technological interdependence may encourage the development of alternative supply chains, payment mechanisms, standards, and innovation ecosystems. In other words, coercive economic competition can itself accelerate the institutional diversification associated with multipolarity.

China's preferred response is not necessarily technological separation. Its policy discourse repeatedly emphasizes openness, cooperation, and the sharing of development opportunities, while simultaneously stressing technological self-reliance in strategically sensitive areas. This apparent tension reflects a broader reality: countries want openness when it expands opportunity and autonomy when dependence becomes a vulnerability. Multipolarity therefore involves a continuous negotiation between interdependence and resilience.

The governance of artificial intelligence illustrates the challenge. AI is global in its scientific foundations but highly concentrated in computing infrastructure, capital, data, talent, and advanced semiconductor supply chains. A genuinely multipolar AI order would require broader participation in technological development and governance. China has increasingly framed AI governance in terms of inclusiveness, accessibility, safety, and development, arguing that developing countries should not be left behind by the technological revolution. Whether this vision can be reconciled with national security controls and intense technology competition remains a challenge. Nevertheless, the future multipolarity will be defined as much by technology standards and infrastructure as by military balances.

Normative diversity and the Global Civilization Initiative

Perhaps the most distinctive dimension of the Chinese perspective is the insistence that multipolarity is also civilizational. The Global Civilization Initiative

emerged from the argument that modernization should not require cultural homogenization. Its four core propositions —respect for the diversity of civilizations, recognition of common human values, attention to the inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and stronger international people-to-people exchanges— represent an attempt to place cultural diversity inside the discussion of global order (MFA, 2024a).

This perspective responds to a long-standing problem in international political thought: the tendency to confuse the universal with the historically particular. The international system itself contains universal principles, but many of its institutions were developed under particular historical conditions. China's argument is that global governance becomes more legitimate when it recognizes that different societies can arrive at modernity through different institutional trajectories.

The distinction between modernization and Westernization is therefore central. China's own modernization experience is presented as evidence that economic development, technological advancement, urbanization, education, and global integration can occur without reproducing Western political institutions in identical form. Chinese officials argue that this does not invalidate Western experience; rather, it demonstrates that modernization can have multiple pathways.

The civilizational argument also has a diplomatic function. China seeks to position itself not simply as a rising state but as a civilization with its own historical experience and conceptual resources. Concepts such as harmony in diversity, mutual learning, seeking common ground while reserving differences, and (a shared world/common good) are frequently invoked to explain Chinese preferences for coexistence and dialogue. They can provide genuine intellectual resources for pluralism, but they can also become instruments of soft power and national narrative. Their significance depends on how they are translated into actual diplomatic practice.

The establishment of the International Day for Dialogue Among Civilizations, following a UN General Assembly resolution adopted in 2024 with broad support, illustrates how a concept originating in Chinese diplomacy can move into a wider multilateral setting. In 2026, Chinese officials highlighted the continuing implementation of the GCI and the role of civilizational dialogue in international cooperation (MFA, 2026a). The broader significance is that China is attempting to shape not only institutions but also the vocabulary through which international problems are understood.

For multipolarity, the key contribution of this perspective is legitimacy. If the world contains multiple centers of power but only one accepted model of political modernity, material multipolarity could coexist with normative unipolarity. The Chinese argument is that these two forms of hierarchy should also be considered. Different societies should have the ability to choose their own development paths and models while participating in common institutions.

Comparative case studies: what multipolarity looks like in practice

ASEAN and the practice of strategic autonomy

ASEAN provides perhaps the clearest example of multipolarity as structured coexistence. Southeast Asian states have deep economic links with China while maintaining security ties with the United States and other external powers. ASEAN's institutional culture emphasizes consultation, gradualism, non-interference, and consensus. These practices are not identical to China's diplomatic preferences, but they overlap with the Chinese emphasis on dialogue and respect for sovereignty.

China-ASEAN economic relations demonstrate how interdependence can coexist with strategic disagreement. The scale of trade means that a complete economic separation would impose significant costs on both sides. Yet ASEAN governments continue to diversify supply chains and external partnerships. Rather than indicating the failure of multipolarity, this is precisely what multipolarity looks like when viewed from a middle-power perspective: dependence is diversified rather than eliminated.

From the Chinese perspective, the lesson is that regional stability depends on resisting the transformation of economic networks into rigid geopolitical blocs. Connectivity should create incentives for peace. This is why Chinese policy repeatedly links economic cooperation to regional stability. The challenge, however, is to ensure that connectivity is genuinely reciprocal and does not create perceptions of asymmetric dependence. Transparency, local participation, environmental standards, and commercially sustainable projects are therefore not peripheral issues; they are conditions for the legitimacy of Chinese regional engagement.

Africa and development-centered partnership

Africa illustrates another dimension: the demand for development partnerships that provide infrastructure, industrialization opportunities, trade, financing, and skills. China's engagement in Africa has often been interpreted through the lens of great-power competition, but African governments frequently pursue a more pragmatic logic. They seek multiple partners and attempt to maximize development opportunities.

Chinese policy has increasingly responded by emphasizing industrialization, agricultural modernization, health, vocational training, digital connectivity, and smaller people-centered projects alongside major infrastructure. In 2025 China and Kenya, for example, described cooperation in terms of implementing the GCI, strengthening people-to-people exchanges, and supporting

a broader community with a shared future (MFA, 2025c). Such examples illustrate how development and civilization are combined in China's external partnerships.

The Chinese perspective nevertheless needs to take African agency seriously. Multipolarity cannot mean replacing Western dependency with Chinese dependency. Its promise lies precisely in the ability of African states to diversify relationships and negotiate from a stronger position. China's most sustainable role will therefore depend on whether African partners can use Chinese engagement to expand their own industrial and policy autonomy.

Latin America and the logic of diversified partnerships

Latin America offers a different but related case. The region has long sought greater autonomy from external power competition while maintaining strong economic links with the United States and Europe. China's rise as a major trading partner and investor has created additional options. Chinese policy toward the region increasingly emphasizes trade, infrastructure, clean energy, digital cooperation, and development finance while also invoking civilizational dialogue.

The five cooperation programs proposed for China-Latin America and the Caribbean —solidarity, development, civilization, peace, and people-to-people connectivity— illustrate the integrated structure of China's approach (MFA, 2025d). Development is linked to diplomacy, culture to political trust, and peace to regional stability. This is consistent with the broader Chinese conception of multipolarity as a multidimensional process rather than a military balance alone.

Again, however, the central question is agency. Latin American countries do not necessarily want to "choose China." They often want the ability to choose among China, the United States, Europe, regional partners, and others. The Chinese contribution to multipolarity is therefore strongest when it expands choice rather than demands alignment.

Multipolarity as structured coexistence

The preceding cases suggest that multipolarity should not be understood as the disappearance of hierarchy. Hierarchies remain. The United States retains enormous military, financial, technological, and institutional power. China has become a major economic and industrial center. Europe remains an important regulatory and economic actor. India is increasingly influential. Russia retains significant military and energy capabilities. Regional powers possess varying degrees of autonomy. What is changing is the ability of any one center to determine outcomes across all domains.

This is why "structured coexistence" is a more useful concept than simple fragmentation. The global system remains deeply interconnected even as states attempt to reduce strategic vulnerabilities. Supply chains are being diversified rather than eliminated; new institutions operate alongside old ones; states participate in multiple regional and global groupings; and development finance increasingly comes from a wider range of sources. The system is becoming more complex, not necessarily less organized.

From China's perspective, this complexity can be managed through a combination of principles and institutions. The principles are sovereign equality, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, development, and dialogue. The institutions are the United Nations, regional organizations, development banks, BRICS, the SCO, and other issue-specific mechanisms. The practical objective is not to eliminate competition but to prevent competition from becoming the only organizing principle.

This distinction is especially important because competition between major powers can produce self-reinforcing security dilemmas. If every Chinese initiative is interpreted as an attempt to replace the United States, and every American initiative is interpreted by China as an attempt to contain it, third countries may be pressured into choosing sides. The result would be a more rigid and less autonomous international system. By contrast, if major powers accept that influence can be shared, third countries can maintain diversified partnerships and institutions can overlap, multipolarity may create more room for cooperation.

The Chinese idea of a community with a shared future for mankind is an attempt to provide a normative language for this coexistence. Its practical meaning should not be assumed; it must be demonstrated through institutional behavior. The credibility of the concept will depend on whether China can combine national interests with genuine provision of international public goods, whether it accepts criticism from partners, whether its institutions remain open, and whether it supports multilateral rules even when they constrain its own preferences.

Challenges and tensions in the Chinese approach

A deeper Chinese perspective should also recognize the tensions within China's own approach. The first is the tension between sovereignty and universal governance. China emphasizes non-interference and sovereign equality, yet global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, financial instability, cyber governance, and AI cannot be managed through sovereignty alone. Effective cooperation requires states to accept common rules and, sometimes, external scrutiny.

The second tension is between strategic autonomy and interdependence. China seeks technological self-reliance in critical sectors while remaining

deeply integrated into global trade and investment. Complete autonomy is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. The more sustainable objective is resilience: maintaining enough domestic capability and diversified external relationships to avoid catastrophic dependence.

The third tension is between institutional pluralization and institutional coherence. Adding new banks, forums, and coalitions can expand representation, but it can also create duplication. If every institution develops separate standards, financing rules, and governance structures, transaction costs increase. China's argument that new mechanisms should complement rather than replace existing institutions will therefore require practical coordination. The fourth tension is between civilizational pluralism and universal principles. Respect for diversity is important, but diversity cannot become a blanket defense against accountability. China's civilizational argument will be more persuasive internationally if it demonstrates that pluralism and universalism can coexist: different societies can choose different institutional forms while sharing basic principles concerning human dignity, peaceful settlement, sovereignty, and international cooperation.

Finally, there is the tension between China's stated preference for win-win cooperation and the reality of strategic competition with the United States. The competition is structural and unlikely to disappear. The objective should therefore be to manage competition rather than deny it. This is where the Chinese conception of multipolarity faces its most important test: can China support a plural international system without turning its own rise into a demand for deference, and can the United States accept a more plural distribution of power without interpreting every Chinese initiative as revisionist?

Conclusions and policy Implications

Multipolarity is often described as though it were a destination: a world with several major powers instead of one. The evidence examined here suggests that it is better understood as a process. The international system is being transformed simultaneously in economic production, technology, development finance, regional institutions, security arrangements, and normative discourse. The result is not simply a redistribution of military capabilities. It is a reconfiguration of the mechanisms through which influence is exercised. From a Chinese perspective, this process is closely connected to the experience of Chinese modernization. China's rise has reinforced the belief that development is a foundation of security and international agency. This belief informs the Global Development Initiative. The GSI extends the logic to security by emphasizing common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. The GCI addresses the normative and civilizational dimension by arguing that modernization need not entail cultural homogenization. The GGI

then addresses institutional governance by emphasizing sovereign equality, representation, inclusiveness, and reform. Taken together, these initiatives constitute an emerging Chinese theory of order: development, security, civilization, and governance are mutually reinforcing dimensions of a more inclusive international system (MFA, 2025a).

The empirical record suggests that institutional diversification is already underway. AIIB and NDB provide additional channels for development finance; BRICS provides a platform for emerging-economy coordination; Belt and Road cooperation has expanded connectivity and development partnerships; and regional organizations provide additional layers of governance. These institutions should not automatically be interpreted as instruments of Chinese geopolitical replacement. Their actual behavior is more complicated. AIIB's broad membership and co-financing model, for example, demonstrate that a China-initiated institution can operate within the wider multilateral system. The NDB's expanding membership similarly shows that institutions created by emerging powers can develop functions that exceed their original geopolitical identity.

For policymakers, five implications follow. First, major powers should distinguish multipolarity from bloc formation. A more distributed world does not require a return to Cold War-style alliance structures. States should be allowed to maintain multiple partnerships, and major powers should avoid treating every third-country relationship as a zero-sum contest.

Second, international institutions should adapt to the redistribution of global capabilities. Reform of representation in international financial institutions, the UN system, and other bodies should reflect the growing weight of emerging and developing countries. If established institutions fail to adapt, alternative institutions will continue to proliferate.

Third, development should return to the center of international cooperation. Infrastructure, industrialization, digital connectivity, climate finance, food security, and health are not secondary to geopolitics. They are among the foundations of long-term stability. The GDI's emphasis on practical development cooperation is therefore relevant beyond China's own foreign policy.

Fourth, security architecture should become more inclusive. Dialogue mechanisms, regional confidence-building, conflict-prevention tools, and diplomatic mediation should receive greater attention. Competition between major powers is unavoidable, but it should be bounded by mechanisms that reduce the risk of escalation.

Fifth, civilizational pluralism should be treated as a resource rather than a threat. A multipolar world will contain multiple historical experiences and political cultures. The objective should not be to erase differences but to develop common rules through dialogue. The GCI is valuable insofar as it encourages mutual learning; its long-term credibility will depend on whether such mutuality is genuinely reciprocal.

The central conclusion is therefore straightforward but consequential: the emerging multipolar order should not be understood as a contest to determine which country will become the next hegemon. Its deeper significance lies in the possibility that international order itself is becoming more plural. The key question is whether this pluralism produces fragmentation or structured coexistence. China's answer is that coexistence can be supported through development, common security, civilizational dialogue, and institutional reform. Whether that answer ultimately succeeds will depend not on rhetoric but on practice: on whether institutions deliver public goods, whether partners retain agency, whether rules are applied consistently, and whether major powers can accept a world in which influence is shared rather than monopolized.

For China, this means that the legitimacy of its global role will increasingly depend on the quality of the public goods it provides and the openness of the institutions it supports. For the United States and other established powers, it means recognizing that the diffusion of power is not necessarily synonymous with the collapse of the international order. For developing and middle powers, multipolarity may provide greater strategic room—but only if they preserve the capacity to make independent choices. And for the international community as a whole, the challenge is to construct institutions capable of accommodating difference without allowing difference to become permanent conflict.

Multipolarity, in this sense, is neither inherently stabilizing nor destabilizing. It is a historical condition whose consequences depend on political choices. If treated as a zero-sum struggle for primacy, it can generate arms races, economic fragmentation, technological decoupling, and institutional paralysis. If managed as a process of institutional adaptation, diversified partnership, and negotiated coexistence, it can create a more representative and resilient system. The future of world order may therefore depend less on counting poles than on learning how multiple centers of power can live, compete, cooperate, and develop together within a shared international framework.

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Chapter 5

Multipolarity Viewed from the Global South

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Introduction

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound structural transformation, marked by the gradual erosion of post-Cold War unipolarity and the emergence of a more complex and contested global order. While the United States retains a dominant politico-military position, economic, technological, and demographic power is increasingly dispersed across multiple centers, giving rise to a *de facto* multipolar configuration. This reconfiguration is driven by the rise of Asia —particularly China and India— the reassertion of Russia as a revisionist strategic power, and the growing influence of emerging economies and Global South coalitions in global governance.

Contrary to early expectations that globalization would dilute the relevance of state power, interdependence has instead intensified strategic competition among major powers, each seeking to instrumentalize global flows for geopolitical advantage. In this evolving context, the EU continues to embody a distinctive normative and Kantian approach to international relations, grounded in shared sovereignty and rules-based governance, while the US is adapting its leadership strategy to an era of renewed great-power rivalry. Meanwhile, the rise of BRICS and other emerging institutional frameworks signals a gradual rebalancing of the global economic architecture and a diversification of governance structures beyond traditional Western-led institutions.

This policy paper examines the structural features and normative tensions of this emerging order. It assesses the implications of these transformations for global governance, with particular emphasis on the reform of the

UN system and the future of international cooperation in development, human rights, and global public goods. Ultimately, the paper argues that managing contemporary complexity requires not only institutional adaptation, but also a rethinking of the normative foundations underpinning the global order.

Characteristics of the contemporary international system

Against the backdrop of the profound structural transformation described in section 1, this section examines the main structural features of this contemporary system, focusing on its multipolar dynamics, the strategic posture of key actors, the normative distinctiveness of the EU, and the evolving role of the New South. In contemporary geopolitical and development discourse, the term New South refers to a group of emerging powers within the Global South that have gained significant economic, technological, and diplomatic influence. It includes countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey.

De facto multipolarity

The world is now characterized by *de facto* multipolarity, resulting from sources of wealth being far more dispersed today than they were thirty years ago. Admittedly, this is not yet a fully political or strategic multipolarity, given the overwhelming politico-military dominance of the United States. Experience shows, however, that while economic wealth does not necessarily translate into political power, political power without a solid economic foundation remains highly fragile.

Global wealth is now concentrated in three major centers: North America, Europe, and Asia. This *de facto* multipolarity is shaped by three essential factors: Asia's immense demographic potential, the rebalancing of economic power toward the Indo-Pacific region (which is becoming the new center of global gravity), and China's clear political determination to play a major international role.

The Chinese case is particularly significant because it combines several key sources of power: a large population, high labor productivity, a degree of cultural influence rooted in its history and global diaspora, and strong political ambition. Today, China's gross national product is substantially larger than Japan's, whereas twenty years ago it amounted to only a quarter of Japan's output.

In joining the World Trade Organization more than two decades ago, China demonstrated its commitment to globalization. Yet it embraced globalization not to integrate itself into an interdependent world, but rather to enhance its status and influence within such a world. Russia, naturally, does not possess

the same advantages as China, but it too has pursued a strategy aimed at strengthening its power.

If we take into account China's potential, Russia's ambitions, and those of India, it becomes clear that the global order of the twenty-first century may well be characterized by the resurgence of traditional national power politics.

American ambition

For a long time, it was widely believed that globalization would gradually weaken traditional forms of state power. However, developments since the beginning of the twenty-first century have demonstrated the opposite: economic and technological interdependence has coexisted with intensified competition among states. Major powers now view globalization not only as a source of prosperity but also as a means of projecting power, securing supply chains, and protecting their strategic interests.

In this context, the United States remains committed to preserving its dominant position within the international system. Its objective is no longer simply to prevent the emergence of a multipolar world, as articulated in the 2002 National Security Strategy, but also to manage strategic competition with emerging powers —most notably China— while confronting the resurgence of rivalry with Russia. Recent U.S. strategic documents increasingly portray the international system as an arena of great-power competition in which technological, industrial, energy, and digital issues occupy a central role.

American perceptions of the European Union have also evolved. While the EU remains a crucial economic partner, it is increasingly recognized as a geopolitical actor, particularly in the aftermath of successive crises related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and concerns over energy security. Nevertheless, the United States often continues to approach strategic issues through the prism of its own leadership role, especially within NATO.

More broadly, U.S. foreign policy remains strongly influenced by the belief that international security depends largely on the ability of the United States to sustain a global order favorable to its interests and those of its allies. This perspective occasionally generates disagreements with actors that advocate more multipolar or regionally oriented conceptions of security. Tensions in the Middle East illustrate this dynamic, as the security concerns of regional states do not always align with Washington's strategic priorities.

Moreover, contemporary debates focus less on institutions and agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol or the International Criminal Court than on issues related to the governance of emerging technologies, the regulation of artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, semiconductors, digital data, and the energy transition. In these domains, the United States seeks to balance

a willingness to engage in international cooperation with a determination to preserve its strategic autonomy and sovereign decision-making capacity.

Thus, rather than diminishing, sovereignty remains at the core of American strategic thinking. It is, however, exercised within an environment characterized by deep interdependence, intense technological competition, and the emergence of a more fragmented international system —one in which American influence remains significant but is increasingly contested compared with the early 2000s.

Why does EU remain Kantian?

One of the major outcomes of the triple Ukrainian, Palestinian, and Hormuz crises is the reintroduction of questions of national power into debates on globalization. This shift is not particularly surprising from a historical perspective. The first era of globalization, at the end of the nineteenth century, was characterized both by strong economic interdependence and by a balance of power among states. The latest development poses significant challenges for Europe because it highlights the incomplete nature of European power, despite the adoption of the 2022 Versailles Declaration at the start of the war in Ukraine. This declaration outlined the principles of a geopolitical Europe based on defense sovereignty, energy sovereignty, and commercial sovereignty.

Indeed, despite the somewhat caricatured nature of his argument, Robert Kagan's distinction between a 'Hobbesian' U.S. and a 'Kantian' Europe retains considerable analytical value. There is little doubt that Europe is, and remains, a political project deeply inspired by Kantian principles, including some of the tensions and contradictions within Kant's own thought that were later identified by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas emphasized the tension between the cosmopolitan nature of Kant's project for perpetual peace and his inability to fully transcend the framework of state sovereignty. This explains Kant's reliance on the concept of a federation of states, an idea later adopted by Jacques Delors to characterize the European project.

Kant identified three forces that could contribute to the achievement of perpetual peace: the peaceful nature of States, the civilizing and socializing effects of commerce, and the central role of the public sphere. These three principles are clearly reflected both in Europe's internal process of political integration and in the expression of its collective preferences. The *"pacifist character of States"* lies at the heart of the European political project (Laïdi, 2003). The determination to overcome permanently the interstate conflicts that historically divided Europe —particularly the Franco-German rivalry— constitutes the ethical foundation of European integration. Moreover, the reuniting of western and eastern Europe has been the bigger deal.

However, other important factors have also reinforced this orientation. One is the exhaustion of Europe's imperial ambitions and the increasing restraint shown by the continent's major military powers following decolonization. Added to this are Germany's historical sense of responsibility, and a broader Scandinavian political culture that tends to regard the use of military force as something that should either be strictly limited or delegated to the U.S. As a result, Europe is generally reluctant to resort to military force, and those EU countries that are more willing to employ it do not necessarily share a common strategic vision on its use.

To transcend the use of force among Europeans —and, by extension, in their relations with the wider world— the EU has developed a distinctly Kantian model of political regulation: shared sovereignty grounded in governance through norms and rules.

Shared sovereignty rests on a twofold process. The first is a process of avoidance, through which the symbolic dimension traditionally associated with sovereignty is deliberately set aside, leaving only its instrumental and operational functions. This helps explain why shared sovereignty is more often practiced than theorized or celebrated, given the powerful symbolic significance traditionally attached to sovereignty. France, for example, continues formally to reject the notion of transferring sovereignty. Instead, it prefers to speak of the transfer of competences, since sovereignty is regarded, by definition, as inalienable.

Once this initial conceptual step has been taken, a more conventional argument emerges: sovereignty is never truly lost because, even when shared, it can ultimately be recovered and exercised more effectively. Trade policy provides a clear illustration of this logic. Without a common commercial policy, Europe would wield only limited influence in negotiations with the United States. Through a common policy, each EU country relinquishes a portion of its sovereignty, but gains influence through the collective representation of its interests in multilateral negotiations. Within the framework of the World Trade Organization, Europe's influence derives precisely from its unity.

The model of shared sovereignty therefore rests implicitly on the idea that pooling sovereignty enables nations to move beyond traditional notions of prestige and national honor, thereby reducing rivalries and excessive nationalism without compromising their material interests.

The return of Russian hard power beyond its borders

Russia's behavior on the international stage since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 suggests that, in Moscow, power is still associated with control over vast territory and with the possibility of classical territorial expansion —even at the expense of economic development. Because of these

anachronistic conceptions, Russia appears to the West as a solitary power (Mongrenier & Thom, 2024). Yet Russia's relations with Belarus have been strengthened (the country is effectively a satellite), and the China-Russia partnership, although asymmetrical, increasingly resembles a close alliance (the Moscow-Beijing axis), even if it has not been formally and solemnly concluded. We should also note the alliance with Iran, which developed from cooperation established in 2015 in the Syrian theater, prior to the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus in December 2024. Despite economic globalization and a period of greater Russian openness to the outside world, these geopolitical representations have remained largely unchanged, while the legacy of 'Soviet Russia' continues to weigh heavily on mentalities and political practices, both inside and outside the country (Mongrenier & Thom, 2024).

This Russian strategic culture, the dominant geopolitical representations, and the 'grand strategy' underpinning the Kremlin's project of restoring influence over the former Soviet buffer zone, have reactivated the East-West divide inherited from the Cold War (Mongrenier & Thom, 2024). This process has coincided with the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to Euro-Atlantic institutions, while also shifting the dividing line some 1,500 kilometers beyond the former Iron Curtain. Developments over recent decades demonstrate the limited validity of the formula of Vasily Tatishchev —official geographer of Peter the Great— of *"Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals"*. Even if there is territorial continuity between Europe and Russia, the 'vertical of power' established by Putin, the absence of the rule of law, the restriction of public freedoms, and the hostile posture toward Europe have produced a front line stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, passing through Donbas and Crimea.

On the Baltic front, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania fear possible Russian pressure along their borders (including the seizure of the Suwałki Corridor) or destabilization operations (Mongrenier & Thom, 2024). However, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has altered the strategic balance in the Nordic-Baltic region, requiring adjustments in military capabilities and strategic planning. In the Black Sea, Russia's forcible annexation of Crimea and its transformation into a military stronghold have made the Pontic basin a theatre of war and a central arena for East-West confrontation. In this sense, current strategic and geopolitical configurations challenge conventional, overly academic definitions of Europe (Mongrenier & Thom, 2024).

Under former president Boris Yeltsin, Russia appeared to renounce imperial ambitions and to aim at building a nation state integrated into a broad Euro-Atlantic community, from Vancouver to Vladivostok. However, this interpretation warrants closer scrutiny. Many Russian leaders at the time believed that geopolitical retreat would only be temporary. The reintegration of lost territories was expected to occur through economic means, with Russia presenting itself as a model of economic liberalization. The reformers around

Yeltsin at the beginning of his first term were influenced by the concept of a 'liberal empire' formulated by Anatoly Chubais. However, a more covert form of imperial policy was already emerging, framed as rapprochement between Russia and the West. The Kremlin was already moving toward a strategy of co-optation and intimidation, which Putin would later systematize. If, following a geopolitical shock, such as military defeat and an internal power transition in the Kremlin, a national-liberal turn were to occur, the objective of maintaining a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and beyond might nevertheless persist, with only the methods changing.

The New South in the global balances

The 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath set the context for a long-needed discussion about the future of the global economic system and the role of the Global South. First, the crisis gave emerging market economies (EMEs), the opportunity to show their resilience against external shocks, which was particularly significant at a time when the developed world was proven less robust than claimed. Second, the crisis exposed the flaws of the prevailing system, and of the ideology behind it. In other words, the 2008 crisis to an extent was an inflection point for greater political participation of EMEs, which was shown, first, by the replacement of the G7/8 by the G20 as a more inclusive, post-Bretton Woods structure of global economic governance; and, second, by the emergence of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in 2009, as an economic and geopolitical alliance representing 42% of the world's population and over 25% of its GDP.

In this context, the G20 was seen as the most significant change in the wake of the crisis, contributing to a better balance between global economic and political power (Group of 77, n.d.). Following the G20 discussion at the 2009 London Summit, the Financial Stability Forum (FSF) was expanded to include all members of the G20 that were not members of the FSF, which then became the Financial Stability Board (FSB).

Many observers see BRICS as a counterweight to Western-dominated organizations, such as the WTO, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (Law, 2016, p. 51). At their 2014 summit, the BRICS announced the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB). This Shanghai-based bank was established to help finance future infrastructure and sustainable development projects in each member country, and in other emerging economies. The five nations agreed to put up an initial $2 billion each in financing, with a further $1 billion in guarantees, eventually rising to $100 billion. The NDB has the potential to become a significant challenger to the World Bank, thereby increasing the international power of the BRICS economies (Law, 2016, p. 51). Recently, Bangladesh, Egypt, and the UAE have all joined the BRICS NDB (Silk Road

Briefing, 2023), with numerous other countries, including Nicaragua, Nigeria, Senegal, and Thailand, poised to do the same (Silk Road Briefing, 2022). The current BRICS five now contribute 31.5% of global GDP, while the G7 share has fallen to 30%. The BRICS is expected to contribute over 50% of global GDP by 2030, with the proposed enlargement of the group almost certainly bringing that forward (Devonshire-Ellis, 2023).

The rise of EMEs and the emergence of the BRICS has contributed to greater consistency between the international financial architecture and a more multipolar global economy, in which economic and political power has begun to be less concentrated in a few countries —notably the U.S. and Western Europe— than in previous times. This is significant in that the EMEs and BRICS have the potential to project the perspectives and beliefs of the Global South in key policy areas, including economic development, reform of international institutions, and the future of multilateralism. The emergence of new international financial institutions (IFIs) from the EMEs and the BRICS, such as the NDB, the Contingent Reserve Agreement (CRA), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), can also potentially strengthen the international financial architecture by complementing and competing with the traditional Bretton Woods Institutions.

Therefore, it seems beneficial for global governance as a whole to count on the rise of the Global South as a development in international relations. The BRICS and EMEs boost the debate about global leadership and key policy areas, bringing the perspective of Global South and ending the one-sided view on those subjects. Meanwhile, the new IFIs emerging from the EMEs will tend to favor particularly small and medium-sized countries. Thus, when IMF resources were strengthened through New Arrangements to Borrow (NAB) and bilateral agreements following the global financial crisis, almost 25% of the former, and 50% of the latter, was contributed by EMDEs (Sheel, 2020, p. 21). China was the third biggest contributor to NAB (after the U.S. and Japan), and was the biggest lender under the bilateral arrangements (Sheel, 2020, p. 21). The share of BRICS in total contributions to the United Nations system has also risen, from 5.6% to 18.4% between 2008 and 2020, even the G7 share fell from 69% to 52% (Sheel, 2020). Since 2020, China has been the second largest contributor to the United Nations, after the United States (Sheel, 2020).

Nevertheless, three observations must be made about the role of the BRICS and EMDEs:

1. Even if the power of the IMF and the World Bank are reduced with the emergence of new IFIs, the influence over the system of the U.S. and the U.S. dollar will remain substantial for the foreseeable future.
2. While new IFIs are generally regarded as an initiative of EMEs, China's key protagonist status cannot be disregarded.

3. As a geopolitical actor, the Global South remains fragmented and the likelihood of the BRICS making up a strong, powerful grouping is not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the strength of this alliance could easily be diminished by the diverse individual ambitions of parties. They are potentially fierce competitors in global trade, and their investment ambitions in new markets risk creating renewed rivalry between them.

Reform the UN system to support inclusive multipolarity for a different perspective on the world

If the voluntarist vision of a multipolar world appears neither realistic nor desirable, it nonetheless remains necessary to have both a framework for interpreting the world and a framework for articulating it.

From a Southern perspective, defending a pluralistic world involves two approaches. The first consists, at the level of the South, of strengthening the shared value base among all members of the New South. This base refers not only to respect for the G77 rules, but also to respect for all multilateral agreements to which the countries of the New South have subscribed (WTO, the Paris Climate Agreement, etc.). From this point of view, the New South must clearly state that adherence to this value base is part of its multilateral posture. It is now necessary to speak of a communitarian political *acquis*, with the aim of giving substance to the spirit of the G77, rather than referring only to a regulatory *acquis*. This point is essential for anyone familiar with the U.S. tendency to empty the International Criminal Court (ICC) Treaty of its substance through bilateral exemption agreements signed with several countries, including future candidates for accession to the ICC Treaty.

From this perspective, the New South must support all initiatives associated with 'South power', even if not all countries of the South attach the same meaning to this concept. The process through which the South becomes aware of its common interests and its autonomy will necessarily be slow, gradual, and sometimes ambiguous. The emergence of a politically unified South will not happen in a sudden 'big bang'. This is why the question of relations with the West cannot —and will not— be settled in the near future. The South will maintain relations of both independence and growing interdependence with the West, which will only become clearer over time.

The second approach the New South should take should focus on improving its performance as a form of soft power (civilian power). Before becoming a military power, the South must ensure that it is more credible and more imaginative in its relations with the North. Therefore, in matters of aid and development, it is necessary to be more creative, more imaginative, and more innovative, as the performance of the South in this field remains weak,

as illustrated by the relative failure of the BRICS New Development Bank in Shanghai to become an alternative to the Bretton Woods institutions.

Reform the UN system to support inclusive multipolarity

Calls for reformed multilateralism at the UN's 75th anniversary session in September 2020 stressed the need for the equal participation of member states in UN decision-making. Five years earlier, when adopting Agenda 2030, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) acknowledged the interlinkages between peace, security, and development.

Peace and security architecture

It is entirely legitimate to question the effectiveness of the UN. However, it is important to recognize that the UN is not a single, homogeneous organization, but rather a complex system composed of numerous institutions and specialized agencies (Daou, 2024). Several UN bodies continue to perform their mandates effectively. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) plays a vital role in addressing global hunger, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provides essential protection and assistance to millions of displaced people worldwide. Similarly, the International Court of Justice contributes significantly to the development and enforcement of international law, while UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) remain key actors in the fields of child welfare and global public health. These institutions demonstrate the enduring relevance and effectiveness of many components of the UN system.

Debates surrounding the effectiveness of the United Nations primarily focus on the Security Council, the body responsible for maintaining international peace and security. Its effectiveness has frequently been constrained by rivalries between major powers. During the Cold War, ideological and geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and Soviet Union often resulted in institutional paralysis. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, renewed optimism emerged that the Security Council could fully reclaim its original role as the principal mechanism for collective security at the global level (Daou, 2024).

This expectation was partly realized during the 1990 Gulf Crisis. Through the adoption of twelve resolutions, the Security Council succeeded in mobilizing a coalition of 65 states to liberate Kuwait, while establishing a clear legal and political framework for the operation. Although the Council subsequently achieved notable successes, it also experienced significant failures, particularly in Rwanda and Bosnia, where its inability to respond effectively exposed serious weaknesses in the collective security system (Daou, 2024).

Today, the Security Council's functioning is once again hindered by deteriorating relationships between major powers. Western states have largely lost confidence in Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, while strategic competition between the U.S. and China continues to intensify. Conversely, Moscow and Beijing remain deeply suspicious of U.S. foreign policy objectives and strategic initiatives. In such a context, the absence of mutual trust among the permanent members significantly undermines the Council's capacity to act effectively (Daou, 2024).

This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of the war in Ukraine, where Russia's veto power has repeatedly obstructed collective decision-making. A similar pattern can be observed in relation to the conflict in Gaza, with the U.S. frequently using its veto to block resolutions perceived as contrary to Israeli interests. Consequently, the Security Council appears highly dependent on the state of relationships between the major powers, unlike many other UN agencies and institutions that continue to operate despite geopolitical tensions (Daou, 2024).

Security Council reform therefore remains a central issue in contemporary debates on global governance. However, the challenge lies not necessarily in expanding its membership but rather in addressing the veto mechanism. The veto is often criticized for its inherently unequal nature and its adverse impact on the Council's effectiveness (Daou, 2024). At the same time, substantially restricting or abolishing the veto could diminish the willingness of major powers to engage with and support the institution, given the privileged position they currently enjoy within it.

A more realistic avenue for reform may involve strengthening accountability mechanisms governing the use of the veto. In this regard, an initiative proposed by Liechtenstein and adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2022 would require states exercising the veto to justify their decisions publicly before the wider membership. Such measures could be further developed through systematic debates and enhanced scrutiny of veto use within the General Assembly (Daou, 2024).

More broadly, some scholars and policymakers advocate strengthening the role of the General Assembly, which is widely regarded as more representative of the diversity of the international community. Granting the Assembly greater decision-making authority could contribute to a more balanced and inclusive system of global governance. Nevertheless, despite numerous reform proposals advanced over recent decades, meaningful institutional change has remained elusive (Daou, 2024). The only significant reform of the Security Council has been the expansion of its membership from eleven to fifteen members, while the veto privileges of the five permanent members have remained unchanged (Daou, 2024).

Human rights pillar

In its human rights pillar, the UN's biggest challenge comes from the impact of rising inequality between and within its member states. This has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. If not addressed in an inclusive manner, this could jeopardize the incremental success of the UN in constructing a rule-of-law-based global framework to uphold human rights. Its successes include the removal of discrimination based on color between 1946-1994, outlawing mass-atrocity crimes like genocide, and asserting gender equality in 1948. As the rights of the first generation (civil and political rights) remain unfailing, the time has come to reform and empower the elected 47-member UN Human Rights Council (HRC) to respond effectively to this challenge and to bring in human-rights perspectives from the Global South. The work of the Council during the past fifteen years, especially through the Universal Periodic Review of all 193 UN member states, provides the basis for investing the HRC with primary responsibility for the UN's human rights pillar.

On the other hand, the challenges facing the UNSC and the HRC impact the UN's pillar of socio-economic development, which constitutes the rights of the second generation. The UN's activities in this area are dominated by the process of implementation of Agenda 2030, with the eradication of poverty as its overarching goal. UN specialized agencies including WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Labour Organization, UNESCO, and UNICEF, play major roles in the effort to implement Agenda 2030.

Three aspects make Agenda 2030 transformational. First, it puts the onus on each UN member state to prioritize and implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) laid out in 2015. Second, it encourages multiple stakeholder participation in the resourcing and implementing of the SDGs. Third, it focuses on multilateral financial flows and technology transfers as the means to implement the SDGs.

In the longer term, implementing Agenda 2030 will require leadership in the UN system to keep the focus on the twin priorities of climate change, with reference to the environmental rights that constitute the rights of the third generation, and socio-economic progress. The international community must not only establish an International Climate Court to monitor nations' progress in accomplishing their climate goals, and to enforce the provisions of the Paris Climate Agreement and any subsequent agreement, but must also lead a holistic reform of the three multilateral institutions (the IMF, World Bank, and WTO) that have sustained the peace since the Second World War.

The UN needs to be proactive in responding to both new and traditional challenges. This is especially true of the digital domain, or the rights of the fourth generation, which were thrust into the UN's mainstream activities by the COVID-19 pandemic. A roadmap for a human-centric multiple stakeholder approach to securing and applying digital technologies drawn up by the

UN Secretary-General must be integrated as a priority into UNGA's agenda, to bridge digital divides (United Nations, 2020).

Development pillar

On the development pillar, the traditional model of international cooperation, based primarily on development aid, now appears more than ever to be reaching its limits. Official development assistance (ODA) is experiencing its sharpest contraction on record (Pradier Goeting, 2026). Figures published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in April 2026 are particularly striking. ODA from members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) fell by 23.1% in real terms in 2025, marking the steepest annual decline recorded since the indicator was established in 1969 (Pradier Goeting, 2026). Funding levels have returned to those of 2015, erasing a decade of progress, and, with it, part of the commitments made under the 2030 Agenda. According to the OECD, a further decline of nearly 6% is expected in 2026. This dramatic downturn, in a world undergoing significant geopolitical and structural shifts, signals the likely end of the traditional approach to international cooperation based primarily on development aid.

From this perspective, three potentially overlapping trajectories can be envisaged for the aid system:

Degraded continuity: the current model persists in a weakened form, increasingly fragmented and more dependent on geopolitically driven private funding. Western NGOs survive within this framework, but at the cost of a gradual erosion of their transformative capacity. In the short term, this is the most likely scenario.

An already emerging geopolitical reconfiguration. Aid flows from non-DAC countries reporting to the OECD rose from $1.1 billion in 2000 to $17.7 billion in 2022—a sixteen-fold increase over two decades. China has committed $4 billion (€3.4 billion) to its South-South Cooperation Fund since 2015. South-South cooperation does not replace Western ODA in volume terms, but is gradually building an alternative architecture based on different normative assumptions —non-conditionality, reciprocity, and non-interference— which directly challenge those of the traditional Western model.

A more demanding scenario is that of a pluriversal re-foundation: the emergence of a new framework of legitimacy based on the recognition of situated knowledge, the co-construction of solutions, and the rethinking of historical asymmetries of power. It requires Western NGOs to let go of certain assumptions —assumptions their own field teams are already questioning. It also requires public bodies with the ability to reassert a political, rather than purely technical, conception of international solidarity.

Only in this third scenario can we speak not of a forced post-ODA world, but of a genuinely reconfigured system of international cooperation. Ultimately, the question is no longer whether the current model can be preserved in its existing form, but whether international solidarity organizations —broadly defined— are able to imagine and build a different model.

The underlying impression is that the reinvention of international cooperation requires North–South cooperation logics to be articulated effectively with emerging global challenges such as social protection and industrial investments. In terms of social protection, strengthening the health ecosystems of developing countries requires the modernization of health systems, and the expansion of social protection mechanisms. Dominated by the Washington Consensus over the past three decades, social protection has often been relegated to the background in ODA policies. However, numerous studies show that universal social protection systems are a cornerstone of any inclusive development agenda. In industries where technology and capital are highly integrated on a global scale (such as the automotive, aerospace, electronics, pharmaceutical, semiconductor, and fine chemicals sectors), the industrial ecosystem developed between Japan and Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries in the 1980s serves as a key reference. This model fostered effective regional integration, which supported the emergence of local industrial players and could also drive the revitalization of international cooperation frameworks.

Indeed, through what is known as the 'flying geese development model', ASEAN economies shifted from structures dominated by raw material exports to those increasingly oriented toward mechanical and electronic components. This transformation reflected a process of industrial upgrading and growing complexity in intra-regional trade.

Subsequently, with the introduction in 1996 of the ASEAN Industrial Cooperation Scheme (AICO), which provided incentives for locally established firms, Japanese companies were encouraged to invest directly in these countries. This contributed to the creation of a genuinely integrated industrial ecosystem. Most importantly, this model enabled the development of numerous local participants, thereby avoiding purely foreign dominance.

Conclusion

The analysis developed in this paper highlights the emergence of a fragmented yet interdependent international system in which no single actor can impose a stable hierarchical order. Instead, the global landscape is increasingly characterized by *de facto* multipolarity, strategic rivalry between major powers, and the parallel rise of alternative centers of economic and institutional influence. While the U.S. continues to anchor the security architecture

of the international system, its leadership is now exercised in a context of intensifying competition, particularly with China, and renewed geopolitical friction with Russia.

Within this evolving structure, the EU persists as a largely Kantian player, committed to normative governance and the pooling of sovereignty, even as external shocks increasingly expose the limits of its geopolitical autonomy. Russia's return to classical hard-power logics has reactivated Cold War-era fault lines, while the Global South —despite its internal fragmentation— has gained unprecedented visibility through platforms such as the G20 and BRICS, contributing to a gradual diversification of global governance.

These shifts place significant pressure on the post-1945 multilateral order, particularly the UN system. Although many of its specialized agencies remain effective, paralysis in the Security Council and the structural constraints of veto power underscore the growing mismatch between institutional design and geopolitical reality. Similarly, the human rights and development pillars face mounting challenges linked to inequality, geopolitical fragmentation, and the decline of traditional development assistance models.

In this context, reforming global governance is a strategic imperative. Strengthening representativeness, enhancing accountability mechanisms, and adapting multilateral frameworks to reflect contemporary power distributions are essential if legitimacy is to be sustained. However, institutional reform alone is insufficient. What is ultimately required is a broader redefinition of international cooperation that integrates North–South dynamics, acknowledges plural normative orders, and responds to emerging challenges, including climate change, digital transformation, and industrial reconfiguration.

The future of the international system will therefore depend on whether it can reconcile power politics with normative governance, sovereignty with interdependence, and fragmentation with cooperation. Whether through reform of existing institutions, or the gradual emergence of complementary structures, the central challenge remains the construction of a more inclusive and functional form of multipolarity capable of sustaining global stability in an era of profound transition.

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Chapter 6

Multipolarity as Structure, Narrative, and Institutional Strategy: The Politics of Cooperation in a Post-Hegemonic Order

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Abstract. Multipolarity has become one of the defining yet most contested concepts in contemporary international relations. Frequently invoked to describe the redistribution of power and the erosion of traditional hegemonies, the term nevertheless carries distinct meanings across political, regional, and institutional contexts. In some interpretations, multipolarity refers to an objective structural transformation in the international system, marked by the diffusion of economic, technological, and geopolitical capabilities beyond the traditional Western core. In others, it functions as a strategic discourse mobilized by states seeking greater autonomy, legitimacy, or influence within a changing global order. This paper argues that multipolarity should be understood simultaneously as a structural condition, a political narrative, and an institutional strategy. Rather than treating multipolarity as a stable or consolidated order, the paper conceptualizes it as an ongoing and contested process through which states, coalitions, and institutions attempt to renegotiate authority, legitimacy, and hierarchy in a post-hegemonic environment. In this sense, the rise of multipolarity does not necessarily imply the disappearance of hierarchy or the emergence of equilibrium among powers. Instead, it reflects growing tensions between existing governance arrangements and the evolving distribution of capabilities and expectations within the international system. The paper develops three central arguments. First, debates on multipolarity are inseparable from broader disputes regarding the future of the liberal international order and the extent to which contemporary transformations represent hegemonic decline, adaptive reconfiguration, or a fluid interregnum between competing models of governance (Ikenberry, 2018; Hurrell, 2006). Second, multipolarity generates what

the paper describes as a legitimacy gap: a widening mismatch between institutional structures inherited from previous distributions of power and the increasing influence of emerging actors such as China, India, and Brazil. Third, responses to this legitimacy gap have produced competing forms of institutional adaptation, ranging from 'minilateral' coordination mechanisms and regional coalitions to more flexible and layered forms of cooperation. Particular attention is given to Brazil as a middle power whose diplomatic trajectory illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of acting as a bridge actor within an increasingly fragmented international landscape. Rather than assuming Brazil's bridging role as an intrinsic attribute, the paper treats it as a potential and context-dependent function shaped by external perceptions, strategic alignments, and issue-specific dynamics. Ultimately, the paper argues that the future of multipolarity will depend less on the number of poles in the system than on the ability of states and institutions to develop governance arrangements capable of managing interdependence under conditions of geopolitical divergence.

Introduction: what do we mean when we talk about multipolarity?[1]

Over the past two decades, the term "multipolarity" has been repeatedly invoked to describe the redistribution of power beyond the traditional Western core, the relative decline of the United States predominance, and the emergence of a more plural international landscape. Yet despite its widespread use, multipolarity remains a deeply contested concept. It is used to describe structural transformations in the international system, strategic aspirations of emerging powers, competing visions of global order, and even normative critiques of liberal hegemony. In many instances, these meanings overlap without being clearly distinguished.

This ambiguity is not merely semantic. It reflects broader uncertainties regarding the trajectory of the international system itself. Are current transformations signaling the emergence of a genuinely post-hegemonic order, characterized by multiple centers of authority and influence? Or are they instead producing a reconfigured hierarchy in which traditional powers retain disproportionate control over the institutions, norms, and infrastructures of global governance? Similarly, does multipolarity imply a more inclusive and

[1] Author's Note: This chapter is part of a broader research agenda on multipolarity, institutional adaptation, and global governance. It draws on and further develops ideas previously explored in policy-oriented publications by the author, including the paper "Reimagining Cooperation in a Multipolar Age: G7–Emerging Power Engagement and the Politics of Shared Governance.", published in CEBRI Journal. The present chapter substantially expands the theoretical discussion and reframes the analysis within the broader academic debate on multipolarity and post-hegemonic order.

cooperative order, or does it risk intensifying fragmentation, geopolitical rivalry, and institutional competition?

These questions have become increasingly central in debates on international order. The post-Cold War moment, once associated with expectations of liberal expansion and institutional convergence, has gradually given way to a more unstable and contested environment. As Acharya (2014) argues, contemporary transformations are not simply reducing Western dominance, but producing a more decentered and plural configuration of international order. The rise of China, the consolidation of new regional and transregional coalitions, the growing assertiveness of middle powers, and the erosion of confidence in traditional multilateral institutions have collectively challenged assumptions about the durability of the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2018). At the same time, crises ranging from the 2008 financial collapse to the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed the limitations of existing governance structures and intensified demands for institutional adaptation.

Within this broader transformation, multipolarity has emerged not only as a description of changing power distributions, but also as a political language through which states articulate demands for recognition, autonomy, and legitimacy. For some actors, particularly emerging powers, multipolarity represents the possibility of a more balanced and representative order, one less dominated by Western preferences and more responsive to the diversity of political, economic, and regional experiences. For others, however, multipolarity is associated with the weakening of institutional cohesion and the return of great-power competition (Hurrell, 2006).

The concept therefore operates simultaneously at multiple levels. Structurally, it refers to the diffusion of material capabilities across a broader set of actors. Politically, it functions as a narrative mobilized by states seeking to justify alternative institutional arrangements or greater strategic autonomy. Institutionally, it creates pressures for adaptation within governance frameworks that were largely designed under previous distributions of power. Understanding contemporary international politics requires examining how these dimensions interact rather than treating multipolarity as a singular or self-evident phenomenon.

This paper argues that multipolarity should be understood less as a stable condition of equilibrium among powers and more as a contested process of renegotiating authority, legitimacy, and hierarchy in international order. Rather than assuming that the diffusion of power automatically produces a coherent multipolar system, the paper suggests that current transformations are generating competing institutional and political responses. In this sense, multipolarity is not simply an outcome of structural change, but a field of political struggle over how global governance should be organized and who should shape its rules. A central consequence of this process is what the paper describes as a legitimacy gap. Existing governance institutions continue

to reflect historical distributions of power that no longer correspond fully to contemporary geopolitical realities. As a result, global governance is increasingly characterized by tensions between effectiveness and legitimacy, exclusivity and inclusion, coordination and representation.

These tensions have encouraged the emergence of new forms of institutional experimentation. Regional coalitions, minilateral forums, issue-based coalitions, and layered governance arrangements have proliferated as states seek more flexible mechanisms for managing cooperation under conditions of uncertainty and rivalry. Institutions such as BRICS, the G20, and even the evolving outreach strategies of the G7 reflect distinct attempts to adapt governance structures to a more plural and contested environment.

Particular attention must also be given to the role of middle powers. While debates on multipolarity often focus on major powers such as the United States and China, middle powers play a critical role in mediating institutional interactions, shaping coalitions, and articulating alternative understandings of order. Brazil provides a particularly relevant example in this regard. Historically committed to multilateralism and institutional engagement, Brazil has simultaneously sought greater autonomy and broader recognition for emerging actors within global governance structures. Yet its capacity to function as a bridge actor remains conditional, shaped by both external perceptions and the dynamics of geopolitical competition.

The paper develops this argument in four steps. First, it examines the conceptual dimensions of multipolarity, distinguishing between its structural, political, and institutional meanings. Second, it analyzes how the diffusion of power generates legitimacy pressures within global governance arrangements. Third, it explores the role of middle powers in navigating and shaping these transformations, with a particular emphasis on Brazil. Finally, it discusses the implications of these dynamics for the future of cooperation in an increasingly fragmented international system.

Rather than asking whether the world has already become multipolar, the paper asks a different question: what kinds of institutional and political arrangements emerge when multiple actors seek to redefine the terms of legitimacy and authority in global governance simultaneously? The answer to this question may ultimately determine not only the future of multilateral cooperation, but the very meaning of multipolarity itself.

Multipolarity: structure, narrative, or institutional strategy?

The contemporary revival of debates on multipolarity reflects more than a transformation in the distribution of global power. Although the term is frequently used in political discourse, diplomatic rhetoric, and academic analysis,

there is little consensus regarding what multipolarity actually describes, how it operates, or what consequences it produces for global governance.

At a minimum, multipolarity refers to a configuration in which power is distributed across multiple significant actors rather than concentrated in a single hegemon or divided between two dominant poles. In this structural sense, the concept is associated with the relative diffusion of economic, political, military, and technological capabilities beyond the traditional Western node. The rise of China, the consolidation of India as a major geopolitical actor, the resilience of regional powers, and the growing relevance of transregional coalitions such as BRICS all suggest a movement away from the unipolar moment that characterized the immediate post-Cold War era (Hurrell, 2006; Stuenkel, 2016). The rise of emerging actors reflects what Zakaria (2008) described as the 'rise of the rest': a redistribution of influence occurring even without the complete decline of Western power.

Yet the analytical usefulness of multipolarity becomes more complicated once one moves beyond aggregate indicators of power distribution. Structural diffusion alone does not determine the nature of international order. Historically, multipolar systems have produced highly divergent outcomes, ranging from periods of relative equilibrium to episodes of intense rivalry and systemic instability. As a result, identifying multiple centers of power does not in itself explain how international politics will be organized, nor whether emerging configurations will become more cooperative, fragmented, or conflictual.

This ambiguity becomes even more pronounced in the contemporary context because current transformations are unfolding within institutions, norms, and infrastructures largely shaped during periods of Western predominance. The diffusion of material capabilities has not been matched by a proportional redistribution of institutional authority. Existing governance frameworks, including financial institutions, security architectures, and decision-making forums, continue to reflect earlier distributions of power and legitimacy. Consequently, the current international system is characterized not simply by power transition, but by growing tensions between structural change and institutional continuity.

In this sense, multipolarity increasingly functions not only as a structural description, but also as a political narrative. States invoke the language of multipolarity to articulate competing visions of international order, justify institutional reforms, and challenge existing hierarchies. For many emerging powers, multipolarity represents the possibility of a more plural and representative system, less constrained by Western dominance and more open to alternative political, economic, and regional experiences. These differences suggest that multipolarity is not a singular geopolitical project, but a contested political language through which states negotiate legitimacy and authority.

This distinction is important because it complicates simplistic interpretations of the contemporary order as either "post-Western" or "post-hegemonic."

The relative decline of the USA predominance does not automatically imply the disappearance of hierarchy, nor does the emergence of alternative coalitions necessarily produce institutional replacement. In many domains, traditional powers continue to exercise disproportionate influence through financial systems, technological infrastructures, military alliances, and normative frameworks. As Ikenberry (2018) argues, elements of the liberal international order remain deeply embedded in the institutional architecture of global governance, even as their political legitimacy becomes increasingly contested.

The result is a system that appears simultaneously more plural and more hierarchical. Emerging powers possess greater material capabilities and political leverage than in previous decades, yet they continue to operate within structures that constrain their influence. This creates what may be understood as a condition of institutional asymmetry: a mismatch between the distribution of capabilities and the distribution of authority within governance frameworks.

Rather than producing a clearly defined multipolar equilibrium, contemporary transformations may therefore be generating a prolonged condition of transition: an "interregnum" characterized by overlapping institutional arrangements, competing legitimacies, and uncertain trajectories of order formation. Indeed, some authors argue that the contemporary system may be better characterized as 'nonpolar,' marked by dispersed influence across state and non-state actors rather than stable poles of power (Haass, 2008). In this sense, multipolarity functions as an institutional problem as much as a geopolitical condition.

One of the most visible consequences of this process is the emergence of legitimacy disputes within global governance. Existing institutions increasingly face challenges not only regarding effectiveness, but also regarding representativeness and political acceptance. Smaller and more cohesive forums such as the G7 continue to possess considerable agenda-setting capacity, but their legitimacy is questioned by actors excluded from their core structures. More inclusive arrangements such as the G20 address some representational concerns, yet often struggle to maintain cohesion and decisiveness (Brandi, 2019; Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2016).

The tension between legitimacy and effectiveness thus becomes central to understanding institutional adaptation in a multipolar context. Inclusivity may enhance representational legitimacy, but can reduce operational coherence. Exclusivity may preserve coordination capacity, but risks deepening perceptions of hierarchy and exclusion. Multipolarity, in this sense, intensifies rather than resolves dilemmas of governance design. These tensions have contributed to the proliferation of new forms of institutional experimentation. Minilateral coalitions, regional arrangements, issue-based partnerships, and flexible governance mechanisms increasingly coexist with

traditional multilateral institutions. Rather than replacing existing structures entirely, many of these arrangements operate as supplementary or overlapping frameworks designed to manage cooperation under conditions of uncertainty and strategic divergence.

This also helps explain why contemporary multipolarity remains politically unstable. Competing interpretations of order coexist without a clear consensus regarding the rules, norms, or institutional arrangements that should govern international cooperation. Some actors seek reform within existing structures; others pursue greater autonomy through parallel arrangements; still others attempt to preserve institutional continuity despite shifting systemic conditions.

Within this broader process, middle powers occupy a particularly important position. Unlike major powers, they often lack the material capabilities necessary to shape systemic outcomes independently. However, they can influence how institutional relationships are mediated, how coalitions are organized, and how legitimacy is articulated across different governance settings. Their role becomes especially relevant in contexts where cooperation depends not only on material capabilities, but also on political credibility and institutional flexibility.

Brazil exemplifies many of these dynamics. Its historical commitment to multilateralism, combined with its engagement in both traditional and alternative institutional frameworks, reflects the ambiguities and opportunities associated with multipolarity itself. Brazil neither fully rejects the liberal institutional order nor fully aligns with revisionist alternatives. Instead, its diplomatic trajectory illustrates how emerging middle powers navigate between competing institutional and geopolitical configurations.

Ultimately, contemporary multipolarity should be understood less as a finalized structure of global order than as an open-ended political process. Its future depends not simply on the diffusion of power, but on the capacity of institutions and actors to renegotiate legitimacy, authority, and cooperation under conditions of fragmentation and interdependence. As Keohane (2002) suggests, growing interdependence increases the need for governance even as political authority becomes more diffuse. Therefore, the following section examines how these tensions manifest themselves in contemporary governance arrangements, particularly in the relationship between legitimacy and institutional effectiveness.

Multipolarity and legitimacy: governance under institutional strain

One of the most significant consequences of contemporary multipolarity is the growing strain it places on existing governance arrangements. As power

diffuses across a broader range of actors, institutions created under previous geopolitical configurations face increasing difficulties in reconciling effectiveness, legitimacy, and representation. The challenge is not simply that the international system has become more plural, but that existing mechanisms of governance remain unevenly aligned with this new distribution of capabilities and expectations.

This misalignment has produced what may be described as a legitimacy gap within global governance. The term does not imply that institutions such as the G7, the International Monetary Fund, or the United Nations have become entirely ineffective or irrelevant. On the contrary, many of these institutions continue to exercise substantial influence over agenda-setting, coordination, and norm production. Rather, the legitimacy gap refers to the widening discrepancy between the actors formally embedded within core governance structures and the broader set of states whose participation has become indispensable for addressing global challenges.

Importantly, legitimacy in this context should not be understood as a singular or automatic consequence of institutional inclusivity. Legitimacy may derive from multiple and sometimes competing sources, including procedural representation, institutional performance, and political recognition by relevant actors (Brandi, 2019). Smaller and more exclusive institutions may retain significant legitimacy if they are perceived as effective and capable of delivering outcomes, while larger and more inclusive forums may struggle to maintain legitimacy if they appear inefficient or politically fragmented.

This distinction is essential for understanding the contemporary governance dilemma generated by multipolarity. The diffusion of power creates demands for broader participation and representation, yet increasing inclusivity often complicates coordination and decision-making processes. As a result, institutions face growing tensions between effectiveness and representativeness, cohesion and inclusivity, speed and legitimacy.

The contrast between the G7 and the G20 illustrates this dilemma particularly clearly. The G7 derives much of its effectiveness from its relatively small size, political alignment, and informality. These characteristics enable rapid coordination among advanced democracies and facilitate strategic agenda-setting (Hajnal, 2007; Dijkstra & Greco, 2024). However, the group's fixed membership increasingly diverges from the broader distribution of global economic and political influence, raising questions regarding representativeness and political legitimacy.

The G20 emerged, in part, as a response to these limitations. By incorporating both advanced and emerging economies, it sought to create a more representative forum for addressing global economic governance. The 2008 financial crisis reinforced its relevance, as the scale of the crisis made coordination among a broader set of actors unavoidable. This crisis demonstrated both the depth of global interdependence and the insufficiency of

governance coordination restricted to advanced economies alone (Tooze, 2018). In this sense, the G20 reflected an attempt to adapt governance structures to the realities of a more plural international system. Yet greater inclusivity has not eliminated governance tensions. While the G20 enjoys broader representational legitimacy than the G7, its diversity of interests and political systems often complicates consensus-building and implementation. As a result, the G20 embodies a different version of this trade-off: broader representation accompanied by reduced institutional cohesion.

The evolution of BRICS reflects another dimension of this broader process. Unlike the G7 or G20, BRICS does not derive its identity primarily from institutional functionality or crisis management. Instead, it operates as a political and symbolic platform through which emerging powers articulate dissatisfaction with existing governance arrangements and advocate for greater institutional pluralism. The group reflects demands not only for redistribution of influence, but also for recognition of alternative political and developmental experiences within global governance.

At the same time, the BRICS itself illustrates some of the ambiguities of multipolarity. Despite shared critiques of Western dominance (often partial), its members possess distinct geopolitical interests, economic structures, and strategic priorities. China's ambitions differ substantially from those of Brazil or India, while Russia's understanding of multipolarity often carries more explicitly revisionist implications.

These differences highlight an important feature of contemporary governance adaptation: institutional proliferation does not necessarily produce institutional coherence. Instead of converging toward a single multipolar order, the international system is increasingly characterized by overlapping governance arrangements, partial coalitions, and competing forms of legitimacy, creating a more fragmented but also more flexible institutional landscape.

This fragmentation reflects broader transformations in how cooperation is organized. Under conditions of hegemonic predominance, governance structures could rely more heavily on centralized leadership and institutional hierarchy. In a more plural environment, however, cooperation increasingly depends on negotiation among actors with divergent preferences and varying degrees of institutional trust. The result is a shift from hierarchical governance toward more layered and networked forms of coordination. The concept of "adaptive multilateralism" helps capture this transformation. Rather than assuming that existing institutions can simply expand to accommodate new actors, adaptive multilateralism emphasizes the coexistence of multiple governance mechanisms operating at different levels and across different issue areas (Jones & Malcorra, 2020).

Importantly, these developments do not imply the disappearance of hierarchy from global governance. Traditional powers continue to exercise disproportionate influence through technological infrastructures, financial systems,

military capabilities, and institutional resources. However, hierarchy itself is increasingly contested and negotiated rather than simply imposed. Emerging powers may participate within existing institutions while simultaneously supporting alternative arrangements designed to increase their bargaining power and institutional visibility. As governance becomes more fragmented and coalition-based, states capable of navigating multiple institutional settings gain strategic importance. However, their influence depends less on material capabilities alone than on diplomatic credibility, institutional engagement, and external recognition.

Brazil exemplifies many of these dynamics. Its simultaneous participation in the G20, BRICS, and traditional multilateral institutions reflects the increasingly layered nature of global governance. The broader significance of this pattern extends beyond Brazil itself. It illustrates how contemporary multipolarity generates not a singular institutional order, but a contested and adaptive governance landscape in which legitimacy, effectiveness, and representation are continuously renegotiated. The key question is therefore not whether institutions become more or less inclusive, but how they adapt to growing demands for participation without losing their capacity for coordination.

Brazil and the politics of "bridging"

Historically, Brazilian foreign policy has combined a strong commitment to multilateralism with persistent demands for greater autonomy and representational reform within international institutions. Unlike overtly revisionist powers, Brazil has generally sought to expand its influence through institutional participation rather than through direct confrontation with the existing order. At the same time, it has consistently criticized asymmetries embedded within global governance structures and advocated for broader recognition of emerging actors.

This dual orientation places Brazil in an ambiguous but strategically significant position within contemporary multipolarity. On the one hand, Brazil remains deeply invested in traditional multilateral institutions and norms, including the United Nations system, international law, and negotiated forms of cooperation. On the other hand, it has actively participated in alternative or supplementary coalitional arrangements such as BRICS, IBSA, and the G20, which seek to expand the political and institutional space available to emerging powers. Therefore, Brazil navigates between competing institutional and geopolitical configurations, attempting to preserve strategic flexibility while expanding its capacity for influence.

This positioning has often led scholars and policymakers to describe Brazil as a bridge actor: a country capable of facilitating dialogue across political, regional, and institutional divides. In principle, this characterization reflects

several longstanding features of Brazilian diplomacy: preference for negotiated solutions, participation across diverse governance arenas, and avoidance of rigid alliance structures. Brazil's simultaneous engagement with advanced democracies, emerging coalitions, and Global South initiatives appears to position it as a potential intermediary within a fragmented international landscape.

However, the notion of Brazil as a bridge actor requires careful qualification. Too often, the concept is treated as a self-evident diplomatic attribute rather than as a contingent and politically constructed role. In practice, Brazil's capacity to function as a bridge depends not only on its own diplomatic preferences, but also on how its positions are perceived by external actors and on the specific issue areas involved.

From the perspective of many Western governments, particularly within the G7, Brazil is not always viewed as a neutral or consistently reliable intermediary. Its positions on issues such as the war in Ukraine, its engagement within BRICS, and its strategic relationship with China have generated recurring questions regarding alignment, predictability, and geopolitical orientation. At the same time, perceptions of Brazil within the Global South are also complex. Although the country has often presented itself as a representative of developing countries and a defender of institutional pluralism, its own regional leadership has frequently faced constraints and contestation. Latin American regionalism itself has become increasingly fragmented, reducing Brazil's ability to project stable coalitional leadership within its own immediate geopolitical environment.

These tensions suggest that Brazil's role as a bridge actor should be understood as conditional and potential rather than intrinsic. Bridging functions emerge not from diplomatic rhetoric alone, but from specific combinations of political credibility, institutional participation, and external recognition. In some issue areas and institutional settings, Brazil may successfully facilitate dialogue or lower barriers to cooperation; in others, its capacity to do so may be significantly constrained by geopolitical polarization or conflicting expectations among external actors. This conditionality is particularly important in the context of contemporary multipolarity because legitimacy itself has become increasingly fragmented and relational.

The broader significance of Brazil's case lies not in whether it successfully consolidates itself as a bridge actor, but in what its diplomatic trajectory reveals about the changing nature of governance under multipolarity. Middle powers acquire greater relevance not because they replace major powers, but because they contribute to managing the complexity generated by institutional fragmentation. Their influence often derives less from coercive capabilities than from diplomatic adaptability, institutional embeddedness, and the ability to maintain channels of interaction across politically diverse environments.

This perspective also reinforces a broader argument of the paper: multipolarity does not produce fixed roles or stable institutional arrangements. Instead, it generates ongoing processes of negotiation through which legitimacy, authority, and cooperation are continuously redefined. Bridge actors, like multipolarity itself, are not stable categories, but contingent political functions emerging within a fragmented and adaptive governance landscape.

Conclusion: multipolarity as an open-ended political process

Contemporary debates on multipolarity are often framed around a seemingly straightforward question: is the international system becoming multipolar? Yet, as this paper has argued, the more analytically relevant question may be what actors mean when they invoke multipolarity, and how those meanings shape institutional adaptation, political legitimacy, and forms of cooperation within global governance.

Multipolarity cannot be reduced to a purely structural description of power diffusion. Although the redistribution of economic, technological, and geopolitical capabilities beyond the traditional Western pillar is undeniable, structural change alone does not determine the character of international order. The current international environment is shaped not only by the emergence of new centers of influence, but also by competing political narratives regarding legitimacy, hierarchy, representation, and institutional authority.

In this sense, the paper argued that multipolarity operates simultaneously as structure, discourse, and institutional strategy. It reflects material transformations in the distribution of capabilities, but also functions as a political language through which states contest or defend particular visions of global order. Emerging powers invoke multipolarity to demand broader representation and institutional reform, while established powers seek to preserve varying degrees of continuity within governance frameworks built under previous geopolitical configurations. The result is not a clearly defined transition toward a stable multipolar equilibrium, but an open-ended process of institutional and political renegotiation.

This process generates persistent tensions within global governance. Existing institutions continue to provide coordination, resources, and institutional continuity, yet increasingly face challenges regarding representativeness and legitimacy. More inclusive governance arrangements partially address these concerns, but often struggle to maintain cohesion and decisiveness. Multipolarity therefore intensifies rather than resolves trade-offs between effectiveness and legitimacy, exclusivity and inclusion, flexibility and coordination.

The evolution of institutions such as the G7, G20, and BRICS illustrates these dynamics particularly clearly. These forums do not represent successive

stages of institutional replacement, nor do they reflect a linear movement toward a single multipolar order. Instead, they embody different responses to the pressures generated by power diffusion and governance fragmentation. The G7 preserves strategic coordination among advanced democracies; the G20 expands representational participation; BRICS articulates demands for institutional pluralism and greater autonomy among emerging powers. Together, they reveal a governance environment increasingly characterized by overlap, adaptation, and negotiated coexistence. Rather than converging toward a unified post-hegemonic order, the international system increasingly reflects what Kupchan (2012) describes as a world of multiple and competing political modernities.

This fragmented institutional landscape also helps explain why contemporary multipolarity remains politically unstable. Power is more dispersed than during the unipolar moment, but institutional authority remains unevenly distributed. Hierarchies persist, though they are increasingly contested and decentralized. Governance becomes less dependent on universal consensus and more reliant on flexible coalitions, selective cooperation, and issue-specific alignments.

Within this context, middle powers acquire renewed importance. Their significance lies not in their capacity to replace major powers, but in their ability to navigate fragmented institutional environments and facilitate interactions across partially overlapping governance arenas. Brazil exemplifies both the opportunities and limitations associated with this role. Its diplomatic trajectory reflects an effort to balance institutional continuity, strategic autonomy, and coalition-building within an increasingly polarized environment.

At the same time, the paper has argued that bridge functions should not be treated as fixed diplomatic attributes. Brazil's capacity to operate as a bridge actor depends on political credibility, external recognition, and issue-specific conditions that remain contingent and unstable. This conditionality reflects a broader feature of contemporary multipolarity itself: roles, coalitions, and institutional alignments are increasingly fluid rather than structurally fixed.

The rise of adaptive multilateralism further reinforces this conclusion. Rather than converging toward a coherent post-hegemonic order, global governance appears to be evolving toward a layered and negotiated institutional ecology in which states operate simultaneously across multiple frameworks, coalitions, and governance mechanisms. Cooperation persists, but in more fragmented, selective, and politically contingent forms.

This suggests that the future of international order will depend less on the number of poles within the system than on the capacity of institutions and actors to manage interdependence under conditions of geopolitical divergence. The central challenge is no longer simply how to distribute power, but how to organize legitimacy and cooperation in an environment where no single institutional framework commands universal authority.

Ultimately, multipolarity should not be understood as a finalized geopolitical condition, but as a contested political process through which authority, hierarchy, and governance are continuously renegotiated. Whether this process produces greater institutional pluralism, intensified fragmentation, or new forms of negotiated cooperation remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the politics of multipolarity will shape not only the future of global governance, but also the evolving meaning of international order itself.

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PART III

GOVERNING AND NAVIGATING THE EMERGING ORDER

Chapter 7

Growing Unequal. International Institutions in Today's Multipolar System

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the global distribution of economic and political power has shifted significantly. While the relative weight of established Western powers has gradually declined, emerging powers have expanded their economic, demographic, and geopolitical influence. These transformations have profoundly strained the post-war international order, whose institutional architecture was largely designed around a fundamentally different global balance of power.

While incumbents have endeavored to preserve the status quo, challengers have increasingly contested the representativeness, objectives, and functioning of multilateral institutions.

More recently, this tension has been further exacerbated by the surge of power politics, self-interested policies, and hierarchical multipolarity. As strategic competition intensifies and consensus becomes more difficult to

achieve, multilateral institutions have faced increasing difficulties in addressing global challenges and maintaining their effectiveness.

This chapter examines the factors underlying the decline of multilateralism, a process accompanied by the emergence —or re-emergence— of regional and plurilateral international organizations. These developments reflect attempts by both challengers and incumbents to adapt to a changing international environment: emerging powers have sought greater influence and alternative channels of cooperation, while established powers have tried to reinforce existing frameworks to preserve strategic coordination.

This chapter then assesses whether, and to what extent, these forms of plurilateral or regional cooperation can contribute to effective global governance in an increasingly fragmented international environment. It further considers the implications of the decline of a rules-based international order for small and middle powers, before examining possible pathways amid growing rivalries and conflicts.

The declining appetite for multilateralism

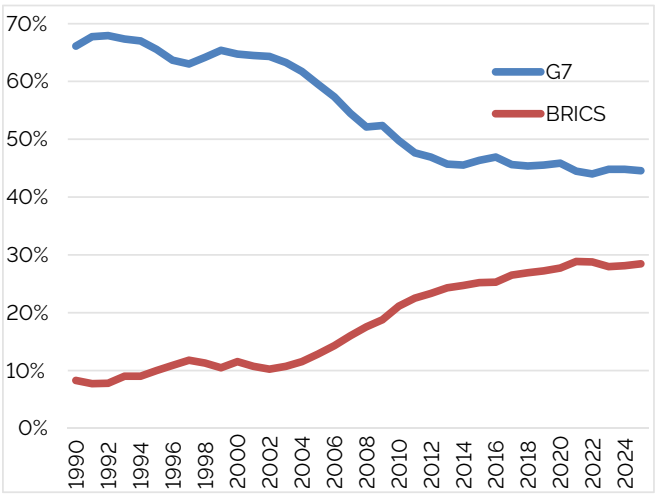
The return of multipolarity coincides with the decline of multilateralism. The consequence is an international system where —apparently— anything goes, politically, militarily, economically, and financially.

This combined transformation has deep-rooted causes that have intensified over the past two decades. It stems primarily from growing global rivalry triggered by the political and economic rise of some state actors. Over the past decades, the distribution of global output has shifted markedly: as shown in Figure 1, while in the 1990s the G7 accounted for two-thirds of world GDP, its relative share (with the sole exception of the USA) has steadily declined as emerging powers, particularly the BRICS, have expanded their contribution to global GDP from less than 10% up to 28%, mostly boosted by Chinese growth. This transformation is also underpinned by structural factors, including demographic dynamics, as countries such as India benefit from large and, in some cases, still expanding populations that support domestic demand and long-term growth potential. In parallel, global trade networks have been reshaped, with China becoming the main manufacturing country in the world, accounting for 31% of global output and the primary trading partner for more than 100 countries, surpassing the United States. Financial influence has also evolved, as emerging countries now account for a growing share of global capital flows, while China has become a major source of outward investment[1], particularly in infrastructure and strategic sectors. At the same time, technological capabilities are advancing rapidly: China has emerged as a serious

[1] UNCTAD, World Investment Report 2025

competitor to the United States in research and development investment, challenging its long-standing leadership[2], while India is striving to position itself as a key hub in digital and innovation-driven services. The result is an unequal diffusion where two major powers are competing for leadership. This has been raising questions about the extent to which existing multilateral institutions are equipped to reflect and manage these changes. At the same time, the ability of emerging powers to translate their growing influence into coherent and effective alternative governance frameworks remains uneven, raising doubts not only about the inclusiveness of existing institutions but also about the capacity of new arrangements to effectively contribute to address global challenges.

Figure 1. G7 and BRICS share of world GDP



Source: IMF

Challengers andincumbents: the (failed) quest for balance

These emerging powers, in fact, due to their increased relevance on the global stage, have been seeking recognition and coherent representation within the Western-led international institutions established after the Second World War. This tension stems from the very origins of institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund established at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 and designed to reflect the economic and geopolitical balance of the post-war order, with the notable exception of the

[2] OECD, Research and Development statistics database

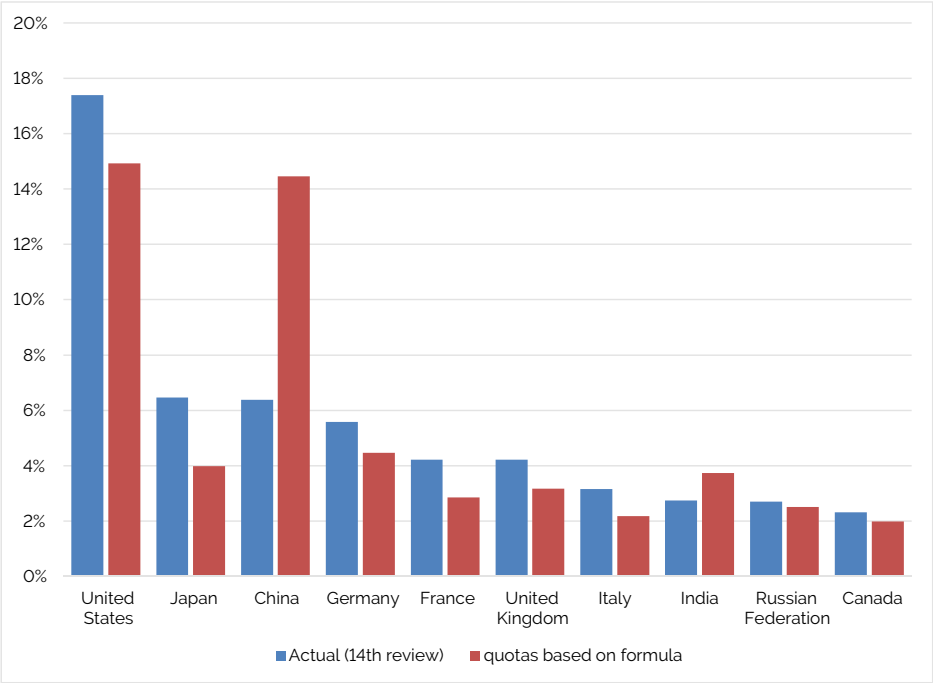
Soviet Union, which did not ratify the agreements and remained outside the system. While these institutions were designed to combine representativeness with financial stability and effective crisis prevention and response, their governance structures were deliberately built to be stable and resistant to frequent change. Over time, however, this rigidity has generated increasing frictions between incumbents and challengers as global economic power has shifted from the former to the latter.

The IMF provides a particularly clear illustration of this institutional design. Voting power is primarily determined by quotas, which are in turn derived from a formula based on four variables: GDP (the dominant component), trade openness, economic variability, and international reserves. In principle, this framework grounds representation in objective economic fundamentals and ensures that financial contributions align with economic weight and exposure to global shocks. In practice, however, the translation from formula to final quotas is mediated by political negotiation among member states. Although quota reviews are formally conducted every five years, there is no automatic mechanism that enforces adjustment of quota shares. Any reform must be explicitly agreed by member countries, meaning that changes in relative influence depend on political consensus rather than technocratic recalculation. This creates a structural asymmetry: countries that would gain influence under the formula must effectively secure approval from those that would lose it. As a result, the system tends to reproduce existing distributions of power rather than continuously updating them in line with changes in global economy.

This institutional configuration produces a persistent tension between incumbents and challengers. Established powers, which historically designed and dominated these Institutions, retain voting shares that tend to exceed their current economic weight, while some emerging powers remain underrepresented relative to their calculated quota shares. As shown in Figure 2, the gap is particularly visible in the case of China, whose calculated quota share would be significantly higher than its actual voting power, which remains broadly comparable to that of Japan despite a much larger share of global GDP. Even the 2010 quota reform, implemented only in 2016, partially addressed these imbalances by increasing the representation of emerging economies and shifting quota shares toward them, with China becoming the third-largest shareholder and India entering the top tier of members. However, the reform was incremental rather than transformative. The United States retained a quota share above the threshold required to block major decisions, preserving de facto veto power over fundamental institutional changes, which require an 85% majority. Several subsequent attempts at further reform have stalled. The only time they succeeded, in 2023, the result was an equiproportional 50% quota increase which left the relative quota shares unchanged, thus reinforcing the impression that adjustment is possible only

at the margins rather than as a systematic realignment with global economic shifts. At the same time, these tensions also reflect differing preferences across member states regarding the role of conditionality, development priorities, and the allocation of financial risks, which complicate the emergence of a shared reform agenda.

Figure 2. Shares of the IMF



Source: IMF

This institutional tension is also visible in the governance structure of the World Bank, which, like the International Monetary Fund, was created at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 to support post-war reconstruction and long-term development financing. While the IMF is centred on macroeconomic stability and balance-of-payments support, the World Bank focuses on development lending and project-based investment, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Despite this functional difference, its governance architecture reflects a similar underlying logic: voting power is determined primarily by financial contributions, which are themselves closely linked to capital subscriptions rather than population or development needs.

However, the World Bank introduces a slightly different form of institutional rigidity compared to the IMF. Its shareholding structure is periodically adjusted through negotiated capital increases, but these adjustments require agreement among existing shareholders and therefore tend to preserve status quo. In practice, this means that changes in global economic weight are not automatically translated into proportional changes in voting power. Instead, they depend on politically negotiated rounds of capital increases and periodic shareholding reviews, in which incumbent shareholders must collectively agree to dilute or preserve their relative influence. This institutional configuration reflects not only questions of representation but also the distribution of financial responsibilities within the organisation. Advanced economies, particularly the United States and major European countries, remain the primary providers of capital and financial guarantees, while the World Bank's lending activities are largely directed toward developing and emerging economies. This creates an inherent tension between financial contribution and governance: countries that provide the bulk of resources seek to retain influence over their allocation, while recipient countries demand greater representation in decision-making processes. As a result, this produces a similar but not identical form of tension to the one existing in the IMF between incumbents and challengers. Established powers continue to hold greater influence relative to their share of global economic growth, while emerging ones remain structurally underrepresented.

Empirically, this friction has become more visible as countries such as China and India have increased their role as both borrowers and contributors to development finance. While reforms over the past decades have increased the voting shares of emerging powers, including incremental gains for China, the United States retains a unique position due to its large shareholding and informal influence within the institution. As a result, as with the IMF, governance reform in the World Bank has tended to be incremental rather than transformative.

Even the governance of the World Trade Organization, where decision-making is formally based on one-member-one-vote and operates through consensus rather than weighted voting, is not immune to frictions. In principle, this should represent the most egalitarian design within the multilateral system, as it removes explicit hierarchies of representation and treats all members as formally equal sovereign actors. However, this institutional design does not eliminate asymmetries in practice, but instead shifts the source of potential standoffs from representation to decision-making procedures and their results. Because all major decisions require consensus, any single member can prevent agreement, turning formal equality into a potential constraint on collective action. In this sense, the WTO illustrates a different type of systemic tension compared to institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank: the issue is not under- or over-representation, but the difficulty of achieving

effective cooperation under unanimity rules in a system of unequal economic and political power.

This dynamic became particularly evident in the paralysis of the Appellate Body, which performs the appellate review function under the Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU). Since 2017, the United States has systematically blocked the appointment of new judges to the Appellate Body, arguing that it had exceeded its mandate and engaged in judicial overreach. Because appointments require consensus, this unilateral refusal has prevented the replenishment of its members, and since 2019, the Appellate Body has been unable to function due to a lack of quorum. The result has been the effective suspension of the WTO's appellate dispute settlement system, often considered one of the central enforcement pillars of global trade rules. This episode highlights a broader structural point: formal equality in voting rights does not automatically guarantee institutional effectiveness or enforceability. Even in the absence of weighted voting structures, multilateral governance remains dependent on cooperation by key actors, and even more by the most powerful states whose strategic preferences can determine whether institutional mechanisms function or stall. The WTO experience, therefore, illustrates that institutional deadlock can arise not only from unequal representation, but also from procedural dependence on consensus in a context of asymmetric capabilities and incentives.

Fragmentation within blocs

This continuous decline of multilateral institutions and international norms has gone hand in hand with the surge and proliferation of both old and new regional and plurilateral institutions. Rather than representing a purely parallel development, this trend can be understood, at least in part, as a response by both incumbents and challengers to the growing limitations of the multilateral frameworks. As decision-making becomes more constrained by institutional rigidity and increasing heterogeneity of interests and power, states have progressively shifted toward smaller and more flexible bilateral or plurilateral arrangements, where coordination is perceived to be easier and outcomes more closely reflect shared priorities.

These alternative frameworks differ significantly in both function and degree of institutionalisation. On the one hand, organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) operate as flexible coordination platforms that rely on consensus-based decision-making and produce largely non-binding outcomes that prioritise sovereignty and gradual cooperation. On the other hand, more structured institutions have emerged in domains traditionally dominated by global organisations. The Asian Development Bank, for instance, reflects a regional adaptation of the Bretton Woods model, with

weighted voting systems and binding lending operations. More recently, the New Development Bank, established by the BRICS, has introduced an additional layer to the global financial architecture, striving to offer development finance through a governance structure designed to provide greater balance among member states. Taken together, these arrangements illustrate not only a diversification of institutional forms, but also the emergence of partially overlapping and, in some cases, alternative channels for cooperation. At the same time, their capacity to address collective challenges remains uneven. Within the BRICS framework, internal divergences, most notably between China and India, have limited the group's ability to translate shared reformist rhetoric into coordinated policy action. Similarly, organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) often struggle to produce common positions on particular sensitive geopolitical issues, reflecting the persistence of divergent national interests among their members. In this sense, they seem to reproduce, on a smaller scale, similar results of multilateral institutions.

Despite the drawbacks of these plurilateral and regional Institutions, their proliferation should not be seen as inherently at odds with the multilateral order, provided that they help simplify multilateral negotiations by fostering coordination and the elaboration of common positions within each respective group or region. On closer inspection, however, this "simplification" has not occurred, largely because the demands of emerging powers are not limited to the representativeness and functioning of multilateral institutions. Rather, these demands aim —at least partially— to revise the very goals of these institutions as well as international rules and practices. These demands increasingly extend to substantive aspects of the global economic order, although they are not fully uniform across emerging powers. Countries such as China have emphasised greater policy space for industrial strategies and state intervention, particularly in relation to state-owned enterprises, subsidies and technology upgrading. By contrast, India has been a leading voice in defending special and differential treatment within trade agreements, highlighting persistent development asymmetries and the need for regulatory flexibility. Similarly, South Africa has strongly supported reforms of intellectual property rules, particularly in the context of access to medicines and public health emergencies. Despite these differences, these positions converge on broader claims for greater policy autonomy, more flexible interpretation of global trade and financial rules, and a rebalancing of development conditionality within international institutions. Nonetheless, important divergences often reveal the group's competing priorities more than its shared interests.

When it comes to the established powers (acting as incumbents), they have strived to preserve the status quo that positions them advantageously and have repeatedly tried to revive "old" organisations, such as the G7 and NATO. Once again, the result risks being a constraint on the ambition and

scope of multilateral institutions rather than contributing to complementarity and support.

Moreover, the analysis above makes increasingly clear that a key obstacle to simplification is the presumed "homogeneity" of positions within each group of countries (whether incumbents or challengers) to be later, hopefully, integrated into broader multilateral frameworks. Categories like "Global North and South," or "The West and the Rest"[3] suffer from fundamental conceptual flaws: they arbitrarily define the boundaries of membership (where does the North end and the South begin?) and fail to adequately account for the heterogeneity of the countries they encompass. Within each group, various countries often hold political and economic interests that are not aligned with those of other members. Sometimes, they even consider each other rivals, if not enemies —for instance, in the case of unresolved territorial disputes. Within the ASEAN, divisions over the South China Sea have repeatedly prevented the adoption of joint communiqués, with countries such as Cambodia and Laos opposing language critical of China, thus reflecting their economic and political de facto alignment with Beijing. In the BRICS framework, cooperation is similarly constrained by internal rivalries, most notably between China and India, whose border disputes and competing regional ambitions limit the group's ability to translate shared reformist rhetoric into coordinated policy action. In Africa, the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area has been uneven, as countries differ in their willingness and capacity to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers, leading to significant gaps between formal commitments and actual integration. Once again, rather than acting as cohesive blocs, these organisations often replicate, rather than resolve, the fragmentation observed at the global level, thereby limiting their capacity to support effective multilateral coordination.

Therefore, these dynamics risk undermining multilateral cooperation and the related system of international rules in a context where new and old regional or plurilateral institutions contribute to increasing complexity rather than simplification. This dynamic has become increasingly evident within the G20, which represents the most recent attempt to achieve a more balanced framework of global governance between advanced and developing economies. Although the high level of compliance with commitments under the G20 framework may suggest a reassuring picture of multilateral effectiveness[4], it fails to capture the scope —or rather, the level of ambition— of these commitments. We are far removed from 2009, when the G20 coordinated a decisive and unified response to the global financial crisis. A cursory glance at the modest multilateral response during the COVID-19 pandemic, or the

[3] Niall Ferguson, Civilization: The West and the Rest, Penguin Books, Londra, 2011

[4] John Kirton, The Nexus Thinking in Multilateral Forums: A Focus on G7 and G20 Summits, G7 and G20 Research Groups, February 28, 2025

hesitations and backpedalling in the UNFCCC negotiations on climate change, underscores the decline in multilateral ambition. This suggests that the limitations of global governance are not confined to legacy institutions but extend to newer or more flexible formats as well. Furthermore, the 2026 US Presidency of the G20 has not included crucial global issues —from inequalities to development, from debt sustainability to the fight against climate change— among its priorities. More broadly, various foreign policy initiatives and provocations by the U.S. President have influenced both the causes behind the decline of multilateral institutions and the growing divide between these institutions and regional or plurilateral ones. When it comes to the representativeness, functioning, and goals of multilateral institutions, the change is radical. It is no longer simply a matter of obstructing or delaying change but of actively pushing certain multilateral institutions toward irrelevance. Under Trump, the U.S. not only continues to block the appointment of judges to the WTO Appellate Body but also announced, in 2026, its withdrawal from 66 international organizations and multilateral bodies. As for homogeneity within each regional or plurilateral bloc —as a prerequisite for a common position in multilateral formats— even historical military alliances have been shaken by Trump's second mandate.

This is particularly evident within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where internal cohesion has been increasingly tested in recent years. After the European allies resisted Trump's requests during his first term, the relationship between the USA and the bloc grew strained by repeated criticisms of unfair burden sharing, coupled with explicit demands that NATO members increase their military budgets and, more or less implicitly, their purchases of U.S.-manufactured defence equipment. Divergences also emerged in operational contexts, as illustrated by differing European responses to requests for access to airspace and bases access during the operation Epic Fury. Following the NATO summit in July 2026 and the renewed commitments to increase defence and security spending to 5% of GDP, these tensions appear to have been eased, but it remains unclear how sustainable this convergence will be.

To sum up, the regionalization of international debate and priority setting could, in principle, serve as an intermediate step that facilitates broader multilateral cooperation by allowing states to reconcile their positions within smaller institutional settings before engaging in global negotiations. In practice, however, persistent divergences of national interests within both established and emerging regional and plurilateral groupings often prevent this reconciliation from taking place. Rather than simplifying multilateral negotiations, these divisions risk being transmitted to the global level, weakening the effectiveness of both regional and multilateral institutions and further contributing to the fragmentation of global governance.

The unequal "no-man's land" scenario

The decline of international Institutions and norms risks creating a "no-man's land" scenario, in which state actors apparently enjoy increasing freedom of action and alliances become more fluid. However, this newfound "freedom without strings attached" is unevenly distributed across states. There is a clear hierarchy in today's unequal multipolar world, determined by the power each state holds. The degree of freedom —in terms of strategies and alliances— is greatest for the two leading world powers, the U.S. and China, and decreases progressively from regional powers to states with the lowest levels of political and economic influence. The power of these latter states was often minimal even in the past, but international institutions and norms —despite their significant limitations— served as a last defence or, at least, as a means of making their voices heard. A notable case is the 2003 dispute brought in front of the WTO by Antigua and Barbuda against the United States over online gambling restrictions, in which WTO rulings found U.S. measures inconsistent with agreed rules and authorised retaliatory measures. While Antigua ultimately faced difficulties in enforcing these rulings in practice, the case illustrates how a rules-based system can, at least in principle, provide smaller states with a mechanism to contest unilateral actions taken by bigger ones.

The erosion of this system therefore leaves the most vulnerable actors increasingly exposed. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic and recent tensions affecting energy markets, supply disruptions led to sharp price increases in essential goods, from vaccines to energy and key industrial inputs such as fertilizers. Under these circumstances, access was largely determined by purchasing power: countries with greater financial resources were able to secure supply, often through advance purchases agreements or stockpiling, while others were effectively priced out of the market.

These differences in access reflect broader disparities in crisis-management capacity. While larger economies can build strategic reserves, mobilize fiscal resources, and deploy policy tools to cushion the impact of shocks, these options are often unavailable to smaller or lower-income countries. Crises also tend to reinforce self-interested behaviour, as governments prioritise domestic stability and redirect resources inward, thus reducing support for international cooperation, aid, and development financing. As a result, global shocks do not affect all countries equally, perhaps even more today in a context of declining international Institutions. In addition, their costs are distributed unevenly, with the most exposed, least diversified, and least represented countries bearing a disproportionate share of the burden. In the absence of strong multilateral frameworks, these asymmetries are likely to deepen, further widening the gap between those who can manage shocks and those who cannot.

Greater freedom of action for major powers comes with significantly higher risks for small and medium-sized powers, even when they play a critical role in global supply chains. As international institutions weaken, large economies face fewer constraints, allowing their domestic priorities to take precedence with limited regard for spillovers on the rest of the international system. In a more fragmented environment, power asymmetries become more visible, and the ability to shape outcomes is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few big actors.

Against this backdrop, a number of middle powers have increasingly embraced what may be described as a pragmatic form of multilateralism, one that seeks to preserve institutional cooperation while recognizing that partners may not share the same values, interests, or strategic priorities, and that great powers are increasingly willing to deploy their leverage in pursuit of national interests. Rather than pursuing universal consensus across all policy areas, this approach emphasizes flexible, issue-specific coalitions capable of advancing cooperation where interests converge while avoiding institutional paralysis where they do not. Among middle powers, Canada has emerged as one of the clearest proponents of this approach, advocating ad hoc coalitions organized on an issue-by-issue basis and built around shared interests and concrete policy objectives rather than membership in a single institutional framework. Whether this model will ultimately reconcile effectiveness with legitimacy remains uncertain, and it cannot fully substitute for a functioning multilateral system. Nevertheless, in an international environment where fragmentation and geopolitical competition are likely to remain defining features, it may offer a more realistic basis for sustaining international cooperation than either attempting to restore the post-war model of multilateralism unchanged or accepting its continued erosion.

Conclusions

Today's unequal multipolar system may create a few winners and many losers. The redistribution of economic and political relevance has exposed the growing mismatch between the existing architecture of multilateral institutions and the contemporary distribution of global influence. While emerging powers increasingly demand greater representation and a greater role in shaping international rules, established powers remain reluctant to undertake reforms that could reduce their relative influence. As a result, institutional adaptation has proceeded incrementally, often failing to keep pace with broader systemic changes.

This tension has contributed to the weakening of multilateralism through a gradual reduction in their ambition, effectiveness, and capacity to generate collective solutions. The difficulties experienced by institutions such as

the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO illustrate different manifestations of the same underlying challenge: institutions designed for the power distribution of the past, now struggle to operate effectively in an environment shaped by diverging interests. At the same time, the emergence of new regional and plurilateral arrangements has not been instrumental to the simplification of global negotiations and implementation of previous commitments. While these frameworks can provide greater flexibility and allow states to coordinate among smaller groups of actors, they often reproduce many of the same divisions and competing interests.

This fragmentation has particularly significant consequences for smaller and less powerful states. In a more hierarchical multipolar order, the weakening of international rules and institutions does not create equal freedom of action for all actors. Instead, it disproportionately benefits those with greater economic, military, and technological capabilities, while reducing the ability of weaker states to constrain unilateral actions or secure collective responses to global challenges. For many smaller powers, international institutions have represented not only mechanisms of cooperation but also the main source of representation and protection against raw power.

The way forward therefore might not lie in attempting to restore an outdated, at times naive, model of multilateralism, nor in accepting an increasingly fragmented international system as inevitable. A more realistic approach requires a form of pragmatic and adaptive multilateralism: one that builds a variable-geometry consensus while remaining open to new —governmental and non-governmental— actors to scale-up impact. At the same time, an effort should be made to find the lowest common denominator in existing multilateral institutions and to fully implement previous commitments.

It is unrealistic to expect that such a reform of global governance will emerge from those at the top of the new global hierarchy in today's multipolar system. Pursuing such a reform is —above all— in the interest of all other states, without distinction between North and South, East and West, or any other divisions. These distinctions risk undermining the effectiveness of collective action and, ultimately, would play into the hands of the most powerful states. The challenge ahead is therefore not merely to create new institutions or to rescue old ones, but to ensure that existing and emerging forms of cooperation contribute to a more effective, legitimate, and inclusive international order. An order in which small and middle powers join forces, cognizant that the decline of international rules and institutions disproportionately affects them.

Chapter 8

Multipolarity, Technology, and Latin America's Strategic Autonomy

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Abstract. The international system is undergoing a profound transformation characterized by the gradual erosion of the post-Cold War unipolar order and the emergence of a more complex and competitive multipolar environment. This transition is not limited to shifts in economic output or military capabilities; it is increasingly driven by technological innovation, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, data governance, and the control of information networks. As a result, technology has become one of the principal arenas through which states project power, shape dependencies, and compete for influence in the twenty-first century.

This essay argues that technology has reinforced contemporary multipolarity by enabling the rise of new centers of power, particularly China, while simultaneously preserving the structural influence of the United States in Latin America. To support this argument, the paper traces the historical relationship between technology and geopolitics, beginning with the origins of the internet during the Cold War and examining its evolution from a strategic military asset into a global infrastructure with significant political, economic, and security implications. The analysis highlights how the digital sphere has evolved from an environment associated with openness, innovation, and transnational cooperation into a contested space where states seek to secure strategic advantages.

The essay compares the distinct approaches to digital governance developed by China, Russia, and the European Union. China has promoted a model centered on digital infrastructure expansion and cyber sovereignty, Russia has

emphasized information control and technological self-sufficiency as components of national security, and the European Union has pursued regulatory leadership through the promotion of digital rights, market regulation, and digital sovereignty. Together, these models illustrate the fragmentation of the digital order and the growing geopolitical significance of technology.
Within this context, Latin America faces a strategic dilemma. The region is increasingly exposed to competing influences from the United States, China, and Europe, particularly in technology. The essay contends that Latin America should avoid automatic alignment with any single power and instead pursue a pragmatic strategy of technological and strategic autonomy. Drawing on the concepts of *Respice Omnia* and Peripheral Realism, it argues that regional governments must strengthen technological capabilities, invest in digital infrastructure, develop human capital, and foster greater coordination between the state, the private sector, and academia. Such an approach would allow Latin America to reduce vulnerabilities, preserve decision-making autonomy, and participate more effectively in shaping the emerging international order.

Introduction

The world is experiencing a profound polycrisis: a convergence of interconnected challenges that overlap, reinforce one another, and generate unprecedented levels of complexity (Morin & Kern, 1993). In such an environment, simplistic explanations are increasingly inadequate. Understanding contemporary global dynamics requires a more pragmatic and multidimensional approach, one that remains firmly anchored in democratic values and institutions.

Identifying the causes of today's crises is no easy task. Yet a striking paradox emerges: humanity has never been better equipped to confront major challenges. Technological advances have transformed virtually every dimension of human life, from enabling instant communication across continents to unlocking genetic engineering and even making commercial space travel conceivable. The rapid development of artificial intelligence has further expanded these possibilities, creating scenarios in which automated systems and intelligent machines can solve problems that only a few years ago seemed uniquely human.

At the same time, however, technological progress has deepened the web of relationships, dependencies, and vulnerabilities linking states, societies, and markets.

The central paradox of our era is therefore political rather than technological. Despite unprecedented scientific capabilities, today's geopolitical environment has become so complex that even the most seasoned security analysts, political scientists, and sociologists struggle to interpret it with

sufficient certainty. In many respects, the defining challenge of our time is not technological but human.

This essay argues that technological change has accelerated the transition toward a more multipolar international order, thereby increasing the number and diversity of external influences shaping Latin America. Yet these transformations have not displaced the structural role of the United States in the region. Instead, they are compelling Latin American countries to rethink the meaning of strategic autonomy and digital sovereignty in the twenty-first century.

Latin America and the Caribbean are increasingly embedded in a more multipolar world, though not necessarily a less asymmetric one. The United States continues to occupy a dominant position due to the depth of its economic, financial, productive, and digital ties with the region. Meanwhile, China has expanded its presence in strategic sectors, while Europe remains an influential actor as both an investor and a regulatory power. The defining characteristic of the current international environment is therefore not the disappearance of American primacy, but the emergence of multiple centers of power competing for resources, infrastructure, data, markets, technological standards, and strategic influence.

As a result, traditional categories such as trade and investment are no longer sufficient to understand the region's external environment. Latin America must also contend with a more complex struggle in which the digital economy, artificial intelligence, and connectivity have become direct expressions of geopolitical power.

From the Cold War to the internet: technology as an infrastructure of power

The history of the internet is often told as a story of technological innovation, expanding connectivity, and democratized access to information. Yet its origins reveal a different reality. Far from being a neutral technological development, the internet emerged as a strategic infrastructure of power shaped by the geopolitical competition of the Cold War. That legacy remains visible today, as digital networks have become central arenas of influence, security, and international competition.

The Cold War reshaped alliances, conflicts, and spheres of influence, but it also transformed the relationship between national security and technological innovation. According to Isaacson (2016), American policymakers gradually came to view scientific research and technological leadership as essential components of national defense, rather than merely drivers of economic growth.

A decisive turning point came with the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in October 1957. The event demonstrated that science and technology had become central arenas of geopolitical competition and raised concerns about Soviet technological superiority. In response, President Dwight Eisenhower mobilized leading scientific adviser to create the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) within the Department of Defense, tasked with funding advanced research and fostering cooperation among government, academia, and the defense sector (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, n.d.). ARPA would later help develop technologies that laid the foundations for the internet.

Although ARPA's immediate objective was not to build a network capable of surviving a nuclear attack, its work intersected with one of the central strategic questions of the Cold War: how could communications continue functioning after a major military strike? RAND Corporation engineer Paul Baran approached this challenge by developing the concepts of distributed networks and packet switching, innovations that would become foundational to the architecture of the modern internet.

Bipolar competition was fought not only through ideological blocs and proxy wars, but also through laboratories, knowledge networks, and institutions capable of transforming scientific advances into strategic power. That logic remains very much alive today in the age of artificial intelligence, reflected in the growing influence of companies such as OpenAI, Palantir, and Microsoft, as well as in the technological strategies pursued by China, Russia, and, more recently, the European Union, as discussed below.

Despite its close association with national security concerns, the internet was initially envisioned —particularly in the United States— as a domain of free information flows, private innovation, and transnational cooperation, where government intervention should be kept to a minimum.

This was not a vision of a stateless internet. Rather, it reflected a new understanding of governance in which authority was no longer tied exclusively to territory. The central objective was to preserve an open environment for innovation, markets, and the transnational exchange of information. As Justin E. H. Smith (2022) argues, this worldview extended a longstanding tradition of rationalist optimism: the belief that information networks could foster a more connected, informed, and deliberative society. Over time, the internet also came to be viewed as a vehicle for political and economic liberalization (Griffiths, 2021).

Taken together, this period can be understood as a transition from the Cold War's security-driven and geopolitical logic to an era of relatively open internet governance under conditions of American unipolarity. Yet this vision would eventually collide with mounting concerns over cybersecurity, censorship, mass surveillance, and the return of geopolitical competition to the digital domain.

From the unipolar moment to contemporary multipolarity

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled the United States to exercise an unprecedented degree of hegemony throughout the 1990s, the economic rise of China, Russia's enduring geopolitical relevance, and the European Union's pursuit of greater strategic autonomy have gradually redistributed international power. The result has been the emergence of an increasingly multipolar order that challenges American predominance without fully replacing it.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a new era. For Krauthammer, this was the advent of a "unipolar moment" —a period in which American hegemony provided the United States with sufficient power to intervene decisively in global affairs, drawing on its overwhelming military, diplomatic, political, and economic capabilities. The Gulf War offered a clear illustration of this reality. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the United States led the international response and demonstrated its capacity to shape the outcome of major geopolitical crises largely on its own terms.

The United States' dominant position was so evident that Krauthammer openly criticized what he called the "pseudo-multilateralism" of the period. In his view, the international system was characterized by a single dominant power that acted essentially alone while remaining reluctant to acknowledge its own primacy, continuing instead to pay homage to the ideal of collective security (Krauthammer, 1990/1991). Yet American unipolarity would prove far less durable than many historical empires. The emergence of new centers of power at the beginning of the twenty-first century gradually eroded the relative predominance of the United States.

Data based on purchasing power parity (PPP) illustrate the magnitude of this transformation. According to International Monetary Fund estimates, the United States' share of global output declined from approximately 20.4 percent in 2000 to 14.5 percent in 2026. During the same period, China's share increased from 6.6 percent to 19.8 percent, while India's rose from 3.9 percent to 8.4 percent. The European Union retained considerable economic weight, although its relative share of global GDP fell from approximately 21.6 percent in 2000 to 13.7 percent in 2026. These figures reveal the emergence of new economic poles with growing geopolitical and military significance, increasingly capable of contesting the position long occupied by the United States.

China simultaneously advanced a series of geoeconomic initiatives designed to complement —or in some cases counterbalance— Western-led institutions. The most prominent example is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast infrastructure and connectivity program that now encompasses more than 140 countries and seeks to strengthen commercial, logistical, and digital corridors linking Asia, Europe, Africa, and other regions (University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2022).

Alongside the BRI, Beijing promoted new institutions and groupings that function as alternatives or complements to the liberal international order. Among the most significant are the BRICS, which today account for nearly half of the world's population and approximately 40 percent of global GDP (BRICS India 2026, n.d.). China has also played a leading role in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), focused on regional security, stability, and economic cooperation across Eurasia, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which became operational in 2016.

Russia, although far less significant economically than China, has remained an important geopolitical actor due to its military capabilities and energy resources. Moscow has also sought to consolidate its regional sphere of influence through institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). More recently, Russia's prolonged war against Ukraine has reaffirmed its geopolitical relevance, while rising oil and gas revenues —partly linked to disruptions associated with the United States–Israel confrontation with Iran— have further strengthened its strategic position.

The European Union has displayed a more ambivalent relationship with the concept of multipolarity. For many years, European institutions preferred to frame international politics through the language of multilateralism —understood as institutionalized cooperation among states— rather than openly advocating for a multipolar order. Yet following the global financial crisis of 2008 and, more decisively, after the Crimea crisis in 2014, European strategic documents increasingly acknowledged a more fragmented and multipolar international environment. This evolution is evident in both the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass (European External Action Service, 2016; European External Action Service, 2022).

In the same vein, leaders such as Emmanuel Macron have argued that Europe should establish itself as a "third pole" between the United States and China, linking this ambition to the broader objective of achieving greater European strategic autonomy (Reuters, 2023). Some observers have gone even further. Timothy Garton Ash, for example, has described the European Union as a non-hegemonic superpower whose influence extends across numerous domains despite the absence of traditional military predominance (ARTE, 2025).

This gradual shift in the global center of economic gravity did not eliminate American primacy in strategic, financial, or institutional terms. It did, however, narrow the gap separating Washington from other major centers of power. In this respect, the redistribution of global economic weight constitutes one of the clearest indicators of the transition from the "unipolar moment" of the 1990s toward an increasingly multipolar international order —a transformation that is perhaps most visible in the digital sphere, where technological competition has become a defining feature of contemporary geopolitics.

Three models of digital power: China, Russia, and Europe

The transition toward a multipolar international order has transformed not only the distribution of economic and military power, but also the ways in which states conceive, manage, and project influence in the digital sphere. The approaches adopted by major actors such as China, Russia, and the European Union —alongside that of the United States— demonstrate that internet governance no longer reflects a universal and homogeneous vision largely shaped by American preferences. Instead, it has evolved into a contested arena in which competing political systems and strategic cultures vie for influence. In this environment, technology functions simultaneously as an engine of economic development, a mechanism of political control, and a source of geopolitical power.

China emerges as one of the principal poles shaping contemporary geopolitics and frontier technologies. While several initiatives could be examined —including *Made in China 2025* and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)— this analysis focuses on the Digital Silk Road (DSR), often described as the technological dimension of the broader BRI.

The Digital Silk Road should be understood as one of the clearest manifestations of the shift of geopolitical competition into the digital domain. Its objective extends far beyond expanding connectivity corridors. It seeks to reorganize the circulation of data, computing capacity, and digital services around technological ecosystems linked to Chinese firms and infrastructure providers (China Mobile Research Institute, 2025).

As Jonathan Hillman (2021) argues, technology has become the defining arena of twenty-first-century competition, with China seeking to position itself as an indispensable node in global digital infrastructure. Through fiber-optic networks, submarine cables, satellites, cloud platforms, surveillance systems, and telecommunications networks, Beijing aims to create long-term dependencies on Chinese technologies, standards, and corporate ecosystems. As reliance on this infrastructure grows, so does China's ability to influence markets, standards, and political decisions, a dynamic Hillman (2021) describes as a future in which "all routers lead to Beijing." Griffiths (2021) complements this analysis by showing that China's Great Firewall is not merely a censorship tool but a broader political project that enables regime preservation, social surveillance, and centralized information control, challenging assumptions that the internet necessarily weakens authoritarian governments.

Internationally, China has promoted the doctrine of cyber sovereignty in global forums, advancing the principle that states possess the right to monitor, filter, and securitize their own segments of cyberspace. This approach offers an alternative vision of global digital governance: one that is less universal, more territorially bounded, and more closely aligned with state interests. Although rooted in China's political system, aspects of this vision have

gained broader traction since the attacks of September 11, 2001, as governments around the world have increasingly prioritized security, surveillance, and control within the digital sphere.

Russia's internet, commonly known as Runet, emerged at the intersection of technological modernization and a political culture deeply shaped by information control. It has been characterized by a tension between technological openness and political surveillance. This tension became particularly visible during the anti-government protests of 2011–2012, when the internet evolved from a communication platform into a powerful instrument of political mobilization (Bodrunova et al., 2017). The Kremlin responded by gradually tightening control over the digital sphere, seeking to neutralize opposition networks and independent media.

Yet the strategic significance of cyberspace extends far beyond domestic dissent. Digital networks facilitate cyber espionage, information theft, disinformation campaigns, and a wide range of activities that modern states increasingly regard as matters of national security. For Russian policymakers, information has long been understood as a strategic asset closely tied to intelligence and state power.

The revelations made by Edward Snowden in 2013 reinforced these concerns. Snowden's disclosures exposed extensive American surveillance programs capable of collecting and processing vast quantities of global communications data. From Moscow's perspective, these revelations validated longstanding fears regarding technological dependence and external vulnerability. In response, Russia accelerated the expansion of SORM, its system for the interception, storage, and monitoring of digital communications.

Over time, Runet evolved from a national communications network into a broader instrument of digital sovereignty and geopolitical resilience. Russia's strategy combines technological independence through domestic infrastructure and platforms with digital sovereignty, defined as the state's capacity to control information flows within its territory (Epifanova & Dietrich, 2022). Together, these objectives seek to strengthen regime stability and reduce vulnerability to external pressure and technological coercion. Russian authorities also present Runet as a symbol of national identity and development. During the 2025 Russian Internet Governance Forum, officials described the Russian internet ecosystem as "stable" and "resilient" despite Western sanctions and technological restrictions following the war in Ukraine (Coordination Center for TLD .RU/.РФ, 2025).

In this sense, Runet can be understood as the practical manifestation of a distinctly Russian vision of cyberspace. Unlike the American conception of the internet as a largely open and transnational environment, or China's ambition to expand technological influence through global infrastructure networks, Russia views the digital domain primarily through the lenses of sovereignty, security, cultural preservation, and state authority. Cyberspace is

not conceived as a neutral global common, but as a strategic national space whose governance must ultimately remain under state control.

The European approach differs significantly from both the Chinese and Russian models. From the outset, the European Union viewed the internet primarily as a vehicle for economic integration and market expansion. Digital connectivity was seen as a means of strengthening the Single Market through regulatory harmonization, enhanced consumer protection, and the development of institutions capable of supporting long-term economic integration. The European project embodied a distinctly civilizational understanding of digital power: connectivity, competition, and regulation were viewed not merely as economic tools but as foundations of prosperity and social cohesion.

Europe entered the digital age with a structural disadvantage, as it lacked control over the critical layers of internet governance. As Mayer (2000) observed, cyberspace remained largely shaped by the United States, reflecting both its origins and America's dominant position in the institutions governing the internet. This dependence was particularly evident in the Domain Name System (DNS), a core component of internet infrastructure managed primarily through the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a California-based organization responsible for maintaining the stability and security of internet identifiers (ICANN, n.d.). Consequently, Europe lacked comparable institutional authority and technical influence over these foundational digital structures.

This structural reality, combined with Europe's democratic traditions and institutional values, helps explain the path the European Union subsequently pursued. Lacking full control over the internet's underlying infrastructure and technical architecture, Europe chose to build influence through law, regulatory harmonization, and normative legitimacy. In this regard, Christopher Marsden (2011) argues that the defining characteristic of the European approach is co-regulation: a hybrid model of governance in which private self-regulation operates under the oversight of public authorities and independent institutions.

Over the past decade, however, this regulatory tradition has been reconfigured around the concept of European digital sovereignty. Lukas von Ditfurth (2025) demonstrates that digital sovereignty has become a cornerstone of the Von der Leyen Commission's digital agenda, defining it as Europe's capacity to exercise greater autonomy and control over the technologies, digital services, and data operating within its political space. In this sense, digital sovereignty serves as the overarching framework underpinning a broad range of legislative initiatives, including the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act). Also the European Commission's 2024 White Paper emphasizes that advanced digital

infrastructure constitutes the essential foundation of a digital economy and society consistent with Europe's political values and institutional heritage.

Those models, to varying degrees, have also influenced the evolution of digital governance across Latin America, and its future.

Realities and the new geopolitical context facing the region

In this new international environment, geopolitical competition manifests itself not only through open conflicts such as Russia's war against Ukraine or the confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, but also through more subtle forms of coercion, including the disruption, reconfiguration, or abrupt withdrawal of long-standing economic and political relationships. Interdependence is no longer viewed primarily as a source of peace, cooperation, and mutual prosperity. Increasingly, it has become a mechanism through which states exploit asymmetries and leverage dependencies to advance their strategic interests.

Against this backdrop, Mark Leonard (2016), co-founder and Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, argues that we have entered an era of "connectivity wars." The dense networks of interdependence that emerged in the post-Cold War period did not eliminate geopolitical rivalry. Rather, infrastructure, international institutions, migration, finance, trade, and digital networks have evolved from instruments of integration into arenas of strategic competition.

Recent developments provide clear evidence of this transformation. Unilateral tariff measures imposed by the United States on a wide range of countries, as well as the growing intensity of high-level diplomatic engagement among major powers, illustrate how economic and political relationships have become central instruments of geopolitical maneuvering. China's diplomatic agenda offers a particularly revealing example. During President Trump's official visit to China in May 2026, President Xi Jinping invoked the concept of the "Thucydides Trap," a reference that received considerable international attention.

According to Graham Allison (2017), conflict becomes more likely when a rising power approaches the strength of a dominant power, when the dominant power begins to decline, or when both dynamics occur simultaneously. Allison argues that confrontation between great powers is not merely possible but historically more probable than many observers are willing to acknowledge. Yet he also emphasizes that war is not inevitable, particularly in the case of the United States and China.

Trump's visit to China appeared, at least on the surface, to reflect a shared effort to reduce tensions stemming from the ongoing trade dispute and broader geopolitical frictions, including the repercussions of the United

States–Israel confrontation with Iran, a conflict with direct implications for Chinese strategic interests. However, the composition of the American delegation suggested that the most consequential battleground lies elsewhere: technology.

Among the delegation's most prominent members were the chief executives of companies such as Nvidia, Apple, Tesla, and BlackRock. Their presence underscored a fundamental reality of contemporary geopolitics: technological leadership has become one of the primary determinants of power and competitiveness in the transition toward a multipolar international order. The same occurred during President Xi Jinping's official visit to Washington that same year, 2026. In a spirit of non-confrontation and while safeguarding their respective national interests, one of the central topics of discussion was technology. The leaders of these and other technology companies attended the official state dinner.

The significance of these diplomatic exchanges extends beyond the bilateral relationship between Washington and Beijing. During the same month, President Vladimir Putin also paid an official visit to China. Throughout the year, leaders from Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, Pakistan, and several other countries likewise traveled to Beijing. In addition, China and Russia have appeared together at various summits and international forums. Taken together, these visits illustrate the growing diplomatic and economic dynamism of an international system increasingly defined by multiple centers of power competing for influence, partnerships, and strategic advantage.

Economic indicators reveal a similar transformation. A comparison of global production between 1990 and 2025 highlights the magnitude of the shift. At the beginning of the 1990s, the United States accounted for roughly one quarter of global output, while the European Union represented nearly one third. China, by contrast, contributed only around 2 percent of the world economy. By 2024–2025, this distribution had changed dramatically.

According to World Bank data for 2024, the United States produced approximately US$28.8 trillion in economic output, the European Union US$19.5 trillion, and China US$18.7 trillion, out of a global economy valued at US$111 trillion. These figures correspond to approximately 26.0 percent, 17.6 percent, and 16.8 percent of global output, respectively, underscoring how significantly the gap between Washington and Beijing has narrowed since the end of the Cold War.

In the twenty-first century, however, influence is no longer measured solely through economic production, military capabilities, or diplomatic reach. It has increasingly migrated to the digital domain, where control over infrastructure, information flows, technical standards, and internet governance has become a direct expression of geopolitical and geoeconomic power. As DeNardis, Goldstein, and Gross argue, contemporary competition revolves not merely around the content that circulates online, but around the architecture

of the network itself —its access points, governance mechanisms, and operational rules. At the heart of this contest lies a growing tension between digital sovereignty and distributed models of governance.

The internet has become a central arena of geopolitical rivalry because it concentrates economic, political, and strategic power. Broadly speaking, two competing visions have emerged. The first is a distributed, multistakeholder model of governance, more closely associated with the United States and Europe, in which technical communities, private firms, governments, and civil society actors share responsibility for managing the digital ecosystem. The second is a model rooted in strong notions of cyber sovereignty, under which states seek greater control over data, infrastructure, and information flows within their borders.

In practice, however, these models should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Virtually all states now regard cyberspace as a contested domain within their national security and defense strategies. As during the Cold War—but with even greater economic and societal consequences—the global struggle for technological, economic, and geopolitical advantage is increasingly being fought through innovation, digital infrastructure, and the control of information flows (Suri, 2022).

Where the twentieth century was defined primarily by the technological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by competition among the United States, China, and a range of emerging technological actors. These powers understand with particular clarity that today's technological battles have long-term structural implications. Science and technology are no longer simply engines of economic growth; they have become foundational pillars of geopolitical power itself.

Latin America between dependency, competition, and technological sovereignty

The transition toward a multipolar world has profoundly reshaped Latin America's position within the international system. The region is no longer a peripheral observer of global transformations; it has become a strategic arena where major powers converge, compete, and seek to expand their influence. Although the United States remains the dominant external actor, the growing presence of China and the enduring relevance of the European Union have created a far more complex geopolitical landscape than that of previous decades.

The intensifying competition among the United States, China, and the European Union underscores Latin America's growing importance as a space of economic, technological, and geopolitical contestation. In this context, the

region's central challenge is to develop the diplomatic, productive, institutional, and technological capabilities necessary to reduce vulnerabilities, preserve strategic autonomy, and participate more effectively in shaping the emerging international order.

Fragmentation, polarization, and a host of interconnected global crises have transformed the international environment. The bipolar certainties of the Cold War and the relative stability of the post-Cold War era have given way to a world characterized by multiple centers of power, competing visions of order, and increasingly fluid alignments. As Fernández de Soto and Rugeles (2024) argue, the world has moved from a Cold War to a tense and uncertain "Cold Peace."

Trade and investment patterns illustrate the extent of these transformations. Despite the rise of new actors, the United States remains Latin America's most influential external partner due to the density of its economic ties, productive integration, and financial networks. Between 2020 and 2023, the United States accounted for approximately 36.5 percent of the region's total merchandise trade, significantly ahead of China (17.3 percent) and the European Union (10.3 percent). It also remained the principal trading partner of half the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Yet China can no longer be viewed as a secondary player. Its rise has been more selective —and precisely for that reason, more strategic. According to ECLAC, China's share of Latin American trade increased from less than 6 percent during the 2000s to more than 17 percent in the period between 2020 and 2023, while the relative weight of the United States declined. China has already become the leading trading partner of countries such as Brazil and Chile, and its economic footprint is concentrated in sectors of considerable strategic significance, including energy, mining, infrastructure, and development finance.

Although Chinese foreign direct investment remains below that of the United States and the European Union in aggregate terms, its importance cannot be measured solely by volume. The strategic significance of Chinese investment lies in its location. Beijing has sought positions within critical supply chains, particularly those linked to natural resources, renewable energy, logistics networks, and sectors with long-term geopolitical value.

The European Union occupies a different position. While its role as a trading partner has gradually diminished, it remains one of the region's most important investors, particularly in telecommunications, energy, financial services, and corporate capital. Moreover, Europe's regulatory influence far exceeds its relative economic weight. Through standards, legislation, and digital governance frameworks, the European Union continues to shape key aspects of Latin America's economic and technological development.

Yet the most consequential competition is no longer centered on trade or traditional investment. The digital economy has emerged as a critical arena

of strategic rivalry. Between 2005 and 2024, approximately 36 percent of all announced digital foreign direct investment projects in Latin America and the Caribbean originated from the United States, while 33 percent came from the European Union. These figures confirm that both actors continue to dominate the deployment of telecommunications infrastructure, cloud services, software platforms, data centers, and digital processing capabilities across the region.

China still trails these actors in cumulative investment, but its expansion has accelerated significantly. In 2024 alone, Chinese digital investment announcements increased by 72 percent compared to the previous year. The geography of this competition is equally revealing. Between 2020 and 2024, Mexico attracted approximately US$11.7 billion in announced digital investments, followed by Brazil with US$10.6 billion, Colombia with US$3.1 billion, and Chile with US$2 billion. The leading investors are no longer limited to traditional telecommunications providers; they increasingly include global technology companies and cloud-service operators such as Amazon, Microsoft, CloudHQ, Digital Realty, Huawei, and Samsung.

Latin America has thus become a contested space for critical digital infrastructure, data storage, computing capacity, and advanced digital services.

This trend confirms that the struggle among competing poles of power is increasingly a struggle over technological sovereignty. The ILIA 2025 report shows that Latin America and the Caribbean invest in artificial intelligence at levels well below their share of global economic output. Computing infrastructure, digital connectivity, and advanced technological adoption remain highly concentrated, while the region's digital economy is characterized more by consumption than by innovation. Latin America imports technologies, platforms, and services at a far greater rate than it develops them. It remains underrepresented in intellectual property generation, frontier research, and advanced technological capabilities.

ECLAC's assessment of productive digital transformation reinforces this diagnosis. The region continues to exhibit significant structural gaps when compared with OECD economies, particularly in areas such as the digital economy, the relative weight of digital industries, and the use of intermediate digital inputs across productive sectors (Patiño et al., 2025; Soto et al., 2025).

These figures make clear that Latin America is not operating on a neutral playing field. Rather, it finds itself in an international environment where interdependence has become an instrument of power. Today, major powers increasingly understand that the most durable strategic advantage lies in making others more dependent on them than they are in return. Once established, those economic, technological, or institutional dependencies can be leveraged as mechanisms of influence.

Recent developments illustrate this dynamic. El Salvador, for example, has launched artificial intelligence pilot programs in education and healthcare

implemented through technologies developed by Microsoft and Grok. Likewise, the diplomatic tensions surrounding the proposed "Chile Express" submarine cable —intended to connect Concón with Hong Kong— highlight how infrastructure projects have become entangled in broader geopolitical competition involving Chile, the United States, and China.

As a result, contemporary geopolitical tensions increasingly pressure peripheral countries to choose between competing spheres of influence. Yet for Latin America, the appropriate response should not be automatic alignment with any particular power. Rather, it should be a strategy of autonomy grounded in a clear understanding of the distinct logic driving each major actor.

The United States continues to operate through a deeply entrenched ecosystem of firms, standards, protocols, markets, security guarantees, and investments spanning multiple sectors, including defense. Europe, for its part, is advancing toward greater digital sovereignty through regulatory frameworks, strategic infrastructure, and technological governance, while largely viewing the region as a destination for investment and commercial expansion rather than a partner in co-development. China, meanwhile, has expanded its influence across Latin America at remarkable speed through both physical and digital infrastructure, as well as through investments in critical minerals and rare earths. Yet Beijing is unlikely to assume the role of a developmental partner in the traditional sense. Its approach is driven less by geopolitical patronage than by non-interference and the protection of commercial interests, which remain the foundation of its success abroad.

The world is no longer divided into clearly defined blocs as it was during the Cold War. Economies are deeply intertwined, and technology enables states to influence one another's domestic affairs in unprecedented ways. Beijing does not seek to become a new version of the United States by providing security guarantees to a global network of allies. Instead, it focuses on expanding its room for maneuver, consolidating strategic advantages, and deepening selective dependencies.

For Latin America, therefore, the challenge is not to identify a new hegemonic patron. It is to avoid becoming trapped in a system where all roads lead to a single center of power—and where the most profitable strategy for great powers is precisely to become that center.

The region faces an additional obstacle. Historically, Latin America has struggled to sustain long-term cooperation between a capable state and a dynamic private sector. It is relatively unfamiliar with development models in which governments simultaneously incentivize, invest, regulate, and provide strategic direction while private actors drive innovation and economic transformation. In this context, diplomacy, regional integration, and active state support cease to be abstract aspirations and become concrete instruments of power and development.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how quickly established certainties can disappear. The rise of the internet and artificial intelligence has reinforced another lesson: power no longer derives solely from territory, natural resources, or military capabilities. Increasingly, it also depends on data, infrastructure, technological capabilities, and strategic decision-making.

In twenty-first-century geopolitics, countries that fail to invest in knowledge ultimately become buyers of technology; countries that only buy technology eventually become dependent on those who produce it. This logic can be distilled into the principle of *Respice Omnia* —to look at the whole, to view the broader landscape. As Fernández de Soto and Rugeles (2024) argue, in the context of intensifying geostrategic competition among major powers, Latin America should pursue balance, pragmatism, and a genuinely multilateral outlook, privileging cooperation over confrontation. As a region, it must avoid becoming trapped in dynamics that undermine its autonomy, interests, and principles, while also recognizing that strategic ambiguity cannot become an excuse for inaction.

From this perspective, Latin America's approach to technological sovereignty should be guided by *Respice Omnia*. Looking at the whole means understanding, simultaneously, the strategic logic of the United States, China, and Europe, and acting with a sense of balance rather than ideological preference.

In Escudé's (2012) terms, this implies applying the principles of Peripheral Realism to technological affairs. It means avoiding costly and unproductive confrontations in areas where the region lacks sufficient capabilities, while also ensuring that its digital integration does not become limited to the passive consumption of technologies, infrastructure, and standards designed elsewhere. Technological sovereignty, therefore, should not be understood as a maximalist aspiration for complete independence. Rather, it requires a selective investment in autonomy: strengthening state capacity, coordinating with the private sector, developing critical infrastructure, cultivating human capital, and participating in the higher-value segments of the digital economy.

In a world where interdependence itself has become a tool of power, the most effective strategy for the periphery is neither to challenge without resources nor to comply without strategy. It is to build its own margin of decision-making through pragmatism, cooperation, and institutional intelligence.

As Escudé would likely argue, the region must avoid "sterile rebellions" and instead design strategies grounded in a realistic assessment of costs, benefits, and available resources. The objective is not to win the global race for technological supremacy or artificial intelligence. It is to identify specific sectors, establish concrete priorities, and deploy resources strategically in areas where meaningful gains in autonomy and competitiveness can be achieved.

Toward strategic autonomy in an incomplete multipolar order

Latin America occupies an ambiguous position within the emerging international order. The region continues to gravitate within the structural orbit of the United States due to the density of its historical, commercial, financial, productive, and digital ties. At the same time, it faces an increasingly assertive Chinese presence, manifested through infrastructure projects, financing mechanisms, and access to markets, particularly in strategically important sectors. The European Union, meanwhile, exerts less commercial weight but retains considerable influence through regulation, connectivity, and the diffusion of standards. Consequently, Latin America no longer operates within a classic unipolar system, yet neither does it inhabit a world in which dependencies have disappeared. Rather, it exists within what might be described as an incomplete multipolarity —an international environment in which multiple centers of power compete to shape its decisions, value chains, and technological trajectory.

Technology has become the arena where this competition is most consequential. More than trade, investment, or diplomatic influence, it is control over data, critical infrastructure, digital platforms, cloud services, computing power, and artificial intelligence that increasingly defines the balance of power. In this context, Latin America's position cannot be assessed solely by examining who purchases the region's commodities or who announces the largest investment projects. The more relevant question concerns the place the region occupies within the architecture of the global digital economy.

Latin America's response cannot consist of automatic alignment with one pole or another, nor can it rely on a passivity disguised as neutrality. The region must decide whether it intends to participate as a producer of knowledge, a developer of indigenous capabilities, and a regulator of its own interests —or whether it will remain confined to the role of a consumer of technologies designed elsewhere. Technological sovereignty, therefore, is not an abstract aspiration or a political slogan. It is a tangible dimension of power and autonomy in the twenty-first century.

The central question is no longer simply who trades more with the region or who invests the most capital. Rather, it is under what conditions Latin America is integrated into digital value chains, who controls the critical infrastructure upon which its economies depend, and how much decision-making autonomy its states retain. In the geopolitics of the twenty-first century, failing to choose is itself a choice. Countries that do not invest in technology, human capital, and innovation ultimately become dependent on those that do.

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