

HYBRID POLARITY AND EMERGING TRENDS IN THE GLOBAL ORDER: XXI-CENTURY ANALYSIS

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Abstract *The current international system is one that is increasingly becoming more complex as it defies the understanding of unipolarism, bipolarism, or multipolarism. This article focuses on the fundamental shifts in world power balance, paying attention to how hybrid systems that combine state power with other technologically, economically, and institutionally influenced factors evolve. The world order at the moment is a mix of competing forces, allowing some to dominate particular regions as unipolarity gives way to multipolarity. Emerging trends such as the ongoing tussle between the United States and China, the rise of India, the European Union, and multinational, digitally administered corporations are also being discussed. The gaps left by the United States abandoning several of its unilateral safeguarding policies allow newly configured, powerful states to step in and shift the equilibrium. This piece of work on world governance and world stability seeks to fill the void by combining theories and practical examples to propose a new identifying principle for assessing a country's multipolarity in this digital century.*

Keywords: *Hybrid polarity, global order, power distribution, economic interdependence, U.S.-China competition, digital governance, geopolitical shifts, non-state actors.*

Introduction

The distribution of power globally has always been a bare bone question in the corpus of international relations studies. Traditionally, these have focused on power distributionally as unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity, which aided the analysis of the relative international/ world system. The period after the Cold War was epitomized by the conciliatory phase of American Unipolarity, marked by excellence in permissive economic, military, and ideological advancements. However, the 21st century has witnessed profound changes in global politics, technology, and the economy, raising questions about the sustainability of the unipolar system.

Some existing works, such as Brooks and Wohlforth's *The Myth of Multipolarity* (2023) and Murray and Brown's *Multipolarity in the 21st Century* (2012), offer counterbalancing perspectives. Brooks and Wohlforth pointed out, "the U.S remains in control of global policies through what is known as partial unipolarity dominance," while Murray and Brown argued about the rise of several other equally significant centers of power like China, India, and the European Union.

Aside from academic discussions, policymakers, along with international entities, deal with the real-world consequences of changes in power relations. The increasing military and economic assertiveness of



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China, India's growing global presence, and the EU's attempts at strategic autonomy after D. Trump came to power are signs of a shifting multipolarity. At the same time, the United Nations and the G20 also seek to manage these transitions, highlighting the conflict between the dominant and rising powers. Moreover, the effectiveness of International Organizations is also being analyzed in scholarly discussions.

Additionally, the rise of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and space exploration introduces new dimensions to global polarity. Some scholars suggest that technological supremacy could redefine global power systems, allowing non-traditional actors to exert disproportionate influence.

Theoretical Perspectives on Polarity

The various approaches to polarity offer important theories regarding international relations' power structures. In International Relations (IR), polarity refers to the concentration of power among states within the system. It serves as a key basis for analysing subsystems in global politics, including stasis, conflict, and strategic behaviour. Traditionally, scholarly literature identifies three main types of polarity: unipolarity, in which a single hegemon dominates; bipolarity, in which global rule is shared between two major powers; and multipolarity, characterized by the diffusion of global influence among several states. However, especially new changes call for other types of definitions that incorporate hybrid systems, asymmetric models of power, and the growing influence of non-state actors, which include multinational companies, international NGOs, and transnational social advocacy networks.

The modern debate also raises the idea of partial unipolarity, in which a single state retains maximum power while counterbalancing forces are at work. Other scholars propose 'Complex Polarity,' a term that suggests the existence of regional power centers and leaders on specific issues instead of a singular global superpower.

The neorealist school argues that the stability of power depends on the constraints of an anarchical international system. Kenneth Waltz argues that states need to accumulate power for survival, and those systemic forces dictate state behavior to a certain extent. In his view, the most stable configuration is bipolarity because competition between two superpowers mitigates the risk of miscalculation and divergence of interests, averting large-scale war. This can be seen during the Cold War, when U.S.-Soviet rivalry, although hostile, avoided full global direct military confrontation by employing proxy wars. Mearsheimer's offensive realism builds on this argument, claiming that there is a perpetual struggle for dominance in every region, which shifts power balances and leads to conflict. This is especially important when considering China's advancing influence in the region and the U.S. shift towards Asia to contain it.

Liberal scholars focus on institutional bounds and economic interdependence as delineating factors of global polarity. As Ikenberry notes, the US-dominated unipolar order emerged after the Cold War and has been sustained through liberal institutions such as NATO, the UN, and

the WTO, which contain the anarchical impulses of the international system. These institutions provide structures that lower costs for interactions among states, enhance trust, and foster cooperation even without a central authority. Robert Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism goes on to argue that interdependent economies have reduced the likelihood of conflict emerging, since states focus on more confrontational alternatives that are strategically unbeneficial. This is evident in the stability of the European Union and in China's integration into the global market through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to strengthen trade relations across multiple regions, making direct military confrontation economically disadvantageous. After all, the Ukraine war does contradict this argument because Russia does not follow this principle and starts a war where the Western-led international sanctions pose a significant risk.

Scholars in constructivism posit that norms, identities, and social perceptions shape power relations worldwide, rather than solely material factors such as a nation's military force or economic resources. In international dynamics, it can be said that the system is not an unchanging arena dictated by timeless laws, but rather a social construct that develops through the interaction of states and other actors.

Constructivists diverge from realism by emphasizing the role of perception and collective narratives in society in shaping global order. Concepts such as diplomatic language, shared ideology, and historical memory become among the most useful tools for understanding the formation of interests, alliance building, and threat perception by analysing state behaviour.

Wendt's saying that "anarchy is what states make of it" is the very heart of this perspective: meaning any pre-existing structure of international order is without meaning, until states decide to agree on what to perceive that certain state to be. Hence, material power, possessions, and capabilities aren't the only reasons for determining the balance of power, because other subjective factors are also taken into account to understand the roles assigned power. This suggests that state behaviour is not only driven by self-interest these days, but also by macro-social factors that foster democracy within community interaction.

Alongside International Relations schools' perspectives on polarity, relative newcomers to international relations also augment their perspectives. For instance, the growing impact of non-state actors such as global businesses, transnational groups, and international non-governmental organizations adds further complication to the traditional understanding of polarity. These actors, who frequently operate outside the bounds of state control, participate in global decision-making with their economic power, cyber governance, and cross-border lobbying. The digital age and the expansion of cyberspace further transcend the conventional parameters of power division, allowing smaller states and non-state actors to wield unprecedented control over international affairs. Consequently, power concentration is not only in traditional military or economic strength

but also in controlling technology, information, and global supply chains, undermining unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity.

This argument reveals further advances in the dynamics of polarity, showing that the contemporary world is beyond traditional frameworks for analysing it. Rather, it requires a combination of factors – military, economic, institutional, and ideational – to comprehensively assess the balance of power dynamics in the 21st century.

Empirical Analysis of Hybrid Polarity

The study of the hybrid polarity model's empirical components requires supplementary scrutiny of more case studies to demonstrate the shifting centers of power within the international system. The global order does not fit neatly into categories of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar - each containing its own merits and flaws. There is tremendous interaction between economically and militarily more powerful states and diplomatically weaker ones, which makes classification much harder.

Spain provides insight into the effectiveness of superpower diplomacy. A country with limited economic resources can wield considerable geopolitical power through its military and the careful allocation of its raw materials. Even as Europe tightens its sanctions and starves the country of economic growth, Russia is still able to assert power through its energy supplies and military, especially in Ukraine and some parts of the Middle East. Geopolitical supremacy cannot take place without accompanying the act with military force, as outlined in the claim and capture of Crimea in 2014, coupled with incessant warfare in Ukraine. Increasingly, Russia is becoming more reliant on nonstate actors and employing cyber violence, clearly placing it within the parameters of blurring borders and hybrid polarity.

ASEAN, along with the region's stability, is another example of how hybrid polarity works, particularly when economic cohesion does not translate into security policy integration. While ASEAN member states have strong economic relations and enjoy free trade agreements, a common security policy is absent due to internal political and ideological differences. For example, territorial conflicts like the South China Sea disputes highlight the lack of intra-regional cohesion, as ASEAN members have disparate responses to China's expansive maritime interventions. Some countries, like Cambodia and Laos, tend to align with China, while others, like Vietnam and the Philippines, have stronger security ties with the United States. This is a case of fragmented regional security, which exemplifies the difficulties of a marbled hybrid polarity in which interdependence does not lead to common geostrategic frameworks.

Latin America's shifting alliances demonstrate yet another example of hybrid polarity, as countries balance between U.S. and Chinese economic spheres of influence. Traditionally, within Washington's sphere of influence, several Latin American countries have increasingly accepted Chinese investment in infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded Beijing's economic footprint in the

region, giving rise to a situation in which Latin American countries have grown to balance between two rival economic superpowers. Nonetheless, this form of economic dependence on the United States and China simultaneously creates vulnerabilities, such as volatile long-term development plans beset by trade wars and political shifts. Brazil, for example, illustrates how changing administrations recalibrate external and domestic policies in a hybrid manner, shaped at the regional level within the unitary system.

These case studies demonstrate the inadequacy of singular-polarity approaches while highlighting the need to analyse relations through hybrid models. Russia's unapologetic military prowess, ASEAN's economic-security disconnect, and Latin America's mixed economic relations illustrate how power is distributed across multiple dimensions rather than through a singular hegemonic dominion. With the 21st century rife with the dynamic interplay of economic, military, and technological factors, hybrid polarity emerges as a new lens for examining global relations to determine their hierarchy, fluidity, and network.

Digital polarity

The concepts of digital polarity and technology's impact have added a new layer to the existing power paradigms, moving away from state-centered thinking. The birth of the world's leading technology firms like Google, Apple, and Huawei has undergone transformations in the economic and security realms, proving that states are no longer the only center of power in the international system. These corporations, by virtue of their commanding position in AI, telecommunications, and cybersecurity, have attained unparalleled control that frequently exceeds that of national governments. Unlike bounded traditional territorial actors, the technical giants operate in a relatively unregulated international environment where control systems struggle to keep pace, leaving gaps that states find hard to regulate.

They control incalculable businesses on a global scale, exercising authority over commerce, data, digital clouds, computing infrastructure, and several other domains that further enable them to dictate market systems and business workflows internationally. Regarding, for example, the Digital companies that enjoy unprecedented control over market permissions, restrict digital content, and orchestrate monetary exchanges, as the preeminent force at the nexus of international economic activity. From the Political, Technology is also political; it influences information and the information users through content moderation, algorithmic governance, and censorship, thus acting on crucial parts of electoral politics and Geo-strategic struggle. To add to the complexity of digital dualism, security concerns make the picture clearer as rivalry among nations and businesses over emerging technologies such as 5G, Quantum computing, and AI intensifies. The dual U.S.–China digital technology struggle involving such brands as Huawei and TikTok showcases the extent to which

competition of digital advancements challenges the conventional view of state-centric boundaries.

This shift raises fundamental questions regarding accountability and jurisdiction. Governments struggle to manage the activities of technology companies operating across national borders, resulting in a patchwork of governance systems. The European Union's efforts to enforce digital sovereignty through over-regulation, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), seek control but is applied unevenly across the world. Simultaneously, non-state actors, such as hacker groups, cybercrime syndicates, and digital activists, are employing technology in ways that openly defy state and corporate authority, further complicating the international landscape.

With the ongoing advancement of digital technology, the concept of polarity in international relations requires adjustment to account for the rising influence of companies and non-centralized entities. The distribution of power relies not only on military and economic strength, but on information, information systems, and new technologies. This change indicates that the future global order will be dominated, or at least equally influenced, by technology corporations and cyber capabilities alongside traditional military alliances and state coalitions.

Economic Interdependence and Its Impact on Polarity

As globalization increases the scope of trade and economic activities worldwide, economic interdependence is changing traditional definitions of polarity, as discussed above. The US still controls the financial market with the Federal Reserve, the dollar-based international economy, and Wall Street. But China is now a serious rival due to the acceleration of its economy, technological capabilities, and strategic investments that have made it an alternative power center to the Western-dominated order.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a good example of using economic might to reshape global order in governance. By funding infrastructure projects in Asia and extending them to Africa and Europe, Beijing is establishing dependencies to increase its geopolitical influence and control/ Such interdependence does not translate, however, to a straightforward change from unipolarity to multipolarity, as China is still interlocked to the world's financial system through the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's predominance. Even so, China is attempting to establish a fragmented interregional system within the BRICS framework.

The globalized trade system has many interrelated parts, and new problems have emerged alongside them. Financial crises, geopolitical strife, and supply chain disruptions all show how dependency can be both stabilizing and destabilizing. For example, the U.S.-China trade war demonstrates that economic power has its limits in shaping global power dynamics. The retaliatory tariffs and decoupling strategies exposed the dangers of relying too much on economically integrated markets. Furthermore, under Trump's administration, American trade policy was not limited to China. Efforts to renegotiate existing trade deals with key allies

like the EU, Canada, and Mexico meant stepping face-first into sanctioning other partner nations perceived as exploiting the relationship, resulting in America suffering a trade deficit. This switch emphasizes a deeper turn to economic nationalism. Marking a turn from globalization and interdependence.

Existing economic dependencies will continue to shift, and traditional concepts of polarity will have to adapt to the new reality of integration and competition within the system. No single actor has political supremacy, but control of the markets continues to be determined by the availability of international trade, economic strength, and the direction in which they set financial and trade policies.

Supply chain disruptions, financial crises, and geopolitical tensions illustrate how interdependence can be both stabilizing and destabilizing. The U.S.-China trade war, for instance, highlights the limits of economic power in shaping global polarity, as retaliatory tariffs and decoupling efforts have demonstrated the risks of overreliance on interconnected markets. Moreover, U.S. trade policies under the Trump administration extended beyond China, as efforts to renegotiate trade agreements and impose tariffs on key partners—including the European Union, Canada, and Mexico—were framed as necessary measures to address trade imbalances. This broader shift reflects a growing emphasis on economic nationalism, challenging traditional assumptions about globalization and interdependence.

As economic interdependence continues to evolve, traditional notions of polarity must account for the dual forces of integration and competition. While no single actor holds absolute dominance, the balance of power increasingly hinges on economic resilience, access to global markets, and the ability to shape financial and trade rules.

Conclusion

The conclusion and policy implications suggest that the global order today is best understood as a hybrid system that combines elements of unipolarity, bipolarity, and emerging multipolarity. While the United States retains a leading position in military and technological domains, its technological dominance is now strongly contested by China, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and semiconductor production. Additionally, rising powers such as China, India, and the European Union assert influence in specific spheres, challenging the traditional U.S.-led order. Economic interdependence, regional power shifts, and intensifying strategic competition further complicate conventional models of global polarity, suggesting a fluid, evolving international system.

Beyond state actors, the growing influence of multinational corporations, international organizations, and technological advancements necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional polarity models. Digital capabilities, artificial intelligence, and cyber warfare have introduced new power asymmetries that transcend conventional military and economic strength. These shifts highlight that future assessments of global order

must incorporate non-traditional factors that shape influence and strategic decision-making.

Future research should focus on developing metrics to quantify polarity in the digital age, incorporating factors such as cyber capabilities, AI development, and the role of non-state entities. Policymakers must also adapt governance structures to address the regulatory challenges posed by decentralized power centres, ensuring that emerging trends do not exacerbate global instability. By understanding these evolving dynamics, scholars and decision-makers can better navigate the complexities of the 21st-century international system, fostering a more stable and equitable global order.

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