

“The Decline of U.S Hegemony and Emergence of Multipolar World”

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Abstract

After the Cold War, the international system was marked by the unparalleled supremacy of the United States, frequently referred to as a unipolar moment. In recent decades, however, this dominant position has come under increasing scrutiny due to changes in global power dynamics. This article investigates the diminishing dominance of the U.S. and the simultaneous emergence of a multipolar world order in the twenty-first century. The study employs a qualitative and theoretical methodology based on key international relations theories, especially realism, liberalism, and constructivism, to examine economic, military, political, and institutional indicators of hegemonic transition. Additionally, the paper investigates the rise of new power centers, including China, Russia, the European Union, and India, as well as the increasing influence of coalitions like BRICS and the Global South. It contends that the current phase signifies a gradual diffusion of power among multiple actors, resulting in a more intricate and contested global order, rather than a sudden collapse of American power. According to the study, the emergence of multipolarity offers both prospects and difficulties for global governance and international stability, making it essential for states and international institutions to develop adaptive strategies.

Keywords

U.S. Hegemony, Multipolarity, Global Power Shift, International Order, Power Transition, Global Governance

Introduction

Following the Cold War's conclusion, the United States became the dominant force in the international system, a phase commonly referred to as unipolarity. In this phase, the United States had a considerable impact on global economic, political, and security institutions. However, in recent decades, shifting power dynamics have increasingly challenged this hegemonic position. The rise of emerging powers such as China and India, the reassertion of Russia, and the growing influence of the Global South have contributed to a gradual diffusion of power in world politics. Simultaneously, internal economic pressures, prolonged military engagements, and declining political legitimacy have raised questions about the sustainability of U.S. dominance. These events have intensified academic discussions regarding whether the international system is experiencing a decline of U.S. hegemony or a shift toward a multipolar world order. This study investigates these changes and assesses their significance for the developing global order.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the concept of U.S. hegemony in the post-Cold War international system.
2. To analyze the economic, military, political, and institutional factors contributing to the relative decline of U.S. dominance.
3. To explore the emergence of multipolarity and the rise of new power centers in global politics.

4. To assess the role of emerging powers and groupings such as China, Russia, India, and BRICS in shaping the contemporary world order.
5. To evaluate the implications of a multipolar international system for global governance and international stability.
6. To critically engage with major theoretical perspectives on hegemonic transition and power diffusion in international relations.

Theoretical framework

To analyze the decline of U.S. hegemony and the emergence of multipolarity, it is useful to consider major theoretical traditions in International Relations. Given that no single theory sufficiently accounts for the intricacies of current global power transitions, this research employs a pluralist theoretical framework, primarily based on Realism (and Neo-realism), Liberalism, and Constructivism. The combination of these viewpoints offers a thorough comprehension of changes in material power, institutional dynamics, and ideational influences that are molding the developing international order.

1. Realist and Neo-Realist Perspective

According to realism, the distribution of material power among states in an anarchic international system fundamentally shapes international politics. While neo-realists like Kenneth Waltz concentrated on the structure of the international system and the balance of power, classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau highlighted power as the primary factor influencing state behavior. Hegemony is maintained within this framework as long as a dominant state has overwhelming military and economic capabilities compared to other states. Hegemonic stability theory, proposed by scholars like Robert Gilpin, posits that a hegemonic power creates and sustains international order by offering public goods such as security, a stable currency, and open markets. Nevertheless, Gilpin contended that the inherent instability of hegemonic systems over time is a result of varying economic growth rates and the expenses associated with maintaining dominance. With the growth of rival powers, the hegemon experiences relative decline, resulting in systemic change.

When applied to the modern context, realism views the relative decline of U.S. hegemony as stemming from power diffusion rather than an absolute collapse. China's swift economic ascent, Russia's military aggressiveness, and the increasing strategic independence of middle powers like India suggest a movement toward multipolarity. Realists point out that U.S. military overstretch, especially due to long-term conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, is a contributing factor to the erosion of hegemony. Viewed from this angle, the move to multipolarity heightens rivalry, security dilemmas, and the chances of regional wars.

2. Liberal Perspective

Liberal theory provides a different perspective by highlighting how international institutions, economic interdependence, and cooperation can reduce the impact of power politics. Liberal scholars contend that if global institutions and norms remain robust, hegemonic decline does not have to result in disorder. This perspective posits that U.S. leadership has been formalized through entities like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank, thus embedding American influence in the rules-based international order.

Joseph Nye's idea of soft power adds depth to the liberal framework by emphasizing the significance of attraction, legitimacy, and cultural influence in maintaining hegemony. Viewed from this angle, the power of the U.S. extends beyond its military and economic capabilities to encompass ideological appeal, technological innovation, and institutional leadership. Liberals contend that, despite a potential relative decline in material terms for the United States, its normative and institutional influence remains a shaping force in global politics.

3. Constructivist Perspective

Constructivism contributes a significant ideational aspect to the examination of hegemonic transition. In contrast to realism and liberalism, constructivists highlight how norms, identities, discourse, and legitimacy influence the formation of international politics. Viewed this way, hegemony is maintained not just via material power but also through common convictions and the endorsement of other actors. Thus, the waning of U.S. hegemony can be partially interpreted as a legitimacy crisis. The moral authority of the United States has been challenged by changes in global norms concerning sovereignty, intervention, development models, and governance. The emergence of alternative development narratives championed by China, alongside the growing assertiveness of the Global South, suggests a transformation in collective views on leadership and order.

According to constructivists, multipolarity involves not just a redistribution of power but also a transformation in the understanding and exercise of power. An evolving international identity structure is reflected in the increasing focus on strategic autonomy, regionalism, and non-Western norms. This viewpoint clarifies why U.S. dominance is increasingly challenged, even in regions where material superiority remains.

Indicators of U.S. Decline

1. Economic Constraints

The United States is confronted with escalating economic challenges, such as a growing public debt, ongoing trade deficits, and intensifying competition from emerging economies, especially China. Measures aimed at de-dollarization and the development of alternative financial arrangements have diminished the U.S. dollar's relative dominance in the global economy.

2. Military Overstretch

The extended military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan have underscored the constraints of U.S. power projection. While the U.S. still has unparalleled military capabilities, the expenses associated with prolonged interventions and decreasing strategic benefits suggest a state of relative military overstretch.

3. Political Polarization

The coherence of U.S. foreign policy has been weakened by deepening domestic political divisions and governance challenges. Domestic unrest has had a negative impact on the credibility and consistency of U.S. leadership in global affairs.

4. Institutional and Normative Challenges

The diminishing capacity of the United States to influence results in global organizations like the World Trade Organization and the United Nations mirrors a weakening of institutional authority. Moreover, the increasing opposition to norms and interventionist policies spearheaded by the U.S. indicates a wider legitimacy deficit.

Rise of Multipolarity: Emerging Power Centres

As U.S. hegemonic dominance has gradually declined, multiple power centres have emerged, indicating a shift from a unipolar to a multipolar international system. Multipolarity describes a power distribution where multiple states or coalitions of states have similar capabilities and wield considerable influence on regional and global matters. This transition illustrates the dispersal of power among a variety of actors functioning within a global landscape that is becoming ever more complicated, rather than the substitution of one hegemon for another.

1. China as a Leading Power Centre

China poses the greatest challenge to U.S. supremacy in present-day global politics. It has become a key player in international relations due to its swift economic development, technological progress, and growing military strength. China's strategic use of economic diplomacy to expand its influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe is exemplified by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, China's escalating assertiveness in the South China Sea and its augmented involvement in global institutions signal a transition from being a rule-taker to becoming a rule-shaper. Viewed through a realist lens, China's ascent serves as a prime example of classic power transition dynamics; constructivist perspectives, on the other hand, underscore China's attempts to advance alternative norms concerning governance and development.

2. Russia and Strategic Reassertion

Russia has re-established itself as a key power center despite economic constraints, thanks to its strategic use of military capabilities and geopolitical leverage. Its activities in Ukraine, Syria, and other areas demonstrate an effort to contest Western supremacy and reaffirm its influence in neighboring regions. Russia's foreign policy emphasizes the importance of military power and strategic disruption within a multipolar system, where states can offset economic vulnerabilities with bold security strategies. Russia's focus on sovereignty and opposition to Western interventionism has found a sympathetic response among various countries in the Global South.

3. European Union as a Normative Power

The European Union holds a unique position in the multipolar order. Although the EU does not possess a consolidated military force, it wields considerable influence due to its economic power, regulatory abilities, and normative guidance. The EU, frequently referred to as a "normative power," influences global standards in fields including trade, environmental policy, data protection, and human rights. Despite the fact that internal divisions and strategic reliance on external security actors limit its capacity to act as a traditional great power, the EU continues to be a significant pillar of multipolarity through its institutional and normative influence.

4. India and the Rise of Middle Powers

With its expanding economy, strategic location, and rising diplomatic involvement, India has established itself as a significant emerging power in the multipolar world. India's focus on strategic autonomy, involvement in various alignments, and leadership in organizations like the G20 demonstrate its aspiration to influence global governance without being tied exclusively to any major power bloc. In addition to India, other middle powers like Japan, Australia, Brazil, and Turkey are taking on roles of growing significance in both regional and global politics. Rather than pursuing global dominance, these states contribute to multipolarity by exerting influence within particular issue areas and regions.

5. BRICS and the Global South

The emergence of coalitions like BRICS underscores the increasing collective impact of the Global South in global political affairs. These coalitions advocate for greater representation, alternative development models, and reforms in global governance structures to challenge the dominance of Western-led institutions. Although internal differences restrict their unity, these groupings represent a larger movement toward a more inclusive and decentralized global order.

Implications of Emerging Power Centres

Global politics has been reshaped by the emergence of multiple power centres, which have led to increased strategic competition, regionalization, and the formation of issue-based coalitions. In contrast to the unipolar era, during which one nation was primarily responsible for determining the global agenda, the multipolar order features divided authority and overlapping areas of influence. This change highlights the intricate and fluid character of modern international relations, in which power is more and more shared among various states, institutions, and regions.

1. Transformation of Global Governance

The emergence of a multipolar world order brings about significant changes to the operation of global governance institutions. As power is distributed among multiple states rather than concentrated in one, the process of making decisions grows more intricate. Organizations like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund are under growing pressure to reform so that they can better align with the interests of emerging powers. This diffusion of power can create a more inclusive governance structure, but it may also lead to slower consensus-building and reduced institutional effectiveness.

2. Increased Strategic Competition

The existence of multiple poles increases the strategic rivalry between established and developing powers. When a clear hegemon is absent, it often results in changing alliances, regional rivalries, and balance-of-power politics. In contested areas like the Indo-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, this environment can heighten uncertainty and security dilemmas.

3. Opportunities for Middle Powers

As multipolarity increases, it opens up more opportunities for middle powers to demonstrate strategic autonomy. Countries like India, Japan, Brazil, and Australia can seek issue-based collaborations and multi-alignment strategies instead of being limited by inflexible alliance frameworks. While this increases diplomatic flexibility, it also necessitates careful balancing to prevent involvement in great-power rivalries.

4. Changing Nature of Conflict

In a multipolar system, conflicts are marked more by hybrid warfare, proxy conflicts, cyber operations, and economic coercion than by direct military confrontations between great powers. This change complicates established security frameworks and challenges current norms regarding warfare and conflict resolution.

5. Normative and Ideational Pluralism

Multipolarity fosters an increase in the diversity of global norms and values. As emerging powers advocate for alternative governance and development models, the supremacy of Western liberal norms is facing growing challenges. This pluralism may improve inclusivity, but it also brings up worries about the fragmentation of global norms and standards.

6. Implications for Global Stability

The influence of multipolarity on international stability is still debated. Certain academics contend that an equilibrium among various powers can diminish unilateral control and foster moderation, whereas others warn that the lack of a definitive leader might heighten instability and strife. Ultimately, the ability of states and institutions to manage competition through cooperation and dialogue will determine the stability of the multipolar order.

Critical Evaluation

The argument regarding the decline of U.S. hegemony and the emergence of multipolarity enjoys widespread support, yet it remains a subject of contention in international relations scholarship. Claims regarding the decline of the U.S. should be approached cautiously, as a critical evaluation shows that American power remains significantly resilient across various domains. In terms of military, the U.S. possesses unparalleled global power projection capabilities, extensive networks of alliances, and technological dominance. These factors indicate that U.S. dominance, while contested, has not been fundamentally overthrown.

From an economic perspective, the U.S. dollar remains the dominant global reserve currency, which affords Washington considerable structural advantages. Even with talks of moving away from the dollar, alternative financial systems are disjointed and do not possess the necessary institutional depth to take the place of dollar-centric arrangements. Likewise, the U.S. maintains its sustained impact on global affairs through leadership in innovation, higher education, and technology.

In addition, the rise of multipolarity does not automatically entail stability or a fair distribution of power. Historically, multipolar systems have been linked to heightened uncertainty, fluctuating alliances, and regional disputes. While the lack of a clear hegemon may diminish unilateral dominance, it can also undermine global coordination, especially in times of crisis that demand collective action. Moreover, newly emerging power centers frequently encounter internal political, economic, and demographic difficulties that constrain their ability to maintain global leadership positions.

Consequently, instead of indicating a conclusive end to U.S. hegemony, the present global order might be more accurately viewed as a transitional phase marked by overlapping power structures and disputed authority. This viewpoint emphasizes the necessity of perceiving changes in hegemony as something that is multifaceted and gradual, rather than as a straightforward or unavoidable result.

Conclusion

The study of the decline of U.S. hegemony and the emergence of multipolarity uncovers a gradual and multifaceted transition in global power. Although the United States maintains considerable military, economic, and institutional advantages, emerging powers like China, Russia, India, and collective entities such as BRICS are transforming the international system. Multipolarity offers opportunities, like enhanced influence for middle powers and normative diversity, but also presents challenges, including strategic competition and complex governance. It is crucial to comprehend this transition in order to analyze the changing patterns of global stability, diplomacy, and international relations in the twenty-first century.

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