

Shifting Dynamics: The US and the Emerging Multipolarity

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Abstract

As the end of the short-lived dream of the unipolar world harbors the rise of a multi-polar world, the US loses its capability to shape global affairs unilaterally. The emergence of China as a peer competitor, the resurgence of Russia, and other economic powers such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia bring with them challenges for the US hegemonic role. However, there are still many advantages and opportunities for the US to maintain its dominant position in several sectors of world politics. The paper examines the opportunities and challenges for the US's dominant position in the multipolar world.

Keywords: Multipolar, US, Dominant, Challenges, Opportunities

Introduction

It would not be wrong to say that the economic crisis of 2008 and China's role in stabilizing the global economy had already initiated a drastic change in the international power structure. The crisis revealed that the United States was unable to use its power to unilaterally shape the direction of global issues. The higher oil price enabled Putin's Russia to make a comeback as an important geopolitical player, which it did by annexing Crimea in 2014. Since the speed of power diffusion has increased, new economic powers such as China, India, South Africa, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil have emerged at both the regional and global levels. China has now established itself as a peer competitor to the United States. At the regional level, India, Indonesia, and Brazil have emerged as vital stakeholders in regional and global power politics. Across the Atlantic in Europe, President Trump's assertive position against his European allies, alienated transatlantic relations. Thanks to Putin, the Ukrainian war proved a glue for repairing the widening cracks between both sides of the Atlantic. However, in a multipolar world where the potential for miscalculation increases, there are still numerous opportunities for Sino-US cooperation in the domain of non-traditional security (NTS). Non-Traditional Security (NTS) poses an equal threat to both the United States and the rest of the world. At this critical juncture of human history, issues such as climate change, infectious diseases, terrorism, the elimination of poverty, the food crisis, and the stability of the global supply chain offer ample avenues for cooperation and a window for healthy relations. The cooperation in this area will positively spill over into high-level political issues between the evolving powers of the polycentric world.

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The Multipolar World

It is the fourth time in the last hundred years that the redistribution of power among different states has given birth to a distinct power structure. In 1914, a multipolar world erupted into the catastrophic war of WWI, which ended up engendering a multipolar world with different power players at the top. The second time was at the end of WWII, harbingering the arrival of a bipolar world with the US and USSR at its center. The third time, the termination of the Cold War ensured a US-dominated unipolar world. However, the dream of the US dominating unipolarity was short-lived and soon replaced with Multipolarity with the diffusion of power in various states and China as the peer competitor of the US.

The multipolar structure does not provide relative equality or uphold the "balance of power" rule among power players. The instability of the polycentric world makes it prone to conflicts (Varisco, 2013). All great wars, including WWI and WWII, have been fought in the multipolar world. In such a polycentric arrangement, the world transforms into a chaotic theater where the hegemony of a single power is no longer possible. Between the 16th and 20th centuries, different mechanisms were adopted to put a check on the volatile nature of multipolarity on the European continent, including Metternich arrangements, but none of them could deter the nemesis of war. China's ambitions to revise the rules of the liberal world order and its efforts to establish Beijing-centric regimes and regulatory mechanisms for global politics are clear indications of the dawn of a polycentric world structure.

Historical experience shows that multipolar systems have been relatively unstable compared to bipolar or unipolar systems. In the 21st-century multipolar system, China is positioned as a US peer competitor following the emergence of regional and second-ranked powers such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, France, Britain, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and Japan. Several of them are ambitious enough and have the potential to pursue an independent foreign policy. However, the US and China are the leading powers that struggle for the status quo and have a revisionist agenda, respectively. The trajectory and factors influencing their relations can be termed vital variables for the health of the multipolar world structure. The evolving structure offers both tumultuous routes toward conflict and avenues for their cooperation. This paper outlines both the challenges and opportunities for the US to retain its position as a dominant power in a polycentric world. The paper is divided into two sections: first, details on opportunities, and second, challenges. The final part will consist of a conclusion.

Section I

Opportunities for the US Hegemony

Among the many serious challenges that have the potential to attenuate the American voice in world politics, few opportunities can ensure the longevity of American hegemony. Among them are the United States military capabilities, the alliance's quality players, and the ever-expanding seductive narrative of democracy coupled with free speech.

1: US Military Power and Pervasive Mobility

The US has the largest defense budget, even larger than the combined amount of the next 10 countries. The US defense budget for 2022 was \$715 billion. Alexandra Marksteiner, researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Program, maintained:

The increase in R&D spending over the decade 2012–21 suggests that the United States is focusing more on next-generation technologies. The US Government has repeatedly stressed the need to preserve the US military's technological edge over strategic competitors (SIPRI, 2022).

About 750 bases belong to US control in at least eighty different countries and have deployed 173,000 troops in around 153 countries (Haddad & Hussein, 2021). These bases are located in Japan, South Korea, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Cuba, Qatar, Germany, Italy, the UK, and Australia. At its peak in 2011, the US had roughly 100,000 soldiers spread across at least 10 military installations from Bagram to Kandahar. Even after the withdrawal from the region, the US holds drone technology to conduct "over-the-horizon" air missions from the surrounding network of US military bases. Apart from these bases, the US military operates through 11 "unified combatant commands" (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). Out of these 11, four are functional combatant commands – Cyber Command, Special Operations Command, Strategic Command, and Transportation Command – and seven are geographical combatant commands – Africa Command, Central Command, European Command, Indo-Pacific Command, Northern Command, Southern Command, and Space Command. No other great power, whether Russia or China, possesses such vast military resources around the world. This is a great advantage for the US in retaining its position as an influential power in a multipolar world. Russian military bases are limited to former Soviet states. Whereas China has a military base in Djibouti and a military post in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan (Shih, 2019).

2: Quality Players in Its Alliance

The alliance factor has an important place in US foreign policy. Since the First World War, the US has actively pursued its alliance-making strategy, which became vital in the days following WWII. Currently, the United States is a status quo power. Over the course of the past six decades, it has played a vital role in the development and reintegration of Japan, South Korea, Germany, and the overall European economy. The international system is still US-shaped and dominated by the US alliance members. The members of its alliance are rich, belong to the global north, and are technologically far better than the challengers of the liberal world order. On the other side, the challengers to US hegemony, except for China, are poor, sanctions-stricken countries. The United States is in an advantageous position in that, in the event of a major conflict, its wealthy and technologically advanced allies will be an asset, whereas the anti-hegemonic alliance is struggling with its economies and military capabilities, which are far inferior to those of the United States' allies.

In the end, the middle powers do not want a confrontation with the US. Sanctions imposed by Western countries have dealt a severe blow to the economies of Iran, Russia, and North Korea (McNabb & Caine, 2017). Decades of resistance and sanctions have worn out their economic

infrastructure and greatly affected the daily lives of citizens. Many of them are ready to give up on several factors to strike a meaningful bargain with the US. The Obama-Iran nuclear negotiations and Trump-Kim contacts alluded to the desire for meaningful changes. However, it was the US that backed off from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

3: Global Political Awareness and A Cry for Democracy

The digital age has converted the world into a global village. The digitalization of the world enabled humans to communicate with each other from one corner to the other in a split second. In turn, this engendered massive political awareness and the public's realization of their rights, freedom of speech, and desire to be counted or considered in the policy formulation process. In this regard, the United States showcases a liberal democratic political blueprint that considers individual participation in the policy-making process through its elected representatives indispensable.

Emerging powers in the polycentric world have dictatorial or totalitarian domestic political systems. Russia, Iran, North Korea, China, and other anti-US powers are clamping down on civil liberties in their countries. The suppressive state apparatus in these countries often provokes mass protests for the implementation of civil liberties. The 2019-20 Hong Kong protests, the 2022 Iran protests, and the 2022 COVID-19 protests in China are all fresh reminders of citizens' discontent in these countries. A massive wave of demonstrations also took place in the Middle East, most of which were suppressed by state brutality. All these protesters see the United States as a messiah that can play an essential role in liberating them from the iron-grip rule of their own governments. This exercise of soft power over the hearts and minds of these people is a great opportunity to revive its democratic credibility and its role as a champion of human rights and freedom of speech. The Biden administration has inculcated this side of US soft power as the centerpiece of its foreign policy (The White House, 2021).

4: Non-Traditional Security

Non-traditional security (NTS) threats represent the key area where the US can still practice its leadership role. Both the United States and the rest of the globe are equally at risk from NTS. At this pivotal time in human history, problems like terrorism, infectious diseases, poverty eradication, the food crisis, and supply chain stability provide a wide range of opportunities for cooperation and a window for harmonious relations among major powers in a multipolar world. The US is in a better position than the others in this respect due to its advanced R&D and years of experience solving similar issues.

Terrorism

Terrorism does not discriminate, and every state, in either direction, is facing the menace of terrorism. China, Iran, India, Russia, the US, and the EU—no state is immune to these threats. Almost every state has evolved a national counterterrorism policy. As no border can stop the menace, transnational cooperation and intelligence sharing make it easier for states to put a lid on the monster. All members of the international community are now seen as working together to combat terrorism and its causes. Cooperation against ISIS between the US, Iran, and Russia has

been instrumental in controlling the damage. In this regard, the US's material resources distinguish its standing among its peers in the polycentric world.

Hunger and Poverty

The destiny of the world's richest and poorest countries is intertwined, and without urgent and concentrated international cooperation efforts aimed at long-term development, eradicating poverty and hunger will be impossible (Paradela, 2021). The world's poorest countries are also vulnerable to the harsh effects of climate change and pandemics, for which the industrialized nations of the global north bear primary responsibility. A common plan and strategy for the recovery of the world is much needed at this time. In this regard, the primary responsibility falls on the leading powers of the polycentric world, such as the US, EU, China, Japan, and India. These countries have funding to support the agriculture sector, address the damages caused by the climate crisis, and have a massive network of NGOs for mobilization in the wake of any natural disaster. In general, agriculture-driven development, the fight against poverty, and food security are in jeopardy: Multiple shocks are affecting food systems, driving up food costs, and escalating hunger. These shocks range from COVID-19-related disruptions to extreme weather, pests, and wars. Of the major cereal and vegetable crops, the United States, China, India, and Russia frequently appear as top producers. As a leader, the responsibility falls on the US, China, EU, Russia, and India for keeping world affairs normal. The US has a massive opportunity to display the instincts of leadership and lead the peacemaking, reconstruction, and recovery plans as it did in the post-World War II era.

Section II

Challenges for US Hegemony

1: Return of Bear: Resurging Russia

The termination of the USSR paved the way for American supremacy. However, it was a short-lived unipolar world, and within the first decade of the 21st century, Russia recovered from the shock. The resurgent Russia under Putin asserted its influence in both economic and military terms. Its economy under Putin was revived thanks to the high price of a barrel of oil. In 2006, it paid off all its debts to the Paris Club of creditor nations. Russia joined multilateral organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with like-minded states to counterbalance US influence, and it also sparked global debate on the multipolar world. The US unilateral operation in Yugoslavia in the name of humanitarian intervention in the mid-90s pushed Russia to redefine its foreign policy. In 1999, Russia embattled itself against Chechen Islamists; in 2008, it invaded Georgia; and in 2014, it annexed Crimea. However, the annexation of Crimea provoked much hue and cry in the West, but the reaction from NATO hardly crossed the threshold of the sanctions. In 2014, Russia showed its military muscle in Syria, where US forces were already involved.

Ukraine's inclination toward NATO remained a vital security concern for Moscow. After the Western nation rejected Russia's demands, it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The global reaction was mixed, and Pakistan and India abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly. Following Western sanctions and the reduced flow of gas and oil to Europe, India is emerging as a key market for Russian energy products. The failure of American deterrence to impede the Putin designs, first in Crimea and now in Ukraine, substantially places massive constraints on US power. Russia emerges as a separate power pole, not only asserting itself westward but also raising greater question marks on the capabilities of US security commitments with the European allies. Russia has challenged US hegemony in a range of spheres is undeniable, and its motives for doing so are interpreted in ways ranging from self-interest to a more normatively based opposition to hegemony(Santino &Parisot, 2019).

2: Flying Dragan: The Rising China

Napoleon prophesied that China would "astonish the world" when it awoke from its slumber. China emerged from backwardness and famine to become one of the world's most modern, developed, and largest economies in three decades. The real challenge in terms of economics comes from China's mesmerized economy. In terms of PPP, China has already surpassed the US economy. Aside from economic progress, China is aggressively pursuing military modernization with ever-increasing defense budgets. China has shown active ingress in the Middle East and Africa, disrupting the American sphere of influence. The Chinese president announced his ambitious Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) plan in 2013. The project will span more than 65 countries of the world, and after its completion, for the first time in human history, it will knit the entire globe through railway lines, fiber optics, roads, and maritime routes. China is establishing a financial and security network of institutions such as the SCO and AIIB as counterparts to the NATO and IMF. Although these institutions are in their infancy, however, they herald China's potential and ambitions to revise the guidelines set by the liberal world order. The Chinese labor force, oil exploration companies, and ground-breaking deals have been replacing US operations in Africa, the Middle East, and other parts of the world.

In the Middle East, it has been pursuing cordial and friendly relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia and, as a result, successfully mediating between them to bring back their relations to normalization. The element of the peacemaker was absent in China; however, the recent Iran-KSA handshake adorned this attribute in China's foreign policy as well. The Middle East has been a very important region for the Americans. From the 1956 Suez Canal to the Oslo agreements, the United States has been a central peacemaker and mediator in the Middle East. America has been a vital provider of weapons to both Arab countries and Israel. It has orchestrated coups, and supervised armistices, and its support tipped the balance in 1973 in favor of Israel. However, it seems that the US' towering role in the region is being reversed and replaced by other players, such as China and Russia.

3: India's Pluralistic Foreign Policy

India has a growing economy, and soon it will have surpassed the Japanese economy to be ranked the third largest economy in the world, following the US and China. The US provides greater value to India, especially when it comes to China's containment. The United States has

declared India to be the linchpin of its Asia-Pacific policy aimed at China. However, India does not completely subscribe to the US project of China's containment. India pursues a plural foreign policy in which it wants cordial relations with the different power poles of the polycentric world. The trade figures between China and India and the various formats of the engagement indicate that India wants a meaningful partnership with China. Although recent border clashes have strained relations between India and China, both President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi's meetings at the Wuhan Summit were a step toward greater engagement. Both states are engaged in a range of bilateral dialogue mechanisms—such as the financial dialogue, defense and security dialogues, Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED), Working Mechanism for Consultation on India–China Border Affairs, and Special Representatives (SRs) dialogue. On the other side, India has several times conveyed clearly to America its wishes for an independent foreign policy and its reluctance to embrace bloc politics, especially when it comes to the Asia Pacific.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 1, 2018, expressed that "India's relationship with China has "many layers," making it important for global peace and progress." In addition to its role in Asia-Pacific politics, India sees itself as a key player in the growing polycentric world. PM Modi has been emphatic about an open, stable, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. The hallmark of India's evolving foreign policy strategy is aligning with "like-minded" nations without concluding a formal coalition or discounting its relationship with nations outside the Quad framework. The Indian economy is growing at a rate of 6 percent, which will make it a USD 5 trillion economy by 2025–26 (Nageswaran, 2023). Its national power ingredients provide it with the potential to be a global power with a modern military and a booming economy. A country with 5,000 years of history and national power ingredients can hardly serve the national interests of any other power; rather, it charts its own destiny in light of its national interests.

4: Middle Powers

After these great powers, middle powers such as Iran, North Korea, Syria, Iraq, and others resent US hegemony and rallied behind the great powers to revise the liberal world order. The majority of them have an authoritative form of government and it suits them to go with China. China is emphatic on a non-interference policy that is consistent with the whims and wishes of the dictators, and rulers of the semi-democracies.

Conclusion

The nature of the global power configuration has changed since the 1990s. The nature of global power has become so diffuse that it is unlikely that any one world power will exercise its power the way the US did in the post-Cold War decade. India and China have emerged as Asian superpowers with global clout. The Russian resurgence once again contested American dominance over the European Continent. For the first time in history, Asia's defense budget has surpassed that of Europe. The digital age and diffusion of new technologies have made today's masses politically aware and agitated. This political awareness has both a positive and negative side for the American global preponderance. Many among them alienated the imperial and colonial histories of European and American power while asserting an Asian identity. On the

other side, several mass protests inspired by the American way of life staged demonstrations against the dictatorial nature of Asian powers. The United States still has several opportunities to prolong its dominant position in a multipolar world. To do so, it should behave as a global leader and problem solver rather than an imperial power with an arrogant approach. It is high time for all of America to decide whether they want to dominate the world or lead; the former brings challenges while the latter offers opportunities.

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