

## From Unipolar to Multipolar: China's Role in a Shifting World

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### Abstract

World order refers to complex web of relationships existing between states, international organisations, norms and values, economic system and security arrangements. World orders can be classified as Unipolar, Bipolar and Multipolar. The present paper evaluates the evolution of world order post second world war. The paper underscores how China is challenging the US led liberal order by establishing institutions like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). China is rapid modernising its army and navy also. Further, it is focussing also on increasing its soft power.

World order is the term given to a complex concept of international relations: the global power, authority, and norms arrangement that shape international relations. World order refers to the rules, institutions, and practices that govern relations between states and other actors in the world stage (Fukuyama, 2017). It mainly focuses on building stability, security, and cooperation among nations in the context of globalization while seeking solutions to poverty, inequality, climate change, and terrorism among others.

According to Henry Kissinger's US diplomat and scholar, have extensively defined World order in his important book, "World Order." According to him it refers to "the idea held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire the world (Boyle, 2015)." According to Kissinger, the historical and cultural dimensions constitute world order. He submits that it comes into existence based on the values, beliefs, and aspirations of various societies. He identifies four historical models of the world order (Kissinger, 2015).

1. **Westphalian Order** The Westphalian model began following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which held principles such that state sovereignty could not interject within other states matters of business. The Westphalian Order is an idea in international relations born after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Teschke, 1999). This peace agreement ended the Thirty Years' War and defined how sovereign states would eventually evolve and shape the face of world politics for a considerable number of years thereafter. Core Principles of the Westphalian Order

### The underlying principles of the Westphalian Order (Schmidt, 2011) are as follows:

1. **Sovereignty:** Every country is sovereign with respect to its territory and domestic affair. In short, countries have the right of self-determination as well as to govern themselves without let from the outside powers.
2. **Territorial Integrity:** The basic tenet of the system of Westphalia holds that state borders are sacred and inviolable. Other states, in theory, are required to preserve territorial integrity in other countries and not extend their area of influence by military strength.
3. **Non-Intervention:** States should not interfere in the internal affairs of other states. This principle limits the scope of international intervention and promotes state autonomy.
4. Formally equal All states, large or powerful, have equal weight in international society. Such a system makes sure all states stand equal under the law and obligations.

**Imperial Order:** A single dominant power exerts control over other states through military, economic, or cultural means. An imperial order is a system of governance where a single, dominant power exerts control over other states or territories (Agnew, 2005). This dominance can be political, economic, cultural, or military. Empires have been a recurring feature of human history, shaping the course of civilizations and leaving enduring legacies.

### Key Characteristics of Imperial Orders (Eisenstadt, 2017). include

- **Centralized Authority:** A single, powerful ruler or governing body controls the empire.
- **Domination:** The imperial power exercises control over other territories and peoples through various methods like military force, economic exploitation, or cultural means.
- **Hierarchical Structure:** Empires often have a hierarchical structure, with the imperial power at the apex and subordinate territories or colonies below.
- **Cultural Diffusion:** Imperial powers often spread their culture, language, and religion to their dominions, leading to cultural exchange and assimilation.
- **Economic Exploitation:** Empires frequently exploit the resources and labor of their colonies to enrich the imperial power.

### **Historical Examples of Imperial Orders**

Ever since the dawn of human civilisation numerous empires have extended their influence on the entire world. Some notable examples are Roman Empire: British Empires, Mongol Empire, Spanish Empire.

A significant departure happened with the establishment of Liberal international order created by USA after the second world war. **Liberal International Order** is a set of rules and institutions intended to be a tool for maintaining peace, security, and prosperity. Usually, it is associated with the post-World War II era, but “Liberal International Order (LIO) represents global, rule-based, structured relations founded on political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberal internationalism (Mearsheimer, 2019).” From the ash heap of World War II, the LIO came forth for the establishment of an internationally cooperating world of liberal values aimed at bringing more peaceful prosperity and development to every nook and corner.

**Core principles of Liberal International Order** – According to Mearsheimer the following are the core principles of international order (Mearsheimer, 2019)-

**Sovereignty-** The LIO holds all countries respectful of their individual state sovereignties; it promotes the normative structures of international laws, and a system of laws meant to clip absolute sovereignty.

- **Self-determination:** The power of the nation to decide its political future without anyone else's interference.
- **Economic liberalism:** Free trade and free markets with an interdependency of the economies to facilitate economic well-being and help reduce the likelihood of war.
- **Democratic governance:** Upholding democratic principles such as free, fair elections and human rights and the respect for rule of law.
- **Multilateralism:** belief in cooperation coming from sources of international scope, as supported and further built by multilateral systems as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, or the International Monetary Fund. Essential Institutions of the Liberal International Order
- **United Nations (UN):** The leading intergovernmental agency responsible for maintaining international peace and security while working to promote and develop all sectors of economic activities and respect for human rights.
- **International Monetary Fund (IMF):** The chief focus of this organization was to ensure global monetary cooperation, exchange rate stability, and economic growth.
- **World Bank:** a international financial institution that issues loans and grants to countries that are developing to develop the various development projects.

### **Major Components of World**

World Order can be classified as Unipolar, Bipolar and Multipolar based on Power Distributions. Unipolarity refers to the condition wherein one country One hegemony dominating international affairs. When two superpowers are dominant it is called as Bipolarity. Throughout the cold war era this type of world system existed. Two major powers wield influence, often creating a balance of power and strategic competition. Multipolarity refers to the world order where power is relatively diffused amongst major powers. Multiple powers vie for influence, making for a vibrant and dynamic international system.

2. International Institutions happen to be major component of world order.

Formal organizations established by states to address specific problems, including the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). NGOs: Autonomous organizations advocating specific causes, including human rights, environmental protection, and social justice.

3. Norms and Values: Shared beliefs and principles guiding state behaviour, such as sovereignty, non-interference, and human rights.

4. Economic Interdependence: Global trade, investment, and financial flows connecting countries and shaping their economic and political relationships.

Important milestones in the emergence of the post second world war which can be best described as liberal international liberal order-

### **Treaty of Westphalia- 1648**

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) marked a turning point in European history, establishing a new political order based on the principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, religious tolerance.

### **League of Nations**

The League of Nations, though flawed and ultimately ineffective, marked a significant step in the evolution of world order (Clavin, 2013). It was the first intergovernmental organization established to promote international cooperation and prevent future wars. While it failed to achieve its primary goal, the League laid the groundwork for future international organizations like the United Nations. It introduced innovative concepts such as collective security and international cooperation, and its efforts in fields like public health, refugee relief, and intellectual property rights had a lasting impact. Although it did not prevent World War II, its legacy continues to shape our understanding of global governance and international relations.

### **United Nations**

The United Nations has played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of the world order since its establishment in 1945 (Murphy, 1996). It has served as a platform for international diplomacy, conflict resolution, and cooperation on global issues. The UN has been instrumental in promoting human rights, protecting the environment, and addressing humanitarian crises. By providing a forum for dialogue and negotiation, the UN has contributed to the maintenance of international peace and security. Additionally, its specialized agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), have made significant contributions to global health and food security.

### **Bretton Woods Conference (1944)**

The Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 was a pivotal moment in the evolution of the global economic order (Rofe, 2017). It laid the foundation for post-World War II economic stability and growth by creating the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The IMF was established to oversee a system of fixed exchange rates, promote international monetary cooperation, and provide financial assistance to countries experiencing economic difficulties (McKinnon, 1988). The World Bank was created to finance reconstruction and development projects, particularly in war-torn Europe. These institutions, along with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which later became the World Trade Organization (WTO), played a crucial role in shaping the global economy and promoting economic interdependence.

### **Bipolar World order- Important characteristics**

The bipolar world order, primarily characterized by the Cold War era, was dominated by two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. This period was marked by several key characteristics:

The bipolar world order, primarily characterized by the Cold War era, was dominated by two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. This period was marked by several key characteristics:

- **Ideological Rivalry:** The two superpowers were divided by stark ideological differences, with the United States championing capitalism and democracy, while the Soviet Union promoted communism and a command economy.
- **Arms Race:** Both nations engaged in a massive arms race, stockpiling nuclear weapons and conventional military forces. This led to a period of heightened tension and the threat of nuclear war.
- **Proxy Wars:** The superpowers often fought indirectly through proxy wars in various regions of the world, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan.
- **Bloc Formation:** Both powers formed alliances with other countries, leading to the creation of two major blocs: NATO, led by the US, and the Warsaw Pact, led by the Soviet Union.
- **Espionage and Intelligence:** Intense espionage and intelligence activities were conducted by both sides to gather information and undermine the other's interests.
- **Detente:** Periods of relative calm, known as détente, occurred during the Cold War, marked by increased diplomatic engagement and arms control agreements.

The Cold War was a period of intense ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. This rivalry was rooted in fundamental differences in their political, economic, and social systems.

The United States championed capitalism, democracy, and individual liberty, while the Soviet Union advocated for communism, a centrally planned economy, and a one-party state. This ideological divide fueled a global competition for influence, as both superpowers sought to expand their spheres of influence and promote their respective systems.

### **The ideological conflict manifested in various ways, including:**

- **Propaganda Wars:** Both sides engaged in extensive propaganda campaigns to discredit the other's ideology and win the hearts and minds of people around the world.

- **Arms Race:** The two superpowers engaged in a massive arms race, stockpiling nuclear weapons and conventional military forces. This arms race created a climate of fear and uncertainty, as both sides sought to maintain a military advantage.
- **Proxy Wars:** The US and the Soviet Union often supported opposing sides in regional conflicts, leading to proxy wars in countries like Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan.
- **Space Race:** The competition extended to space exploration, as both nations sought to demonstrate their technological superiority.

The ideological rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union shaped the course of international relations for decades, influencing global politics, economics, and culture. It was a defining feature of the Cold War era and had a profound impact on the 20th century. The Cold War was characterized by the formation of two major military alliances: NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

- **NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization):** Established in 1949, NATO was a military alliance between Western European countries and the United States and Canada.<sup>3</sup> Its primary goal was to deter Soviet aggression and protect Western Europe. NATO's collective defense principle meant that an attack on one member would be considered an attack on all.
- **Warsaw Pact:** Formed in 1955, the Warsaw Pact was a military alliance between the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states. It served as a counterbalance to NATO and aimed to solidify Soviet control over Eastern Europe.

These alliances played a crucial role in maintaining stability during the Cold War. The threat of mutual destruction through nuclear weapons, known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), prevented direct military conflict between the superpowers (Sokolski, 2004). However, the alliances also contributed to increased tension and mistrust between the two blocs, leading to a prolonged period of geopolitical rivalry.

#### **UN's inefficiency during cold War-**

The Cold War era significantly hampered the UN's effectiveness due to the prevailing bipolarity and ideological divisions (Mingst, & Karns, 2019). Here are some key factors contributing to the UN's inefficiency during this period:

- 1. Veto Power:** The Security Council's five permanent members (US, UK, France, Russia, and China) possessed veto power, which could paralyze the organization's decision-making process. This often resulted in inaction on critical issues, particularly when the superpowers disagreed.
- 2. Cold War Polarization:** The Cold War's ideological divide often spilled over into the UN, with the superpowers using the organization as a platform to advance their own interests. This led to frequent stalemates and hindered the UN's ability to address global challenges.
- 3. Limited Resources:** The UN often lacked the necessary resources, both financial and human, to effectively carry out its mandates. This was particularly evident in peacekeeping operations, where underfunding and inadequate staffing hindered the organization's ability to maintain peace and security.
- 4. Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms:** The UN had limited enforcement mechanisms to compel member states to comply with its resolutions. This made it difficult to implement decisions, especially when dealing with powerful states that were unwilling to cooperate.
- 5. Bureaucracy and Inefficiency:** The UN's bureaucratic structure and internal procedures often slowed down decision-making and hindered the organization's ability to respond effectively to crises.

#### **Post Cold War Era- Unipolar era**

After the disintegration of Soviet Union a significant shift could be witnessed in the evolution of world order. This world order which roughly lasted for almost two decades can be best described as a unipolar order. USA remained the only superpower. All nations started to woo America. Pax Americana (Van Ham, 2005) is a term used to describe the period of relative peace in the Western Hemisphere, when the United States became the world's dominant economic, cultural, and military power. The U.S. emerged as the sole superpower, wielding significant influence over global politics, economics, and culture.

#### **USA's Economic dominance-**

**World's Largest Economy:** The US economy consistently ranks as the world's largest, contributing significantly to global GDP. The US economy is the world's largest, with a GDP of approximately \$29.17 trillion in 2024. This represents about 26% of the global economy (Rothwell, 2022). Several factors contribute to the US economy's dominance. One of the most important amongst them has been Strong Economic Fundamentals. The US boasts a stable political system, well-established property rights, and a strong rule of law, which fosters economic growth and investment.

Another factor that is worth mentioning here is USA technological prowess. The US has been a global leader in technological innovation, driving industries such as information technology, biotechnology, and aerospace (Kennedy, & Lim, 2018). The US dollar remains the world's primary reserve currency, and Wall Street is the global financial centre.

The US is a great power in international trade. It is the world's biggest importer and the second biggest exporter, which has a massive influence on the global economy (Gilpin, 2016).

The US exports a variety of products and services, including agricultural produce, manufactured goods, and high-tech products. Its leading export partners are Canada, Mexico, China, Japan, and the United Kingdom (No, 2010). The US exports goods and services of trillions of dollars yearly, greatly playing a role in international flows of trade.

As an Importer, Consumer Goods, Intermediate Goods, Capital Goods (Feldstein, 2008).

The US Top Importing Countries include China, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Germany. The US imports goods and services of trillions of dollars a year, which is one of the biggest markets for all goods produced internationally. This role of the US in international trade is important for some reasons like Economic development and employment are experienced at the same time by both trading partners and the US (Kantarelis, 2016). The exchange of goods and ideas and services leads to innovative ideas and stimulates economic activity development. The economic relationship rather than conflict promotes cooperation. The US government actively engages itself in trade negotiations and agreements for ensuring free and fair trade, seeking to expand market access for US businesses and protecting America's workers.

The US is a big source of foreign direct investment, with investments in businesses and economies in other countries. US firms invest in various sectors including manufacturing, technology, finance, and services (Cline & Williamson, 2005). Investment by US firms contributes to growth in the recipient country, job creation, and technological development.

#### **Some key reasons why the US remains a major source of FDI include:**

**Strong Corporate Sector.** The US has a strong corporate sector with many multinational companies that have the financial wherewithal and know-how to invest abroad.

**Technological Leadership** provided by America's company is worth mentioning. USA is a world leader in technology and innovation, and many US companies invest in research and development in other countries. (Wolff & Wessner, 2012).

**Investment-friendly environment** in America really helps innovation.

The US has a political and economic environment that is favourable to investment. Government support-The government of the US encourages outward US investment through various initiatives and programs.

By investing abroad, US companies can capture new markets, acquire new technologies, and reduce their costs. This benefits not only the US but also the recipient countries, hence contributing to global economic growth and prosperity.

#### **Unipolarity paving way to Multipolarity- China's assertion**

China's is challenging American hegemony in more than one way. It is fundamentally altering the liberal international order in many ways. It is launching several key initiatives like The Belt and Road initiative. It is launching financial institutions which can serve as an alternative to Bretton Wood institutions. It is expanding its military budget, modernising its navy. It has become visibly more aggressive in South China Sea. It is also expanding its soft power footprint.

The gargantuan Belt and Road Initiative by China was launched in 2013 (Congiu, 2015). This would link Asia, Europe, and Africa through roads, railways, ports, and pipelines. What started off as a win-win for all players has increasingly been seen to challenge the global dominance of the US. It appears to be targeting most of its criticism towards China's expanding economic and geopolitical influence. As such, it would put China at an advantageous position above the recipient countries in terms of infrastructure project investments in strategic places (Yu, 2020). The criticism leads to the investments resulting in debt-trap diplomacy, as this would leave the countries in a debt position and obliged to adhere to the demands that China subjects them to. This is the way China would gain an upper hand to counterbalance US interests. The BRI will change the courses of global trade routes and supply lines (Yongtao & Sining, 2024). It will enable China to cut its interaction with the US-dominated international financial system, bypassing US-controlled shipping routes, and reduce the engagement. This would affect the position of the dollar and influence US positions in global trade.

More, the BRI's pursuit of alternative institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank threatens the world economic order led by the United States (Atli & Akar, 2020). These alternatives might serve to challenge the status quo of Western-dominated institutions in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, thereby cutting down the influence of the US even further.

But the BRI should only be viewed as a geopolitical instrument. Additionally, it has the potential to accelerate economic development and progress in member nations. BRI is anticipated to improve trade, infrastructure development, job creation, and poverty alleviation globally (Senadjki, Awal, Nee, & Ogbeibu, 2022). However, concerns about sustainability and transparency, corruption, and environmental destruction continue to exist.

It is safe to say that China's Belt and Road Initiative is a complex, multilayered undertaking with significant implications for the global order. Many nations benefit economically from it, but it also undoubtedly puts US hegemony in jeopardy. As China continues to rise, the rivalry between the two countries will intensify and will continue to shape the global landscape for years to come.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was launched in 2016, and it's been trending since then. The prime purpose of AIIB is to finance infrastructure and other projects across Asia. Some people think it's shaking up the old economic model that's been led by the West. The liberal economic order created by the USA post second world war with the formation of Bretton Wood institutions like World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

One needs to ponder how AIIB giving the US sleepless nights. For understanding this it is important to understand its economic impact closely. The loans extended to developing countries via AIIB is reducing the dependence of these nations to the big brother USA (Park, 2016). AIIB is seen by Washington as creation of an Alternative Financial Order: With AIIB stepping into the spotlight, it's like there's a new kid in town when it comes to development finance (Park, 2016). Countries looking for finances no longer need to rely on Uncle Sam. Further, the project has bolstered China's geopolitical stature in the region. Beijing is emerging as viable alternative to USA in the region. China has already undertaken several of such initiatives in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh etc. This is fast changing the power dynamics of the region. In short, one can safely conclude AIIB is leaving an impact on the global financial system. It's whipping up the US-led order and presenting a new way to believe about development finance. Washington consensus is paving way to Beijing Consensus.

China has substantially increased its military might over the last few decades. China is the second-largest military spender globally, with an estimated budget of \$296 billion in 2023(Kochis, 2024), China has rapidly modernized its armed and naval forces. Beijing's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the world's largest active army in terms of numbers. It is equipped with the latest weapons and technologies. As a nuclear power, China possesses a well-developed nuclear arsenal comprising ICBMs that can reach distant targets. China has made tremendous progress in artificial intelligence, which holds much potential application in military sectors, including autonomous weaponry systems and cyber warfare.

China's growing assertiveness in South China sea is testimony to the fact that it is challenging US hegemony. This can have serious implications for regional and global stability. One needs to understand that Indian Ocean Region and South China sea is having critical choke points and one of the busiest waterways for international trade. These are claimed by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. China claims entire South China Sea as its exclusive sphere of influence (Morton, 2016)

Chinese actions in the South China Sea have heightened lately, taking the form of land reclamation, the construction of military facilities, and other aggressive maritime actions. This has challenged the international order based on freedom of navigation and overflight. Chinese claims are not supported by international law. In fact, an international arbitration tribunal ruled against Chinese claims in 2016. Yet China has refused the ruling and further escalated the tensions (Zhang, 2017).

Growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea arises from several factors. These include China's growing economic, and military might, that emboldens it in making more aggressive claims in terms of its territorial areas (Fangyin, 2016). The second factor is the presence of so many natural resources in that region, especially oil and gas, making it strategic for China (Fangyin, 2016). Thirdly, Beijing can control these crucial choke points and can bring economies of many nations to a stand still since majority of them are net oil importers.

The rising tensions in the South China Sea have worried regional and global powers. As a major player in the region historically the United States has questioned China's actions and vouched for freedom of navigation operations in the disputed waters. Other nations like Japan, Australia, and India have also expressed concerns about China's behaviour and have strengthened their military presence in the region.

The South China Sea dispute has deep geopolitical implications. It can potentially result in military conflict, disrupt global trade, and undermine regional stability (Alenezi, 2024). Resolution of the dispute will depend on diplomatic efforts and international law compliance. However, considering the assertive position taken by China, it remains challenging to find a peaceful resolution.

China has been gradually upgrading its soft power in the world. An important element of this strategy is building Confucius Institutes everywhere. Cultural institutions promote Chinese language and culture, fostering a sense of understanding and appreciation for the Chinese legacy (You, 2018). Besides this, China has made a heavy investment in other social media like Youku and WeChat, where the Chinese content finds its digital space to engage with global audiences (Keane, 2019). Thus, it will form a narrative and will impact public opinion. In a bid to strengthen its soft power, China has launched various scholarship programs to attract foreign students. Such scholarship programs allow students around the world to study at Chinese universities, allowing them to be part of the local culture and creating lasting connections.

The expanding entertainment sector in China, which includes movies and television shows as well as music, has gained a world-wide recognition (Gill and Huang 2023). This cultural output besides generating economic benefits gives China soft power in allowing its modern culture and way of life to penetrate world viewership.

An overview of the world orders suggests a swing between Multipolarity, Bipolarity and Unipolarity. World orders have been significantly influenced by the power dynamics. The period after the second world war have been significantly influenced by USA. Liberal international orders foundation was laid down by USA. The important cornerstones of this order were economic liberalism, self-determination, non-intervention and democracy. This liberal international order is being challenged most by the Rise of China. Although, Beijing have always projected its rise as peaceful. However, one can clearly see the emerging multipolarity led by China. Its initiatives like BRI, AIIB are being touted as viable alternatives

to US led economic order. It is also challenging USA soft power potential. Thus one can clearly conclude that China is propelling the transition from unipolar to a multipolar world order.

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