



Article history

Received: 10 Nov 2024

Accepted: 23 Jan 2025

Uncommon Reality: Finding the Unipolar World in Bipolar and Multipolar Discourses

Ranjit Thapa*

Abstract

In the wake of a few critical intersecting global issues, such as the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and the rise of China along with middle powers and power diffusion into many actors, this paper explores the emerging world order, the multipolar world already on its way. However, the epistemological underpinning of the central question that finds a broader scholarly debate lacks clarity. Is the world unipolar or bipolar, or transitioning to a multipolar? While reviewing various literary documents and scholarly papers, this article attempts to qualitatively examine key global strategic issues to draw an analogy of the world's various polarity conditions. Furthermore, it intends to drive a critical discourse on the contemplated world order, especially the multipolar world. It also dwells on other crucial aspects: strategic partners, alliances, and unilateralism. It argues that, on the one hand, there remains a continuing friction in defining the world order in bipolarity and multipolarity discourses; on the other hand, these conditions will be challenging to resonate in reality. While offering policy contours, the article concludes by advancing a strong assertion that the world order will continue to remain unipolar, constructed on the very core of established conditions such as the knowledge economy, democratic power, and values of human freedom and open dialogue for peace and stability, as well as prearranged rules that are widely inherited in a democratic culture. Moreover, the debate on defining the world order will continue to hinge on the actor who significantly possesses these qualities, values, and characteristics. However, the world order will experience the complexities of middle and small powers, finding dilemmas in their alignment and realignment between established unipolar and emerging powers. Meanwhile, Nepal is wedged between two emerging powers, China and India, and the increasing interest of world powers in the region can no longer ignore global events and ongoing power dynamics. While maturing its democratic practices, strategically designed and carefully balanced diplomacy, and a closer look at 'strategic hedging' in its foreign policy, Nepal should support a rules-based international order that contributes to preserving its territorial integrity and national unity.

Keywords: Unipolar, bipolar, multipolar, world order, multilateralism,

* Brigadier General, Nepali Army, PhD in Political Science
Email ID: tranjit13@gmail.com

Prologue

While looking at a few global events, indecisive and lacking consensus by far, of the last couple of years, surfacing division amongst key powers leading to uncertainty and questioning the influential role of unipolar global leadership, can it be concluded that the world is moving to a multipolar world? The emerging world order, in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and many other concerning global events, including the Israel-Hamas conflict, arguably signals a shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world. Scholars cite that “the United States is declining as a global power and that the world is moving towards a multipolar system” (Etzioni, 2012, October 5, para. 1). Similarly, others claim that the concept of the post-American world is meant as a return to multipolarity and the weakening of U.S. primacy (Kagan & Kupchan, cited in Etzioni, 2012, October 5). Even more concerning for the global order is that “China and the United States are already circling each other warily, each believing the worst of the other” (Sachs, 2020, p. 193).

However, the post-Cold War unipolar power and the Cold War period’s bipolar powers still compete with diverse strategic means and ways where Russia reasserts its dominance. With such a reality and the rise of China, along with middle powers, leading to power diffusion in global issues of broader security and economic concerns, an indication of an uncommon multipolar world is in the offing. Whether such an order outweighs the consequences and prevails in mutual co-existence, contributing to global peace, stability, and development, or creating a complex and dangerous world needs a careful analysis.

Issue

The ongoing strategic events and issues are deeply concerning, such as the Russia-Ukraine and the most recent Israel-Hamas conflict, the crisis in the Middle East, and the U.S.-China competition. Besides the ramifications of these issues on mutual co-existence and strategic autonomy in the states' decision-making, uncertainty, severe stress on sovereign equality, and global peace and stability are the most pressing. The rules-based order appears compromised, as major powers are far behind in reaching meaningful outcomes on such issues. Such a scenario is driven by the complexities of garnering shared responsibility and the lack of commitment amongst key global and emerging powers. The ongoing competitive global environment has challenged the fundamental norms and values of international relations. Moreover, it has created a rift amongst the major powers and a strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis posing a question of the effectiveness of the emerging world order, whether ‘multipolarity’ is likely to prevail or not, and whether it continues as such.

On the other hand, it lacks clarity in measuring the depth and spheres of polarity at the present state of power diffusion amongst many emerging powers. However, the power to lead and influence by meaningful engagement for global governance is also critical in defining polarity. The unipolarity continues with little friction in the international system posed by middle powers desiring to create multipolarity. While some assert that unipolarity is the suited means for sustainable peace and stability as it reduces the chances of confrontation, others argue that due to power distribution among many actors and centers, multipolarity creates a balance and contributes more to a rules-based order constructed on the principle of respectful sovereign

equality. In such a complex scenario, it is imperative to analyze the emerging world order in the context of current issues of broader concern and the role of established and emerging powers, which signal many implications.

Objectives, Methods and Literature

This article examines key global strategic issues and events to draw an analogy of the world's various polarity conditions. The central argument of this paper, rests on whether the world remains unipolar or transits into a bipolar or multipolar world. Critics, opine that the decline of the U.S.'s global leadership indicates shrinking unipolarity, and in contrast, multipolarity is gaining more visibility mainly due to the rise of China along with the middle powers. 'Unipolarity' is a condition that has wide power disparities between the great powers and all other states (Levy, 1985, cited in Mansfield, 1993 & Wardhani, 2021). In 'bipolarity,' the two great powers exist with near equal positions and a wide power disparity with the fewer powers, whereas in 'multipolarity,' more than two great powers have an approximately equal position and a vast power disparity between the fewer powers (Levy, 1985 cited in Mansfield 1993 and Wardhani). Polarity has its roots in determining the structure of the international system; this article uses the 'concept of polarity' and 'power' as a theoretical analysis framework.

By methodically reviewing various published literary documents and papers and using data triangulation accessed through secondary sources, it intends to drive a critical discourse on the contemplated world order, especially on the multipolar world and other crucial aspects such as strategic partners, alliances, and multilateralism. While discussing key issues the empirical literature has addressed, it presents evidence on how and why unipolarity retains its place in international order even though multipolarity frameworks have found broader scholarly coverage in recent years. It interprets and illustrates its findings by analyzing texts from various open literary references, including web-archived interviews.

Bipolarity or Multipolarity?

The discourse on world order has moved far beyond 'unipolarity,' and the current scholarly debate is heavily focused on the multipolar world already gaining traction. While taking note of Allison's thesis on 'The Thucydides Trap,' "the risk of conflict is high when a rising power threatens the established power" (Allison, 2017, cited in Sachs, 2020), the rise of China to compete with the U.S. is of no denial. Sachs (2020) further contends:

Either the dominant power (in the current case, the U.S.) attacks the rising power (in this case, China) to put down a competitive challenge "before it is too late," or the rising power peremptorily attacks the dominant power out of fear of otherwise being blocked on its path of growth." (p.193)

Moreover, "some Chinese strategists accept that an assertive China will never remain on the U.S. acceptance corridor, while some American strategists maintain that China is out for world conquest, even though such assertions are viewed as far too pessimistic and deterministic" (Sachs, 2020, p. 193). Perhaps the power competition between the U.S. and China dominates the 'bipolar' discourse. However, the unfolding environment also provides space for a multipolar world. Ashford and Cooper (2023, October 5) posit that "polarity typically takes on one of three forms: unipolarity—one state is by far and away the most powerful; bipolarity—two states are about equally powerful; and multipolarity—power is more diffused among several states"

(para. 6). Is China and the U.S. about equally powerful? The latter is the most powerful, or power is equally diffused to many states.

The world is witnessing multipolarity—the proposition that many significant global powers exist, not just a few superpowers (Ashford & Cooper, 2023, October 5)—with destabilizing events such as the South China Sea dispute, NATO’s expansion, strategic and security groupings, and the growing Sino-U.S. power competition and middle powers on the rise. Ashford & Cooper (2023, October 5) further contend that multipolarity requires significant power to be concentrated in more than two states and not three powers of equal size. Similarly, Borell (2021, March 16) states that:

Over the last three decades, we have seen a rapid transformation in the distribution of power around the world. We went from a bipolar configuration between 1945 and 1989 to a unipolar configuration between 1989 and 2008, before entering what we today could call ‘complex multipolarity’. Economically, we have three dominant poles: the U.S., China, and the European Union. However, politically, the structuring is more complex. ...First, because an emerging Sino-American bipolarity is increasingly structuring the world system. Second, there are important political and military powers without necessarily being strong economic powers (like Russia or Turkey at the regional level). (para. 4)

The world is now multipolar—the basis for this argument is that there are many power centers, and no single state holds the most power of influence. Many middle powers, such as countries of BRICS to Japan, are rising, with a significant impact compared to before. More trade integration and meaningful cooperation are key drivers of BRICS’s expansion, while the West imposes tariffs on exports and sanctions on a few key member countries. The most recent appearance of the BRICS Plus under Russia’s leadership, a summit held in Kazan in October 2024, “indicates a heightening geopolitical rivalry between East and West, the world breaking into competing blocks, and increasing mutual alienation between North and South” (Patrick, 2024, October 9). Similarly, the magnifying relationship between China and Russia appears to be directed toward building cohesive teams of Global South countries to challenge established power. Patrick (2024, October 9) further asserts:

Beijing and Moscow are intent on exploiting some countries’ resentment of the United States and its wealthy world allies to consolidate an anti-Western counterweight to the venerable Group of 7 (G7), a process likely to paralyze global cooperation within other multilateral venues. (para. 2)

However, except for a few democratic middle powers, how much influence do the emerging middle powers possess in global affairs of strategic significance, economics, participatory governance, human development, and maintenance of rules-based order? Are power distribution and polarity measured on economic and military power or the ability to lead proactively in global issues of broader security, stability, and humanitarian concerns?

Resolve in Resolving the Global Crisis

Considering power being distributed amongst many powers, mainly in the economic and military domain, it would be hard to profess that they possess highly influential power to acknowledge them as a power center, thus making a defining feature of multipolarity. The world would be eager to observe the role of the states, especially China and other middle

powers, which contend as emerging power centers in international politics. While the world is becoming multipolar, it demands timely projection of a higher level of strategic thoughts to draw in an open and meaningful dialogue vis-à-vis clarity on foreign policy direction on critical global issues. Policy signaling from the key powers is paramount in a worldwide humanitarian crisis that plays a significant role in limiting escalation and avoiding a tragedy.

For instance, in the Israel-Hamas conflict, the Chinese response was observed as highly calculative. Hale (2023, November 24) opines, “Beijing waited until a day after Hamas’s 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel to call on the “relevant parties” to end hostilities and stress the need for a two-state solution (para. 4). “Earlier, on 26 April 2023, for the first time since the Russia-Ukraine conflict began in February 2022, the Chinese President spoke with the Ukrainian President, conveying Beijing’s desire to send an envoy to Kyiv to serve as a mediator to pursue a “political settlement” (Hatton & Kirby, 2023, April 26). In contrast, a peace summit convened by Kyiv in Switzerland in June 2024 to discuss a diplomatic way out from the worldwide heads or senior state officials on the Russia-Ukraine crisis went without Chinese representation (Umarov, 2024, June 21). However, Umarov (2024, June 21) further details that Beijing is seeking allies in the Global South, and its refusal to join the summit is not to be considered as it wants to remain away from the Ukraine war. Hence, while rallying the support of like-minded states, Beijing still appears to be focused on confidence building vis-à-vis accumulating strength and then approaches issues of broader concern.

The behavior of middle and rising powers in international relations and diplomacy is observed to be more traditionally oriented. Their interaction is guided by carefully designed formal diplomatic dealings rather than confronting challenges of a strategic and security nature that expose them to a risk-aversion. They focus more on economic power and investment cooperation as a guarantee for other forms of power. While expanding such interest, technology is a priority linkage with many conventional objectives of Chinese economic statecraft (Doshi, 2021). For instance, to blunt U.S. financial advantage, develop its own globally, and reduce its vulnerability to the dollar, China believes that issuing its digital currency could mount a disorderly wave of financial innovation (Doshi, 2021, pp. 290-291).

The emerging powers, in the quest of creating an equation of power diffusion and leveraging it to contemplate a bipolar or multipolar paradigm, besides extending economic influence, displaying an effective and meaningful leadership role with soft power projection, and coherent dialogues in finding a solution, if not stopping, of the global catastrophes, need focused attention. For instance, navigating ways to prevent further loss in the Middle East conflict through a revitalized effort of multilateral institutions and an approach to explore a negotiated settlement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict necessitates significant initiatives of emerging and middle powers intending to shape the multipolar world order.

Similarly, the resolution of the Taiwan issue through peaceful means and adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the South China Sea are the cases that demand strategic clarity on the Chinese approach to problem-solving. As Mearsheimer (2014) asserts, “The possibility of a clash between China and the U.S. over Taiwan is hardly remote” (p. 2); a more accommodating behavior of key powers is quintessential. Moreover, as an emerging power, credible policy action in the global climate crisis—China being

the world's largest carbon emitter (Davidson & Pearson, 2024, October 24), and participation in comprehensive forums such as the G-20 summit and confronting core global issues would contribute to regional and international peace, security, and stability.

The way of engagement of China and middle powers, with global powers and states of the global South, in multilateral forums and other platforms and initiatives supports the thesis of power diffusion, convincing a transition from a unipolar world to an extent. For instance, China, India, Russia, Brazil, the US, Japan, the UK, and Australia are members of many groups and forums, such as BRICS, G20, G7, QUAD, and AUKUS, and engage in multiple dialogues through the UN General Assembly and Security Council. If such a scenario continues and China's policy becomes more open and inclusive, the world could develop confidence in China— aspiring to shape the world order—as a responsible player with substance in its actions and behaviors that bestow its potential to consider itself a power center—indeed, that would be the case of bipolarity or multipolarity.

Multipolar Drive and Minilateralism

Pursuing policies based on interests rather than shared values and agreed-upon rules leads to the alignment of middle powers in multilateral forums. Moreover, their competition has brought unprecedented challenges to fundamental norms of international relations. However, various strategic events, deepening clashes of interest, more polarization on global issues, and the formation of new groupings indicate a shift towards a multipolar world. While securing economic interest and ensuring financial return, the 'power to expand investment globally' has been a prominent feature in defining the power balance, alignment, and realignment of actors and players today; the case is observed more with emerging powers. Within such a reality, China continues to claim itself as a developing country and accumulate power until it reaches a position where it can challenge the current global order in unison with a few states of similar governance and political structure, if not unilateral domination.

Out of China's five significant characteristics, outlined by Chinese President Xi Jinping, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and the 'largest developing country in the world' were two key features (Shixue, 2024, April 29). China expresses its desire to continue as a leading partner and a voice for the global south that clubs most developing countries. Chinese leadership recently reiterated this Chinese self-identification as a member of the global South: "China will always be a member of the family of developing countries" (Schuman, Fulton, & Gering, 2023, June 21, para. 26). Similarly, multipolarity has remained a recurrent feature of Chinese foreign policy discourse since the 1980s, where it finds one convergence in Yeltsin and Putin's key foreign policy goal as the promotion of multipolarity (Keersmaecker, 2015, February). "Since the end of the Cold War, several second-tier states have attempted to transform the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity" (Layne, 1993 & Monteiro, 2011, cited in Geeraerts and Salman, 2016, p. 62). Moreover, BRICS countries' summit papers and EU partnership statements with these countries refer to a multipolar world (Keersmaecker, 2015, February).

Furthermore, most of China's recent global and regional initiatives are on economic, security, and civilizational lines dominated by advancing its thoughts and efforts that espouse multipolarity. For instance, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)

mechanism are a few China-led initiatives (Youtube, n.d.) strengthening preferred collaboration in multilateral arrangements. It manifests China's drive to define international order and geopolitics. Scholars argue, "In China's foreign policy, both GDI and GSI have become core elements, and these twin initiatives are China's "blueprint" for transforming the global order" (Schuman et al., 2023, June 21, para. 5). Similarly, to link China economically to Europe and the Middle East through Central Asia and the Indian Ocean, China is actively pursuing Xi Jinping's dream of creating "One Belt, One Road" (Christensen, 2016, p. 314). Furthermore, alternative development models, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank, the Global Energy Interconnection (GEI) initiative, and other global and regional groupings, are arguably coherent indications of China's urge to transition to a multipolar world. The expansion of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) actively reinforces its core desire.

These developments could serve as China's new engagement corridor through multilateralism in the new world order. However, these appear as unilateral efforts to expand its economic influence, and states collaborating with China, by all means, remain subservient to China in financial and other domains. Moreover, these efforts of China in terms of all declared initiatives appear to be competing with the U.S. while keeping the U.S. strategic partnership and engagements away from the Middle East and Arabian Gulf region, as well as Asian and South Asian countries.

Furthermore, established and emerging powers' priority in forming various cooperative arrangements supports the assertion that 'minilateralism' and 'multilateralism' are vital to building confidence and trust and securing a competitive edge in the uncertain and ambiguous contemporary environment. A trilateral framework devised by the UAE, India, and France to work jointly on defense, energy, and technology in early February 2023, and a similar case, where the UAE instituted the Mangrove Alliance for Climate at COP27 in Egypt along with Indonesia and five other countries, are a few examples of 'minilateralism' (Mladenov, 2023, April 14). While the risk of power imbalance in 'minilateralism' is contended, the prospects of enhanced diplomacy through an innovative and flexible outlook are also being discussed (Mladenov, 2023, April 14).

Within multipolarity, most democracies consider 'minilateralism' for mutual advantages on the established mandate, whereas China advances 'multilateralism' favorable for a multipolar world. The materialization of China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) established in 2000 linking New Delhi-Tehran-Moscow, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) declared in the G-20 summit in India in 2023 are cases in point. Few member countries are part of all these groupings. Despite varied ideologies and pending interstate issues, such developments are directed toward maximizing geo-economic interests through minilateral organizations.

The global order rests on the foundational ordering principles of national sovereignty, economic liberalism, and inclusive and rules-based multilateralism (Elistrup-Sangiovanni & Hofman, 2019, October 28). However, the emerging world order needs more clarity; rarely has the world witnessed such a power fragmentation determined to serve diverse geopolitical and geo-economic interests. When multiple powers and actors remain in extensive dialogue and communication, global issues would receive better attention, and every state, without

fear of compliance to alliances or groupings, can advance its national interest and exercise its sovereign rights and equality globally. However, multiple power centers, especially those of non-democratic lines, would need to support the rules-based order for peace and prosperity. Recent empirical cases, such as the Russia-Ukraine and the Middle East crises, suggest that this poses significant challenges in consensus building, unlike in a unipolar world.

Strategic Partners and Alliances

Key powers like the U.S., China, and Russia are making strategic alliances and partnerships with many states to expand security and economic interests. On the one hand, the U.S. is advancing unipolarity through the means and ways of hard, soft, and smart power. In contrast, while competing with the U.S., China is committed to forging a multipolar world through extensive economic investment policies. In its drive to reassert, Russia is improving its ties with China and maintaining relations with North Korea, Iran, and some other East Asian countries. To boost its position and garner support for war policy, including materials and men, against Ukraine, Russian President Putin is enhancing ‘visit diplomacy’ during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis as it faces various sanctions from the West.

China believes ‘multipolarity’ is more favorable to non-Western countries, underpinned by different values and norms, as China is pursuing a drive to become a leading global power (Bradford, 2022, May 4). Nevertheless, the Russia-Ukraine crisis is maneuvering without any outcome; China’s role in the Saudi Arabia-Iran rapprochement, North Korea-Russia increasing ties, China’s advancing position in the Middle East and Arabian Gulf countries, and its expansion of the BRI area case in point towards China’s growing assertion for a multipolar world. Such scenarios, however, would create more power rivalry.

In the Western powers’ realm, the U.S.-led strategies, security forums, and dialogues such as Indo-Pacific Policy, QUAD, and AUKUS, besides NATO and Five Eyes, appear as the latest editions to maintain a unipolar world that hinges on partnership with democratic states for peace and stability. Under such circumstances, China, as an emerging power, is driven to amass more strength; however, it seems stressed about counterbalancing such developments. In contrast, the smaller powers remain in a strategic dilemma when pursuing independent foreign policy. These reflect the interest-driven competition of major powers under the emerging world order that would create a more volatile environment. However, it would be transient, and the ultimate guarantee of the stability factor rests on preserving established rules under a unipolar world order.

Small Powers and their Positions

If countries with economic and military technological might, such as the U.S., China, and Russia, shape the world order, how about the independent and sovereign position and existence of smaller powers in global politics and international forums that wish to remain far from alliances and power competition? As multipolarity favors power distribution, whether it would be conducive for all that espouse economic interdependence, diplomacy, multilateralism, non-alignment, and cooperation is yet to be ascertained.

Many could argue that to advance everyone’s agenda and maintain stability, peace, and harmony, better prospects lie in a multipolar world order that presupposes a geopolitical

situation in which many power centers balance each other. Such a condition is believed to be favorable for small powers as they retain the bargaining power with multiple power centers while maintaining non-alignment. However, it has been far from reality and remained in principle in the current global situation. For that, a “thick multipolarity” is essential. In absolute terms, a universally owned, rules-based order has to prevail within that, though it is hard to achieve such a reality.

Nepal’s options appear limited in any polarity conditions. It should remain focused on a rules-based order to secure its rights through international laws and conventions that enable linkages and communication with the outside world. However, at times, it may appear that, due to Nepal’s geostrategic compulsion, the emerging powers may drag, or the inability on Nepal’s part to maintain flexibility and skillfully manage its statecraft, to a complex and conflictual position. Nepal can assess the “strategic hedging” principle. It includes avoiding direct confrontation with the system leader and applying a broad range of realistic strategies that suit their foreign policy (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011, cited in Geeraerts & Salman, 2016, February 24). As Nepal’s diplomacy primarily focuses on relations with its immediate neighbors, applying the ‘hedging’ principle in its interstate relations with China and India could serve its interest through a set of chosen policies. Moreover, as a landlocked state, preserving its autonomy, independence, and territorial integrity is best achieved by respecting the values of world peace and security through the UN and other established multilateral institutions and forums that endorse democracy and human rights.

Similarly, developing political and socio-economic institutions on the path of core democratic principles and human freedom would endure in Nepal. More importantly, inclusive state institutions based on transparency and accountability are other vital areas contributing to Nepal’s national unity, further expanding its identity as an old nation-state that has contributed to world peace for more than 65 years through the UN. A key to a more robust and unified Nepal that would support building its capability to sustain itself in various polarity circumstances is a polity that remains free of “extractive institutions”—institutions that “expropriate and impoverish the people and block economic development and the most common reason why nations fail today,” argue Acemoglu & Robinson (2013, p. 376). Such a reality necessitates focused attention in the case of Nepal.

As the current global issues are strategic, and Nepal’s military has a rich involvement in the UN and has maintained deep military ties with many countries, the continued focus on ‘military diplomacy’ would contribute to Nepal’s foreign policy and diplomacy through soft power. Moreover, the bottom-line approach should be to safeguard its vital national interests rather than becoming part of any power competition in any polarity conditions. Furthermore, guided by the “strategic hedging” principle, soft power-oriented engagements, and more diplomatic and trade talks with key democratic powers and neighbors appear essential.

Multipolarity Dilemma?

Many could argue that the emerging multipolarity would be more competitive and contested, and the global and regional implications would be more devastating. The risk of great power conflict will increase if current multilateral approaches to global problem-solving become

undermined, bypassed, or disregarded (Stares, et al., 2020, June). Moreover, the power diffusion from a unipolar world to other powers and establishing a multipolar world order could balance the international system with checks and counter-checks. Some multipolarity conditions are observed; in “thin multipolarity,” there could be an unequal position of other competing powers with the great power and a wider power disparity with other middle powers, whereas in ‘thick multipolarity,’ there is an approximately equal position of more than two powers and a lesser gap with other middle powers.

However, the current geopolitical competition under the Russia-Ukraine crisis depicts that a “thin, unbalanced, and unchecked multipolarity” would prevail without a definite departure timeline to a “bold, balanced, and thick multipolarity” that signals a future trajectory of the emerging world order. Moreover, if it prevailed, such a world order would remain blurred with volatility and continued disregard for an established rules-based order. The unfolding of this proposition lies with key divisions. First, democracies under the U.S.-led initiative usually remain in cooperative arrangements, along with democratic middle powers and other alliances and partner states in Asia, Africa, Europe, and countries of the Middle East. Second, China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia will likely remain together. A few countries in the Middle East, South America, and the Caucasus that exercise strategic hedging would be co-opted by Russia or China. Third, other states will maintain relations with all powers that favor mutual goals.

Some argue that China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are allying (Agrawal, 2024, October 17). In contrast, others claim, “A formal alliance to defend each other is lacking, and the alignment is driven by shared antipathy toward the existing U.S.-led world order and features mutual exchanges of military, economic, and political support” (Hass, 2024, September 7, para. 2). Forging a separate alliance of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia is less likely as the agenda of creating a ‘multipolar system’ and ‘power balance’ to counter the West’s influence has temporarily aligned their interests and brought them into a closer diplomatic platform of varied degrees of financial and military support to each other. However, finding ‘convergence in divergence’ is challenging and ambiguous; it lacks the substance to sustain, especially the China-Russia relationship, as strategic history, culture, and socio-economic realities support the broader dimension of such a proposition.

Many small powers, relatively stable but suffering from economic instability, are under various financial and development agreements and cooperative frameworks with the U.S. and China for economic benefits and recovery. However, they would try to avoid a precise alignment and maintain a balanced approach; they mostly favor the U.S.-led unipolarity and are privy to remain under the rules-based order. For instance, while many countries in the Middle East and Asia have economic investment agreements with China, they have still maintained manifold engagements with the U.S., including dependable security cooperation.

Future Trajectory

Consequent to various global issues and challenges, the world seems to be bipolar for a transient period for multiple reasons: the West’s support of Ukraine in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and the U.S.-China competition. China, as it continues its assertive role in the South China Sea, believes it is facing ‘containment’ from the U.S., given the issue of Taiwan

and the U.S. pivot to Asia along with its Indo-Pacific strategy. Closer Russia-China ties are mainly attributed to their aligned interests, attendant to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, which both view as an opportunity to strengthen their partnership to develop a counterweight to the West and gradually pull similar interest-oriented states to their sides.

Moreover, China intends to garner various support from Russia in future conflicts with the West. Allison (2017) argues that war is inevitable but does not have to be when the emerging power threatens to displace the ruling power. Furthermore, the disruption of China's planned geo-economic expansion and investment initiatives due to the ongoing Middle East and the Russia-Ukraine crisis and increased tariffs and barriers on China's trade with the West are factors in China's policy assessment matrix, which China believes are jeopardizing its sustainable growth and desired dominance. Contextualizing these adverse scenarios would further strengthen China's power as much as possible in all domains, and it already possesses a robust nuclear arsenal to confront potential threats and challenges.

Conversely, Russia will try to reassert its power in due course, but that would remain futile concerning its economic, diplomatic, and military power. On the one hand, the U.S., China, and Russia would continue competing for the 'balance of power' along with agreeing on partners and alliances, drawing a thin contour of a multipolar world. On the contrary, the U.S. and China are likely to remain bipolar entities, though blurred on the Chinese pole, where Russia will appear as lightly hedged with China for a time unknown. Meanwhile, other democratic middle powers will remain in cooperative relations with the U.S., as mentioned, and ultimately, unipolarity will retain its position. It is a more likely scenario and takes longer to appear thick. However, indications are on the horizon.

Similarly, Bekkevold (2023, September 22) posits, "It's a misconception that the world today is close to multipolar, and there are only two countries, the U.S. and China, with the economic size, military might, and global leverage to constitute a pole, while other great powers are nowhere in sight, and they will not be anytime soon." It indicates bipolarity; however, the institutional bases and many tools and behaviors are yet to have strategic clarity and to define the other pole as a power in equilibrium in a bipolar world. Nonetheless, the established power should consider China's position in global issues of significant economic, security, climate change, and human development concerns.

Arguably, it is observed that key global players, predominantly the U.S. and others such as China and the EU, have failed to address the Russia-Ukraine Crisis and the Israel-Hamas conflict. While considering the Cold War bipolarity, it could be argued that the U.S. role was more prominent in global strategic issues, where the USSR pole was blurred and its power gradually diluted, ending in 1990. Since then, the world has witnessed unipolarity. Although challenges on consensus building and veto situations in many strategic issues were observed in multilateral forums, in crises mainly of a political nature, the world has been primarily driven by the U.S.-led initiative based on democratic liberal values, socio-economic and human development, and so forth. While realizing a few indicators, such as the original contribution to scientific and technological innovations, intellectual property rights, human development index, research-based publications, and similar others, it appears that the country's power—'knowledge economy of the West,' primarily the U.S. has maintained coherency and will continue to remain

as such. The capability-based knowledge-intensive activities, scientific discoveries, applied research, innovation and development, and a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities are mainly the domain of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Powell & Snellman, 2004).

The 2023 data on the Global Knowledge Index (GKI) illustrates that, amongst 133 countries, the U.S. ranks fifth after Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands (UNDP & MBRE, 2023). Similarly, in 2024 GKI, the U.S. occupies the seventh position, whereas China ranks 49th out of 141 countries (UNDP & MBRE, 2024). To counter such a base, qualitatively and quantitatively, although China is rising in the technological domain, an approach away from open and democratic principles will mostly remain futile. Furthermore, if a few emerging powers and actors vigorously pursue multipolarity and attempt to overturn the rules-based order, that will be an interim and destabilize regional and global peace and prosperity.

The power of the knowledge economy, democratic control, checks and balances, open and informed ideas and values, and human freedom are the keys that drive the world in any polarity situation, as in the recent past. Such a condition supports validating unipolarity under U.S. leadership. Moreover, these attributes and capabilities are part of democratic culture and governance that outweigh others, especially in China’s power equilibrium, whose policy behavior expresses diction rather than tangibility.

An established strategic culture with substance enhances the quality and aspiration to navigate global complexities through dialogue, communication, and inclusive mechanisms. As evident, the U.S. power will occupy a dominant position, and the world order will remain unipolar under its leadership. Kissinger (2014) argues, “Throughout, American leadership has been indispensable, even when it has been exercised ambivalently” (p. 213).

However, the bipolarity and multipolarity debate will acquire academic momentum because of China’s rise along with the middle powers, their changing behavior, and vying for their roles and stakes in the global order. Has the world witnessed reliable clarity in the behaviors of emerging powers with an expression of historical depth and strategic culture in negotiating global issues, and can this be expected in the future? Hence, bipolar and multipolar assertions must be followed closely regarding ongoing global issues, interests, alliances, and groupings of strategic, security, and economic nature, as well as initiatives of China and other middle powers in global peace and stability that unfold in the coming days.

Policy Contours

Although every actor has a significant role in the international system to make a more cooperative, harmonious, and peaceful world, more responsibility rests with key global players in shaping the world order that pronounces states’ dignity and more inclusivity. Despite the appearance of multipolarity, unipolarity will retain its significance. For international peace and stability, the U.S. should continue promoting broader strategic dialogue and communication based on a rule-based order while engaging with rising powers, though they differ ideologically. Under unipolarity, its leadership role and initiative constructed on democratic principles have been indispensable in the last several decades of significant global transitions. As observed, the global environment will be more uncertain and complex under a bipolar and multipolar world order compared to a unipolar world. The rising and middle powers should engage in

constructive dialogue and extend cooperative behavior underpinned by firm and open ideas and shared values with established powers by further strengthening the multilateral institutions.

Similarly, Russia should renounce violence and kinetic actions, adopt peaceful means of resolving disputes, and engage in more cooperative strategies. A broader rapprochement with key global powers would benefit Russia and China rather than focusing on forming groupings or alliances of a few states intended to serve interests temporarily. Moreover, China and the middle and small powers should increase their constructive engagement in the UN and other multilateral forums for global and regional peace and stability. Although a state's economic interest precedes other interests, the priority should be centered on human development, security, and stability through soft power.

For global governance, a meaningful focus and leadership on critical strategic issues while accepting risk, similar to its priority on geo-economics, and moving away from less calculative diplomatic behavior would provide more opportunities for China. It should resonate with the constituted rules-based system and liberal values that garner the global aspiration for security and development. Nevertheless, with better policy integration in international affairs, the world can benefit from China's rise as an influential power by witnessing the manifestation of its actual substance.

Conclusion

The world will remain unipolar, constructed on values and principles such as the power of a knowledge economy and leadership roles espoused by democratic power and influence. Underscoring such assertions is an open and accessible idea, as well as their thoughts and endeavors to maintain the states' dignity, human freedom, and inclusivity. However, to an extent, the emerging world order could appear bipolar, and that would more likely remain blurred and volatile with an increasing disregard for established rules. While the multipolar world order debate would capture more discourses, it would be hard to draw them into profound reality. If it finds its path, it will be thinly held and transient and invite a complex situation. To prevent the world from becoming more dangerous and fragmented, emerging powers should refrain from power competition and engage in strategic dialogue and communication through multilateral institutions underpinned by democratic values and mutual respect.

A more inclusive approach that preserves human and economic security and promotes an established order is pressing to find a common approach to the ongoing global issues. In the case of Nepal, it should carefully read the emerging situation and remain committed to extensive diplomatic dialogue with all that support in preserving its territorial integrity. As the emerging polarity has its roots in the unipolar and bipolar world order and is likely to manifest with the hazing situation, it would be hard to keep unguarded, and the world has to accommodate the unfolding uncommon reality. Moreover, whatever the issues and challenges the world is confronting vis-à-vis emerging powers' efforts for multipolarity under various initiatives, it appears as a subtle approach, the world order, founded on democratic values and principles, will retain unipolarity.

References

- Acemoglu, D. & Robinson, J. A. (2013). *Why nations fail: The origin of power, prosperity, and poverty*. The United States: Profile Books.
- Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?* United Kingdom: Scribe Publication.
- . (2017, June 9). The Thucydides trap. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/the-thucydides-trap/>
- Agrawal, R. (2024, October 17). How to manage an alliance of autocracies. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/17/slavin-lee-alliance-of-autocracies-north-korea-iran-russia-china/>
- Ashford, E., & Cooper, E. (2023, October 5). Yes, the World is multipolar. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/>
- Bahree, M. (2023, October 27). Shifting politics make India a hotbed for Israel-Hamas war misinformation. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/10/27/shifting-politics-make-india-a-hotbed-for-israel-hamas-war-misinformation>
- Bekkevold, J. I. (2023, September 22). *No, the World is not multipolar*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/22/multipolar-world-bipolar-power-geopolitics-business-strategy-china-united-states-india/>
- Blake, D. (2023, July 31). Moving towards a multipolar world need not be a bad thing. <https://www.ft.com/content/33888a23-2cdf-4b04-bd16-8529acdc386c>
- Borell, J. (2012, March 16). How to revive multilateralism in a multipolar world? *European Union*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/how-revive-multilateralism-multipolar-world_en
- Bradford, C. I. (2022, May 4). Perspectives on the future of the global order: Beyond singular visions to multivalent forcefields. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/perspectives-on-the-future-of-the-global-order/>
- Brooks, S. G., & Wohlforth, W. C. (2008). *World out of balance: International relations and the challenge of American primacy*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7sxgh>
- . (2023, April 18). The myth of multipolarity: American power's staying power. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>
- Chivvis, C. S., & Keating, J. (2024, October 8). Cooperation between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and potential future threats to America. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/cooperation-between-china-iran-north-korea-and-russia-current-and-potential-future-threats-to-america?lang=en>
- Christensen, T.J. (2016). *The China challenge: shaping the choices of a rising power*. New York, USA: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

- Clinton, H. R. (2009). Foreign policy address at the council of foreign relations. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm>
- Dahal, G.R. (2021). Nepal's strategic hedging behaviour: 2008-2019. <https://esciencepress.net/journals/index.php/JSAS/article/viewFile/3416/1916>
- Davidson, M. R., & Pearson, M. M. (2024, October 24). Where are the US and China on addressing climate change? <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/where-are-the-us-and-china-on-addressing-climate-change/>
- Diesen, G. (2019). The disorderly transition to a multipolar world. *New Perspectives*, 27(3), 125–129. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26889961>
- Doshi, R. (2021). *The long game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M., & Hofmann, S. C. (2019, October 28). Of the contemporary global order, crisis, and change. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(7), 1077–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1678665>
- Etzioni, A. (2012, October 5). The myth of multipolarity. *The National Interest*. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-myth-multipolarity-7500>
- . (2013, Winter). "The devolution of American power." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 37 (1), pp. 13-34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45289720>
- Friedman, L., & Sengupta, S. (2020, November 4). The U.S. left the Paris Climate Pact. Allies and Rivals Are Pressing Ahead. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/04/climate/paris-agreement-us-election.html>
- Geeraerts, G., & Salman, M. (2016, February 24). Measuring strategic hedging capability of second-tier states under unipolarity. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41111-016-0010-6.pdf>
- Gramer, R., Bazail-Eimil, E., & Gould J. (2024, October 29). Naming the Russia-China-Iran-North Korea quartet. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2024/10/29/naming-the-russia-china-iran-north-korea-quartet-00183727>
- Hale, E. (2023, November 24). Pro-Palestine or a trend? China's stance on Israel-Hamas war splits opinion. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/24/pro-palestinian-or-following-trends-chinas-stance-on-israel-hamas-war>
- Hass, R. (2024, September 7). The new gang of four. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-iran-north-korea-challenges-to-world-order-by-richard-haass-2024-09>
- Hatton, C., & Kirby, P. (2023, April 26). Ukraine's Zelensky holds first war phone call with China's Xi. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65396613>

- Italian Institute for International Political Studies. (2023, July 26). The world is changing: Who will set the rules? ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-world-is-changing-who-will-set-the-rules-137132>
- Joyce, G. B. (2024, April 5). China's changing climate change rhetoric. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/04/05/understanding-chinas-changing-climate-change-rhetoric/>
- Kagan, R. (2002, June and July). "Power and weakness". *Policy Review* (113). https://campusweb.franklinpierce.edu/ICS/icsfs/2_19r360.pdf?target=90096719-76a1-4a55-80c0-de16b2954ad5
- Keersmaeker, G. (2015, February). Multipolar myths and unipolar fantasies. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/76806720>
- Khanna, P. (2019). *The future is Asian: The global order in the twenty-first century*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Kissinger, H. (2014). *World Order: Reflection on the Character of Nations and the course of history*. USA: Allen Lane.
- Kupchan, C. (2012, March 1). No power will dominate the coming Era, argues Charles Kupchan in new book. *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/news-releases/no-power-will-dominate-coming-era-argues-charles-kupchan-new-book>
- Lawder, D. (2024, September 1). US locks in steep China tariff hikes, some industries warn of disruptions. <https://www.reuters.com/business/us-locks-steep-china-tariff-hikes-many-start-sept-27-2024-09-13/>
- Layne, C. (1993). The unipolar illusion: why new great powers will rise. *International Security*, 17(4), 5–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539020>
- Mansfield, E. D. (1993). Concentration, polarity, and the distribution of power. *International Studies Quarterly*, 37(1), 105–128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600833>
- Marsili, L. (2017, June 16). It's high time for a new, multipolar world order. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/6/16/its-high-time-for-a-new-multipolar-world-order>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Mladenov, N. (2023, April 14). Minilateralism: A concept that is changing the world order <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/minilateralism-concept-changing-world-order>
- Moeini, A. (2023, October 5). A requiem for the rules-based order: The case for value-neutral ethics in International relations. <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/article/requiem-rules-based-order>
- Monteiro, N. P. (2011). Unrest Assured: Why unipolarity is not peaceful. *International Security*, 36(3), 9–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41428108>

- Patrick, S. (2024, October 9). BRICS expansion, the G20, and the future of world order. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/brics-summit-emerging-middle-powers-g7-g20?lang=en>
- Pillsbury, M. (2015). *The hundred-year marathon: China's secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Powell, W. W., & Snellman, K. (2004). The knowledge economy. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/kaisa/files/powell_snellman.pdf
- Rajagopalan, R. P. (2023, February 16). France-India-UAE trilateral: India's minilateral engagements ticks up. *Observer Research Foundation*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/france-india-uae-trilateral>
- Sachs, J. D. (2020). *The ages of Globalization: Geography, Technology, and Institutions*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schuman, M., Fulton, J., & Gering, T. (2023, June 21). How Beijing's newest global initiatives seek to remake the world order. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-beijings-newest-global-initiatives-seek-to-remake-the-world-order/>
- Scott, D. (2013). Multipolarity, multilateralism and beyond...? EU-China understandings of the international system. *International Relations*, 27(1), 30–51. <https://d-scott.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/china-eu-multipolarity-multilateralism.pdf>
- Sharma, K. (2024, November 4). India's response to the Israel-Hamas war sparks political fight at home. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Israel-Hamas-war/India-s-response-to-Israel-Hamas-war-sparks-political-fight-at-home>
- Shixue, J. (2024, April 29). China is still a developing country despite what US leaders might say. <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/china-opinion/article/3260473/china-still-developing-country-despite-what-us-leaders-might-say>
- Smagin, N. (2023, June 15). A North-South Corridor on Putin's Dime: Why Russia is bankrolling Iran's infrastructure. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/06/a-north-south-corridor-on-putins-dime-why-russia-is-bankrolling-irans-infrastructure?lang=en>
- Stares, P. B., Jia, Q., Tocci, N., Jaishankar, D., & Kortunov, A. (2020, June). Perspectives on a changing world order. <https://www.cfr.org/report/perspectives-changing-world-order>
- Swanson, A., & Holman, J. (2024, September 13). Biden administration ratchets up tariffs on Chinese goods. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/13/us/politics/biden-tariffs-chinese-goods-clothing.html>
- Tessman, B., & Wolfe, W. (2011). Great powers and strategic hedging: The case of Chinese energy security strategy. *International Studies Review*, 13(2), 214-240.

- UNDP and MBRF.(2023). Global knowledge index. https://knowledge4all.com/admin/2023/Methodology/GKI2023_Methodology_EN.pdf
- . (2024). Global knowledge index. <https://www.knowledge4all.com/ranking>
- U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). I2U2. <https://www.state.gov/i2u2/>
- . (n.d.).The Abraham Accords. <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>
- Varisco, A. E. (2013, June 3). Towards a Multipolar International System: Which prospects for global peace? <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/03/towards-a-multipolar-international-system-which-prospects-for-global-peace/>
- Wagdy, A. (2022, October 17). Multipolar world: A transformation in the global system. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2022/10/17/a-multipolar-world-a-transformation-in-the-global-system/>
- Wi, X., & K, Dongchan. (2024, October 4). China’s perception of minilateralism and Chinese-style multilateralism. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2024.2409969?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
- Wardhani, N. F. (2021). The concept of polarity and centres of power in International relations. *Jurnal Politik Indonesia (Indonesian Journal of Politics)*, 7(2), 106–111. <https://doi.org/10.20473/jpi.v7i2.31126>
- YouTube. (n.d.). Unpacking China’s multilateral initiatives: GDI, GSI, GCI. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0sMS83vX2E>

