

The world today as a unipolar society



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The world is a complex and dynamic with almost endless combinations of events leading to different outcomes. Sovereign states, multinational corporations, NGOs, militias, terrorists, regional and global organisations, media outlets and rogue states affect global relations. Environmental changes, natural disasters, regional and inter-state conflict, economic instability, migration and demographic changes are a fraction of the events that add uncertainty to the path of future global relations. So can we neatly categorise this multifarious world?

Gordon Allport said “ categories are nouns that cut slices through our environment.” This applies to all things, not simply to a person’s nationality or skin colour. From birth we learn to categorise the world, to drop items or situations into ‘ buckets’ that broadly meet its features. This helps us process complex information without being utterly overwhelmed. Regarding world order; no two situations are alike but we are able to apply the basic constructs to a ‘ polar’ system. There are those who argue for unipolarity, multipolarity and nonpolarity. This essay will assess each of the arguments in turn and, in conclusion, you will be presented with an opinion based on those arguments.

In 1939 the international system was multipolar with France, Germany, Italy, Japan, USSR, UK and US as the major global powers. This balance of power led to a total war between two alliances with two superpowers emerging, the USSR and US. From 1945 these two superpowers were engaged in a political and military standoff, the Cold War, which despite its deadly potential delivered a degree of stability to world order. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 left a period of uncertainty that saw the US take the role as global

hegemon. This power shift has been ongoing since well before WWII, even before Carl von Clausewitz's days in the multipolar early 19th century, and above all this demonstrates the dynamic and ever shifting nature of the international system of power.

Unipolarity can be defined as a system in which a single power is geopolitically preponderant because its capabilities are potent enough to preclude the formation of an overwhelming balancing coalition against it[1]. To suggest that a unipolar state must be capable of achieving all its goals, everywhere, by itself is nonsense[2]. If this were the case there would never have been a unipolar state on the global stage. There have, of course, been unipolar powers; America is the most recent and the best example but the Roman Empire, the Mongol Empire and China's Han Dynasty are other examples.

There is no stomach for anything other than US hegemony on Capitol Hill. The US has dominated since the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. An entire generation of Americans has grown up knowing nothing apart from US hegemony and they are not keen to lose it. Following the end of the Iraq War there was no flurry of US innovation to try and prevent future Iraq wars; there was instead a shift in the doctrinal approach of the Pentagon towards counter insurgency and more money spent on equipping the military to fare even better in future Iraq wars.

Key factors defining superpower status are military, economic, political and technological. An economically strong US has built a military, unmatched in terms of the size of its technologically advanced forces. The US Navy's fleet

tonnage is greater than that of the next 13 navies combined.[3]China and India have larger armed forces than the US but the US has more forces stationed overseas (460, 000 in 146 countries). It has the most technologically advanced weaponry in the world, spending almost as much on defence as all other nations combined[4]. This ability to project power globally is significantly unmatched by any power in the world and this gives the US a more prominent place at the international table. Of the four key factors, military power is the most relevant to maintaining US global hegemony but even US culture has migrated around the globe. MTV, CNN, Coca Cola, McDonalds, Disney and Hollywood are but a few US brand names in what is known in some camps as the “ McDomination Effect”.

The US enjoys a unique geographical advantage, having allies on each of its borders; Canada, Mexico (an uneasy ally but a strong trading partner), and the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Other states tend to have their ascent to superpower status blocked by their neighbours. The huge margin between the US and its nearest competitors may have reduced in recent years but it remains. Furthermore there is no other single country that can compete with the US in all areas of power. Yale historian Paul Kennedy claimed the US would suffer from “ imperial overstretch” but, in such awe of US success in Afghanistan in 2002, he wrote “ nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing”. The notion of overstretch is largely ill founded as the potential final nail in the coffin for the US; unlike Great Britain, France and Spain before it, the US does not crave territory, almost before they put boots on foreign soil they are looking for an exit strategy[5].

The commonly held view is that unipolarity is unstable, mainly due to the tendency of other states to seek counterbalance and inevitably cause conflict. In this case, however, there are no power enemies that are seeking to directly counter the US. Indeed, following the September 11 attacks India, Pakistan, Russia and even China have revised their foreign policies regarding the US. Even North Korea may be entering back into dialogue in April with the US over dismantling its nuclear programme.

Which other countries enjoy the ability to disregard the international system without retribution? Not only disregard the system but draw their allies along with them, such as with the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cases of torture of terror suspects, the last invasion of Iraq, not signing up to the Ottawa Treaty (despite being a P5 member of the UN Security Council), the Highway of Death massacre in Iraq; the list is extensive but the point remains that the US remains at the head of the international table despite multiple infringements of international law or, in the case of the Ottawa Treaty, setting a poor example to the international community.

Charles Krauthammer coined the “ Unipolar Moment” in the early 1990s and in 2002 he suggested that moment had become the “ Unipolar Era”. Since 1990 however, the US has been at war in the Middle East, Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia in the main. It has suffered a disastrous presidency under Bush and financial meltdown following the collapse of the sub-prime market. In addition it has suffered a major terrorist attack, a catastrophic diversion of attention from Afghanistan to Iraq regarding WMDs and has suffered a moral own goal by practising torture and violating human rights, specifically the authorised use of waterboarding by CIA personnel on US terror suspects.

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Financially the country is a shell following Bush's presidency; he took office with \$120 billion in reserve and left a deficit of \$1.2 trillion eight years later. In every dimension other than military power the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from U. S. dominance. That does not mean we are entering an anti-American world but we are moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people[6].

Many argue, most notably Richard Haass, that the unipolar moment is over, that sovereign states have lost the monopoly on power in a world now dominated by dozens of state and non-state actors, each with a significant amount of power. In today's world, states are challenged from above, by regional and global organisations (UN, NATO, IMF and WTO), from below by militias and terrorist groups (drug cartels, Al Qaeda, CIRA and Hezbollah) and from the side by NGOs (Amnesty International, the Red Cross and Greenpeace) and the media. The six major world powers are joined by global, regional and functional organisations that wield tremendous power; consider OPEC for example. In this nonpolar environment, mechanisms for providing solutions to world problems are becoming multilateral in nature and not state driven. Recent meetings at the UN have been held including government departments, UN agencies, NGOs, pharmaceutical companies, foundations, think tanks and universities[7].

Military might does not equate to effect. The events of 11 Sep 01 demonstrate that a small organisation with minimal funding and manpower can strike a devastating blow to a powerful state. The events since have shown that, even with the full prosecution of its power, the US has been unable to bring the "war on terror" to a satisfactory conclusion. Power and

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influence have become less synonymous in recent years due, in part, to the decline of the US on the world stage but also to the growth in stature of other states and non-state actors. The increase in production and consequential consumption of fossil fuels has seen substantial funds flow to oil producing countries. These countries have enjoyed the benefits of these profits and are now rising in power and influence themselves. The success of the US machine has contributed to its own downfall. The dollar is in decline, worldwide talks are taking place regarding the cessation of trading in the dollar for oil; already many global exchange holdings are now in other currencies.[8]The emerging BRIC and Middle Eastern countries are discussing alternative currencies for international reserve.

Globalisation is a major factor in the global diffusion of power. In both the physical and the virtual world, borders have become more porous over the last 20 years and therefore less susceptible to state control. In the same way that states have increased in their ability to succeed financially and technologically, non-state actors have matured in the same way. This, coupled with more porous borders in a smaller world has enabled far more actors to exert their influence around the globe.

Terrorist groups communicate worldwide via internet, move funds electronically via internet and move members internationally via a high tech worldwide air bridge. Media groups such as CNN and Al Jazeera distribute current footage of war zones across the world that has not been subject to government censorship; many non-western countries receive instant footage in their native language, not subject to western control.

US primacy has been challenged and found wanting. The dollar is in decline and countries are regularly able to resist US petitions (Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela and Zimbabwe most recently). Other states have grown significantly (including China, Brazil, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia) and there has been a great deal of backlash to “ Americanism”. Despite the decline of US hegemony, no state has stepped up to the plate to take on the role of hegemon. This, combined with globalisation, has led to a unipolar world.

So what of multipolarity? Iran’s rise to nuclear power seems inevitable; supported by both Russia and China, financially and in the UN, the US appears powerless to halt Iran’s nuclear progress. Iran’s accumulation of wealth shows no sign of waning, especially as it holds three fifths of the world’s oil reserves and two fifths of the world’s natural gas reserves. Russia has made a massive comeback under Putin. It holds half of the world’s supply of nuclear weapons and has the third largest gold and foreign currency reserve in the world. There is heavy reliance on Russian oil and gas supplies across the continent and, with the financial crisis pushing investors to liquidate assets into oil, gold and other commodities, Russia benefited greatly in recent times.

China has also rapidly risen as a diplomatic and economic power; at current rates the country will lead the US in GDP by 2050. Despite its unusual peaceful rise to power, compared with Britain, the US, Japan, Germany and Russia before it, China may be prepared to support Russia’s objection to a possible US anti-missile shield in Europe by use of military power. China has been one of the first to move into Africa, capitalising on untouched oil and

mineral reserves. Also there has been a direct challenge to the US might via cyberspace; Chinese hackers have repeatedly compromised Pentagon computer security, rendering entire systems inoperative.

India is another rising power and a nuclear power. It too has very good relations with Russia and China, who has given financial support.

Unfortunately India suffers with a similar problem to the EU in that it is a multi-faceted entity that faces challenges from within regarding a single voice and unity in aim. Further to this it is hampered in its quest for hegemony in South Asia by Pakistan who, although significantly weaker in conventional terms, possesses a nuclear capability.

Brazil has made a meteoric rise in power in recent times. Already a mineral rich country it has recently discovered extensive oil reserves offshore and has signed a multi-billion dollar military technology sharing deal with France. It sits under the US security umbrella and has no serious threats from its neighbours and does not seek to be a military power but an economic one. Vast swathes of land have been made fertile and the country now leads the world in the exports of many foodstuffs and is the second highest producer of ethanol in a world looking for alternative fuels.

The Muslim world is increasing in power across the world. Birth rates in Muslim countries are increasing and the availability of medical services is improving – this gives rise to longer life expectancy coupled with a larger young population. With the concentration of fossil fuels in Middle Eastern countries and the financial benefits that brings we can expect to see increase in the effect of the Muslim world on the west. This may take the

form of states increasing in production and becoming more powerful but there is a chance this could mean increased migration to the west.

The US remains primus inter pares but is no longer hegemon. It now relies on more imports and is able to export less (exports of goods and services grew by 12. 0% in 2008 to \$1. 84 trillion, while imports increased 7. 4% to \$2. 52 trillion[9]). Meanwhile other countries are growing at increasing rates (China grew 9. 6% in 2008 compared with 1. 1% in the US[10]).

China's GDP growth may be increasing but it is unlikely that spending on defence will come close to the US. The poor majority Chinese population will continue to sap economic growth. EU GDP may be in excess of the US and its armed forces may be great in number but the union is not yet truly unified and the region is suffering an ageing population. Japan too is suffering an ageing and shrinking population. India is making huge advances in its economy but suffers from a bureaucratic system with little in the way of infrastructure. Russia could be seen as a possible contender again, although it is challenged from within by a declining population (falling at about 0. 5% per year since 1991[11])and internal challenges to its government.

The most recent example of nonpolarity is Iran. With the surge in oil prices Iran has accumulated wealth and power and is now seemingly aspiring to join the nuclear family. Despite its protestations, the US is unable to turn the tide without significant help from other states and organisations to assist with sanctions or to block access to nuclear technology and materials.

[12]Iran now has the ability to exert influence over OPEC, which in turn could significantly affect the US.

There is no doubt that the US still leads the world in the power stakes but its place at the top has become more unsteady in recent years. Iraq and Afghanistan have cost a considerable amount to fund and have turned opinion against them around the globe.

US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan has seen its national debt rise to over \$250 billion; this coupled with the recent sub-prime market crash has seen the US economy weakened considerably. Hence the accumulation of wealth elsewhere in the world has a more marked effect.

GDP growth differentials are reducing. The EU already beats the US GDP by some considerable margin and both Japan and China are closing the gap

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But polarity is not a binary phenomenon. The world will not stay unipolar for decades and then suddenly, one afternoon, become multipolar[13].

The US remains primus inter pares – more powerful in more areas than any other country. This does not mean, however, that it remains at the top of a unipolar system; Iran is a case in point.

Success in the US has fed many other countries around the world, particularly oil producing states. China has benefited from US trade and with all

While the concept of categorisation discussed at the beginning of this essay has clear benefits, we cannot simply assign one of the given categories to the world today.

Unipolarity has been a reality since the collapse of the Soviet Union but the 'unipolar moment' is truly over. The US does not have the ability to act with impunity or support any longer. There is a definite case of imperial overstretch, given its financial position, with the 'war on terror'. Heavy economic and financial reliance on China sits paradoxically with the US position regarding Russia, Iran, India (opposed as it was to the Indian nuclear testing programme) and, more irritatingly, Chinese 'cyber war'. There may currently be no state that is directly challenging the US on the global stage but the door of opportunity is certainly open for others to pose a threat to the US if conflict is provoked.

While it is true that globalisation has increased the power of non-state actors to have an effect on the world stage, they are only able to apply pressure to sovereign states. Ultimately the sovereign states retain the real power, the combination of military might, geopolitical influence, economic power and technological advancement. Other actors play a key role in making the system work and providing solutions to global problems (global warming, financial crises, conflict prevention and so on) but the state remains king on the world stage.

Multipolarity is re-emerging as nation states amass wealth, technology and increase cooperation through globalisation. There is possibility of conflict arising from this situation, especially with the Middle Eastern situation and with various states opposed to the US and its foreign policy.

The reality would appear to be that we are in a transition phase between two elements of polarity, those being the unipolar world of the post Cold War era and the multipolar world of the future.