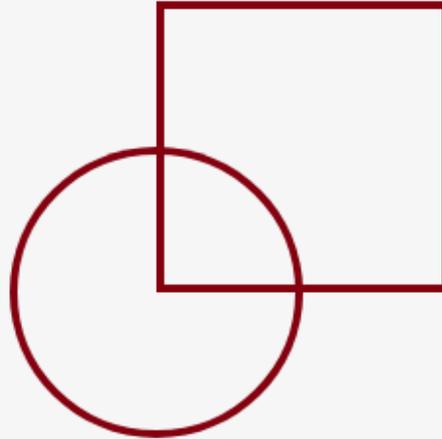


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Multipolarity: a lasting mutation or a transitory phase of the international system?

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Executive Summary

"Multipolarity" has emerged as the umbrella term for the era opened up by the erosion of Western primacy, the rise of China, the re-intensification of strategic rivalries, and the consolidation of autonomous regional poles. However, behind the apparent obviousness of the word, the reality is more ambivalent: multipolarity describes less a stabilized order than an environment of broad competition, where interdependence remains but becomes politicized, where norms fragment, and where coalitions are recomposed according to the issues.

The central question does not strictly oppose "sustainable change" and "transitional phase". Multipolarity must be understood on two levels. It is sustainable as a dynamic of relative diffusion of power and the affirmation of new decision-making centers. On the other hand, it is still largely a transitional phase when understood as a coherent international order, with shared rules, recognised balances and effective crisis management mechanisms. In other words, the world is engaged in a lasting multipolarization of power relations, but it is going through a transition of orders whose institutional outcome remains uncertain.

Problem

To speak of multipolarity implies specifying what we are measuring. Is it the material distribution of capabilities (economy, technology, armies), the capacity for influence (norms, institutions, currencies, standards) or the structuring of a relatively stable system of alliances? These dimensions do not entirely overlap and do not evolve at the same pace. It is therefore possible to observe a relative diffusion of power without seeing the emergence of a stabilized multipolar order.

The problem can be formulated as follows: does multipolarity constitute a structural transformation of the international system, or only an intermediate moment between two configurations of order? And, above all, what practical consequences can be drawn from this for strategic decision-making in a world where common rules are weakening faster than new stability routines are being built?

Structural context

The international system is permeated by a double tension. On the one hand, the multiplication of centres of power and the empowerment of regional players are densifying the strategic space. Several states, without being "superpowers", have the ability to pivot on decisive variables: energy, logistics corridors, control of straits, defence markets, financial hubs, critical resources, data, or political mediation. On the other hand, this diversification is part of a world that is still highly connected, where interdependencies persist but become instruments of coercion, resilience or negotiation.

On the economic and technological level, the dominant trend is not total decoupling, but the reconfiguration of value chains around concerns about sovereignty, security and control of standards. The result is partial fragmentation: duplication of industrial capacities, segmentation of certain digital ecosystems, competition on standards and critical architectures. This fragmentation does not cancel out globalization; it re-embeds it in geopolitics.

Finally, at the institutional level, multilateralism remains, but it is becoming more transactional, more contested and more difficult to universalize. Global institutions continue to exist, but their capacity to produce robust compromises is diminishing, in favor of ad hoc arrangements, variable coalitions, and limited formats. Global governance is becoming more modular, more fragmented, and often dependent on the balance of power.

Power relations

Multipolarization does not mean the disappearance of hierarchies; it signifies their multiplication and specialization. Some players remain structuring in several areas, while others acquire specific comparative advantages: projectable military superiority, financial centrality, technological mastery, industrial control, demographic power, informational

influence, or the ability to impose standards. The result is a multi-domain asymmetry: no single player dominates everywhere, but several can block, slow, steer or commodify decisions in key areas.

In this context, the hotbeds of tension are no longer concentrated in a single theatre. European, Indo-Pacific and Middle Eastern dynamics are intertwined, creating ripple effects and risks of overlapping crises. Competition becomes simultaneous, which increases miscalculations, the burden on alliances, and the temptation to escalate by demonstration.

Finally, the middle powers gain in relative weight not because they dominate, but because they arbitrate. They optimize their room for maneuver by diversifying partnerships, seeking transactional advantages and the ability to make themselves indispensable in a specific segment. Their characteristic strategy is that of "functional non-alignment": cooperate on one issue, oppose each other, and preserve maximum decision-making autonomy.

Interests at stake

The interests of the great powers are organized around the control of interdependencies and the prevention of loss of centrality. The United States seeks to preserve technological leadership and a credible system of alliances, while preventing the emergence of lasting strategic exclusion zones. China aims to secure its access (energy, roads, technology), reduce its vulnerability to financial and commercial coercion, and increase its institutional and normative influence. Russia, for its part, is working to convert asymmetric assets — military, energy, information — into political leverage, by relying on the fragmentation of opposing coalitions and the sustainability of its capacity to cause harm.

The European Union is located in a specific area of tension: it has a normative and economic force, but its conversion into material power remains incomplete, particularly in the industrial, energy and defence sectors. Its strategic interest is to limit critical dependencies without cutting itself off from flows, and to stabilize its neighborhood without permanently having a perfect strategic unity.

Regional players and pivotal states pursue a common objective: to maximize the gains from competition between major hubs by avoiding automatic alignment. Their advantage often comes from their position in the flows — maritime routes, land corridors, energy, minerals, finance — and their ability to offer platforms (logistical, industrial, technological) that are essential to one or other of the major groups.

Dynamics of evolution

The major trend is that of multipolarization, but the political form of this multipolarity remains uncertain. A true multipolar order would require a minimum of stabilized rules, a common language for crisis management and mutual recognition of certain balances. However, the current period is characterized by the coexistence of competing norms, by a more frequent use of sanctions and economic coercion, and by a more pronounced conflictuality over common spaces (maritime, cyber, space). In this context, multipolarity looks more like an expanded field of competition than a stabilized architecture.

This situation corresponds to a transition of orders: the old framework is disintegrating without a single new guiding principle being imposed. Arrangements are often temporary, coalitions variable, and compromises conditional. The political economy of power accentuates this transition, because competition now concerns complete ecosystems (innovation capacities, data control, standards, talents, capital) and not only territories.

Prospective scenarios

The first scenario, that of a stabilized multipolarity, assumes the emergence of credible deconfliction mechanisms, a form of mutual recognition of red lines and a minimum of agreements on the management of large risks. It is not impossible, but it appears difficult in the short term as strategic mistrust and technological competition structure interactions.

The second scenario, which is more plausible, is that of competing regional orders. It combines subblocks, divergent standards and modular alliances. Interdependencies do not disappear, but they are compartmentalized. Attacks are frequent, often contained, but likely to multiply quietly.

The third scenario is that of a conflictual bipolarity against a multipolar background: the Sino-American rivalry structures a large part of the system, while the other poles seek to maximize their autonomy, avoid binary choice and monetize their cooperation. This scenario creates increasing alignment pressures, but it does not necessarily produce a total decoupling: the reality remains that of a selective entanglement.

The fourth scenario, finally, is that of a systemic disorder marked by escalations and overlapping crises. Its probability may be lower than scenarios of controlled fragmentation, but its severity is high: market volatility, supply disruptions, increased militarization of contested spaces, and weakening of control regimes.

Recommendations

The first recommendation is conceptual: it is necessary to distinguish between multipolarization (a sustainable process) and multipolar order (uncertain stabilized configuration). This clarification avoids misdiagnosis and makes it possible to calibrate policies not on a hypothetical stability, but on the management of a prolonged transition.

The second recommendation concerns resilience: in a world where interdependencies are becoming levers of power, the priority is to map critical dependencies and to organize a strategy of diversification, redundancy and substitution capacity. The goal is not autarky, but the reduction of vulnerability to coercion.

The third recommendation concerns diplomacy. The period requires a modular diplomacy, based on alliances with concentric circles: a core of vital commitments, complemented by functional partnerships on specific objectives (technology, maritime, energy, standards). This approach allows for cooperation without requiring full alignment, while maintaining strategic coherence.

The fourth recommendation aims at normative credibility: standards have a lasting influence only if they are backed by industrial, technological and security capacities. Any standards strategy must therefore be articulated with a productive base and sustained investment in critical sectors.

Finally, the fifth recommendation is of a security nature: escalation management becomes central. It requires robust communication channels, deconfliction mechanisms and crisis protocols, particularly in areas where ambiguity and speed increase the risk of strategic accidents.

Strategic implications

Multipolarity must be thought of as a lasting reality of power relations and as a prolonged transition of order. The main danger is not multipolarity per se, but the instability of the transition phase, when the rules weaken faster than new equilibriums stabilize. In this context, the most successful actors will be those able to orchestrate modularity — alliances, dependencies, standards — and transform interdependence into an advantage rather than a vulnerability. The relevant sovereignty is not total; it is selective, hierarchical, and geared toward the most costly breaking points.