Opinion – Why Unipolarity Is Not Over

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PåL RøREN, MAY 26 2024

We often hear that the world is changing, that the United States is losing influence and power. And China, Russia, and other regional and middle powers are on the rise. Scholars talk about structural changes from a unipolar system with one dominant state, to either a bipolar system (with two dominant states), or a multipolar system (with three or more dominant states). Most agree that a multipolar system is the most unstable and least peaceful. It becomes more difficult to maintain the balance of power in a multipolar system, which increases the likelihood of great power war.

Several experts believe that multipolarity is already the dominant feature of the international system. Or that it soon will be. For example, Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper say that the world is indeed multipolar. The United States losing power and others gaining power means, according to Ashford and Cooper, that neither unipolarity nor bipolarity describes today's international system well. Moreover, a recent informal poll conducted by Foreign Affairs showed that 65 percent of prominent scholars on international politics believe the world is more multipolar or bipolar than unipolar. Only 23 percent of the scholars believe that the world is still more unipolar. Those who argue against the system being unipolar say we must accept the economic and demographic power shift we have witnessed over the last 30 years. Power shifts away from the West, towards India, Russia, and China.

Ashford and Cooper's case for multipolarity rests on findings from their own policy paper. To measure the polar structure, they use a combination of Gross National Income (GNI), GNI in purchasing power parity, GDP per capita, total national wealth, as well as a range of aggregate economic and power indices. But does a bigger economy and population mean that states become polar powers? Not really. Political scientists often define power as the ability of one state to make another state do something it normally would not do. Considering this definition, neither the economy nor population are particularly good measures of the current international distribution of power.

Even if a country overnight increases its population by 50 million people, it does not necessarily become more powerful. The same applies to a country's economy. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union at its richest had only a third of the economy of the USA. But the Soviet chose guns over butter. And that is precisely why the world was bipolar during the Cold War. The communist power matched, even surpassed, the USA in military strength.

Money and people are primarily potential sources of power. A country's military strength offer a better insight into the current balance of power and the ability of states to make other states do something they usually would not do. In a recent research article, I look at the size of all countries' armed forces *and* how much money they spend on each soldier. This gives an indication of the size, strength, and sophistication of states' military. I then compare how the distribution among the great powers has evolved over time. The result is clear: The world is still unipolar.

Russia, the United Kingdom, and France are nowhere near the military strength of the United States. Vladimir Putin's Russia shouts a lot but does not really have the power to call itself a polar power. The United Kingdom and France are not the powers they once were. Describing the world as multipolar – which requires three or more power centers – is therefore incorrect.

To be sure, China's growth is remarkable. And Beijing plays in a higher league than Russia, for example. But that alone does not make the world bipolar. If the current system were to be considered bipolar, then the 1970s would also have to be considered multipolar with China, Russia, and the USA as the superpowers. It was not. The model I

develop provides some support for the ideas by Jo Inge Bekkevold and others that we are beginning to see the contours of a bipolar world. China has a large population and economy which they have quickly converted into military strength. But there is no guarantee that China will be able to continue on the same track. Doubts can also be cast about how large China's economy actually is. And for the second year in a row, the country's population is declining.

Moreover, it is not certain that states can or will use money or employ people for military purposes. Japan, Germany, and the EU are examples of actors who, for various reasons, have not converted their potential into military strength. Thus, experts are right in saying that China's economy and population give the country the potential to build up more power. This could indeed make the world more bipolar. But they are wrong when they say that this will happen or has already happened. And they are even more wrong when they say that Russia, India, Brazil, or other regional powers will fill the last polar spots. The world remains unipolar, with the United States at its center.

About the author:

Pål Røren is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Oslo. His research concerns diplomacy, great power rivalry, and the pursuit social status and prestige in world politics. His most recent article is "Unipolarity is not over yet" (*Global Studies Quarterly,* 2024*)*.