



## Transition in World Order after the Cold War: Instability and Insecurity in the Anarchic International System

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### Abstract

The international political system has been in continuous transformation since its inception. History records a shift in world order from multipolarity to bipolarity, onward to unipolarity, and again toward emerging multipolarity. This article revisits a research study that investigates the causes and consequences of these transitions and analyses the instability and uncertainty of polarity structures that generate insecurities in the anarchic international order. Using an explanatory approach and drawing on power transition theory, world-systems analysis, neo-realism and interdependence theory, the article defines world order and its types and traces how changes in the distribution of power trigger systemic transformation. Historical episodes from the World Wars and the Cold War to the post-9/11 era and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that major transitions have been driven by conflicts and perceived exploitation in the distribution of power, thereby dissatisfying rising states. The article argues that the contemporary movement toward a complex form of multipolarity, shaped by the rivalry between the United States & China, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and growing regional coalitions in the Indo-Pacific, intensifies systemic uncertainty, complicates collective security, and magnifies non-traditional threats such as pandemics, cyberwarfare, and climate change.

**Key words:** Transition, Multipolarity, Instability, World Order, Power Transition, Anarchy, Collective Security

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## Introduction

World political history shows that the world order has been continuously transformed since the rise of the modern state system. After the Second World War, the distribution of power shifted from a loose multipolarity to a bipolar system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, which confronted each other in the Cold War. With the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, world politics again shifted from bipolarity to a unipolar order in which the United States acted as the sole hegemon. In the early twenty-first century, however, the rise of new powers has pushed the system back toward multipolarity, as several states now possess significant capabilities and seek greater influence.

This article builds on a previous research study that sought to explain the transformation of world order, the unpredictability of systemic change, and the causes of recurring transitions in polarity. The core claim is that the world order is in continuous transition and therefore cannot be stable or permanently fixed; accordingly, no actor can reliably predict the next configuration of order. As Palmer and Perkins have already observed, “The world community is in continuous transition” (2003).

The transformation of order affects governing structures, security concepts, and the meaning of sovereignty. It also shapes how states interpret their national interests and their willingness to cooperate for collective security. In a globalized world marked by deep economic, technological, and social interdependence, these dynamics become more complex. Interdependence creates dense cross-border ties but also new vulnerabilities, especially when coupled with what many scholars see as an evolving but unstable multipolar order.

Recent history illustrates the contemporary relevance of these questions. The 9/11 attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic have each disrupted expectations about US hegemony and the resilience of liberal order. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has tested European security arrangements and revived large-scale interstate war in Europe. In parallel, the intensifying rivalry between the United States & China across the Indo-Pacific and the growth of regional coalitions such as the QUAD and AUKUS point to a more fragmented and contested global order in which multiple poles seek influence and security guarantees.

Historical experience also shows that major changes in the world order are closely associated with shifts in power and capital. Wars have often been fought to gain power and reshape the distribution of capabilities. After major wars, the world has repeatedly been introduced to new organisational forms and concepts of order. This ongoing transformation contributes to the unpredictability of world politics; the next transformation cannot be precisely predicted. The international system has entered a turbulent phase in which longstanding assumptions about stability, hegemony, and collective security are being fundamentally reexamined. Building on debates over unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity, this article situates the post-Cold War era within a longer historical pattern of recurrent power transitions and systemic crises. By linking great-power rivalry, regional wars, and nontraditional threats such as pandemics, cyber conflict, and climate change, it highlights how the contemporary shift toward a complex form of multipolarity is generating new forms of insecurity in an anarchic world order.

Against this backdrop, the article asks: Why do world orders change? How do power transitions generate instability and insecurity? And how can collective security be managed in an anarchic, technologically advanced, and increasingly multipolar system?

## Theoretical Framework

### World Order and Anarchy

World order in international relations refers to the overarching set of formal and informal arrangements that shape how states relate to one another, regulate conflicts, and conduct economic and political interactions. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, this order has revolved around sovereign states as the principal units of the system.

From a neo-realist perspective, the international system is anarchic because there is no central authority with legitimate coercive power over states. According to this view, systemic anarchy pushes states to prioritize survival, autonomy and power, often at the expense of collective goods. Kenneth Waltz famously argued that the structure of the international system, specifically the distribution of capabilities among great powers, largely

determines patterns of conflict and cooperation; he also maintained that bipolarity tends to be more stable than unipolar or multipolar configurations. He also agreed that the world order is continually changing, creating instability in the system.

### **Polarity and Power Distribution**

The World order is a system in which every provision is linked to power, and the power game runs through the world's political system. Historians claim that this power game continues and changes its players from time to time as states engage in wars to enhance power, due to which the order transitions from one to another or shows gradation, i.e., the polarity system. Polarity refers to how power is distributed among the most capable states in the system. It is a gradation system that describes the distribution of power among members of this system. Three types of configurations are usually distinguished:

**Unipolarity:** Where one state holds predominant economic, military and cultural influence and functions as a hegemon, as the United States did in the immediate post-Cold War era.

**Bipolarity:** Where two superpowers dominate and balance one another, as in the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.

**Multipolarity:** Where more than two great powers coexist, alliances are fluid, and no single actor can enforce systemic rules; this often produces a more complex and potentially unstable environment.

Historical experience suggests that shifts between these polarity structures are closely connected to wars, economic upheavals, and systemic crises.

### **World Systems and Power Transition Theories**

World systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein conceptualizes the global economy as a hierarchical structure comprising core, semi-peripheral and peripheral zones, differentiated by their roles in production and the division of labor. Core states exploit peripheral and semi-peripheral states, concentrating capital and advanced industries, while peripheral states remain dependent and vulnerable. As the world system is a "multicultural territorial division of labor in which

the production and exchange of basic goods and raw materials is necessary for the everyday life of its inhabitants".

Power transition theory by A.F.K Organski complements this by focusing on the dynamics of rising and declining powers. It holds that systemic transitions often occur when dissatisfied rising states challenge dominant powers, particularly when they close the gap in capabilities but resist the existing distribution of benefits. As these challenges escalate, conflicts become more likely, potentially leading to systemic war and later reshaping of the system.

### **Interdependence and Complex Insecurity**

In today's globalized world, states are increasingly interdependent through trade, finance, technology, migration, and information networks. This "complex interdependence" deepens cross-border ties but can also threaten national security by exposing societies to external shocks and by making domestic crises rapidly international. Hedley Bull underlined several forces working in this direction as regional integration, state disintegration, private international violence, transnational organizations, and technological unification.

In such a context, non-traditional threats like pandemics, climate change, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns become central to collective security. The onset of fifth-generation warfare, involving propaganda and cyber conflicts, further complicates efforts to manage insecurity within an anarchic multipolar system.

### **Historical Transitions in World Order**

#### **From Multipolarity to Bipolarity**

In the early twentieth century, the international system was multipolar, with several European powers and Japan competing for colonies, markets and influence. The First and Second World Wars were, in large part, struggles among these powers for dominance. As the earlier study notes, "every war was the result of gaining power and enhancement of power", and each major conflict transformed the world system completely.

By the end of the Second World War, traditional great powers such as Germany, Italy and Japan had been

defeated, while others, like the United Kingdom and France, emerged victorious but economically weakened. The resulting vacuum allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to become the two main poles of power, ushering in a bipolar order.

### **Bipolar Stability and Ideological Conflict**

During the Cold War (1945–1991), the United States and the USSR led rival blocs grounded in capitalist and communist ideologies, respectively. The world was effectively divided into three “worlds”: states aligned with the United States, states aligned with the USSR, and non-aligned states seeking neutrality. Despite numerous proxy wars, the bipolar system is often judged to have been relatively stable at the systemic level, largely because nuclear deterrence and clear bloc structures reduced incentives for direct confrontation between the superpowers.

### **Post-Cold War Unipolarity**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s marked a decisive shift to unipolarity, with the United States as the sole superpower and hegemon of the world system. Many observers believed that this liberal unipolar order might endure indefinitely. Francis Fukuyama famously argued that the spread of liberal democracy signaled “the end of history,” suggesting that no alternative system would rival it in the future.

However, the rapid development of globalization, the rise of new powers, and the growing role of international organizations and non-state actors contradicted this optimism. Far from reaching an endpoint, the early twenty-first century witnessed renewed contestation over norms, institutions and power balances.

### **The Turn toward Multipolarity**

With the rise of China, India, Brazil and the resurgence of Russia, many scholars began to argue that unipolarity was eroding and that a new multipolar order was emerging. Acharya expresses concern that “with the end of uni-polarity, US-hegemony is also on its end” (2014). Reich and Lebow (2014) similarly question whether the global system become more unstable and war-prone without a hegemon to provide order.

For Qian Qichen, the world is still in transition; the new model of world order is incomplete, but its outlines are visible in the coexistence of a superpower with several great powers, linked by dense interdependence. Benjamin Zala (2017) notes that existing literature is often confusing, as debates over unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity rely on different definitions of polarity and divergent assumptions about how actors perceive the system’s structure.

### **Contemporary Multipolarity and Present-Day Insecurities**

#### **Rising Powers and Great-Power Rivalry**

China’s dramatic economic and military rise has been one of the most important drivers of change in the global order. Many scholars argue that China has challenged US unipolarity and accelerated the move toward multipolarity. Francis J Gavin (2009) highlights how China’s ascent has reshaped the global economy and industrial system, and how debates increasingly focus on the capabilities of China and other rising powers.

This rivalry is evident in strategic competition over technology, supply chains, and regional influence, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The formation and strengthening of groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and AUKUS can be understood as attempts by the United States and its allies to manage and balance China’s rise, while China advances initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and deepens its own regional partnerships. These developments illustrate power transition theory in practice: rising powers dissatisfied with existing hierarchies seek greater say, while established powers resist dilution of their dominance.

#### **Regional Conflicts and the Ongoing Wars**

The systemic consequences of multipolarity also appear in regional conflicts with global implications. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has not only destabilized European security but has also exposed divisions within the broader international community regarding sovereignty, intervention, and sanctions. While NATO and EU states have largely aligned in support of Ukraine, other major powers have adopted more

ambivalent positions, reflecting competing interests and alignments characteristic of a multipolar environment.

At the same time, the Israel war on Palestine and attacks on other Middle East states, illustrate that how cultural and civilizational fault lines, which Samuel P Huntington predicted as future “battel lines”, have now become “deadly conflicts” in the 21st century as the cultural differences are a major source of violence in contemporary politics.

Alongside these wars, the sharpening strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific between the USA and China demonstrates how power transition and complex interdependence operate together to create new insecurities. Current tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and surrounding regions show this fluctuation in order in practice, as military build-ups, alliances, economic coercion, and cyber operations all take place in a multipolar context without any central authority to regulate them.

The Israel & USA war on Iran exemplifies how imperial ambitions and media narratives shape perceptions of legitimacy in modern conflicts. The US and Israel launched a direct military intervention targeting Iranian nuclear and military sites, aiming to delay Iran’s nuclear program by at least a year, while Iran demonstrated resilience by striking Israeli military bases despite advanced defense systems.

This conflict exposed the gap between Western media portrayals of Iranian weakness and the complex realities on the ground, reinforcing imperial discourses through selective framing and Islamophobic tropes that support hegemonic agendas in the region. The war also intensified regional instability, with no ceasefire or peace agreement reached, highlighting the fragile security environment shaped by competing powers and unresolved sovereignty issues.

The broader geopolitical context involves balancing relations with other global powers such as China, complicating Israel’s strategic calculations amid rising Middle Eastern violence. The war’s economic repercussions are significant due to disruptions in energy supply routes like the Strait of Hormuz, affecting global markets and emphasizing the urgent need for diplomatic solutions over prolonged military confrontation.

Together, these developments underscore how multipolarity and complex interdependence contribute to ongoing insecurity in this critical region. These wars have triggered energy and food crises that reverberate

worldwide, underlining how regional wars in a globalized system can amplify insecurities far beyond the battlefield.

### **Non-Traditional Threats**

Non-traditional threats have further highlighted the vulnerabilities of the existing order. The COVID-19 pandemic “changed the world system messily and reshaped the new framework of order,” affecting the balance of power and contributing to a more unstable multipolar world. It exposed weaknesses in the health systems of powerful states that had invested heavily in military power and technology but lacked adequate preparedness for a global health crisis.

Mark Neimar (2020) argues that during such crises, it is crucial to distinguish between illusions and the “true essence” of international phenomena to understand the deeper causes of global and regional conflicts. Non-traditional threats increasingly include climate change, which profoundly influences the global system by altering weather patterns, ecosystems, and resource availability. Climate change drives long-term shifts in temperature and precipitation, impacting agriculture, freshwater supply, human health, and biodiversity, thereby creating economic and social risks worldwide.

These environmental changes exacerbate existing geopolitical tensions by intensifying resource scarcity, triggering migration, and increasing the likelihood of conflicts over water and food security. The pandemic, combined with growing climate emergencies, cyber threats and disinformation campaigns, suggests that collective security now depends as much on managing shared vulnerabilities as on deterring traditional military aggression.

### **Fifth-Generation Warfare, Cyber Conflict and Information Disorder**

The contemporary era has seen the advent of what is often termed fifth-generation warfare, involving cyberattacks, information operations and psychological warfare alongside conventional capabilities. As the earlier study notes, societies now confront “new forms of propaganda and cyber conflicts,” which interact with natural disasters, pandemics and climate change as “a major part of collective security to handle”. In a multipolar system where states, non-state actors and even private companies can possess significant cyber

capabilities, attribution is difficult, and escalation risks are hard to manage.

Social media and digital platforms also amplify controversies and “new fault lines of violence among nations,” contributing to polarization and undermining trust both within and between states. These dynamics deepen the sense of unpredictability that characterizes the current order.

### **Findings: Power Transitions, Instability and Unpredictability**

The synthesis of historical analysis and theoretical perspectives in this study gives several key findings:

**First:** Transitions in world order are closely linked to shifts in the distribution of power often accelerated by wars, economic crises, and technological changes. In each major transition, rising powers dissatisfied with existing distributions of power and benefits have challenged dominant states, leading to systemic conflicts and re-ordering.

**Second:** Continuous transitions generate a persistent state of uncertainty. As the article notes, this “causes the immense level of uncertainty or instability, which disrupts the regulations of the system, making the order very unpredictable”. Because actors cannot reliably anticipate the next configuration of power, strategic planning becomes more difficult, and security dilemmas intensify.

**Third:** Multipolarity tends to be associated with greater complexity and potential instability than bipolarity. Multiple centers of power, fluid alliances, and competing regional orders make it harder to maintain a coherent balance of power and to coordinate collective responses to global threats. In such a system, both traditional and non-traditional insecurities proliferate.

**Fourth:** Complex interdependence and technological advancement amplify vulnerabilities. Economic and technological linkages, while creating prosperity, also create pathways for contagion whether financial, epidemiological, cyber or informational. As a result, crises in one part of the system can quickly destabilize others, reinforcing perceptions of anarchy and insecurity.

### **Implications for Stability and Collective Security**

The findings underscore that stability in the existing anarchic order cannot rely solely on traditional balances of military power. Instead, several measures appear crucial:

**Restraint and power management:** States “must be limited within their power” to avoid destabilizing arms races and coercive behavior that heightens insecurity.

**Strengthening international institutions and law:** International institutions must move beyond “verbal treaties” to more effective implementation of norms governing the use of force, human rights, environmental protection, and global health.

**Prioritizing humanity and collective goods:** States need to “obey the rules of humanity” and avoid inhumane practices in pursuit of technological and military superiority, recognizing that long-term security depends on the wellbeing of people and ecosystems.

**Diplomacy over war:** Negotiations and diplomatic tools should be preferred over war to resolve disputes, particularly in a tightly interconnected world where the costs of conflict are high and widely shared.

### **Conclusion**

The contemporary world is multicultural, globalized, and technologically advanced, yet marked by profound instability. Societies have entered a phase of fifth-generation warfare in which cyberwarfare, propaganda and pandemics join traditional military threats as central security concerns. In this context, maintaining the stability of world political order requires careful management of power distributions, recognition of shared vulnerabilities, and genuine commitment to collective security.

The study’s central conclusion is that transitions in world order are driven by dissatisfaction with the distribution of power among rising and established states; these transitions disrupt systemic regulations and allow instability to prevail. Historical examples and recent crises confirm that the world order remains fundamentally unpredictable. Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis has been falsified by renewed ideological, cultural and geopolitical conflicts, as anticipated by Huntington’s argument that future conflicts would be shaped by civilizational division.

Given the ongoing US & China rivalry, Russia's assertiveness, Israel's war on Palestine, the war on Iran led by the USA & Israel, with regional realignments and the rise of transnational threats, it remains highly uncertain what the next configuration of world order will be. Climate change adds another layer of challenge in this context, particularly through its impact on water scarcity and food availability. What is clear, however, is that without stronger mechanisms for cooperation, restraint, and collective problem-solving, instability and insecurity in the existing anarchic system are likely to deepen rather than recede and future peace efforts must consider both geopolitical realities and environmental challenges to be effective.

An important implication of this analysis is the need to rethink security in broader civilizational and societal terms rather than only through the lens of great-power rivalry. The persistence of conflict along cultural, ideological, and regional fault lines, combined with accelerating environmental degradation and technological disruption, indicates that future stability will depend on how far states and societies can cultivate habits of coexistence, inclusive governance, and equitable development alongside traditional deterrence and diplomacy. A durable world order will require not just re-calibrating material power and reforming institutions, but also transforming the narratives that legitimize domination, dehumanization, and exploitation across the core-periphery division. If rising and developed powers cannot move beyond zero-sum competition toward a shared commitment to justice, sustainability, and mutual recognition, the next phase of systemic transition is likely to reproduce familiar patterns of crisis and violence under new, and potentially more destructive, conditions.

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