

Polycentrism or Multipolarity: Understanding the Contemporary International System - Ünal Çeviköz



The post-Cold War international system was dominated by unipolarity, with the United States as the uncontested hegemon. Over the past two decades, this structure has faced challenges from emerging powers, regional organizations, and non-state actors, prompting debates about the emergence of a multipolar order. The contemporary international system, therefore, is often described as transitioning from unipolarity to multipolarity. However, multipolarity, which assumes a system of relatively equal power among multiple poles, does not adequately describe the current landscape. Instead, polycentrism—characterized by the coexistence of multiple, differentiated centres of power—better reflects the realities of the contemporary international system.

This piece explains the distinctions between multipolarity and polycentrism, arguing that the latter provides a more accurate framework for understanding today's global order. It examines the key features of polycentrism, critiques the limitations of multipolarity as an analytical lens, and assesses the implications of polycentrism for global governance and international relations.

Multipolarity traditionally refers to an international system with multiple power centres, or "poles," that possess roughly equal capabilities in military, economic, and political influence. Historical examples include the European balance of power in the 19th century (Waltz, 1979; Kissinger, 1994). Multipolar systems are often characterised by intense competition, alliances, and shifting balances of power (Morgenthau, 1948). Polycentrism, on the other hand, denotes a system where multiple centres of power exist but are not equal regarding their influence, reach, or capacities. This concept has its roots in governance theory (Ostrom, 1990) but has gained traction in international relations to describe the current global order (Ruggie, 2014). Unlike the rigid structure of multipolarity, polycentrism emphasises the diversity and fluidity of power dynamics, acknowledging the interconnected yet asymmetric nature of global influence.

While the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the growing influence of regional powers such as India, Brazil and Turkey are often cited as evidence of multipolarity, these actors do not possess equivalent capabilities. The United States retains significant military and economic preeminence, while China's influence is regionally concentrated despite its global ambitions. Meanwhile, actors like the European Union and international organisations function as critical centres of governance but lack cohesive military power. The disparity among these centres undermines the premise of a truly multipolar system. For example; Russia's geopolitical influence contrasts sharply with its economic limitations, India's

global ambitions remain constrained by domestic challenges and regional competition, and the case with Brazil and Turkey is not much different.

The contemporary system is better described as polycentric, with multiple centres of influence operating across different domains. The United States, China, the European Union, ASEAN, emerging economies, but also new groupings such as BRICS prevail as economic centres. NATO, the U.S., Russia, and regional alliances like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the African Union are considered as security centres. The United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the OSCE and other global institutions are characterised as normative and institutional centres. Moreover, Silicon Valley, global media conglomerates, and transnational tech firms happen to be technological and cultural centres. These centres of influence often overlap and compete, but rarely achieve dominance across all spheres. Hence, there is a rich diversity and pluralism in the structure of today's international system.

The multipolarity framework assumes symmetry among power centres, leading to oversimplified analyses of interstate dynamics. It overlooks, a) the asymmetry of power, namely the uneven distribution of military, economic, and institutional capacities, b) the existence of non-state actors, the growing influence of multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations, and transnational advocacy networks, c) interdependence, namely the interconnected nature of the global system, where power is diffuse and often exercised collaboratively or competitively across domains. By focusing on state-centric poles multipolarity fails to capture the complexity of contemporary global governance.

One should also take into account the new developments which could exemplify the polycentric approach, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, as its influence extends through infrastructure investments, trade networks, and regional partnerships, in spite of the fact that its reach is limited by political pushback and economic

dependencies. The EU also exemplifies institutional and normative influence, shaping global norms on trade, climate change, and human rights. Yet, its military and geopolitical power remains limited. While the U.S. continues to dominate in military and technological domains, its influence is challenged by regional powers and shifting alliances, reflecting the interconnected dynamics of polycentrism.

A polycentric system challenges traditional models of great-power competition and necessitates new approaches to global governance. It requires coalitions of actors across regions and domains, moving beyond rigid alliances or blocs. Furthermore, with no single hegemony or dominant poles, global governance must embrace shared leadership and collaborative frameworks. Polycentric systems are inherently dynamic, too, requiring states and institutions to adapt to shifting power dynamics and emerging centres of influence.

The contemporary international system, therefore, is better understood as polycentric rather than multipolar. The diversity and asymmetry of power among states, organisations and other actors challenge traditional notions of balance and hierarchy. By adopting a polycentric framework, scholars and policymakers can better analyse and navigate the complexities of global governance in the 21st century. Future research, therefore, should choose to focus on refining the concept of polycentrism, exploring its implications for international relations theory, and developing strategies for effective governance in a world characterised by multiple, unequal centres of power.



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