

Systemic Turbulence that shaped World Politics from Multipolar to Unipolar International World Order

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Abstract

This paper delves into the systemic turbulence that shaped world politics from the multipolar to unipolar international world order. The paper relied on library documented instrument of research from the historical descriptive approach. Findings indicate that each distinct polarity type possesses its own highly characteristic structural strengths and inherent vulnerabilities. The multipolar order of the Concert era offered essential diplomatic flexibility and the cooperative management of power, but it was chronically, fatally susceptible to the catastrophic miscalculations, alliance entanglements, and competitive arms dynamics that ultimately produced the unmitigated disaster of the First World War. The bipolar Cold War order provided vastly greater predictability at the highest systemic level and maintained powerful nuclear deterrent mechanisms against direct great power conflict; however, it consistently generated intense, incredibly violent turbulence at the global periphery through devastating proxy wars and ideological interventions that ultimately cost millions of lives across the developing world. The unipolar order that briefly followed the Cold War successfully enabled a period of massive institutional expansion and economic globalisation under dominant American leadership, but it inevitably produced its own entirely new forms of turbulence, specifically hegemonic military overstretch, asymmetrical terrorist threats from determined non-state actors, and the fierce resistance of rising secondary powers, that starkly demonstrated the ultimate limits of preponderant power as a reliable guarantor of absolute international stability. The paper concludes that managing this dangerous, unprecedented transition—specifically containing its inevitable, violent turbulence whilst desperately attempting to preserve the cooperative, institutional achievements of the liberal order—will undoubtedly be among the absolute central, existential challenges of twenty-first-century global statecraft. Ultimately, this newly emerging multipolar order will undoubtedly generate its own entirely unprecedented, systemic turbulence in the critical decades to come, proving once again that friction and instability are the enduring hallmarks of global power transitions. The paper recommends multilateralism and a renewed global governance system that respects sovereign equality of states and international law, in order to curtail systemic political tension.

Keywords: Systemic; Turbulence; Multipolar; Bipolar; Unipolar; World Order

Introduction

The famous quote of Albert Einstein, which forewarns that a Third World War (WWIII), if ever fought, would be a nuclear apocalypse, is a warning that it would be too catastrophic that neither civilization nor industrialization would be left. To him, the absolute, no-holds-barred destructive nature of the war, characterized by loss of infrastructure, technology, and human knowledge, would be so profound that the survivors of this apocalypse would be forced to return and rebuild from the primitive stone age. An assumption that is appropriately captured by Ogbonna (2017), who noted that war arrests, reverses, and destroys development. As such, extreme wars built on fierce alliances, and mediated by sophisticated weaponry, will see to the total annihilation of the entire ecosystem. An insight that should be of critical concern to analysts, scholars, and statesmen, especially concerning the dynamics of the evolving polarity of the international system.

The international world order may be understood as the overarching arrangement of rules, norms, institutions, and distributions of power that govern relations among sovereign states at any given historical moment (Ikenberry, 2011). It is not a static condition but a dynamic configuration that evolves in response to shifts in material capabilities, ideological currents, and the rise or decline of great powers. Central to any analysis of world order is the concept of polarity, which defines the number of dominant power centres, or "poles," around which the international system organises itself. Scholars of international relations have long recognised that polarity shapes the incentives, constraints, and behavioural patterns of states in profound ways (Waltz, 1979).

Three structural configurations have dominated scholarly and policy discourse: multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity. A multipolar order is one in which three or more great powers share influence, none enjoying decisive supremacy. A bipolar order features two dominant powers whose rivalry structures the behaviour of all other states. A unipolar order exists when a single state commands so preponderant a share of military, economic, and political resources that it has no near-peer competitor (Wohlforth, 1999). Transitions among these configurations are rarely smooth; rather, they tend to generate precisely the kind of systemic turbulence that is the subject of this paper.

The central thesis of this analysis is that the historical transitions between these distinct structural systems have consistently generated profound instability, turbulence, and conflict. The world has systematically experienced severe turbulence at each phase of this structural evolution, from the alliance rivalries and great power wars of the multipolar era, through the proxy conflicts and nuclear brinkmanship of the Cold War, to the asymmetric threats and regional power competition of the unipolar period. As the balance of power shifts, the resulting friction creates systemic turbulence that fundamentally redefines global relations. This turbulence is not incidental but structural; it flows directly from the logic of power competition that operates differently under each specific polarity type. Where these flows would end, when it will end, and whether it would encroach and mainstream Africa as a major actor in it is a discussion for another day.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Understanding the mechanisms of systemic turbulence requires a robust theoretical foundation. The international system, as an analytical concept, refers to the ensemble of interacting states and the structural context within which they are forced to operate. States are the primary units of this system, and the international environment operates within a perpetual state of anarchy, meaning there is no overarching, global sovereign authority capable of enforcing rules or guaranteeing

security. This anarchic structure inherently shapes the nature of power relations among states, compelling them to prioritise their own survival and security above all other objectives, as their behaviour is shaped crucially by the distribution of capabilities across the system as a whole.

To theoretically make meaning in this analysis, one must apply the foundational tenets of Classical Realism and Structural Realism (Neorealism). Hans Morgenthau's Classical Realism provides the primary starting point. Morgenthau (1948) argued that international politics is fundamentally driven by the innate human desire for power, defined in terms of national interest, which results in a perpetual, inescapable struggle for dominance. In Morgenthau's view, the management of this relentless struggle through balance-of-power politics constitutes the principal mechanism by which hegemony can be checked and a semblance of international stability maintained.

Kenneth Waltz (1979) significantly refined this insight within the framework of Structural Realism. Waltz shifted the analytical focus away from human nature and to the structure of the system itself, positing that the distribution of capabilities, specifically the number and relative power of the great powers, dictates state behaviour and the overarching likelihood of conflict. The parameters for classifying multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity are thereby established by counting the number of "poles," or states capable of independently threatening the survival of others. For Waltz (1979), bipolar systems are inherently more stable than multipolar ones because, with only two dominant states, each possesses a powerful incentive to manage the system carefully, alongside the capability to do so without relying on the unpredictable actions of unreliable alliance partners. Multipolar systems, by contrast, are highly prone to fatal miscalculations, buck-passing, and complex alliance entanglements.

Furthermore, state behaviours across these different eras can be explained through Balance of Power Theory and Hegemonic Stability Theory. Balance of Power Theory, advanced by scholars such as Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001), suggests that national security is enhanced when military capability is distributed so that no one state is strong enough to dominate all others. States will inherently tend to balance against dominant powers to prevent hegemony, a dynamic highly prevalent in multipolar systems, utilizing either internal efforts such as military build-ups or external efforts like alliance formation. In contrast, Hegemonic Stability Theory, developed by Gilpin (1981) and Kindleberger (1973), posits that the international system is most stable when a single nation-state acts as the dominant world power. This hegemon must be willing and able to provide the public goods necessary to sustain global order, including open trade routes, a stable international currency, and overarching security guarantees. Within this comprehensive theoretical framework, systemic turbulence, a metaphor effectively employed by Rosenau (1990), can be understood as the instability generated by power competition, rapid structural transitions, and the absence of effective mechanisms to manage rivalry among states in an era of rapid change.

Multipolar World Order: Characteristics and Turbulence

The quintessential historical example of a multipolar system is found in the European state system following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, extending until the outbreak of the First World War (WWI) in 1914. Convened in the immediate aftermath of the devastating Napoleonic Wars, the Congress of Vienna was explicitly designed to prevent the re-emergence of a European hegemon. The resulting framework, known as the "Concert of Europe," established a complex web of great power management. Under this arrangement, five great powers, Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, Russia, and France, collectively managed the international system through periodic diplomatic

conferences and a shared, overarching commitment to preventing the domination of Europe by any single state.

This era was highlighted by several key characteristics. Power was distinctly dispersed among several roughly comparable major powers, none of which could achieve unchallenged dominance or dictate systemic norms alone. During this period, balance-of-power politics served as the defining feature of the international order. Alliances were highly flexible and constantly shifting, reflecting the pragmatic dictates of the balance of power rather than rigid, fixed ideological commitments. States rapidly changed partners to counteract any single power that threatened to grow disproportionately strong. Diplomacy acted as the primary tool of statecraft, and the management of power transitions was, for much of the nineteenth century, a reasonably successful enterprise, suppressing numerous potential conflicts during the decades following 1815, as noted by Schroeder (1994).

However, this multipolar structure was inherently fragile and carried within it the seeds of its own violent turbulence. As the nineteenth century advanced, several potent dynamics severely eroded the relative stability of the Concert era. The rise of nationalism profoundly reshaped the domestic politics of European states and generated fierce irredentist pressures that the great powers found increasingly difficult to contain, a phenomenon extensively documented by Hobsbawm (1987). Furthermore, aggressive colonial competition intensified as industrial capitalism drove European powers to aggressively seek overseas markets and raw materials, bringing them into recurring, dangerous confrontations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Kennedy, 1987). Rapid arms races, particularly the intense Anglo-German naval rivalry that emerged after 1898, dramatically raised geopolitical tensions and systematically undermined the baseline trust that effective great power management strictly required.

The alliance system that subsequently crystallised in the late nineteenth century further amplified these systemic tensions. The formation of rigid, opposing alliance blocs, the Triple Alliance comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy on one side, positioned against the Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia on the other, fatally transformed the flexible balancing of the early Concert era into an inflexible, highly reactive system of interlocking military commitments. As Keohane and Nye (1977) observed regarding complex interdependence, such intricate webs create vulnerabilities alongside opportunities; the rigid alliance system of this period perfectly illustrates the darker, destabilising side of that interdependence.

The fragility of this multipolar instability was clearly illustrated by key historical examples. The Crimean War (1853–1856), arising from competing great power interests in the declining Ottoman Empire, offered an early, bloody indication of latent instability, exposing the structural limits of the Concert mechanism and demonstrating that great power management easily breaks down when vital interests are at stake (Figes, 2010). The ultimate and most catastrophic expression of multipolar turbulence, however, was the First World War (1914–1918). The war was not the product of a single diplomatic failure, but rather the explosive culmination of accumulated multipolar tensions: the rigid alliance entanglements that transformed a minor regional crisis in the Balkans into a global conflagration, the total failure of deterrence in a system of multiple power centres, and the fatal miscalculations that structural realists like Waltz (1979) regard as endemic to multipolar configurations. As Mearsheimer (2001) argued, the structural incentives of the European multipolar order - specifically the absolute imperative to balance, the fear of falling behind, and the dangerous temptation to exploit temporary windows of strategic opportunity -

made systemic war highly probable. The resulting loss of some seventeen million lives violently confirmed that multipolarity, despite its initial diplomatic flexibility, harboured a profound propensity for catastrophic miscalculation and systemic conflict.

Transition from Multipolarity to Bipolarity

The transition from multipolarity to bipolarity was neither a sudden event nor a smooth diplomatic process; rather, it was accomplished through the unprecedented devastation of two world wars that cumulatively destroyed the traditional European balance-of-power system. The immense physical, economic, and demographic destruction wrought by these global conflicts triggered the total collapse of the old European order and elevated two non-European powers - the United States and the Soviet Union - to a position of preponderant, global strength (Kennedy, 1987).

The First World War conclusively shattered the Concert of Europe and the century-old framework of great power management. The subsequent Treaty of Versailles (1919) attempted to reconstruct the international order based on principles of national self-determination and collective security through the establishment of the League of Nations. However, this ambitious experiment failed to take root, largely because the United States declined to join, and the major European powers lacked both the capacity and the political will to enforce its mandates (Keylor, 2003).

The Second World War completed the absolute destruction of European hegemony. Great Britain and France, historically the two principal European great powers, emerged from the brutal conflict militarily exhausted, financially dependent, and facing the rapid disintegration of their vast colonial empires, marking a definitive, irreversible decline of traditional European global arbiters. Concurrently, the revisionist powers whose aggression had precipitated the war - Germany, Italy, and Japan - were totally defeated, occupied, and subsequently reconstructed under external allied supervision. The old multipolar order, characterised by European great powers competing for position and global influence, had definitively ceased to function as a viable system (Bull, 1977).

Into this geopolitical vacuum, an entirely new configuration of power emerged. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as two distinct, unparalleled superpowers, whose combined industrial output and military capacity completely dwarfed that of any other existing state. The United States, having entered the war reluctantly, emerged from the conflict as the world's absolute largest economy, possessing a temporary monopoly on nuclear weapons until 1949, and maintaining vast military deployments spanning the globe. The Soviet Union, despite suffering catastrophic demographic losses of approximately twenty-seven million people (Overy, 2004), had simultaneously demonstrated a formidable, unmatched capacity for industrial mobilisation and military organisation. By 1949, the Soviet Union had successfully tested its own nuclear device and decisively extended its political and military control over much of Eastern Europe.

This dramatic transition had profound global consequences, namely the rapid, systematic reorganisation of global alliances and a stark, uncompromising ideological division of the world. The international system was effectively and rigidly split into two competing spheres of influence: the capitalist, democratic West, championed heavily by the US and formalised through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), positioned against the communist, authoritarian East, led by the USSR and formalised via the Warsaw Pact. The multipolar flexibility of the past century was thoroughly replaced by a rigid, zero-sum global competition, giving the bipolar structure a quality of comprehensiveness that distinguished it sharply from the shifting politics of the multipolar era (Gaddis, 2005). The transition period itself was fraught with turbulence, directly

marked by acute crises such as the Berlin Blockade (1948–1949), the Greek Civil War, and the literal hardening of the Iron Curtain across the European continent.

Bipolar World Order and Global Turbulence

The ensuing era of global turbulence is best understood with the Cold War, spanning from approximately 1947 to 1991, serving as the primary historical context and the definitive example of a bipolar international order. The core characteristics of this new structural system included absolute domination by two distinct power centres, intense ideological confrontation between the fundamental tenets of capitalism and communism, and the persistent, existential shadow of nuclear deterrence.

From a theoretical perspective, Kenneth Waltz argued that bipolarity was inherently more stable than multipolarity because the two superpowers only had to focus their strategic attention on each other, thereby massively reducing the likelihood of systemic miscalculation. There is notable empirical support for this view: the Cold War successfully avoided producing a direct, conventional military conflict between the superpowers, and the overall record of great power war during the period compares highly favourably with the preceding multipolar era.

However, the stability of bipolarity at the highest level of direct superpower confrontation was purchased at the devastating cost of intense instability and turbulence at the global periphery. While direct confrontation between the US and the USSR was prevented by the terrifying doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), turbulence severely manifested through devastating proxy wars, a relentless nuclear and conventional arms competition, and pervasive political rivalry across the Global South. The superpowers deliberately exported their ideological conflict to the developing world in order to avoid a direct, mutually annihilating nuclear exchange.

The defining instrument of this Cold War turbulence was the proxy war, conflicts in the developing world wherein the superpowers actively supported opposing local factions as part of their broader ideological competition (Westad, 2007). These peripheral conflicts were not incidental to the Cold War; they were entirely central to it, resulting in millions of deaths across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The Korean War (1950–1953) served as the first major proxy conflict of the era, triggered by North Korea's invasion of the South, drawing in the United States and China, and ultimately costing approximately three million lives (Cumings, 2010). The Vietnam War (1955–1975) became the most prolonged and destructive proxy conflict, demonstrating the absolute limits of superpower military projection and the immense resilience of locally rooted nationalist movements (Herring, 2002). Despite the United States deploying over five hundred thousand troops, the ultimate communist victory represented a severe, if regionally contained, setback for American hegemonic power. Even the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970 has traces of super-power interest.

Furthermore, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 remains the absolute defining moment of Cold War nuclear brinkmanship, illustrating the severe turbulence generated by bipolarity. The Soviet installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba, mere miles from the American mainland, brought the superpowers to the absolute closest point of direct military confrontation in the entire Cold War period (Kennedy, 1969; Allison & Zelikow, 1999). The negotiated resolution of the crisis illustrated both the immense dangers and the necessary mechanisms of crisis management in a bipolar nuclear order, giving concrete reality to the concept of nuclear deterrence by demonstrating

that the mutual possession of thermonuclear weapons created powerful, overriding incentives to avoid direct conflict even under extreme provocation.

Later in the era, the Soviet-Afghan War (1979 -1989) added further bloody evidence of the turbulence generated by bipolar competition. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, undertaken to prop up a failing Marxist government, drew immense American support to the Mujahideen resistance, becoming a costly and ultimately futile counterinsurgency that contributed significantly to the internal stresses that later brought about the collapse of the Soviet state (Braithwaite, 2011). This conflict possessed profound long-term consequences, directly creating the volatile conditions in which Islamist militant networks, including those that would later carry out the September 11 attacks, were able to develop and flourish (Rashid, 2000).

To this end, ideological rivalry constituted a major dimension of Cold War turbulence. The contest between liberal capitalism and Marxist-Leninist communism was not merely a territorial competition between two states, but a total struggle between two comprehensive visions of social organisation, each seeking universal validity and total global adherence (Gaddis, 2005). This pervasive ideological dimension drove both superpowers to continuously intervene in the domestic politics of vulnerable states, frequently destabilising fragile political systems through supported coups, manipulated elections, and funded civil conflicts. Therefore, one must conclude that while bipolarity offered greater structural predictability than multipolarity, it simultaneously caused persistent, deadly global tension and peripheral violence due to unyielding, systemic ideological competition.

Transition from Bipolarity to Unipolarity

The bipolar order came to a rapid, sudden, and largely unanticipated end, prompting a dramatic structural transition from bipolarity to unipolarity. Few analysts had successfully predicted that the Soviet Union would completely collapse within a single generation of its apparent stabilisation; even fewer anticipated the absolute speed with which the bipolar order dissolved once its principal eastern pillar began to substantially weaken.

This momentous shift is marked distinctly by the end of the Cold War and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The structural causes of the Soviet collapse remain debated among historians, but most scholarly accounts emphasise a fatal combination of severe economic stagnation rooted deeply in the inefficiencies of the command economy, the political and ideological exhaustion of the Marxist-Leninist project, and the cumulative, excruciating economic burden of the relentless arms race with the United States (Brown, 2009; Gaidar, 2007). Furthermore, the internal reforming ambitions of Mikhail Gorbachev, specifically his policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), unleashed powerful domestic and nationalist forces that the centralized Soviet state simply could no longer contain.

The total dissolution of communist bloc politics proceeded at a breathtaking pace between 1989 and 1991. The largely peaceful revolutions of 1989 swept away entrenched Soviet-aligned governments across Eastern Europe, including Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, with a speed that utterly astonished global observers. The dramatic fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 became the iconic, defining symbol of the Cold War's end. Ultimately, the Soviet Union itself was formally and legally dissolved on 25 December 1991, fragmenting into fifteen newly independent republics (Plokhy, 2014). This incredible geopolitical

event resulted in the total dissolution of communist bloc politics, permanently leaving the global ideological battle decisively won by the West.

With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the bipolar structure that had rigidly organised world politics for over four decades ceased to exist. The international system witnessed the rapid emergence of a system that was, at least for a distinct period, genuinely unipolar. This new order was definitively defined by the United States' uncontested, overwhelming dominance in military capabilities, global economic output, technological leadership, and institutional political influence. It became a period of hyperpower existence. The US military expenditure vastly exceeded that of the next several powers combined, and its economy accounted for roughly one quarter of total global GDP at the moment of Soviet collapse (Wohlforth, 1999).

To theoretically frame this unprecedented transition, scholar Charles Krauthammer coined the influential concept of the "Unipolar Moment" in 1990. Krauthammer observed that, for the first time in modern history, a single power had emerged with such comprehensive, unmatched dominance that it faced no plausible peer competitor, possessing the unprecedented power to unilaterally shape global affairs. While his confidence in the long-term durability of this moment would eventually prove premature, his analysis correctly identified the profound structural novelty of the post-Cold War situation.

However, the transition itself was entirely not without its own localized turbulence. The sudden disintegration of the centralized Soviet state unleashed a massive wave of dormant ethnic nationalism and violent territorial conflict in the former Soviet space - most notably in Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, and Moldova - that the international community severely struggled to effectively manage (Snyder, 1993). Furthermore, the horrific dissolution of Yugoslavia, though technically not part of the formal Soviet bloc, produced the absolute bloodiest wars in Europe since 1945, including tragic genocides in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. These brutal conflicts starkly demonstrated that the total removal of the bipolar strategic overlay could easily unleash dormant, historical conflicts rather than automatically produce a new era of global peace.

Unipolar World Order and Contemporary Turbulence

The unipolar world order fundamentally and structurally restructured international relations. The new systemic architecture was distinctly characterised by the dominance of a single, unrivalled superpower, the rapid, unprecedented acceleration of global economic integration and globalisation, and the aggressive expansion of liberal international institutions. Under American leadership, institutions such as the World Trade Organization were championed, and NATO saw significant eastward expansion (Ikenberry, 2011). The United States actively sought to permanently embed its global hegemony by creating a comprehensive institutional order that vigorously promoted free markets and liberal democratic governance as the universal, preferred model of domestic governance. This ambitious project enjoyed considerable success throughout the 1990s, as states across Central and Eastern Europe enthusiastically transitioned to market democracies and integrated into Western institutions.

However, unipolarity unequivocally did not eliminate global turbulence; rather, it fundamentally reconfigured it. Unipolarity birthed modern, complex sources of turbulence that were fundamentally different from the traditional, symmetric great power wars of the past. These new destabilising forces included frequent unilateral military interventions, the terrifying rise of transnational terrorism, highly asymmetrical resistance to American hegemony, and localized,

intense regional power competition. One could also add the emergence of Non-State Armed Groups, claiming that they are products of the prevailing global injustice system.

The Gulf War of 1991 provided an early illustration of the new challenges of order maintenance under unipolarity (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). When Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait - calculating incorrectly that the end of the Cold War had created a window of strategic opportunity - a massive coalition assembled and led by the United States defeated Iraqi forces in a brief but highly decisive campaign. While serving as a stark demonstration of total American conventional military dominance, this American-led response simultaneously set a complex precedent for military intervention in defence of international norms that would be invoked with vastly more controversial, destabilising results in subsequent years.

The most dramatic, paradigm-shifting challenge to the unipolar order occurred with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which brutally exposed the severe limits of military preponderance as a guarantor of absolute national security. Nineteen hijackers affiliated with the transnational al-Qaeda network killed approximately 3,000 people across New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, terrifyingly demonstrating that a small, non-state actor could inflict catastrophic, historic harm on the world's most powerful state (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2004). These horrific attacks revealed what scholar Joseph Nye (2002) accurately described as the "paradox of American power": a state possessing unparalleled material capabilities was nonetheless acutely vulnerable to asymmetric threats generated by the very globalised processes - such as the diffusion of technology and open communications networks - that its own liberal world order had actively promoted. Because non-state actors and rogue states were structurally unable to match American conventional military might, they increasingly resorted to unconventional, asymmetric warfare to achieve their political aims.

The subsequent American military response, specifically the Global War on Terror encompassing the War in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and the controversial Iraq War (2003–2011), deeply illustrated both the massive reach and the stark limits of unipolar power. The invasion of Afghanistan rapidly removed the Taliban government that had harboured al-Qaeda; however, the subsequent two-decade effort to reconstruct a stable, democratic Afghan state proved entirely beyond the capacity of even the world's dominant hegemon (Jones, 2009). Similarly, the 2003 Iraq War, controversially launched on the basis of disputed intelligence and without explicit United Nations authorisation, successfully removed Saddam Hussein but immediately unleashed a protracted, brutal insurgency that cost over one hundred thousand Iraqi civilian lives and severely, permanently damaged American global credibility and diplomatic influence (Ricks, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2004). The US's ambitious attempt to unilaterally police the globe frequently generated immense, unmanageable blowback. Both massive conflicts starkly demonstrated that military dominance does not translate automatically into sustained political control, and that unchecked hegemonic power generates its own fierce forms of resistance - a phenomenon Bacevich (2002) described as the dangerous "imperial temptation" and its inevitable consequences.

Beyond terrorism and exhausting military interventions, the unipolar period consistently generated further turbulence through the determined resistance to American hegemony by rising regional powers. Russia forcefully signalled its intention to contest the post-Cold War settlement in the former Soviet space through its military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and the highly controversial annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Trenin, 2014). Simultaneously, China's dramatic, unprecedented economic growth and rapid military modernisation raised profound geopolitical

questions regarding the longevity of the unipolar moment and the fundamental sustainability of the American-led order in East Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014). Furthermore, the proliferation of nuclear weapons to North Korea and the persistent strategic challenge of Iran's nuclear programme demonstrated conclusively that American dominance could not reliably prevent the dangerous spread of the most destructive technologies. Ultimately, an evaluation of this specific era reveals that the relative dominance by one power did not successfully eliminate systemic instability; instead, it definitively led to the emergence of highly complex, new structural challenges that extended far beyond traditional interstate warfare, thoroughly reconfiguring the sources of global instability.

The Potential Return to Multipolarity

As the twenty-first century actively progresses, mounting geopolitical evidence suggests that the "Unipolar Moment" is steadily fading, strongly signalling a potential, highly consequential return to a more complex, multipolar configuration of global power. This fundamental structural shift is primarily driven by the rapid, sustained economic and military growth of heavily populated emerging powers, specifically China, India, and a geopolitically resurgent, aggressive Russia. Including the tendency of the US wearing itself out through miscalculated wars like the currently ongoing Israel-Iran War.

The most significant and transformative indicator of this shift is the dramatic rise of China, a transformation of global economic and military power so substantial that leading scholars such as Mearsheimer (2014) and Allison (2017) have devoted major analytical works entirely to its long-term systemic implications. China has aggressively positioned itself as a true near-peer competitor to the United States. Remarkably, China's economy, when measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, successfully overtook that of the United States by 2014 to become the absolute largest in the world (International Monetary Fund, 2014). Furthermore, China's military expenditure grew by an astonishing seven hundred per cent between 1995 and 2015, heavily equipping the People's Liberation Army with highly advanced anti-access/area denial capabilities designed specifically to challenge American military dominance in the critical Western Pacific (Friedberg, 2011). Strategically, China has extensively utilized massive geoeconomic initiatives, specifically the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013, to ambitiously reshape global infrastructure and aggressively expand its global influence and strategic interests across multiple continents (Hillman, 2020).

India fundamentally represents a second major structural element of the rapidly emerging multipolar order. As the world's most populous state and a declared nuclear power since 1998, India has sustained highly impressive rates of economic growth, is actively projected to become the world's third-largest economy by the mid-twenty-first century, and has steadily developed highly significant, modern military capabilities (Pant, 2016). Crucially, India's foreign policy has consistently and historically resisted formal alignment with any single great power - a tradition deeply rooted in the Non-Aligned Movement of the Cold War era - whilst increasingly and confidently asserting itself as a completely independent, powerful pole in South Asia and the vital Indian Ocean region (Mohan, 2006).

Concurrently, Russia, despite being economically weaker and demographically smaller than either China or India, fiercely retains highly significant attributes of traditional great power status. Russia maintains a massive nuclear arsenal, holds a highly influential permanent veto seat on the United Nations Security Council, and has demonstrated a persistent, aggressive willingness to utilize conventional military force to violently assert its geopolitical interests in its immediate

neighbourhood (Lo, 2015). Russia's aggressive military intervention in Ukraine - beginning with the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and severely escalating to a devastating full-scale invasion in February 2022 - constituted the absolute most significant challenge to the established post-Cold War European security order, clearly illustrating that Russia remains highly capable of unilateral, disruptive military action on a massive, continental scale. However, how well its military campaign in Ukraine has gone remains a factor that would define its role in the transitioning global system. Furthermore, the strategic formation of closer, coordinated ties between Russia and China, while currently falling short of a formal mutual-defence alliance, has added profound complexity to the emerging multipolar strategic landscape (Lukin, 2021).

There are increasingly clear institutional indicators of a shifting international order. The formation and expansion of institutions and strategic alignments that operate entirely outside or actively alongside the American-led liberal international order further indicates a definitive shift towards multipolarity. The BRICS grouping (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which significantly expanded its membership in 2023, represents a highly coordinated attempt to provide a powerful institutional voice for massive emerging economies and to actively reform or entirely bypass Western-dominated international financial institutions (Cooper & Farooq, 2016). Similarly, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provides an alternative Eurasian security framework heavily centred on Chinese and Russian strategic cooperation. While these developments do not yet amount to the complete construction of a coherent, unified alternative world order, they powerfully indicate that the institutional architecture of the unipolar moment is under sustained, irreversible pressure.

The profound implications of this potential return to multipolar dynamics strongly suggest that the twenty-first century will inevitably witness entirely new, highly complex forms of systemic turbulence. As the United States gradually transitions from an unquestioned hegemon to a "first among equals," the structural risk of catastrophic miscalculation between heavily armed, competing great powers significantly increases, closely echoing the alliance dangers of the pre-1914 multipolar system. However, these new forms of turbulence differ in critically important respects from the multipolar era before 1914. Crucially, the presence of thermonuclear weapons, currently possessed by nine sovereign states, heavily constrains the possibility of direct, total great power conflict in ways entirely unavailable to the great powers of the nineteenth century, effectively reproducing something of the deterrent logic of the bipolar Cold War, but dangerously scaled to a multipolar level (Paul, 2009).

Simultaneously, twenty-first-century multipolarity massively increases the complexity of managing rapid international crises, raises the risk of accidental miscalculation among multiple, competing actors, and generates intense, unprecedented competitive dynamics in entirely new technological domains. Modern strategic competition is now exacerbated by advanced capabilities in cyber space, artificial intelligence, weaponised space platforms, and the highly ambiguous grey zones between formal war and peace, for which established international norms and legal frameworks are severely weak or entirely absent (Nye, 2010). The emerging multipolar order is thus highly likely to generate its own entirely distinctive forms of structural turbulence, deeply shaped by the volatile intersection of traditional, territorial geopolitical competition with completely new technological and ideological contests.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no gainsaying that, a comprehensive, rigorous comparative analysis of the three major historical orders demonstrates conclusively that the fundamental structure of international politics directly and heavily influences the exact nature of global conflict and stability. The global political landscape has undergone a highly systematic, often violent evolution from the diplomatically flexible but structurally volatile multipolarity of the nineteenth century, through the rigid, ideologically charged, and peripheral violence of Cold War bipolarity, and into the American-led, institutionally expansive but asymmetrically vulnerable unipolarity of the post-Cold War era.

Each distinct polarity type possesses its own highly characteristic structural strengths and inherent vulnerabilities. The multipolar order of the Concert era offered essential diplomatic flexibility and the cooperative management of power, but it was chronically, fatally susceptible to the catastrophic miscalculations, alliance entanglements, and competitive arms dynamics that ultimately produced the unmitigated disaster of the First World War. The bipolar Cold War order provided vastly greater predictability at the highest systemic level and maintained powerful nuclear deterrent mechanisms against direct great power conflict; however, it consistently generated intense, incredibly violent turbulence at the global periphery through devastating proxy wars and ideological interventions that ultimately cost millions of lives across the developing world. The unipolar order that briefly followed the Cold War successfully enabled a period of massive institutional expansion and economic globalisation under dominant American leadership, but it inevitably produced its own entirely new forms of turbulence, specifically hegemonic military overstretch, asymmetrical terrorist threats from determined non-state actors, and the fierce resistance of rising secondary powers, that starkly demonstrated the ultimate limits of preponderant power as a reliable guarantor of absolute international stability.

The core, unifying argument logically advanced throughout this comprehensive analysis is that systemic instability is unequivocally not a historical pathology exclusive to any single polarity structure. Rather, turbulence is a recurring, deeply intrinsic, and constitutive feature of the international system. It is systematically generated, in varying historical forms, by the relentless competitive logic of global anarchy - the permanent absence of a central, global authority capable of effectively enforcing order among highly armed sovereign states - operating distinctly under each evolving structural configuration. This foundational insight, entirely central to both Morgenthau's Classical Realism and Waltz's Structural Realism, carries incredibly important, urgent implications for the future of contemporary world politics.

Assessing the current, highly volatile trajectory of the contemporary international system, it is abundantly evident that the world is rapidly pivoting toward a new, highly complex multipolar order. The clear, undeniable signals of a return to multipolarity - the massive economic and military rise of China, the violent reassertiveness of Russia, and the growing strategic weight of India and other rising powers - strongly suggest not a return to a golden era of peace, but rather the definite emergence of a new, incredibly complex competitive landscape. In this emerging system, the exact forms of global turbulence will be heavily shaped by the highly volatile interaction of traditional geopolitical, territorial rivalry combined with entirely new, unregulated technological domains and the fracturing legacies of the American liberal international order.

The structural trajectory of the contemporary international system thus points ominously towards a prolonged period of deep structural uncertainty and high potential instability as the incredibly complex transition away from unipolarity fully unfolds. Effectively managing this dangerous, unprecedented transition—specifically containing its inevitable, violent turbulence whilst

desperately attempting to preserve the cooperative, institutional achievements of the liberal order—will undoubtedly be among the absolute central, existential challenges of twenty-first-century global statecraft. Ultimately, this newly emerging multipolar order will undoubtedly generate its own entirely unprecedented, systemic turbulence in the critical decades to come, proving once again that friction and instability are the enduring hallmarks of global power transitions. The historical record meticulously examined herein offers both stark warnings and, perhaps in the diplomatic experience of the Concert of Europe at its absolute best, some highly cautious grounds for hope that such cooperative management is theoretically possible, even if historically difficult and practically imperfect. Multilateralism and a renewed global governance system is recommended to reduce political and systemic tension among states.

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