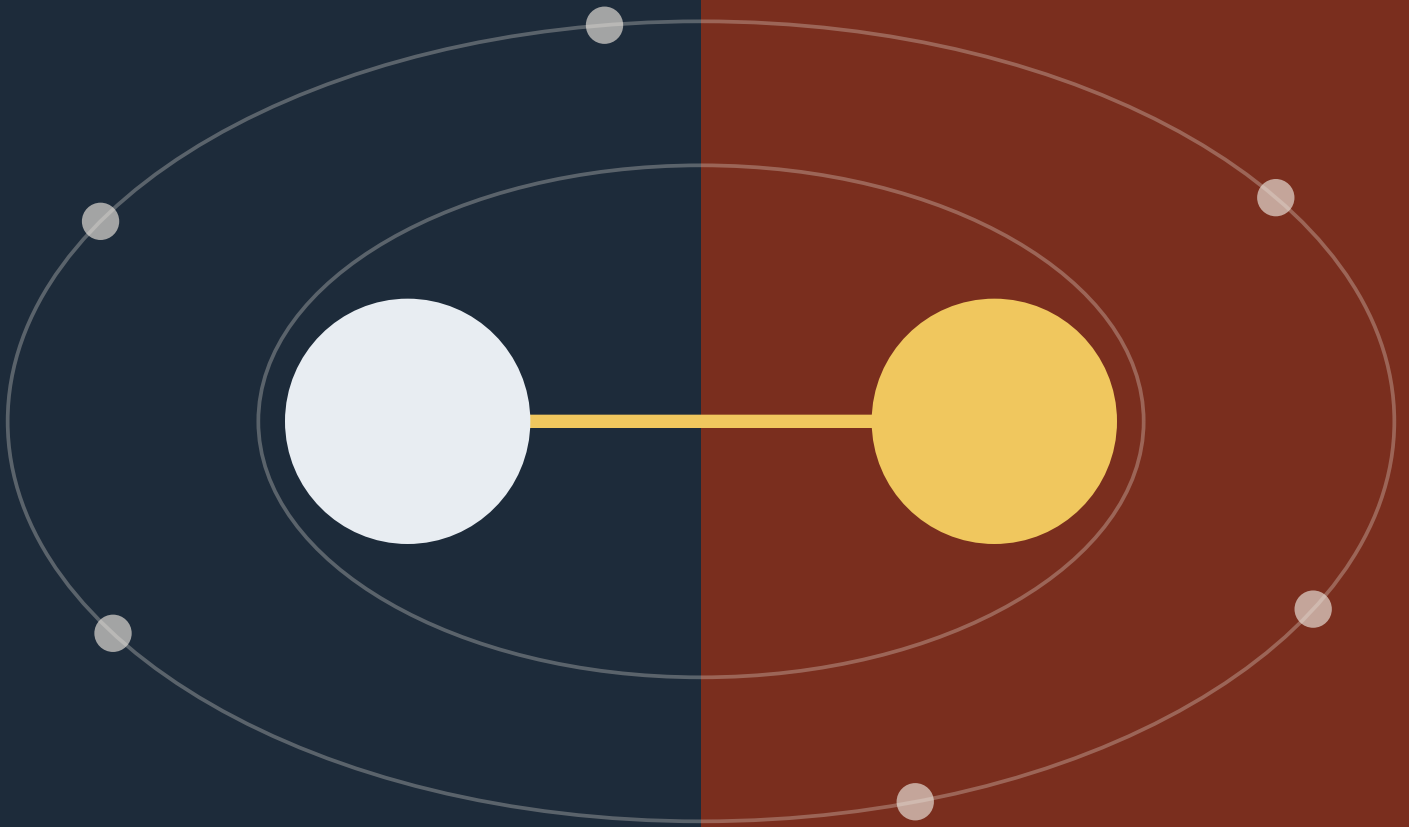




An Emergent Multipolar Security Regime?

Michael O'Hanlon

The concept of an emerging multipolar security order has been exaggerated. To be sure, power distributions and security challenges are changing. However, a shift toward multipolarity would require multiple regional hegemonies each leading its own network of organizations, with each network operating on unique principles and interests. There would likely be significant friction and competition between the various networks. Alternatively, it would imply a genuinely collaborative and powerful global security order, but that exists only for certain issues like nuclear nonproliferation at a time when the United Nations Security Council has been largely defanged due to great-power competition. Thus, today's institutional landscape is more bipolar or tripolar than multipolar — though with the United States clearly the single greatest security power, supported by allies even in the Trump era. Today's world is more

similar to that of the Cold War than to a genuinely multidimensional power distribution.

China and Russia are again aligned, albeit in different ways than in the Cold War (and with different goals back then). Iran and North Korea remain complex problems for the United States and its allies. China-led security institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are still not major players on the big issues of the day.

The Western world as a system of alliances is still largely the same as it ever was, only a bit bigger (though weakening under Trump with an uncertain prognosis). Maybe I don't want to see or acknowledge change, but I see more continuity than change, at least in terms of power structure and global order, despite Trump's occasional efforts to weaken it.



U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III shakes hands with North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington, D.C., July 11, 2024. | U.S. Army photo by Spc. Phyleicia-Nicole Dais (public domain)

Consider some historical perspective for a moment. Since World War II, we had many phases of thinking about American decline — the implication that the United States and its allies are losing ground to a new rival or, as this *FSR* issue postulates, a group of potential rivals and competitors. The first time, as observed by the late great Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, was within a few years of the formation of the post-1945 alliance network. By the late 1950s and the "Sputnik moment," the Soviet Union seemed to catch up to a lagging United States in various areas of technology (and in the overall strength of its military, especially in Central Europe). China was somewhat independent of the Soviet Union and therefore a third pole, with the Global South being a fourth; but for the most part, the world was bipolar, and the United States with allies was seen as slipping behind.

Similar observations were made throughout the next decades: in the late 1960s, as the protracted Vietnam War sapped our military strength and divided the American people; in the late 1970s, after the defeat of South Vietnam by North Vietnam, the fall of the Shah of Iran, as well as stagflation in the economy; in the late 1980s, when Paul Kennedy wrote his seminal work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, documenting a half millennium of history and using it in part to predict the next period of American decline; and in the late 2000s, when a combination of "forever" wars in the Middle East as well as the 2008 global financial crisis seemed to herald American decline in both relative and absolute terms.

Sometimes these predictions of decline presupposed a single relative beneficiary of America's reduced strength; sometimes they presupposed several. There were also times when new power centers seemed to

emerge separately from any noticeable decline in American power. The coining of the phrase "BRICS" in the early 2000s recognized the growing success and strength (not just in economic terms) of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa among other countries. Never mind that, in the words of my Brookings colleague, Bruce Jones, "the BRICS had no mortar" — there was little holding them together as a bloc or new pole in the global security order, even if some of them are individually powerful, notably Russia and China.

My point in reviewing this history is not to disprove the possibility of a relative American or allied decline that might facilitate the arrival of new powers and a multipolar world. It is only to note that the same prediction has been advanced many times in the last seventy years but generally incorrect to date.

WHY THE WORLD REMAINS BIPOLAR - FOR NOW

So, what about today? My contention is that while a world of 200 countries and 8 billion people will indeed have many different types of security challenges and many important actors, the world remains roughly bipolar, or tripolar on some issues — with little reason to think that will change anytime soon. Here are my main reasons:

- * The United States, with a national defense budget nearing USD 1 trillion a year, still accounts for more than 35 percent of global military spending.

- * U.S. allies in Europe, stepping up their efforts after considerable hectoring from

the Trump Administration, plus U.S. allies and security partners in East Asia and the Pacific and the Middle East, represent about another 35 percent.

- * Russia is a formidable military power in Eastern Europe and globally as well, because of its nuclear weapons in particular - at least in its ability to threaten devastation, if not to control events or territory.

- * But China, Russia's security partner "without limits," is the real rising superpower. China's military budget is estimated at well over USD 300 billion, once appropriate adjustments are made to account for costs not included in its official defense budget, but the U.S. would, and its already rough parity with U.S. military power in the western Pacific (I would contend). No other country with the very partial exception of India (and Iran, in a different way) is making any real effort to be an important security player far from its own shores.

- * Finally, multilateral security efforts centered on the United Nations system have weakened in relative importance in recent decades. Nobody is meaningfully regulating AI or gene splicing or climate change or pollution of the oceans or destruction of rain forest.

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It is also worth noting that, as of early 2026, the world still has nine nuclear weapons states (official and unofficial) - the same number throughout the twenty-first

century to date. This is less than half of the number that JFK feared would exist by the

end of the twentieth century, when he made his predictions in the early 1960s.



The Security Council Chamber at UN Headquarters, New York. | UN Photo/Albert Fox (used for editorial/news purposes; credit required per UN Photo terms)

Of course, it is not all about spending levels nor global ambitions. There are new security issues where traditional measures of military power do not equally apply. Other security issues, broadly speaking, include the regulation and control of AI and modern microbiology, the management of global climate change, and the management of pandemics. Given the weakening of multilateral security institutions (not just UN Peacekeeping Operations, but also the WHO and other health-related organizations), I would describe the existing state of play for addressing such

transnational challenges as one of international anarchy (or weak policy intervention) rather than multipolarity. I wish things were more genuinely multipolar because we could use more governance and more good ideas on several key issues of the day. Alas, I fear we are collectively floundering as a human civilization on a number of them.

My argument here is not to be dismissive of the notion that aspects of the world's security order are becoming more multipolar - or at least, that they should

become more multipolar. It is only to say that, for the moment, I see more of a mélange of bipolarity or tripolarity with quasi-anarchy rather than genuine

multipolarity, by most metrics of power and on most matters of top-tier security importance for the planet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael O'Hanlon is Phil Knight Chair in Defense and Strategy, Brookings Institution, and author of *To Dare Mighty Things: U.S. Defense Strategy Since the Revolution* (Yale, 2026).

