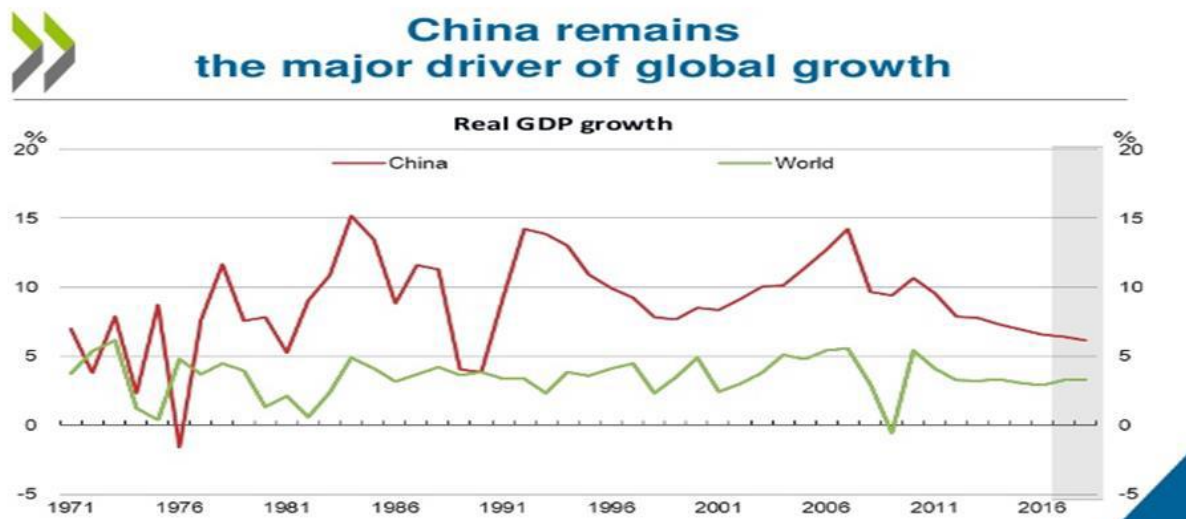


The Rise of Regional Powers: Is Global Leadership Becoming Decentralized?

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Introduction

Global power politics is going through a major shift. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States entered an unparalleled period of unipolar dominance². Its strong economy, powerful military, and global influence allowed it to build and maintain an international order that largely reflected American interests. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. played the leading role in shaping global trade, governance, and security systems. While this order was based on ideas like open markets, international cooperation, and democracy, it also served to strengthen U.S. supremacy. Over the past two decades, however, this dominance has been steadily weakened by a combination of internal and external pressures. Domestically, the 2008 global



Source: OECD Economic Outlook Database

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² Alexis Esposto and Juan Felix Agudelo Quintero, "From a Unipolar to a Multipolar World: What's in It for Australia?," *Chinese Journal of International Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): 2450008..

financial crisis damaged perceptions of U.S. economic invulnerability, while costly and lengthy military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan strained resources and diminished global credibility³. From outside, the biggest factor has been China's economic rise. Its GDP grew from only 189 billion dollars in 1980 to 17.3 trillion in 2021, making China a major global player that can influence world affairs and compete with U.S. economic leadership⁴.

The transformation in global power dynamics marks the gradual decline of unipolarity and the rise of multipolarity. Whereas the post Cold War era was defined by U.S. hegemony, the contemporary landscape is increasingly shaped by multiple centers of power. China's economic and geopolitical reach, Russia's strategic maneuvering, India's growing market and diplomatic clout, and the institutional initiatives of coalitions like BRICS illustrate a shift toward a more pluralistic configuration of global governance.

The implications of this trend are profound. A more decentralized order could foster greater inclusivity and balance, but it may also lead to fragmentation, contested norms, and heightened geopolitical rivalry. This raises a critical question: Is global leadership moving irreversibly away toward a multipolar, and potentially more unstable, international structure?

Unipolarity to Multipolarity: The Rise of Regional Powers

The shift from unipolarity to multipolarity has opened new opportunities for regional and middle powers to redefine their roles in the international system. Middle powers are generally understood as states positioned between great powers and smaller states in the global hierarchy. They hold significant influence and can impact global affairs, but not on a worldwide scale. Regional powers, on the other hand, focus their strength within certain areas, and if they face no rivals, they can even become dominant leaders in their regions⁵. Together, these actors—ranging from established economic leaders like Japan and Germany to strategically ambitious states such as Turkey—have emerged as pivotal agents of change. By building regional security ties and taking part in global

³ Muhammad Muzaffar, Zahid Yaseen, and Nazim Rahim. "Changing dynamics of global politics: Transition from unipolar to multipolar world." *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 1, no. 1 (2017): 49-61.

⁴ World Bank Group, "National Accounts Data", 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN>.

⁵ Şuhnaz Yilmaz. *Middle powers and regional powers*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

decision-making, they show how power is spreading out across many centers instead of being controlled by just one dominant power.

China is a clear example of how a regional power can turn into a global one. Its fast economic growth, along with projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), has allowed Beijing to extend its influence far beyond Asia, reaching Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. By combining economic statecraft, selective military modernization, and institutional innovation, China not only challenges U.S. primacy but also redefines what it means to be a regional power in the twenty-first century⁶. In this way, China is no longer just a regional power but a key force behind multipolarity, promoting a global order based on connectivity and national sovereignty instead of Western-style liberal values.

India shows the steady transformation of a regional actor into a systemic power. Ranked third in Asia by the Asia Power Index 2024⁷ and fourth globally in military strength by the Global Firepower Index 2025⁸, its rise is fueled by consistent defense modernization, a youthful workforce, and economic initiatives such as Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat⁹. India has the resources, democracy, and cultural influence of a major power, and its location in the middle of the Indian Ocean makes it central to regional security and trade¹⁰. Its active engagement through the Quad and growing regional partnerships reflects a strategy of balancing rivals while anchoring stability in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific¹¹. India's leadership in the Global South—from hosting the Voice of the Global South Summits to championing African Union membership in the G20—has further strengthened its diplomatic profile. By supporting digital access, renewable energy, and climate action, India highlights the issues of developing countries and acts as a bridge between the Global North and South. India's influence is therefore best understood as that of a regional power—

⁶ Megumi Nishimura, "The BRI in a Multipolar World: A Normative Tool for Cooperation or Nationalism?," in *New Nationalisms and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Exploring the Transnational Public Domain*, ed. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 13–24.

⁷ Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index 2024, (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2024), <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>.

⁸ Global Firepower, "Countries Listing," Global Firepower, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>

⁹ Collins Chong Yew Keat, "India's Rising Power Force – Analysis," **Eurasia Review**, February 3, 2025, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/03022025-indias-rising-power-force-analysis/>.

¹⁰ Swapna Kona Nayudu, "India Rising: From Regional to Global Power." *Centre for Land Warfare Studies* paper no. 194 (2009).

¹¹ Dr. Ravi Shankar Raj, "India's Rising Influence: Leading the Global South's Agenda in a Multipolar World," **Diplomatist**, January 15, 2025, <https://diplomatist.com/2025/01/15/indias-rising-influence-leading-the-global-souths-agenda-in-a-multipolar-world/>.

ambitious, pragmatic, and increasingly important in shaping the balance of power in Asia and the wider Global South.

Japan, in contrast, illustrates how middle powers navigate systemic rivalry through balancing strategies. Although closely tied to the U.S., Tokyo has tried to increase its own strategic independence by investing in regional infrastructure, leading in technology, and slowly building up its military strength¹². Japan's dual-track approach—engaging China economically while counterbalancing it strategically through partnerships such as the Quad¹³—demonstrates the ability of middle powers to act as stabilizers within a polarized environment. This shows an important point- middle powers usually act not to challenge the system but to keep stability, while avoiding relying too much on any one major power.



Source: Institute of Peace and Diplomacy

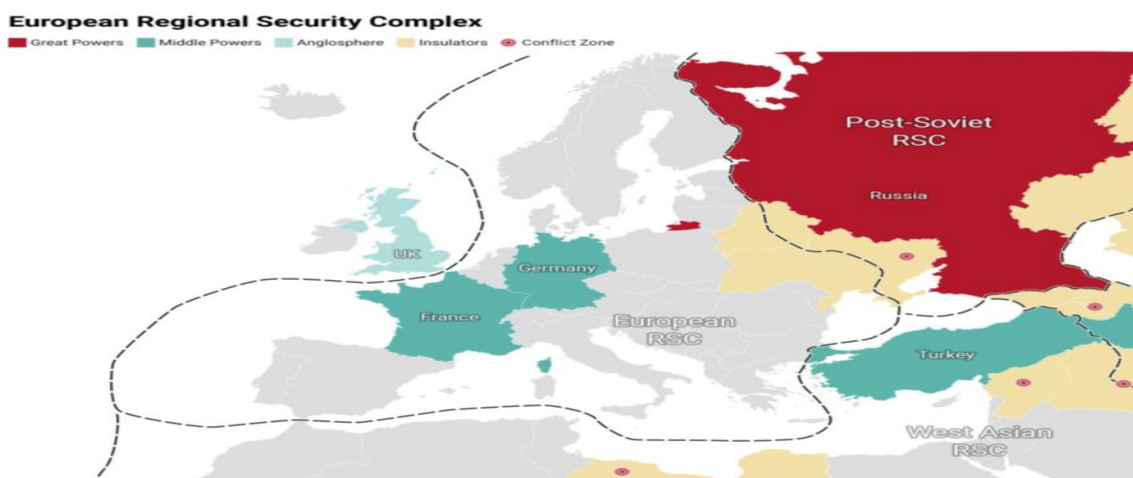
Germany is another example of a middle power with global influence. Traditionally, Berlin has avoided using military power and focused instead on economic tools and working through the EU.

¹² Ryan Ashley, "Japan's Revolution on Taiwan Affairs," published 2021, accessed December 13, 2021.

¹³ Tobias Harris, "Quality Infrastructure': Japan's Robust Challenge to China's Belt and Road," *War on the Rocks*, September 9, 2019.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point, forcing Germany to reassess its security posture and spend record amount resources to defense¹⁴. This change shows that middle powers can adjust their strategies when major crises happen, while also relying on regional organizations like NATO and the EU to increase their influence. Germany's careful approach shows the dual role of middle powers: they are key to keeping regional stability but often cannot or do not act alone to project power globally¹⁵.

Turkey, meanwhile, shows how regional powers can be disruptive when they act outside traditional alliances. Its neo-Ottoman ambitions and opportunistic diplomacy—ranging from military interventions in Syria and Libya to balancing relations between NATO and Russia¹⁶—highlight how regional actors can act as power brokers in volatile contexts. Turkey's assertive use of military technology, especially drones, shows how middle powers can use specific strengths to have a bigger impact, affecting local conflicts and wider geopolitical balances¹⁷.



Source: Institute of Peace and Diplomacy

Ultimately, the rise of regional and middle powers highlights a key challenge of multipolarity: while they help create a more diverse and inclusive global order, their competing interests and

¹⁴ Michael Birnbaum and Rick Noak, "Germany Abandoned Muted Approach to Aid for Ukraine, Sending Weapons and Greenlighting Sanctions," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/26/germany-weapons-swift-russia-ukraine/>.

¹⁵ Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky, "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World," *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, March 26, 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/>.

¹⁶ Billy Perrigo, "Ukraine's Secret Weapon Against Russia: Turkish Drones," *TIME*, March 1, 2022, <https://time.com/6153197/ukraine-russia-turkish-drones-bayraktar/>.

¹⁷ Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky, "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World," *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, March 26, 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/>.

rivalries make unified global leadership harder. This means multipolarity can offer opportunities for cooperation, but it can also bring instability to the international system.

Drivers of Multipolar World

Regional Institute: China's rise is not merely quantitative but also institutional and strategic. Through flagship initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Beijing has positioned itself as both a provider of public goods and an architect of alternative development pathways. These initiatives provide real alternatives to Western-led financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank, increasing China's



Source: BSS News

influence and changing the rules and incentives of the global economy¹⁸. This institutional activism mirrors a broader trend among emerging powers to reduce dependency on Western-dominated governance structures and to assert greater agency in setting the global agenda.

The BRICS bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and recently expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, and others—illustrates this shift toward a pluralised order. Its

¹⁸ Alexis Esposto and Juan Felix Agudelo Quintero, "From a Unipolar to a Multipolar World: What's in It for Australia?," *Chinese Journal of International Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): 2450008..

establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and collaboration with the AIIB signals a deliberate move to diversify sources of development finance and policy influence, reducing the monopoly long held by Bretton Woods institutions¹⁹.

Fourth Industrial Revolution

The diffusion of global power is being accelerated by a combination of technological, institutional, and geopolitical drivers. Technological disruption—particularly the transformations associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)—is reshaping the foundations of state power. Advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and green technologies allow smaller and mid-sized states to exert influence disproportionate to their traditional economic or military capacity²⁰. These innovations open new competitive domains, from cyber operations to advanced manufacturing, compelling both major and regional powers to prioritize “technological sovereignty” as part of their national security strategies. Technology is not just a tool for economic growth but also a key part of global power, allowing countries to overcome some limits of traditional military strength.

Geopolitical Crisis

Geopolitical crises have further accelerated this redistribution of influence. The war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, and broader contestations over global security have exposed the limits of U.S. unilateral action²¹. These global phenomena have accelerated the redistribution of influence, prompting states like India, Brazil, and South Africa to pursue strategic autonomy through diversified partnerships and non-alignment. The resurgence of neutrality, as seen in Turkey’s stance, reflects a deliberate evasion of superpower dominance rather than passive non-alignment. Together, these trends show a world where middle powers use regional influence to

¹⁹ Muhammad Muzaffar, Zahid Yaseen, and Nazim Rahim. "Changing dynamics of global politics: Transition from unipolar to multipolar world." *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 1, no. 1 (2017): 49-61.

²⁰ Glenn Diesen, *Great Power Politics in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: The Geoeconomics of Technological Sovereignty* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 1–272.

²¹ Faisal Devji, “Ukraine, Gaza, and the International Order,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, February 6, 2024, <https://quincyinst.org/research/ukraine-gaza-and-the-international-order/>.

shape global power, leaving the U.S. struggling in a world where its military and economic strength no longer ensures dominance.²².

Beyond Superpower: From Global Leadership to Regional Leadership

The rise of regional powers signals an undeniable decentralization of global leadership. The post-Cold War era of U.S. unipolarity, characterized by Washington's unrivaled military dominance, economic strength, and ideological influence, is giving way to a more complex and pluralistic order in which authority is increasingly shared among multiple actors. China's fast rise as a global challenger, Russia's comeback, and the increasing assertiveness of regional powers like India, Turkey, and Brazil have together weakened the idea that one country can set the rules of the world. This transformation reflects a gradual but profound shift toward multipolarity, one in which global governance is shaped less by unilateral American leadership and more by negotiated influence across multiple centers of power.



Source: Usanas Foundation

²² Alexis Esposto and Juan Felix Agudelo Quintero, "From a Unipolar to a Multipolar World: What's in It for Australia?," *Chinese Journal of International Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): 2450008..

Yet, this shift is not absolute. The United States continues to enjoy significant structural advantages that preserve its centrality in world affairs. Its military capabilities remain unmatched, ensuring that Washington retains the ability to project force globally in ways no other state can replicate. Economically, the U.S. dollar still leads international finance, supporting the global financial system and strengthening America's influence²³. The U.S. alliance network is still unmatched, covering NATO in Europe, AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific, and the Quad in Asia. These partnerships help the U.S. balance rising powers and maintain a rules-based order that many countries rely on for stability, security, and open markets. Even as its ability to dictate outcomes unilaterally has diminished, the United States remains a critical power broker in global politics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, global leadership is indeed shifting away from a U.S.-centric order toward a more multipolar configuration, but the process is neither linear nor entirely irreversible. The United States still retains unmatched military reach, technological innovation, and deep alliance networks that sustain its global centrality, yet its capacity to unilaterally dictate the international agenda has been steadily reduced. The likely outcome is not the fall of U.S. power, but a mixed system where American influence exists alongside rising powers. This evolving order will be more fragmented, competitive, and uncertain than the unipolar era it succeeds, requiring new strategies of adaptation, cooperation, and balance to prevent instability and preserve a measure of order in world politics.

²³ Alexandre Tombini, "The Impact of International Fragmentation and the Role of the US Dollar," remarks delivered at the International Finance Forum (IFF) 20th Anniversary, Guangzhou, October 27–29, 2023, Bank for International Settlements, speech, October 28, 2023, <https://www.bis.org/speeches/sp231028.htm>.