Expert Comment

Multipolarity and multilateralism: Cooperative or rival cornerstones of a new world order?

Peter W. Schulze (2019)
Multipolarity and multilateralism: Cooperative or rival cornerstones of a new world order?

Peter W. Schulze

Andrey Kortunov, Director General of the influential Russian think tank, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and one of the most brilliant Russian foreign policy analysts, has argued convincingly that the concept of multipolarity is a product of the 20th century and not a recent invention (Kortunov, 2018).¹

Nevertheless, multipolarity experienced a rebirth at the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century in Russia, China, and the EU. It never left the scene in the US foreign and security community or the US Congress. Today, different versions of multipolarity exist. Surprisingly, there is even debate around where, when, and who created the concept.

In post-Soviet Russia, the concept is first and foremost associated with the late foreign and then Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. The notion of multipolarity was conceptualised in the mid-1990s, rebuking fallacies of the ‘romantic Western’ orientation of Russian foreign policy under Andrei Kosyrew.

The primary objective of Primakov’s concept was to form a multipolar alliance between Russia, China, and India to balance the hegemonic influence of the US in global politics. This concept never materialised: all three potential actors were either too economically and politically weak, or, in the case of Russia, engulfed in mastering the domestic challenges of transformation after the USSR’s demise. However, the guiding idea remains a structural element in today’s Russian foreign and security policy, which is pivoting away from a partnership with the EU toward Asia (Ivanov, 2018).² The concept of Greater

¹ According to Kortunov, the roots of multipolarity differ: there is the Western version, which traces multipolarity to changes in the international economy in the 1970s with the rise of Asia, the EU, and OPEC’s dominance in energy policies and other detrimental developments that weakened America’s global position. During the catastrophic 1990s in Russia, the concept was typically associated with then-Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Beijing claims its own version of multipolarity that evolved during the 1990s and combines multilateral and bipolar elements.

² Ivanov stated, “Russia’s numerous opponents and adversaries want to lock the country up in a geopolitical ghetto and, isolate it as much as possible from the rest of the world. Economically, by imposing numerous sanctions and other restrictive measures related to trade, finance and the transfer of modern technologies. Politically, by attempting to drive Russia into a corner in international organizations, from the United Nations General Assembly to the Council of Europe. And strategically, by undermining the very foundation of the international arms control regime, destroying the bilateral and multilateral talks and pushing Moscow towards strategic isolationism and a new arms race.”
Asia is an essential and structural element in contemporary Russian global thinking (Schulze, 2018). But the Kremlin is cautious about the fact that a multipolar order is in the process of being established. America’s role and position in military, economic, and financial matters, both in Southeast Asia and within the Transatlantic Alliance/NATO/EU, is still too strong to speak about a real demise of US hegemony or its loss of supremacy in global politics. Together, and despite public declarations, the involved states act as cliental forces and stem against the transition of the present (and, to some extent, unipolar) global system into a multipolar mode.

Western reflections on the origins of multipolarity vary from the Russian view. There are traces of such a concept in expert circles of the US, but they are secondary – if not irrelevant – compared to the country’s political mainstream of maintaining the nation’s global reach and preserving the objectives of global supremacy at any cost. Officially, Washington never embraced multipolarity despite fundamental technological and economic changes in the international environment. In a way, one could argue that challenges against US global supremacy have emerged since the 1970s, yet their impacts were not felt until the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Nonetheless, feeble attempts were made to prepare for such potential challenges and cope with associated changes. Institutions like the Trilateral Commission (1973), along with Bilderberg and others,3 were founded to create a common consensus on shared objectives among Washington’s allies and to keep them under control. Washington’s main objective, to defend its global leadership and preserve the leading positions of Western powers against challengers and competitors, has remained lively until today.

In Europe, the EU and its main member states such as Germany, France, and Italy are considered strong supporters of the multipolar concept. Unlike the contemporary debate in the US, multipolarity is not seen as a competing force against multilateralism. Rather, one could argue they are twins; both concepts share similar convictions and are somewhat complementary.

The People’s Republic of China is the most recent newcomer to the notion of multipolarity. The idea was formulated in the 1990s, accompanying China’s rise as a potential economic and political superpower.4 From Chinese experts’ points of view,  

---

3 Bilderberg Conferences dating back to the origins of the Cold War (1954) are the pre-runners for forming common and consensual objectives between European and US-American representatives of politics, media, military, academics, and secret services to cope with and contain the Soviet Union’s influence in Europe and globally.

4 However, ample evidence suggests that structural elements of the concept can be traced back to Mao Zedong.
multipolarity is fundamentally different from the US position on global politics and shares basic tenets of the European perception. The Chinese notion combines structural elements of the former bipolar system with new elements; that is, a multitude of new actors will play considerably important roles in shaping the emerging global order.

As Kortunov has persuasively contended, multipolarity did not evolve from a hypothesis of the 20th century into a full-fledged theory of international relations. In reality, a multipolar world has not yet arisen; instead, the new design of the world order is rather different: it is multilateralism, based on interests and not on geopolitical state actors or power blocs that constantly need to ‘balance each other’. Kortunov has defined multilateralism as a network of corresponding regimes based on and interwoven by political, economic, and cultural ties. These networks result in a state of mutual interdependency. Multilateralism other than multipolarity is shaped by commonly agreed-upon ideas from institutions and stages of deep cooperation, even integration. Such a design seems more suitable for describing the complex and multifaceted world we are facing in the future or in which we already live. This future world will be more “complex and contradictory” (Kortunov, 2018), composed of many different actors interacting and participating in global politics.

Kortunov’s verdict is harsh: multipolarity will evaporate in the historical process and be remembered as comparable to the short-lived and temporary unilateral world order ruled by the hegemonic position of the US after the USSR’s demise.

Origins and diverse schemes of multipolarity

Kortunov’s argument is well taken but defines multipolarity in an overly narrow historical context. His starting point is the classic version of the Concert of Europe that prevailed in the 19th century; however, there we may imagine many potential versions of multipolarity. Let me briefly describe three other possible schemes:

1. The lone-warrior scenario: A group of sovereign (not allied) powers acting independently according to their national interests. They may be bound by cultural, economic, political, and even family ties and share similar ideological and religious beliefs; however, they will behave and pursue their objectives in either a cooperative or opposing manner.

2. The alliance or block-building scenario: Each of the powers that could serve as a potential pole looks for support, mostly from smaller or weaker states, to strengthen its competitive position versus opposing rival powers. This could be
done in a cooperative or enforcing manner but would definitely split the multipolar arena into opposing building blocks.

3. **The bipolar or tripolar deformation scenario:** The multipolar system composed of powers not approximately equivalent in economic, military, and social strength will force weaker states to bandwagon. The system will eventually transform into a bipolar or tripolar order of stronger poles surrounded by alliances and supporting states (Garbuzov, 2019).⁵

Kortunov is right if suggesting that the ideal conditions of the Concert of Europe afforded the country peace and stability for nearly 100 years despite two ensuing wars. However, neither the war of Prussia against Habsburg in 1866 nor the consecutive war and victory of Prussia against France in 1870–71 destroyed the system. Even so, the ascent of the German empire after 1871 created, among other factors, the preconditions for a slow death of the multipolar order. Challenges to the multipolar consensus of ruling feudal power elites were both domestic and external.

The struggle for mastery in Europe (Taylor, 1954) destroyed the feudal consensus, which led to rivalry among states and unravelled the balance of power. This development was further linked to an imperialist race to swallow up colonies. Feudal systems were also domestically threatened by the socioeconomic emergence of the bourgeoisie and its political demands for regime change.

In sum, one should be reminded that shifts in the international system of states in the global order hardly ever occurred within an evolutionary process. Instead, in retrospect, such changes in 1815 (Congress of Vienna), 1919 (Treaty of Versailles), and after 1945 (Yalta and Potsdam) were the results of war and revolution.

**The golden century of multipolarity**

The Vienna system of peace, restoration of feudal supremacy, and a power balance among the great European powers at that time was truly multipolar and lasted for nearly a century. It was based on the Concert of Europe, a group ruled by social and cultural homogenous elites that shared similar phases of economic development. Those powers were relatively comparable in their military strength and influence. Above all, the system was flexible in

---

⁵ Garbuzov introduced the term ‘polycentric multipolarity’ to describe US–China and US–Russia relations.
adjusting to changes in power constellations by forming coalitions and alliances to keep all powers confined to the agreed-upon prime goal of balance and to maintain the status quo. Ideologically, these powers were united in blocking attempts for regime change.

This system exhibited strength as long as internal and external conditions did not waver. But its static nature could not absorb the political, economic, or military rise of the German empire after 1871. Nor could the system take up the emerging divides following from industrial-technological developments. Both factors undermined the idea of balance. Rivalries among participating states in Europe were growing, reaching the sphere of colonialism. In addition, as Kortunov stated, an additional cause for the breakup of the Concert of Europe was associated with the slow but steady shift from autocratic-feudal state systems to constitutional monarchies and democratic societies at the end of the 19th century. Awakened national themes, agitation, and polarised public opinion destabilised the autocratic systems from within. These trends played decisive and destructive roles well before 1914. All three – Germany’s rise to a dominant power in Europe, the effects of industrial-technological revolutions, and the emergence of ferocious and aggressive nationalism – certainly contributed to the end of the European concert of balanced powers and ended the golden era of European multipolarity. Later, these factors, plus the disastrous results of the Versailles Treaty, prevented creation of a fair and balanced multipolar system in Europe after 1919.

The world that emerged after 1919 was definitely different and less multipolar, attempting to exclude the Soviet Union and Germany as pariah states from participating as equal actors in the concert for European peace and stability. Bloc building and state exclusion dominated Europe’s political landscape, resulting in a highly imperfect multipolar state.

After 1945, the main actors of Europe, France, and the UK – never mind Germany – ceased to be decisive or balancing powers in the emerging bipolar system. The idea of multipolarity vanished from Realpolitik in the emerging bipolar world. From 1949 to 1991, the US and Soviet Union split Europe into two hostile camps with no apparent trace of multipolarity. But strangely enough, beneath this bipolar structure, sets of multilateralism developed within each camp.

In light of these historical experiences, a new world order – even a multipolar one – may emerge, but its breakthrough could take some time to assume its ultimate form. This world order will be accompanied by war, upheaval, failed and failing states, and persistent conflicts, evoking uncertainty, fear, and unpredictability among its actors and within their
societies. To quote former German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, we appear to have already entered such a transient era in which the world seems to be in disarray. Steinmeier’s verdict is also shared among expert communities globally. Today’s transient international order is characterised by chronic instability, regional and global turmoil, and a dramatic decline in ease of governance (Schulze, 2019).

Undoubtedly, the current international order is in transition, driven by the interplay of its main actors: Washington; Moscow; Beijing, and less significantly, the EU. Other emerging powers are also challenging this arrangement, and if successful, they will eventually create a multipolar global order (Schulze, 2019).

Given the economic, political, cultural, and military diversity among currently decisive international actors, especially when including potential challenger states of the threshold or newly industrialised world, a multipolar world would be fundamentally different from the successful and prosperous Concert of Europe system that produced stability and peace from 1815 to 1914. Due to fundamental differences between the main and challenging actors, the multilateral order – if it emerges – would better resemble a tripartite or quadripartite order interlaced with bipolar building blocks (Timofeev, 2019). From this perspective, the Chinese description of multipolarity could more closely reflect future reality compared to other theoretical narratives of the West or Russia.

Obviously, the present but transient global system is heavily structured by prevailing bipolar conditions and several hard-to-pin-down elements that do not permit the construction of flexible coalitions or alliances. Bipolar elements exist in US–Russia and US–China relations (RIAC, 2019). The EU is somewhat sandwiched in between; nevertheless, the US–EU or transatlantic bloc is certainly a structural and insurmountable reality (Brzezinski, 2004). The EU follows the IR axiom of ‘bandwagon’: to team up with the strongest actor (i.e., the US) to protect itself or to avoid being pushed into a scenario of being burdened with international obligations.

---

6 Timofeev considered four scenarios that may shape the new world order and discussed their potential effects on Russia:
1. Liberal order: An attempt at adaptation
2. Strategic autonomy and the new multipolarity
3. Bipolarity 2.0
4. A new anarchy

Timofeev concluded that all four scenarios are “ideal types” and that many other options are available. Accordingly, these “scenarios are not mutually exclusive”; they can “appear in succession” and together with other forms. He wrapped up his argument by stating that, for Russia, the new multipolar scenario could be optimal but would be rife with risk.

7 The latest RIAC report, “RIAC Forecast 2019-2014: Global Governance and World Order”, revealed a fierce and divided internal debate in Russia’s expert community on global developments; specifically, what type of world order could emerge and what Russia’s role and position will be in this transient period.
This bloc is unlikely to break up or see individual member states leave it. It seems equally unlikely that the whole bloc will seek an alliance or intense cooperation with Russia to counter Beijing. Moscow and Beijing are presently singular players, unsupported by determined alliances or coalitions with other states. Each has a community of common interests, which cannot be defined as an alliance.

The central question is whether the emerging multipolar order can provide security and welfare for the international community – or will we see policies based on protracted, narrow definitions of national interests, thereby undermining opportunities for trust and confidence-building among the driving forces behind such transformation? Are we bound to reawaken memories of the bipolar Cold War era, with its proxy wars and antagonistic ideologies, dividing the global system into hostile camps?

These questions demand answers: are the driving actors of the multipolar global order (i.e., China, the US, Russia, and the EU), plus emerging challengers from the developed world, powerful and persuasive enough to create such a balanced multipolar global order?

The answer seems clear: they are neither sufficiently persuasive, nor powerful, nor willing to construct such a balanced multipolar world (Lukyanov, 2019). The parameters defining a multipolar balance between multipolar poles are becoming increasingly complex. Corresponding changes can affect members’ roles and positions. The reference to the concert of European powers of the 19th century or to the interwar period – even to the bipolar era – no longer apply to the prerequisites of our epoch. Kortunov is right in his verdict that “a permanently growing number of independent variables” make the evolution of a stable and balanced system of multipolarity nearly impossible.

**A hybrid form of multipolarity and multilateralism**

Multipolarity and multilateralism are not necessarily mutually exclusive; in a way, they can coexist. What’s more, multilateralism could serve as the basis for a multipolar global order that accentuates more cooperative than conflicting issues. Although both concepts are rooted in distinct modes and objectives, their interplay clearly mirrors our complex social,

---

8 According to Lukyanov, “Beijing got the global trend right, which, by juggling with two fashionable slogans of this year, can be formulated as #MeFirst. States are increasingly putting the interests of their own internal stability higher than international issues, and global governance is giving way to local governance.” Speaking of Europe, Lukyanov remarked that the EU and their major member states cannot do anything to influence or stop Washington’s objectives regarding Iran – despite complaints about US foreign policies. Europe will agree ‘ex post’ on Washington’s policy to isolate Iran.
economic, and technological reality. In this context, they differ fundamentally from the traditional Concert of Europe in the 19th century. Such a concept rested on hereditary cultural and political ties between ruling elites. Economic interrelations, mainly trade relations, existed; however, common institutions were not established, and interlinkages between civil societies were rare. The bipolar concepts of the 20th century created deeply integrated political, military, economic, and ideological camps, but interactions between opposing camps/poles were primarily devoted to defence and security matters; the civil societies of both camps barely interacted.

Paradoxically, after the breakdown of the bipolar order, multilateral approaches gained momentum even during the short-lived unipolar state of the international system in the 1990s and during the first decade of the new millennium. Multilateral relations boomed, stimulated by the rapid technological penetration of nearly all scientific, economic, and cultural sectors of states and societies on a global scale. As a result, we are now confronted with a strange asymmetry: while the technology-driven processes of globalisation are interconnecting societies and creating networks of mutual interdependence in all sectors of life, the adaption of a political order to such revolutionary changes lags behind. This discrepancy has led to unease, conflicts, and uncertainties that haunt our societies. A classical question is now out in the open: are the fundamental forces unleashed by the technological revolution, and its impact on changes in socioeconomic relations, strong enough to create a balanced world order based on peaceful cooperation among the various multipolar actors?

Peter Schulze
Professor, Political Science Department, Georg-August University of Göttingen
References


