China's Rise and the Limits of American Hegemony: Reassessing the Emerging International Order

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Abstract:

This article critically examines whether the contemporary international system remains unipolar or is transitioning towards contested multipolarity. Drawing on Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism and his critique of the liberal international order in "Bound to Fail," it distinguishes economic capacity from military power and examines how rising powers challenge established hierarchies. China's economic, military, and institutional ascent is considered the principal challenge to US primacy, alongside Russia's renewed assertiveness and India's growing influence. The article argues that emerging multipolarity does not necessarily entail systemic chaos but instead intensifies balancing dynamics and competition between bounded orders.

Introduction:

The end of the Cold War represented the beginning of a new era for world politics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States of America (USA) emerged as the sole superpower with having the strongest military, largest economy, and ideological power. Krauthammer (1990) referred this situation as the global community's "Unipolar Moment." It initiated a global belief that American hegemony, alongside the liberal international order, would persist and be continually bolstered over time. Nonetheless, after thirty years, it is increasingly challenging to uphold this perspective. With China's ascent, Russia's revival, and the growing self-reliance of middle powers, longstanding questions about the durability of unipolarity have resurfaced.

While the unipolar dominance of the U.S. has been significant and tangible, it is often criticized for lacking a feasible framework. Drawing upon John Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism and his critique titled "Bound to Fail" to the liberal international order, this paper contends that unipolarity inherently fosters conditions conducive to its own decline. In an anarchic system, rising powers are compelled to transform economic growth into military and institutional dominance to avoid subordination. China's transformation from a regional actor to a near-peer competitor complements this dynamic, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, where the United States increasingly encounters constraints on its strategic autonomy.

The article proceeds in three sections. First, it examines American unipolarity through the theoretical perspective of Offensive Realism. Second, it considers China's economic growth, military modernisation, and institutional initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative. Third, it assesses whether the contemporary international system is becoming multipolar or remains characterised by challenged American hegemony. It concludes by considering the implications of growing security competition for international order.

America's Unipolar moment:

Polarity is a term often used in International Relations but it is still under-analyzed. It is used vigorously to shed light on the distribution of power in the global system (Tizzard, 2017). In order to comprehend the hierarchical status of the states, it is necessary to evaluate this. After WWII, the world was split into two competing poles. After, the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States became clearly unipolar in its military power and technological advancements. Krauthammer (1990) referred to this period as the "Unipolar Moment" for the United States following these accomplishments. As global political dynamics transitioned away from the established bipolar and multipolar systems, Washington experienced an unprecedented degree of strategic autonomy. American power was unchallenged and dominant in that major period of the 1990s. As one former French foreign minister named Hubert Védrine coined that USA was no longer a superpower; it had become a "Hyper-power" (Védrine, cited in SAGE Publications, 2021, p. 99). After the advent of the Westphalian nation-state system, no country has ever enjoyed this magnitude of hierarchy in the military, economy, and technology as like USA. America had the arbitrary rights and conditions that allowed it to be a decisive actor in any part of the world and address any conflict, should it decide to intervene.

Ikenberry (2018) observed that the United States secured a dominant role within the international framework by positioning itself as a hegemonic leader. This leadership was characterized by efforts to sustain economic stability, foster international collaboration, and solidify alliances (Ikenberry, 2018). Ikenberry (2018) claimed the rise of nationalism, protectionism, and populism has led to the liberal international order weakening, yet the principles of liberal internationalism remain deeply rooted in the global political system, and it is under severe stress and political competition. Furthermore, he dismissed any notion of the order being withered away.

William Wohlforth (1999) stated, “The U.S. combination of quantitative and qualitative material advantages is unprecedented, and it translates into a unique geopolitical position” (Wohlforth, 1999, p.17), signaling the Unipolarity of the United States in the post-cold war era. Wohlforth additionally noted that the vast extent of American power has considerably diminished the probability of other nations effectively counterbalancing it, thus ensuring the persistence of U.S. unipolarity (Wohlforth, 1999).

From the viewpoint of Offensive Realism, the United States' grand strategy during this period, characterized by military interventions, NATO expansion, and global force projection, can be perceived as a rational endeavor to preserve dominance and prevent the emergence of rival challenges (Mearsheimer, 2001). Such a strategy indicated the logic of preemptive power preservation rather than merely short-term aggression.

But the unipolar moment had its setbacks. Joseph Nye (2011) stresses that in a world that is becoming more connected, American power is not only based on the ability to use force, but also on soft power, legitimacy, and institutional leadership (Nye, 2011). The strategic use of soft power in conjunction with hard power can enhance the perceived hegemony of international order. However, the United States' engagement in unilateral actions and prolonged military conflicts has undermined its credibility, thereby complicating its ability to garner support from other nations. These include diplomatic obstruction and strategic long-term hedging, particularly in response to China's growing power. Reflecting on it, unipolarity seems to be more of a transient phase rather than a lasting structural transformation.

Offensive realism and the temporary characteristics of Unipolarity

John Mearsheimer is the dominant figure in International Relations who theorized Offensive Realism. His theory mainly delineates how states will behave in the anarchic structure of international relations in order to secure their integrity. Mearsheimer (2001) stated in his book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” detailing some key tenets of Offensive Realism To start with his assumptions, the international system is anarchic meaning there is no higher authority to regulate the interactions among states. This lack of any authority pushes the states to rely upon themselves for their securities. Then, states are always power driven and skeptical towards each other. Moreover, the idea of security dilemma is central whereas states find themselves in a distrust situation they maximize their relative military power in order to ensure their existence which in most of the times culminate in an arm race (Mearsheimer, 2001). The reasoning is simple: the stronger a state is compared to its rivals, the less likely it is to be in danger of extinction (Mearsheimer, 2001).

(Myšička, 2021) argued that as per John Mearheimer’s theory of Offensive Realism, great powers incessantly try to augment their power in this highly competitive anarchic world to assure their survival

by becoming regional hegemon at the expense of other states and aggressive foreign policies. Just as Mearsheimer illustrated it, (Myšička, 2021) observed that such a scenario results in a central power conflict among the primary players. From the Offensive Realism perspective, states reach for hegemony in the global order because only that status guarantees them optimum safety. In Mearsheimer's view, current world politics is a case of omnipresent and 'tragic' logic, which flows from the necessity of successive struggles for dominance in international relations (Myšička, 2021).

Unlike Waltz who argued that states' search for power and security has limits, Mearsheimer deviated from this view (Snyder, 2002). Therefore, the only way to extinguish this drive is for a state to attain the hegemonic power necessary to prevent an attack from a revisionist state.

Lastly, Mearsheimer (2019) in his "Bound to Fail" stated that the Liberal International order is in a state of deep peril, offering a clarifying response to the deviation of the USA's unipolarity from the principles of Offensive Realism. Mearsheimer argues that, in the post-cold war era, the liberal international order was an extension of American power, and the order was dominant, unipolar, and post-cold war. Mearsheimer points out that sovereign states with competing interests presented a counter to America's drive to dominate the globe with the Liberal international order.

Additionally, he demonstrated that unipolarity becomes undermined since as in a hyper- globalized economy, all other states also get opportunities of becoming great powers and that is how China is rising and Russia is reviving (Mearsheimer, 2019). In addition, from his perspective, the emergence of nationalism and the politics of the balance of power seem to perform pivotal functions towards bringing about the collapse of this order (Mearsheimer, 2019). The system attends to a high degree of economic integration but it was also trying to keep a particular geopolitical hierarchy intact. In the order, more states had a greater degree of power, but were less prepared to be viewed as occupying a subordinate position. Thus, Mearsheimer's "Bound to Fail" outlines a set of clear, logically structured reasons as to why unipolar dominance is giving way to a more complex international order which is characterized by a greater degree of rivalry among numerous great powers (Mearsheimer, 2019).

In my opinion, although the United States' unipolar moment led to an unparalleled concentration of power, offering institutional leadership, economic stability, and legitimacy as highlighted by Ikenberry (2018), this dominance was never certain to last. In Mearsheimer's "Bound to Fail," it becomes evident the United States will always be challenged in a hostile environment, whether it is a reviving state like Russia, or a rising state like China. The paradox of strength further solidifies the case Mearsheimer outlines as the United States unipolarity creates conditions for rapid decline. By putting these points of view next to each other, it becomes clear that unipolarity was real in the past but not possible to keep going. The liberal order may remain intact, but Mearsheimer's realist framework illustrates that the international system is transitioning towards multipolarity, with China's rise representing the primary challenge to U.S. dominance.

Mearsheimer (2019) argued that the emerging multipolarity will have a realist international order that prioritizes the management of the world economy, the governance of trade in arms, and the management of global problems like climate change. Quoting Mearsheimer (2019), it is argued, "In addition to this new international order, the United States and China will lead bounded orders that will compete with each other in both the economic and military realms (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.8)". Thus, with respect to Mearsheimer's framework, great powers are differentiated not by intentions or ideology but by the ability to transform economic growth into military power and create a favorable strategic environment.

The following section examines China's rise through three interconnected dimensions—economic capacity, military modernisation, and institutional influence—to assess its position in the emerging international order.

Second part:

Economic power: The basis of "Latent power"

When discussing Offensive Realism, economic power is viewed as the basis of 'latent power' (Mearsheimer, 2001). This means that it is not possible for states to compete militarily for any extended period of time without producing sufficient economic resources, and those that do will always convert prosperity into military capability. Thus, the most fundamental structural change that has challenged the U.S. hold on unipolarity is the rise of China as an economic powerhouse.

No other example in modern history has demonstrated economic development as remarkable as China's, especially after the implementation of its economic reform in 1978 (Naughton, 2007) China also passed its foreign trade reforms at the end of 1993 (Naughton, 2007). These amendments resulted in the regulation of the country's foreign exchange system, a currency depreciation, and the liberalization of the current accounts (Naughton, 2007). The Chinese government regarded these steps as showcasing the seriousness of the country aiming to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, the journey towards membership required China over a decade of arduous negotiations, which finally paid off when the country became a member of the WTO in December 2001. Membership meant that China had to commit to a cluster of regulations that would stimulate the country's compliance with global standards. At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States had the world's highest nominal GDP of USD 28.75 trillion, with China coming in second with USD 18.74 trillion GDP (World Bank, 2024). Mearsheimer (2014) argues that the wealth China has been able to accumulate gives it the "latent power" to challenge the United States in securing dominance over the region. In terms of offensive realism, this shift represents a more significant consolidation of latent power, as well as significant economic growth.

Malkin (2022) argues that by attempting to gain control of the high-value global production sectors, China's initiatives in the "Made in China 2025" Strategy undermine U.S. structural power. Using Susan Strange's concept of structural power, Malkin (2022) explains how the integration of state-led industrial policy, management of intellectual property, and regulations of multinational firms enables China to convert previously idle productive capacity into structural power within global value chains. "Many people look at China's rise in terms of GDP, but Malkin (2022) and others said that its real polar strength comes from its 'structural power' over global production." This challenges Strange Susan's (1987) classic perception of unshakeable U.S. hegemony because it monopolizes money and knowledge. China is, in fact, forging a new pole by capturing the technological underpinnings of the modern 21st century economy.

As the Chinese economy grows, it becomes ever more unwilling to accept U.S. dominance. Mearsheimer's "Bound to Fail" captured this perfectly: ascending powers cannot accept being put in the subordinate position indefinitely, no matter the concessions the hegemon offers (Mearsheimer, 2019). Moreover, China has greatly utilized economic statecraft. Owing to their trade relations, loans, building contracts, and buying power, Beijing influences many smaller and peripheral countries. An illustrative example is Sri Lanka. As a result of the Chinese-financed Hambantota Port deal, China is now able to

influence the country's strategic choices. Sri Lanka relinquished control of the port to China for 99 years, in exchange for some Chinese-financed loans that were in default (Hillman, 2018). While Liberal theorists may view this as China and Sri Lanka's collaboration, from an Offensive Realist perspective, this is economic statecraft and serves to increase power position and influence of the state. Additionally, Russia is returning to the state it deserves as a great power. Its economy is beginning to recover, albeit at a slower pace than China. But it is now using that recovery to challenge U.S. dominance.

Following the collapse of the economy during the 1990s, Russia was able to increase state control over the key sectors of oil, gas, and defense, due to the rise in energy prices during the 2000s (Rutland, 2008). An offensive realist perspective argues that the recovery conferred sufficient latent power to Moscow to bolster its military and pursue revisionist ambitions in its close geography.

Transforming latent power into active power:

Offensive Realism centers military power as the primary focus of global politics. Snyder (2002) suggested that this manifestation stands at the heart of offensive realism. He has noted that Mearsheimer has considered military might as a salient point in the contending for security (Snyder, 2002). Therefore, the threat posed by the modernization of China's military to the United States is most direct. The modernization of the military in China since the late 1990s has signified not only an enhancement of military capabilities but also an augmentation of the structural challenge posed to United States' unipolar dominance in South and Southeast Asia. In regards to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its evolving military forces, Wortzel (2014) stated, ``China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is undergoing an extensive modernization program that poses significant challenges to US security interests in Asia'' (Wortzel, 2014, p. 3). Wortzel (2014) expressed that the reforms in China's military defenses have been the combination of the advancement of cyber warfare, space denial systems, and precision strike systems to mitigate the U.S. military's overwhelming advantage, along with the integration of joint operations (Wortzel, 2014). A crucial element to this is the advancement of China's Anti- Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The DF-21D and DF-26 missile systems target the U.S. aircraft carriers and forward bases. This increases the risks for the U.S. involvement in regional crises with Taiwan and the South China Sea, especially in the context of the U.S. providing robust support to regional partners (Wortzel, 2014).

The South China Sea's shifting power dynamics are fundamentally a ramification of the expansion of the PLA NAVY. In terms of number of vessels, it has become the world's largest Navy and has shifter the balance in the South China Sea (Taneja, 2014). China can never militarily confront the United States in terms of its geopolitical position. Instead, it is augmenting its military capabilities to limit the US military's ability to exert power in the western Pacific (Taneja, 2014). As Taneja (2014) quoted, "This is why the DF-21D and other weapons systems designed to deny the US access to China's eastern space figure prominently in its military modernization programme" (Taneja, 2014, p. 153). The result is consistent with the logic of offensive realism, stating that rising powers invariably seek regional dominance, rather than assimilation into the existing global order.

Cyberspace is a growing part of China's overall national power and strategy against the U.S. and how it progresses (Wortzel, 2014). China's involvement in cyberspace and space warfare is a direct risk to U.S. military technological dominance. As pointed out by Wortzel (2014), there was ample evidences in the

2013 Congress report that pointed to a coordinated and systematic cyber espionage operation by the Chinese Government directed at the United States.

Driving Institutional Change: The New Alternative Order

In addition to economic and military might, China's challenge to U.S. unipolarity is more institutional. Mearsheimer (2019), in Bound to Fail, posited that the ascending power does not seek internally to reform the hegemon's order, but rather builds 'bounded orders' that operate simultaneously to and eventually constrict the existing order. A case in point is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the expanding BRICS+, all of which represent a practical formulation of the idea of creating order in the periphery. The BRI is a geopolitical strategy. It aims to transform China's external environment in a way that shields its security and autonomy. William Callahan (2016) linked the BRI to China's larger "Asia Dream", which involved making Chinese preferences central to the regional order, as opposed to Western norms (Callahan, 2016). Considering the BRI from this angle, one cannot view it as a positive development initiative but rather as a tool of geopolitical restructuring of Asia. By making itself the hub of infrastructure corridors, ports, and energy networks, China becomes a regional power. Zhao (2021) writes, "Belt and Road Initiative has become an important factor that influences the US in redefining the China threat" (Zhao, 2021, p.250). Washington's refined "Indo- Pacific" strategy, the Blue Dot Network, and increased trilateral efforts indicate a growing concern that the BRI is undermining U.S. strategic dominance and leading to a loss of their rule-setting power (Zhao, 2021). In contrast to the World Bank and the IMF, China's BRI financing includes no liberal conditionalities, which allows China to uninhibitedly extend its influence. With the absence of a governance system that promotes democracy and free markets, China's funding is a breath of fresh air for the authoritarian regimes in the Global South. China's development of governance structures, such as the AIIB, indicated an increased willingness to engage in global governance. Furthermore, China's militarization of its artificial islands in the South China Sea has also worsened security tensions with Southeast Asian nations and the United States.

China is the primary builder of this new bounded order, with Russia and India also contributing to its multipolarity. Russia and India's strategic partnership with China indicates their shared interest in partnership, seeking to diminish the U.S. monopoly as the single superpower to control a more evenly divided world. They have commenced this through collaborative work on shared security and in regional formations, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Turner, 2009). While India's role is quite ambiguous, given its increasing proximity to the U.S. (Acharya, 2018), its members within BRICS and other non-Western formations. This is primarily because India prefers to manage a network of relationships with multiple powers and not with any one on a dominant basis.

The BRI, AIIB, and BRICS+ illustrate that China doesn't attempt to usurp the US position of being the leader of a unitary global order. Following Mearsheimer's Bound to Fail, Beijing constructs a separate, Bounder order to ensure its own security and to constrain the US, not assuming the global leadership burden.

Third part:

Assessing the Transition: Multipolarity or Challenged Hegemony?

The dispersal of power also includes an element beyond just China. With the rapid advances of the world's economy, coupled with an ascendant military power in India and the ability of a disruptive power in a diminished economy state such as Russia, it becomes increasingly difficult to assert that there is only one superpower that exists in the world (Acharya, 2018, Turner, 2009). While these states continue to lack a sufficient balance of power in the broader global arena, their regional capabilities greatly diminish the dominant position of the US and provide a greater measure of balance to the distribution of power in the world.

This signal in change does not represent an end to order, it represents a reemergence of the principal of balance of power in political relations among countries. For this reason, the deterioration of U.S. unipolarity is not seen as an anomaly, but the return of the unfortunate, rivalrous systems of inter great power relations that have been typical in the past.

Conclusion:

The US has never been so dominating since it was founded but after the cold war it was having its unipolar moment; which is why "unipolar" has been used to describe that. But right now, America is not the sole power like it was more than 30 years ago. This illustrates that the unipolar moment was advocating for a transient domination. The U.S. has always shown its strength in its western-led order while China's ascent is debilitating U.S.'s hegemon and creating systematic conflict. China has built its "latent" power over the past 30 years through economic growth and is now using to modernize its military strength to control Global South to check the U.S. in that region, and becoming sole regional hegemon. On the other hand, Russia is also reviving and other emergent powers like India is also rising. These ongoing shifts mark tangible vicissitude of the world's future while the power is now fragmented.

Viewed through the lens of Offensive Realism, the existing order marks unevenness than a completed shift towards multipolarity. The order also situates not to get befuddled with the disappearance of America's unipolar moment; it only blurs the manifestation of power that is highly contested. The transition can also be understood under the aegis of the institutional evidence. China is not trying to overtake the existing order with a rival order right now. As Mearsheimer (2019) tried to position China's ambition to build a bounded order alongside the US-led one only to enervate America's rule setting power, more precisely in the Global South at the moment. The ramification is an overlapping order, not a new one.

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