

## GEOPOLITICAL FLUX AND THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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*The international political system is undergoing significant geopolitical and economic shifts brought about by fluctuations in the distribution of power among states. This brings into question the future of international cooperation amidst the continuous depletion of global resources and the proliferation of conflict. With the rise and strengthening of potential great and regional powers of the Global South, it is inevitable that the nature of multilateralism will also continue to evolve. However, such an evolution will not only be reliant on material power, but also on the variations in perceptions among states. While multilateralism will remain an undeniable component of international affairs, this issue brief posits that its characteristics will undergo significant reconfigurations based on the growing importance of the Global South and the coinciding interests of developing states to address international issues beyond traditional discourses and methods.*

For foreign and security policy analysts, it is a fascinating and intriguing dilemma as to what the strategic shape of the world would look like some 20 or 30 years later. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the world became unquestionably unipolar. Washington dominated the global stage and assertively shaped and solidified the rules of international engagement, which were based on the U.S.-led liberal order in the aftermath of World War II and through the Cold War.

Today, 30 years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this status faces two distinct

challenges: First, fears of declining U.S. authority and misgivings about its influence, and second, the rise of China. It, thereby, raises the question as to whether Washington would concede to an international world order that involves accommodating and sharing power with China or strive for consensus to retain its hegemony. Given this reality, two aspects need to be especially highlighted in the context of the evolving international geopolitical and politico-economic landscape: The nature of power dynamics and its implications on the characteristics of multilateralism and international cooperation.

## Assessing Contemporary Power Dynamics

China's meteoric rise coupled with a deep sense of nationalism, among its leadership and its people to correct the wrongs of the past and hundred years of humiliation, drives its view of the world. President Xi Jinping's adversarial ambitions and combative style reflects his deep desire and that of the Chinese people that the global community needs to show China the respect that it rightly deserves. Xi has already made it clear that China will not hesitate to assert its aspirations through military means, as and when required. This has caused legitimate anxiety, especially among countries in the Indo Pacific, but also, globally.

This would suggest that Beijing's real interest, in the long-term, is for a unipolar world, where it is the legitimate and sole hegemon. For Washington, this would be a dramatic and indeed, humiliating development that it would certainly oppose. A compromise would be a bipolar world. But that would come about only through what promises to be a dark confrontation. Whether this would translate into a military engagement, or like the Cold War, split the world into two warring camps remains to be seen. Given the nuclear, chemical warfare, and technological capabilities that both sides have, it would be reasonable to assume that we would have a re-enactment of the Cold War.

To achieve their objectives, as a first step, both China and the U.S. would accelerate the consolidation of a network of strategic partnerships. Countries would need to choose whether to support the U.S. or China and would do so depending on what serves their strategic interests best. For China, some of its key allies would be Russia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Laos, North Korea, and Cambodia, for obvious reasons. Sri Lanka and Nepal are unpredictable, given their recent track record. Bangladesh has a naval base recently built with Chinese assistance, which can house six submarines and eight warships. Even though Bangladesh has not agreed, so far, to permit Chinese military

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vessels to dock at the base, how things will unfold in the future is conjectural. The setting up of a dual use remote satellite sensing ground station in Sri Lanka compounds the strategic risk for India.

Satellite imagery of a military facility in Myanmar's Coco islands, close to India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands could, similarly, pose a critical challenge. China's objective is to encircle India with countries and operational capability that are inimical to its security interests, such as, Pakistan, or those that are not averse to aligning with China to enhance leverage with New Delhi. In the Indo-Pacific, the People's Liberation Army force presence in Laos and Cambodia allows Beijing the platform for intelligence gathering and expanded operational flexibility. In the South China Sea, China has fully militarized at least three islands with jamming systems, fighter jets, and anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems. With a reported 2023 defense budget reaching US\$224 billion, along with the world's largest standing army and navy, Xi has made it clear that China is not going to back down from pursuing its global ambitions.<sup>1</sup>

China justifies its actions by pointing to aggressive and threatening moves by multiple hostile forces led by the U.S. However, it must be noted that due to confrontationalist actions by China and credible assumptions of its emergence as a global power and indeed, a threat to the U.S, a strategic and integrated response from Washington was inevitable. At the same time, an assault on the prevailing security architecture and global power equations has been mounted by Beijing, under Xi Jinping's leadership. China is determined to assert its power and authority not only in the Indo-Pacific but also globally. However, its immediate concern is with the Indo-Pacific. The forcible occupation of islands in the South China Seas in total disregard of international law, overriding the protestations of countries in the region, is only a glimpse of what Beijing is capable of, heralding its disenchantment with the global order as it currently prevails.

More importantly, beyond the U.S.-China framework, there also lies more evolving fluctuations in the distribution of power in the Global South. Along with the rise of China as a great power, the rise of India becomes just as important, being the fifth largest economy with the world's largest population and second largest standing army. Moreover, the

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rise and strengthening of other regional powers in the developing world with diverse interests, such as, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brazil, South Africa, and Iran, also add more complexity to the current international security calculations in the region. Given this unfolding power dynamics, it is therefore important to assess how such shifts can impact the nature of international cooperation and the value of multilateralism, and whether it would lead to a rebalancing of power equations.

### **Towards a Recalibrated Multilateralism**

As the international political system continues to evolve based on the rise of potential great and regional powers, the conceptual underpinnings and logic behind multilateralism will inevitably change as well. Given the future uncertainty of the international geopolitical landscape and the implications of the fluctuations in the structural distribution of power, states in different regions of the world are seeking pathways to not only bolster their security, but also preserve their interests in a changing world. In addition, states are also cautious of the potential opportunities and limitations that come with an altering political system given their experiences in the previous decades. While it is certain that multilateralism will remain pivotal for countries to forward their interests, the question that arises is how such arrangements will look like amid the transitioning international power dynamics.

What is important to note about this transition is the role geography can play in impacting the nature of multilateral engagements. China and India are seen as the potential great powers that can soon serve as formidable poles in the international political system. In addition, the emergence of regional powers like Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia also adds more comprehensiveness on what to expect in the years to come. Accordingly, most of these rising and emerging powers come from the developing world across Asia, Africa, and

Latin America. The dynamism and diversity among these states provide a window through which the future of multilateralism can be viewed. However, in assessing this future trajectory, the need to understand the on-ground realities objectively and practically will be just as, or even more, significant than simply perceiving this structural transition as an erosion of U.S. dominance.

Along with the rise of power, the variations in perception must be taken into consideration. Contrary to traditional theories of power politics, the rise of a particular state does not necessarily mean that it seeks to alter, challenge, or replace the rules, norms, and institutions set by the established great power. While such instances are possible, it is also feasible for rising powers to seek to complement, supplement, and expand existing institutions on a win-win basis. While the textbook case for revisionism is often attributed to China's rise, the need to go beyond this is necessary to underscore a holistic analysis of the systemic transition.<sup>2</sup> India, for example, does not seek to alter the established order as it continues to rise; rather, New Delhi will aim to contribute and add more value to it so that accommodates and reflects the interests and concerns of the Global South and thereby, is more inclusive, representative, and fair.<sup>3</sup>

While the traditional institutions set up by bilateral and unipolar structures were often grounded on U.S. and Western values, norms, and rules, the voices of states in the Global South were often limited or even marginalized in key institutional decision-making processes. While such multilateral institutions provided opportunities to developing states, the blanket approach often came at the expense of their overarching strategic interests. As the world continues to be embroiled further in a plethora of traditional and non-traditional security issues, the developing world has often been left with minimal options.

No wonder, states of the developing world have often been wary of straightjacket frameworks

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led by the West due to the latter's inability to effectively grasp and comprehend the diverse interests, culture, and perceptions of these states. Moreover, over the past decades, the nature of the political system only provided superficial acknowledgement of this diversity. However, as most of the emerging powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century come from the Global South, there has been more support and acknowledgement of the sensitivities faced by developing states. For instance, India has been expanding its role in being as the voice of the Global South. Along with the other BRICS states, India has been pushing for reform within the World Trade Organization, and the expansion of permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council to reflect contemporary realities. Consequently, the continuous rise of India in material capabilities has allowed it to translate its growth into a more robust and proactive leadership for the developing world.

A recent example is the India-led Voice of the Global South Summit in January 2023, which centered on not only the promotion of effective cooperative frameworks among the developing states, but also to provide more sustainable means of cooperation

with the Global North.<sup>4</sup> As India heads the Group of 20 (G20) this year, its leadership will be based on promoting an understanding of the intricate balance between respect for diversity on one hand, and the attainment of development and security on the other. Being the world's largest democracy with a pluralistic and multi-cultural society, New Delhi's ability to draw from its experience at home and incorporate it in a dynamic international system adds more value to its rise. Moreover, as other key states like China, Russia, Egypt, and Turkey continue to strengthen and grow, their continued participation in institutions, such as, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) has allowed these multilateral arrangements to gain significant recognition. In fact, several developing states have also voiced their intent to join these multilateral arrangements.<sup>5</sup>

The increasing attention gained by the SCO, BRICS, and CICA, and their potential expansion

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of membership from states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America represent the unfolding shifts in the international geopolitical landscape and their implications for multilateralism. In the past, developing states have often been marginalized in Western-led institutions; however, today, states of the Global South are increasingly participating in institutions led by rising great powers of the developing world, particularly China and India. Institutions like the SCO and CICA provide a significant platform for developing states to not only effectively voice their concerns, but also openly evaluate and shape surrounding narratives regarding international issues beyond a western-centric perspective. Additionally, such institutions allow significant flexibility and non-binding modes of cooperation that highlight the sensitivities of member-states.

Accordingly, with the continuous rise of potential great and regional powers from the developing world, the norms of engagement they support, such as informality, flexibility, collaboration, and equity, will congruently be emphasized in the evolving nature of inter-state relations. In fact, the heightened emphasis on the importance of minilateralism as a supplement to multilateralism is also gaining significant traction. This stems from the belief that states are free to cooperate in loose and area-specific arrangements based on common interests, concerns, and goals without jeopardizing their autonomy and strategic interests. Minilateralism can thus improve confidence building among states, which can serve as a vital catalyst for more effective multilateral cooperation.

Given the reality of the current structural transition towards multipolarity, traditional sources of power in the West are also beginning to slowly adapt to such changes. The reinvigoration of the Quad framework in the Indo-Pacific between the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, for instance, is continuously defined by its members as a loose arrangement between the four democratic powers, which allows them to cooperate on issues of

mutual interests and concerns to contribute to the stability of the established order in the region. Moreover, the recent proliferation of other key minilaterals such as the AUKUS between the U.S., Australia, and the United Kingdom, I2U2 between India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the U.S., the Sulu Sea Trilateral patrols between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and the Our Eyes Initiative between Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand represent a growing acknowledgement of the need to adapt, based on the changing nature of interstate cooperation to spearhead individual and collective goals.

Change in international politics is an undeniable and inevitable force. However, with change, it is expected that traditional sources of power will push back amid the dispersion of influence to other centers of growth and power. This can be seen through the attempts of labelling of the BRICS, SCO, and CICA as anti-U.S. or anti-West.<sup>6</sup> However, an objective look at these institutions' membership and function paints an entirely different picture. For instance, the BRICS as a collective organization seeks to work within existing political-economic structures by suggesting its reform rather than replacement to better accommodate the interests of the developing world.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, majority of the members of the aforementioned multilateral institutions and forums also have strong relations with the U.S. and the West. Therefore, the momentum gained by such multilateral engagements reflects the implications of the emergence of great and regional powers in the developing world, and the coinciding interests of other states of the Global South to leverage this structural shift so as to have the opportunity to address global issues beyond the discourses and understanding of traditional sources of power.

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## Endnotes

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