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The transition to polycentrism is a war of attrition: some insights on the end of the U.S. unipolar order

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, the rise of challenging state powers present significant obstacles to US unipolar hegemony. As Washington's power projection capabilities erode across regional contexts, the prospect of more assertive policy responses becomes increasingly likely. To prevent escalation toward hegemonic war, governments committed to multipolarity must navigate this transition strategically. Through qualitative analysis, we outline a plausible scenario for the evolution toward a multipolar world order and advance two key recommendations: first, the regionalization of international governance systems to reduce dependence on US-dominated institutions; second, the development of coordinated geo-economic strategies to diminish structural reliance on the US dollar. While theoretical conditions for hegemonic war may be emerging, we argue that such an outcome remains unlikely across most scenarios. Instead, the United States and its allies will likely keep resorting to sophisticated forms of economic warfare to contain multipolar initiatives, including sanctions regimes, financial exclusions, and supply chain manipulation. Successfully transitioning from unipolarity therefore requires both containing US hegemony at critical geopolitical junctures and developing collective mechanisms to protect national economies from the weaponization of global trade and finance by the US government and allied non-state actors.

Keywords: Multipolarity, Polycentrism, US Hegemony, De-dollarization, Economic Warfare.

Introduction

The regionalization of international relations has accelerated significantly amid the erosion of global multilateralism and the waning legitimacy of U.S. normative authority on the international stage.. This transformation has fundamentally restructured the international system by creating multiple nodes of agency transmission, challenging the hierarchical architecture that characterized the post-Cold War order. The gradual decline of American hegemony—catalyzed by critical junctures such as the 9/11 attacks, which exposed vulnerabilities in U.S. security paradigms, and the 2008 financial crisis, which undermined confidence in American economic dominance—has created strategic space for alternative regional power centers to consolidate influence (Ashraf, 2023).

This fragmentation is perhaps most conspicuous in Eurasia, where Russia has systematically constructed an alternative regional governance framework that explicitly contests U.S.-led institutional arrangements. Moscow's response to the Ukraine crisis exemplifies this broader pattern: rather than merely opposing Western policies, Russia has actively promoted competing regional mechanisms through initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, thereby institutionalizing resistance to the liberal international order (Slobodchikoff, 2017).

Regionalization thus operates as both symptom and catalyst in the transformation of global governance: as American primacy erodes, regional actors increasingly develop autonomous political, economic, and security architectures that reduce dependence on U.S.-dominated institutions. This process generates self-reinforcing dynamics that accelerate the transition toward a more fragmented, multipolar international system where competing regional orders coexist and contest for influence, fundamentally altering the distribution of power and authority in world politics.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment—encompassing diplomatic, intelligence, military, and bureaucratic apparatus—confronts an increasingly complex international environment that fundamentally challenges the sustainability of U.S. hegemony. The simultaneous management of critical flashpoints across the Levantine coast and Eastern Europe already strains Washington's capacity for decisive power projection, while the looming prospect of escalation in the Taiwan Strait threatens to exceed the threshold of

America's strategic bandwidth. Although the United States retains formidable multidimensional capabilities, its normative authority faces systematic contestation as rival powers construct alternative regional architectures that deliberately circumvent or challenge U.S.-dominated institutions (Bielen, 2017).

Under these conditions of strategic overextension and cognitive overload, U.S. decision-makers face heightened incentives to circumvent deliberative institutional processes designed to constrain precipitous action—a particularly hazardous dynamic as the United States navigates the precarious transition from hegemonic dominance toward a more constrained position of *primus inter pares* within an emergent multipolar configuration (Knight, 2023). This institutional degradation occurs precisely when careful deliberation becomes most critical, creating a dangerous paradox where systemic complexity demands more sophisticated governance mechanisms even as political pressures encourage their abandonment.

The contemporary international environment presents acute risks of escalatory dynamics, particularly given the potential for Washington to respond to systemic challenges with disproportionate force. NATO's deepening involvement in the Eastern European crisis may represent the initial phase of a hegemonic war [1]—analogous to the great power conflicts that have punctuated four centuries of the capitalist interstate system, yet distinguished by unprecedented destructive capabilities. Systemic instability typically intensifies when dominant polities resist their relative decline, generating structural conditions conducive to major power conflict (Wohlforth, 2014). The capacity of

[1] Robert Gilpin conceptualizes hegemonic war as a systemic conflict arising when the distribution of power between dominant and rising states becomes fundamentally misaligned. In *War and Change in World Politics* (1981), he argues that international orders are created and maintained by hegemonic powers whose material and ideological dominance structures the system. Over time, however, differential growth rates among states produce rising challengers that benefit from the system without bearing its costs. When the hegemon's ability to enforce rules erodes, systemic disequilibrium emerges. A hegemonic war—total in scope, involving all major powers, and fought over the very principles of system organization—becomes the mechanism through which a new order is established. Unlike limited wars, hegemonic wars restructure the international system itself, producing new rules, institutions, and distributions of power.

declining hegemons to drag the international system into catastrophic warfare represents one of the most dangerous features of power transitions.

Should such a hegemonic war be averted, however, the emergence of a multipolar configuration may offer superior pathways to global stability and effective governance. Contemporary scholarship suggests that multipolar systems demonstrate greater adaptability to transnational challenges, particularly in climate governance where U.S. hegemonic insecurity has systematically undermined multilateral cooperation (Roberts, 2011). A multipolar world order may prove better equipped to manage the cascading consequences of planetary-scale disruptions: accelerating climate displacement, future pandemic responses, and the governance of massive refugee flows anticipated over the coming decades. These structural transformations are already reconfiguring global governance mechanisms, as the erosion of U.S. unipolarity intersects with environmental, technological, and demographic upheavals that will ultimately determine whether international cooperation can prevail over fragmentation and conflict (Oppenheimer, 2021).

The trajectory of this transition hinges critically on the strategic choices made by U.S. policymakers as they confront challenges to America's unilateral dominance. Whether the international system evolves toward cooperative multipolarity or descends into hegemonic warfare depends fundamentally on Washington's capacity to manage decline gracefully—a historical rarity that will test the adaptability of U.S. institutions and the wisdom of its leadership during this pivotal juncture.

Multipolarity and polycentrism

We conceptualize multipolarity as a systemic condition characterized by three or more state actors projecting multivector power across sub-systemic levels while generating global spillover effects. This multipolar configuration describes an international system where no single regional hegemonic actor possesses the capacity to unilaterally project power and influence across the entire global order or achieve systemic dominance. Multipolarity fundamentally reshapes international dynamics, reinforcing regionalism as

states consolidate influence within their respective spheres while simultaneously maintaining global interconnectedness—a process that exemplifies the inherent duality of interstate relations where *competition* and *cooperation* operate as indissociable dimensions (Garzón, 2015).

Under multipolar conditions, the distribution of power and capabilities among regional powers generates structural gridlocks that paradoxically enhance the significance of arbitration through multilateral governance institutions such as the United Nations. This dynamic illustrates how states must simultaneously compete for positional advantage while cooperating within institutional frameworks to manage their interdependence. Multipolarity thus revitalizes multilateralism's centrality to international governance, contrasting sharply with its dilution and delegitimization under unipolar hegemony (Bowen, 2005). The institutional resilience of the UN and analogous organizations becomes critically important for preventing conflict escalation, as these bodies provide arenas in which competitive states can pursue their interests without abandoning cooperative mechanisms (Izoria, 2024).

Multilateral governance organizations function not merely as passive institutional agents but as dynamic ecosystems where states perpetually navigate the tension between competition for power and influence and the imperative for cooperation—a dialectical relationship that defines the essence of multipolar politics (Garzón, 2017). This understanding underscores how multipolarity simultaneously amplifies both the transformative potential and inherent fragility of institutionalized cooperation, as states must continuously balance competitive positioning with collaborative governance. The resulting system embodies a fundamental paradox: the very competition that fragments unipolar dominance also necessitates more sophisticated forms of cooperation to manage systemic complexity.

Polycentrism represents a complementary analytical archetype that does not negate multipolarity but rather enriches it by incorporating additional layers of agency that transcend state-centric conceptualizations of international relations. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that polycentric world politics reflects the fundamental diversification of authority structures, where global order emerges from the interaction of overlapping centers of power that extend far beyond traditional state actors (Perskaya,

2023). The polycentric framework provides analytical granularity by disaggregating multiple power vectors and proliferating confrontation arenas across diverse domains of governance. Within this complex architecture, economic blocs, international organizations, transnational corporations, and social movements function as distinct yet interconnected nodes in an expansive polycentric network, each wielding specialized forms of influence while engaging in simultaneous competition and cooperation across multiple issue areas.

This structural complexity becomes evident as non-state actors — including non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, and intergovernmental organizations — assume increasingly essential roles in global regulation, frequently operating with autonomous agency that transcends direct state control (Reinalda, 2011). Such dynamics suggest that international power distributions may be significantly more diffuse or concentrated than interstate analysis alone would indicate, with variation depending upon the specific governance arena under examination. The proliferation of non-state actors as decisive participants in international lawmaking, security governance, and regulatory processes underscores the analytical limitations of explanations grounded exclusively in interstate dynamics.

From this polycentric perspective, diverse non-state actors engage in competition and cooperation within specialized domains, while the state's multivector agency enables it to be present across nearly all of these domain. Multinational corporations and international non-governmental organizations exemplify this phenomenon by exercising substantial transnational influence, negotiating directly with state authorities while simultaneously shaping global policy agendas through independent initiatives (Goodman, 2007). Although states retain primacy in many domains, leading International Relations scholarship emphasizes that contemporary theoretical frameworks must integrate both state and non-state forces within polycentric architectures that accurately reflect the complexity of modern governance networks. This integration reveals how competition and cooperation operate simultaneously across multiple levels and among heterogeneous actors, creating intricate webs of interdependence that defy simple hierarchical categorization (Ward, 1998). The resulting system embodies a fundamental characteristic of polycentrism: the coexistence of competitive dynamics and collaborative imperatives

across diverse actors and issue areas, where traditional boundaries between domestic and international, public and private, state and non-state become increasingly blurred and mutually constitutive.

In summary, multipolarity and polycentrism offer complementary analytical frameworks for understanding the global order. Multipolarity captures interstate system dynamics through the lens of traditional state actors and power distribution, while polycentrism provides a more fine-grained analysis of international system functioning that encompasses diverse actors competing and cooperating across multiple, overlapping arenas of governance and influence. Rather than viewing these concepts as mutually exclusive, this study treats them as illuminating different dimensions of the same complex reality.

The United States Faces the Specter of Multipolarity

As a founding architect and dominant force within key international institutions including the UN, WTO, and IMF, the United States has consistently challenged the theoretical premise that systemic stability will be ensured once institutional rules are established, as the hegemon would supposedly adhere to them. This pattern contradicts liberal institutionalist expectations that leading powers will be constrained by the very multilateral frameworks they helped establish. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, successive U.S. administrations have demonstrated increasingly selective engagement with multilateral commitments, revealing the instrumental rather than normative basis of U.S. institutional participation.

Trump's administrations (2017–2021; 2025–) represented an acceleration rather than a departure from this trajectory, systematically withdrawing from climate accords, arms control treaties, and trade frameworks while explicitly rejecting multilateral constraints on U.S. sovereignty. This prompted other nations to explore "multilateralism minus one"

strategies [2], effectively institutionalizing American exceptionalism (Fehl & Thimm, 2019). The administrations' simultaneous contestation of non-state governance mechanisms while reinforcing state-centric geopolitical narratives reflected a broader rejection of complex interdependence frameworks that had previously anchored U.S. global strategy (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). Withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and WHO exemplified this shift toward bilateral arrangements ostensibly designed to preserve Washington's decision-making autonomy.

The Biden administration's partial reversal of Trump-era withdrawals has not fundamentally altered this underlying trajectory. While rhetorical commitments to multilateralism have resumed, substantive policy changes remain limited, apart from renewed NATO engagement driven by geopolitical competition in Eastern Europe. Critical examination of U.S. trade policy reveals that American disengagement from WTO-centered multilateralism predates the first Trump administration, reflecting structural concerns about eroding institutional dominance amid China's economic ascendancy (Hopewell, 2021).

This selective multilateralism has manifested in increased reliance on minilateral arrangements such as the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia, India) and AUKUS (U.S., Australia, UK), which offer greater strategic flexibility while excluding potential rival powers (Caverley, 2023; Wei, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the hollowing out of U.S. multilateral leadership, as initial withdrawal from global health coordination created strategic openings for Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy

[2] The term “multilateralism minus one” describes a pattern of international cooperation where multilateral institutions and agreements persist or even strengthen despite the withdrawal or opposition of a dominant power. This phenomenon has become particularly evident in responses to U.S. disengagement from various international regimes. When a hegemon like the United States withdraws from or actively obstructs multilateral frameworks, other states and international organizations often choose to maintain, adapt, or deepen these cooperative arrangements through alternative coalitions. Rather than allowing the absence of a major power to undermine the entire multilateral system, participating states demonstrate institutional resilience by continuing coordination through modified frameworks that exclude the non-participating hegemon. This approach reflects both the intrinsic value that states place on multilateral cooperation and their strategic interest in reducing dependence on any single dominant actor, thereby creating more diversified and potentially more stable forms of international governance. (Fehl & Thimm, 2019; Zürn, 2018).

(Gordanić, 2022). Similarly, reduced American development assistance has facilitated expanded Chinese influence across governance and development sectors, undermining traditional U.S. soft power instruments (Regilme, 2022).

Washington has signaled its determination to resist any transition toward a genuinely multipolar order through increasingly aggressive economic measures. U.S. opposition has materialized through the systematic deployment of economic warfare instruments, revealing a structural containment strategy designed to preserve hegemonic primacy through coercive non-military mechanisms. Escalation of tariff conflicts formed one component of this broader strategy, while the "dollar weapon" regained a centrality not seen since the Volcker "hegemonic shock" of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when aggressive monetary policy was mobilized to reassert U.S. financial dominance amid systemic turbulence (Tooze, 2018). Financial sanctions and disconnections from the SWIFT system targeting Iran, Russia, and other adversaries exemplify how Washington leverages the inertia of the international monetary-financial order to exert asymmetric pressure. Given that SWIFT connects more than 11,500 institutions in over 200 countries and processes upwards of 44 million messages daily, exclusion from this network produces devastating consequences for targeted economies (Zoffer, 2019). Yet this strategy contains inherent contradictions: while weaponized interdependence amplifies U.S. influence in the short term, its overuse accelerates de-dollarization initiatives that threaten the dollar's long-term centrality in global finance (Burke, 2024; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Mirzehanov, 2023).

Parallel to monetary coercion, Washington has intensified support for national technology champions, abandoning free-market rhetoric in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and 5G infrastructure. Severe export controls on advanced chip-making equipment to China, combined with legislative initiatives like the CHIPS and Science Act, reflect an attempt to re-nationalize supply chains and entrench technological supremacy (CHIPS and Science Act, 2022). Scholars interpret this technological containment as part of a comprehensive strategy to preserve U.S. dominance across energy and digital domains, with control over financial and technological infrastructures serving as mutually reinforcing pillars of hegemony. (McDowell, 2023). Ironically, however, such strategies—anchored in coercive restrictions and financial

weaponization—risk accelerating precisely the multipolar and de-dollarizing tendencies they are designed to forestall (Azevedo, 2024; Hopewell, 2021; Torres Filho, 2024).

In summary, the United States remains unequivocally committed to prolonging a declining unipolar moment, deploying multivector power instruments—corporate leverage, military projection, diplomatic pressure, and civil society networks—to maintain hegemonic control across multiple arenas simultaneously. Yet the growing chasm between hegemonic ambitions and material capabilities increasingly exposes the structural unsustainability of the unipolar project.

Of moral crusades and a declining unipolar order

The reluctance of many Global South nations to embrace Washington's claim to world leadership arises not only from American unilateral militarism but also from the persistent contradiction between U.S. rhetoric and practice. By repeatedly violating the very international rules it demands others follow, the United States erodes the ethical legitimacy of its foreign policy and fuels perceptions of hypocrisy. This tension has long been embedded in what critics describe as a pattern of "liberal humanitarian imperialism," a discourse that justified interventions under the banner of democracy and human rights while serving strategic self-interest. Although Trump's administrations (2017–2021; 2025-) disrupted this liberal-humanitarian narrative by prioritizing protectionist and nationalist "America First" policies, the Biden administration sought to restore a liberal hegemonic framework, even as its credibility diminished in the Global South (Rudolf, 2016; Quinn & Cox, 2007). Historically, U.S. foreign policy has been guided by a conviction that Anglo-Saxon political and cultural norms embody universal values whose global diffusion is both inevitable and morally imperative. When these values met resistance, Washington often blamed authoritarian elites or malign foreign powers, overlooking the diverse historical and cultural specificities of other societies (Quinn & Cox, 2007). This "civilizing mission," promoted through diplomacy, academic networks, and cultural industries, effectively constructed a Manichean worldview: states either accepted the liberal template of liberal democracy and free markets, or faced marginalization as pariahs. Far from fostering genuine cooperation, this universalist

project deepened distrust across the Global South and entrenched perceptions of U.S. hegemony as exploitative rather than benevolent.

Governments that define their societies as civilization-states, such as Russia, India, and China, prove especially resistant to American ideological proselytism. In India, the civilizational identity is a long-standing frame, shaping its political institutions and foreign policy outlook (Ayar, 2024; Volodin, 2022). China likewise increasingly presents itself as a civilization-state, emphasizing cultural continuity and national sovereignty as foundations of its global posture (Bajpai, 2024; Xia, 2014). Russia, too, has employed the concept in justifying its distinct path within the international order, embedding civilizational narratives in strategic discourse (Kotchetkov, 2024). Yet resistance to U.S. universalism extends beyond civilization-states characterized by distinctive ethical, political, and institutional frameworks that derive from their unique long-term historical development paths. Progressive administrations in Latin America, including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, also contest American moral crusades when these entail external interference. While committed to incorporating Western-style democratic principles into their public policies—such as advancing gender equality, protecting minority rights, and safeguarding representative democracy—these governments simultaneously reject external instruments such as economic sanctions or regime change. In Brazil, for instance, public opinion reveals strong preferences for sovereignty and non-intervention in foreign policy (Tavares de Almeida, Fernandes, & de Sá Guimarães, 2022), and across Latin America, governments have consistently expressed reluctance to adopt coercive sanctions in multilateral crises, favoring diplomacy and internal resolution mechanisms instead (Columbia University Center on Global Energy Policy, 2022; Latam News, 2022). This dual stance highlights a convergence among societies otherwise separated by values, institutions, and cultures: the refusal to weaponize liberal principles for coercive ends in global politics.

However, although the current Trump administration maintains the crusading posture and Manichean worldview, its ideological foundations have been radically transformed. The moral crusade continues but now operates under fundamentally different premises, abandoning liberal humanitarian universalism for an alternative moral framework that redefines both the mission and the means of American global engagement. Instead of

advocating democracy in the liberal sense—anchored in minority rights, pluralism, and civil liberties—Trump's foreign policy reframes "democracy promotion" as a pragmatic instrument to delegitimize political opponents abroad, particularly center-left or progressive governments, while backing illiberal, nationalist, and far-right regimes. This inversion of the traditional democracy-promotion agenda reflects what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2023) call the "authoritarian playbook": democratic rhetoric is preserved, but its substance is hollowed out to normalize exclusionary practices and undermine rights protections. It should be noted that previous administrations have also employed democracy promotion rhetoric to justify interventions against progressive regimes, particularly in Latin America—Chile in 1973 and Brazil in 1964 being notable examples. However, the current approach represents a qualitative shift: while earlier interventions maintained at least nominal commitments to democratic institution-building, the current Trump administration appears to utilize democracy promotion discourse primarily as a strategic tool for delegitimizing opponents, with reduced emphasis on substantive democratic development.

Internationally, Trump officials cast governments in Latin America, Africa, Asia and parts of Europe as “authoritarian” when they resist U.S. strategic preferences, while simultaneously endorsing leaders such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, or Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu as defenders of “real democracy” (Appelbaum, 2024). This selective appropriation mirrors what Snyder (2018) describes as the weaponization of democracy discourse to justify authoritarian alignment. Under Trump, democracy promotion has become less about institutional strengthening and more about fortifying an ideological axis of conservative regimes willing to align with Washington’s worldview. By recasting democracy in culturally exclusivist terms, the administration advances a global project that not only undermines liberal rights frameworks but also accelerates democratic backsliding worldwide (Ikenberry, 2020).

The administration’s trade and sanctions strategy is fully consistent with this ideological inversion. Economic coercion is framed not simply as a tool of national interest but as a moral instrument within Trump’s redefined “democracy promotion” framework. India has been a primary target of this approach: beginning in April 2025, the United States imposed a 26% tariff on Indian exports under Trump’s “reciprocal tariff” doctrine,

escalating by July–August to 50%, justified on grounds of India's continued purchase of Russian oil and defense equipment (India Briefing, 2025). This punitive strategy illustrates how alignment with Washington's geopolitical preferences, rather than adherence to democratic norms, defines the new boundaries of acceptable behavior in the international system.

Brazil has faced an equally aggressive campaign. In mid-2025, Washington levied 50% tariffs on a broad range of Brazilian products—including footwear, textiles, and machinery (Reuters, 2025). The selective nature of these measures underscores their political function: to punish a progressive administration critical of U.S. foreign policy, even at the cost of domestic consumption. Brazilian officials denounced the sanctions as politically motivated and launched the Brasil Soberano initiative, a credit program designed to mitigate trade disruption (Baker McKenzie, 2025). The asymmetry here reflects how economic warfare is mobilized less as a response to policy disputes than as a disciplinary mechanism against governments unwilling to submit to Washington's ideological line.

For China and Russia, Trump's second administration has pursued a strategy of secondary sanctions, pressing G7 partners to impose tariffs on states purchasing Russian energy. In August 2025, Washington formally proposed punitive measures against China and India for what it called "collusion" in financing Moscow's war effort, seeking to transform commercial ties into a litmus test of democratic virtue (Financial Times, 2025). At the same time, U.S. pressure has intensified over China's semiconductor sector, with export controls framed in explicitly moral terms—defending the "free world's technological sovereignty"—despite the obvious continuity with Trump's 2018–2019 trade war.

Regionalization and Multipolar Cooperation as Alternatives to Unipolarity

In the twenty-first century, the absence of a state actor capable of directly challenging U.S. military and financial hegemony has encouraged an active regionalization of international relations as a counterbalance to American power projection. This trend has

manifested most clearly in the ascent of regional powers that deploy assertive capabilities within their respective sub-systems, aiming to preserve and enhance their economic and political sovereignty. Institutions such as Mercosul in South America, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Eurasia, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the African Union exemplify this dynamic. Unlike explicitly geopolitical alliances such as NATO, these multilateral organizations emphasize economic and developmental cooperation while incorporating mechanisms for managing asymmetries among member states (Acharya, 2014; Söderbaum, 2017). Although political integration within these bodies remains moderate, they nonetheless serve as critical arenas for the articulation and reinforcement of collectively agreed principles, often reflecting shared commitments to sovereignty, non-intervention, and regional solidarity (Fawcett, 2013). This form of "regional multilateralism" reflects an attempt to rebalance the international order away from unilateral dependence on U.S. leadership, embedding systemic pluralism through regionally anchored governance structures (Hurrell, 2008; Acharya, 2017).

Economic cooperation serves as the primary objective of these organizations. However, this does not preclude the political dimension, as regional cooperation requires the formation of communities of mutual trust where uncertainties over the principles governing each party's political behavior are minimized. Geographical proximity and potential sources of disturbance from shared maritime or land borders — which in extreme cases create opportunities for armed aggression — necessitate careful attention to the principles guiding each country's domestic politics. These defining ethical principles are not universal but depend on regional political culture and agreements established by member states within each organization. For instance, Mercosul's democratic clause need not have equivalents in other regional organizations whose member countries operate under different governing principles.

These constitute first-order regional organizations, forming communities that share not only interests but also common identities, values, and legitimacy criteria. In contrast, second-order organizations include BRICS, an interstate union established in 2009 with Brazil, Russia, India, and China as founding members. South Africa joined in 2010, and in January 2024, the organization expanded to include Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and Iran. In January 2025, the first Southeast Asian country joined: Indonesia.

Saudi Arabia was also invited to join but has yet to formally ratify its membership. While Argentina under the Milei administration withdrew its candidacy to align more closely with the United States, the October 2024 Kazan Summit introduced a "partner state" category encompassing Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Nigeria. This extensive list reveals a consortium of nations with considerable differences, suggesting that there are neither political and institutional barriers preventing membership nor clear identity-defining elements for inclusion.

The tensions characteristic of first-order regional organizations become diluted in BRICS due to the global scale and geographical dispersion of its membership. Nevertheless, regional considerations remain relevant in this supra-regional union's formation. Brazil's reservations regarding Venezuela's membership—despite acceptance by other members at the 2024 Kazan Summit—reflected at the time Brasília's concerns about Caracas's commitment to maintaining stable South American relations [3].

The BRICS coalition, while primarily oriented toward economic cooperation, remains institutionally light, operating mainly through annual summits, ministerial meetings, and the New Development Bank (NDB). Decision-making occurs exclusively by consensus, which imposes a significant burden on behind-the-scenes diplomacy to reconcile divergent interests and reach common positions. This mode of operation underscores the governance challenges the group will increasingly face as its agenda expands. Strategically, BRICS aims not only to enhance economic development and mutual security among its members but also to provide a credible systemic alternative to the weaponization of the U.S. dollar and the interbank settlement mechanisms controlled by Washington and its allies. In this regard, initiatives such as discussions on alternative payment systems, local currency settlement, and de-dollarization have become central to

[3] Brazil's position regarding Venezuela has evolved in response to increased US military pressure on the Maduro administration. In September 2025, President Lula da Silva criticized the deployment of US naval forces to the Caribbean, calling them "a factor of tension incompatible with the region's vocation for peace" during a virtual BRICS summit. This shift represents a notable change from Brazil's earlier diplomatic reservations about Venezuela's regional behavior, with Brasília now emphasizing principles of regional peace and non-interference in response to what it perceives as external military threats (Al Jazeera, 2025, September 8).

the bloc's identity, signaling its aspiration to reshape the global financial order (Stuenkel, 2016).

The assertion that BRICS is an anti-Western alliance makes little sense, given that among its members are countries with basic liberal democratic principles embedded in their political cultures. What BRICS signals is that democratic institutions and principles are not the exclusive domain of the "collective West"[4]. Furthermore, BRICS demonstrates that meaningful economic, scientific, and security cooperation can flourish among states with divergent cultural values, ethical frameworks, and institutional systems. This cooperation succeeds when governments respect each other's sovereignty and reject the ideological universalism that has characterized U.S. foreign policy, both in its liberal interventionist form and its more recent far-right populist variants.

BRICS embodies both multipolar and polycentric characteristics simultaneously, reflecting the multi-dimensional dynamics of contemporary international relations. The multipolar aspect is evident in its internal asymmetries: major powers like China, India, and Russia possess significant regional influence and global reach, while Brazil and South Africa function as substantial middle powers with strong regional weight (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). These disparities—economic output, trade structures, technology industrialization, and diplomatic leverage—create potential fault-lines within the bloc (Pomeroy et al., 2016). Yet BRICS also exhibits ability for conflict management through its collegial, economically oriented multilateral framework Decisions are made by consensus, formal institutions remain limited—beyond the New Development Bank and periodic summits—and much of the work occurs through informal diplomacy and coordination rather than coercion. By emphasizing voluntary cooperation and mutual benefit, BRICS reduces

[4] The collective West primarily consists of the NATO countries and select Indo-Pacific allies including Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Australia. This grouping is characterized by market economies, synchronized policy responses, and strategic alignment under American leadership. While this geopolitical alignment has existed for decades, the specific terminology "collective West" gained prominence and widespread usage beginning in 2022, in the context of the geopolitical tensions that led to the conflict in Ukraine (Forca, 2023). Although the term has been predominantly employed by Russian media, it offers a precise characterization of these countries' coordinated international stance, particularly in their relations with Global South nations.

incentives for overt power projection among members—even while acknowledging structural asymmetries.

Geopolitics and Geoeconomics on the Path to a Multipolar System

A multipolar-polycentric global order, where multilateral organizations function as both primary actors and interaction platforms, requires sustained geopolitical commitment to emerge. Regional security subsystems become essential for protecting member states from potential military threats posed by the United States and its allies, who remain committed to preserving the unipolar system architecture (Layne, 2018). Similarly, monetary-financial subsystems linking Global South central banks are crucial for reducing dollar dependency and associated vulnerabilities (Prasad, 2019).

As long as Washington maintains its global hegemonic policies, Global South countries must prioritize substantial military capacity building. The transition toward a multipolar-polycentric system will likely pass through a phase of increasing global bipolarization, signaling the exhaustion of the unipolar regime (Ilyin & Leonova, 2023, p. 9). This shift is driven by an evolving balance of power and the declining economic predominance of Western Europe and the United States (Acharya, 2017). The geoeconomic dimension of this emerging bipolarity presents a novel feature: one pole operates collectively, challenging U.S. dominance through bloc coordination rather than unilateral action, focused on gradual de-dollarization and cooperative development frameworks. Current restrictions on Russia's and Iran's access to SWIFT, combined with escalating U.S. tariff warfare against countries that challenge U.S. predominance, have inadvertently accelerated Global South interest in establishing a "parallel global economy" where currency and trade cannot be weaponized. However, economic complementarity and competitiveness challenges severely limit the scope of any alternative compensation system. Financial and trade flows with economies outside such a parallel circuit cannot be easily replaced without fundamental changes to the global economy. Nevertheless, long-term strategic planning must account for this emerging trend.

Washington's unwavering support for Israel's military actions against Palestinians further demonstrates its prioritization of regional dominance over humanitarian concerns. This pattern signals to Global South governments that consolidating Middle Eastern political and economic partnerships can serve as a counterweight to U.S. geopolitical influence in this strategic arena. The inclusion of Iran, the UAE, and Egypt in BRICS, alongside Turkey's status as a close partner, reflects critical steps toward reducing exposure to American power. Yet Saudi Arabia's hesitation to finalize BRICS membership despite accepting the invitation underscores the dilemmas faced by close U.S. allies when confronted with initiatives perceived in Washington as threats to its strategic interests and worldview.

Should geoeconomic factors prove decisive and the Global South act collectively to surpass the "collective West" in economic terms within this emerging bipolar structure, it could establish a position that substantially diminishes U.S. economic leverage. While U.S. influence will persist, constraining it to more manageable proportions would grant sufficient policy autonomy to accelerate a multipolar transition. However, even under favorable conditions, this transformation will unfold gradually, echoing Gilpin's (1981) argument that systemic change tends to be long and conflictual rather than sudden. Therefore, the United States and its allies will likely maintain their hegemonic project despite emerging bipolarization, adapting their strategies rather than abandoning their fundamental objectives.

This implies that containing the American hegemonic project will require the powers organized around the "collective pole" to prepare extensively for potential military conflict over an extended period. In the Pacific—a crucial projection arena for the United States, China, Russia, and Latin American nations—the formation of AUKUS clearly demonstrates Washington's determination to align with Canberra and London to prevent alternative geopolitical agendas from gaining ground in the region (Medcalf, 2020). An effective anti-hegemonic project will demand substantial military investment to establish a power balance in this and other critical theaters now essential for preserving unipolarity, such as the Middle East and Eastern Europe. This strategy must be well-coordinated and persistent while carefully avoiding "red lines" that could precipitate a hegemonic war with inevitably global dimensions (Allison, 2018).

Economic and technological changes can gradually erode the foundations of international hierarchy, making the hegemon's position increasingly vulnerable to challenges. Under specific structural conditions, the hegemon faces rising costs to maintain leadership while other system actors find their costs to expand autonomy decreasing. This creates a "revolutionary situation" where isolated events with limited initial impact can trigger radical restructuring of systemic hierarchies, potentially leading to war or a series of systemic conflicts involving multiple actors within the shifting power structure.

The emerging bipolarity, as a transitional phase toward a multipolar international structure, arguably meets Gilpin's (1981) conditions for triggering hegemonic war, though the likelihood of such conflict remains limited. Geopolitical containment of the United States must be conducted as a war of attrition rather than as the pursuit of rapidly achievable objectives, gradually constraining U.S. military operations in regions Washington considers central to its Grand Strategy. Open confrontation remains undesirable; instead, the goal must be creating diseconomies for U.S. power projection and undermining the sustainability of U.S. hegemony in key theaters.

These containment efforts must coincide with genuine geoeconomic transitions among "the Rest" countries, pursued collectively through multilateral institutions and frameworks. This represents the true driver of transformation in the international system—not antagonizing the United States and its allies, but reducing them to one node within a broad, horizontally organized network. Systemic transformation should not require "collective West" defeat but rather the decentering of Western institutions and cultural systems currently imposed as universal organizational and behavioral models.

The transition to multipolarity and polycentrism should counter longstanding American claims that "non-Western" countries threaten the American way of life, its economic structures, and ethical-moral standards. The United States and its allies should be invited by the global majority to maintain their way of life within their own territories while refraining from imposing it globally through universalist modernization projects. Peaceful integration into a multipolar-polycentric world requires respecting different civilizations while earning respect for one's own principles in return.

Final Remarks

Given the high stakes involved in hegemonic war scenarios, the United States and its allies will more likely attempt to prevent multipolar transition through economic sanctions rather than direct military confrontation. In this context, gradual de-dollarization becomes essential for systemic change, given the impossibility of negotiating an exit that would prevent Washington from strategically and aggressively exploiting its control over the international reserve currency and international trade. The U.S. dollar's triple function as reserve currency, means of payment, and unit of account provides Washington with unparalleled economic leverage that cannot be voluntarily relinquished.

Through first-order regional organizations and second-order institutions like BRICS, emerging powers aim to construct secure environments for negotiation, agreement, and economic development. The goal is not to eliminate conflicts among parties in multipolar-polycentric contexts (such conflicts are inevitable) but to establish frameworks where disputes can find peaceful resolution before they weaken a united front against Washington's objective to regain full hegemony. Building institutions capable of resolving economic disputes among Global South countries while fostering deeper economic integration represents the most effective strategy for containing U.S. unipolar initiatives. These institutional frameworks serve two essential purposes: first, mitigating internal disputes that could preemptively undermine efforts toward broader Global South cohesion; and second, creating economic cooperation systems that shield member states from U.S. economic coercion.

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