Multipolarity – The Definition and the Differentiation Between its Meanings

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From a purely scientific point of view, there still exists no full and complete theory of a multipolar world (TMW) to date, nor can it be found among the classical theories and paradigms of International Relations (IR). We will try to look for it in the latest post-positivist theories in vain. It is not fully developed in its final aspect, the sphere of geopolitical research. Time and time again this theme is openly comprehended, but still left “behind the scenes” or treated in too biased of a fashion within international relations.

Nevertheless, more and more works on foreign affairs, world politics, geopolitics, and actually, international politics, are dedicated to the theme of multipolarity. A growing number of authors try to understand and describe multipolarity as a model, phenomenon, precedent, or possibility.

The topic of multipolarity was in one way or another touched upon in the works of the IR specialist David Kampf (in the article "The emergence of a multipolar world"), historian Paul Kennedy of Yale University (in his book "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers" ), geopolitician Dale Walton (in the book "Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the XXI century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in strategic perspective"), American political scientist Dilip Hiro (in the book "After Empire: Birth of a multipolar world" ), and others. The closest in understanding the sense of multipolarity, in our view, was British IR specialists Fabio Petito, who tried to build a serious and substantiated alternative to the unipolar world on the basis of the legal and philosophical concepts of Carl Schmitt.

The "multipolar world order" is also repeatedly mentioned in the speeches and writings of political figures and influential journalists. It was thus that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who first called the United States the “indispensable nation”, stated on February 2, 2000, that the US does not want to “establish and enforce” a unipolar world, and that economic integration has already created "a certain world that can be even called multipolar" . On January 26, 2007, in the editorial column of "The New York Times", it was openly written that the "emergence of the multipolar world", along with China, "now takes place at the table in parallel with other power centers such as Brussels or Tokyo". On November 20, 2008, in the report "Global Trends 2025" by the National Intelligence Council of the U.S., it was indicated that the emergence of a "global multipolar system" should be expected within two decades.

Since 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama was viewed by many as the harbinger of an "era of multipolarity," believing that he would orient U.S. foreign policy priority to rising powers such as Brazil, China, India, and Russia. On July 22, 2009, Vice President Joseph Biden, during his visit to Ukraine, said: “We’re trying to build a multipolar world”.

And yet, all these books, articles, and statements do not contain any precise definition of what the multipolar world is (MW), nor, moreover, a coherent and consistent theory of its construction (TMW). The most common treatment for "multipolarity" means only an indication that in the current process of globalization, the undisputed center and core of the modern world (the U.S., Europe, and the wider "global West") is faced with certain new competitors - thriving or simply powerful regional powers and power blocs belonging to the "second" world. A comparison of the potentials of the U.S. and Europe on the one hand, and of new rising powers (China, India, Russia, Latin America, etc.) on the other hand, convinces one more and more of the relative traditional superiority of the West and raises new questions about the logic of further processes that determine the global architecture of forces on a planetary scale – in politics, economics, energy, demography, culture, etc.

All of these comments and observations are critical for building the Theory of the Multipolar World, but by no means piece out its absence. They should be taken into account when constructing such a theory, but it is worth noting that they are fragmentary and patchy in nature, not even rising to the level of primary theoretical conceptual generalizations.

But, despite this, the reference to the multipolar world order is increasingly heard in official summits and international conferences and congresses. Links to multipolarity are present in a number of important inter-governmental agreements and in the texts of national security and defense strategy concepts of a number of influential and powerful countries (China, Russia, Iran, and partly the EU). Therefore, today more than ever, it is important to take a step towards the start of a full-fledged development of the Theory of the Multipolar World, in accordance with the basic requirements of academic scholarship.

Multipolarity does not coincide with the national model of world organization according to the logic of the Westphalian system

Before closely proceeding to the construction of the Theory of the Multipolar World (TMW), we should strictly distinguish the investigated conceptual area. For this, we must consider the basic concepts and define those forms of the global world order which are certainly not multipolar and which, accordingly, multipolarity is presented as an alternative.

Let's start with the Westphalian system, which recognizes the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state and constructs the legal field of International Relations on this basis. This system, developed after 1648 (the end of the Thirty Years’ War in Europe), has passed through several stages of its development, and to some extent continued to reflect objective reality until the end of World War II. It was born out of rejecting the claims of the medieval empires to universalism and the “divine mission”, and it corresponded with the bourgeois reforms in European societies. It was also based on the assumption that only a nation-state can possess the highest sovereignty, and that outside of it, there is no other entity that would have the legal right to interfere in the internal policy of this state – regardless of which goals and missions (religious, political, or otherwise) guide it. Form the middle of the XVII century to the middle of the XX century, this principle predetermined European policy and, accordingly, was transferred to other countries of the world with certain amendments.

The Westphalian system was originally relevant only for European powers, and their colonies were regarded merely as their continuation, not possessing sufficient political and economic potential to pretend to be an independent entity. Since the beginning of the XX century, the same principle was extended to the former colonies during the process of decolonization.

This Westphalian model assumes full legal equality between all sovereign states. In this model, there are as many poles of foreign policy decisions in the world as there are sovereign states. By default of inertia, this rule is still in force, and all of international law is based on it.

In practice, of course, there is inequality and hierarchical subordination between various sovereign states. In the First and Second World Wars, the distribution of power among the largest world powers led to a confrontation between separate blocs, where decisions were made in the country that was the most powerful among its allies.

As a result of World War II, owing to the defeat of Nazi Germany and the Axis Powers, the bipolar scheme of international relations (the Yalta bipolar system) developed in the global system. International law continued to de-jure recognize the absolute sovereignty of any nation-state, but de-facto, basic decisions regarding the central issues of the world order and global policy were made only in two centers - in Washington and in Moscow.

The multipolar world differs from the classical Westphalian system by the fact that it does not recognize the separate nation-state, legally and formally sovereign, to have the status of a full-fledged pole. This means that the number of poles in a multipolar world should be substantially less than the number of recognized (and therefore, unrecognized) nation-states. The vast majority of these states are not able today to provide for their own security or prosperity in the face of a theoretically possible conflict with the current hegemon (the U.S.). Therefore, they are politically and economically dependent on an external authority. Being dependent, they cannot be the centers of a truly independent and sovereign will concerning the global issues of the world order.

Multipolarity is not a system of international relations that insists upon the legal equality of nation-states as the actual, factual state of affairs. This is only a facade of a very different picture of the world based on a real, rather than nominal, balance of forces and strategic capabilities.

Multipolarity operates not with the situation as it exists de-jure, but rather de-facto, and it proceeds from the statement of the fundamental inequality between nation-states in the modern and empirically fixable model of the world. Moreover, the structure of this inequality is that the secondary and tertiary powers are not able to defend their sovereignty, in any transient bloc configuration, in the face of possible external challenge by the hegemonic power. This means that sovereignty is a legal fiction today.

Multipolarity is not Bipolarity

After the Second World War, the Yalta bipolar system was developed. It continued to formally insist upon the recognition of the absolute sovereignty of all states, the principle on which the UN was organized, and carried on the work of the League of Nations. However, in practice, two centers of global decision-making appeared in the world – the U.S. and the USSR. The U.S. and the USSR were two alternative political-economic systems, respectively global capitalism and global socialism. It thus was that strategic bipolarity was founded on ideological and philosophical dualism – liberalism against Marxism.

The bipolar world was based on the symmetric comparability of the economic and military-strategic parity potential of the American and Soviet warring camps. At the same time, no other country affiliated with a particular camp remotely had the cumulative power to compare to that of Moscow or Washington. Consequently, there were two hegemons on the global scale, each surrounded by a constellation of allied (half-vassal, in a strategic sense) countries. In this model, formally recognized national sovereignty gradually lost its weight. First of all, countries associated with either hegemon were dependent on that pole’s policies. Therefore, the said country was not independent, and regional conflicts (generally developed in areas of the Third World) quickly escalated into a confrontation of two superpowers seeking to redistribute the balance of planetary influence on the "disputed territories". This explains the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, etc.

In the bipolar world, there was also the third force – the Non-Aligned Movement. It consisted of some Third World countries that refused to make an unequivocal choice in favor of either capitalism or socialism, and that instead preferred to maneuver between the global antagonistic interests of the U.S. and the USSR. To some extent, a few succeeded, but the possibility of non-alignment itself assumed the existence of two poles, which in a varying degree balanced each other. Moreover, these "non-aligned countries" were in no way able to create a "third pole" owing to the main parameters of the superpowers, the fragmented and unconsolidated nature of the Non-Aligned Movement members, and the lack of any joint general socio-economic platform. The world was divided into the capitalist West (the first world), the socialist East (the second world), and “the rest” (the Third World). Besides, “all the others” in every sense represented the world periphery where the interests of the superpowers occasionally appeared. Between the superpowers themselves, the probability of conflict was all but ruled out due to parity (specifically in the guarantee of mutual assured nuclear destruction). This made it so that the preferred areas for the partial revision of the balance of power were the periphery countries (Asia, Africa, Latin America).

After the collapse of one of the two poles (the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991), the bipolar system also collapsed. This has created the preconditions for the emergence of an alternative world order. Many analysts and experts in IR rightly talked about "the end of the Yalta system ". While de-jure recognizing sovereignty, the Yalta Peace was de-facto built upon the principle of the balance of the two symmetric and relatively equal hegemons. With the departure of one of the hegemons from the historical scene, the whole system ceased to exist. The time of a unipolar world order or “unipolar moment" arrived.

A multipolar world is not bipolar world (such as we knew it in the second half of the twentieth century), because in today's world, there is no power that can single-handedly resist the strategic power of the United States and the countries of NATO, and moreover, there is no generalizing and coherent ideology capable of uniting a large part of humanity in a hard ideological opposition to the ideology of liberal democracy, capitalism, and "human rights", on which the United States now bases a new sole hegemony. Neither modern Russia, China, India, or some other state can pretend to be a second pole under these conditions. The recovery of bipolarity is impossible due to ideological (the end of the popular appeal of Marxism) and military-technical reasons. As for the latter, the U.S and NATO countries took the lead so much over the past 30 years that symmetric competition with them in the military-strategic, economic, and technical spheres is not possible for any single country.

Multipolarity is Not Compatible With a Unipolar World

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the disappearance of both a symmetrical and powerful superpower, as well as a giant ideological camp. It was the end of one of the two global hegemonies. The entire structure of the world order from this point is irreversibly and qualitatively different. Herewith the remaining pole - led by the United States and on the basis of liberal-democratic capitalist ideology - is preserved as a phenomenon and has continued to expand its socio-political system (democracy, the market, the ideology of “human rights”) on a global scale. Precisely, this is called a unipolar world or the unipolar world order. In such a world, there is a single center of decision making on major global issues. The West and its core, the Euro-Atlantic community, led by the United States, found themselves in the role of the only remaining available hegemony. The entire space of the planet in such an environment is a triple regionalization (described in detail by the Neo-Marxist theory of E.Wallerstein ):

 - Core zone (“rich North”, “center”),

 - Area of the world periphery (“poor South”, “periphery”),

 - Transitional zone (“semi-periphery”, including major countries, actively developing towards capitalism: China, India, Brazil, some countries in the Pacific, as well as Russia, by inertia preserving significant strategic, economic, and energy potential).

The unipolar world seemed to finally be an established reality in the 1990s, and some U.S. analysts have declared on this basis the thesis of the "end of history" (Fukuyama). This thesis meant that the world will become totally ideologically, politically, economically and socially homogenous, and that now all of the processes occurring in it will no longer be a historical drama based on the battle of ideas and interests, but rather an economic (and relatively peaceful) competition of market participants - similar to how the internal policy of the free democratic liberal regimes is constructed. In this understanding, democracy becomes global and the planet is composed only of the West and its purlieus (i.e. the countries which will gradually integrate into it).

The most precise design of the theory of unipolarity was proposed by American neoconservatives, who emphasized the U.S.’ role in the new global world order. They sometimes proclaimed the United States as the "New Empire" (R.Kaplan ) or the "benevolent global hegemony" (U.Kristol, R.Keygan ), anticipating the offensive of the "American Century” (The Project for the New American Century). In the neocon view, unipolarity has acquired a theoretical foundation. The future world order was seen as a US-centric construction, where the core is the U.S. as a global arbiter and embodiment of the principles of "freedom and democracy", and a constellation of other countries is structured around this center, reproducing the American model with varying degrees of accuracy. They vary in geography and in their degree of similarity to the United States:

 - First, the inner circle – countries of Europe and Japan,

 - Secondly, the thriving liberal countries of Asia,

 - Finally, all the rest.

All the zones located around the "Global America”, regardless of their political orbit, are included in the process of "democratization" and "Americanization." The spread of American values goes in parallel with the implementation of practical American interests and the expansion of the zone of direct American control on a global scale.

At the strategic level, unipolarity is expressed in the central U.S. role in NATO, and further, in the asymmetric superiority of the combined military capabilities of NATO countries over all the other nations of the world.

Parallel to this, the West is superior to other non-Western countries in its economic potential, level of development of high technology, etc. Most importantly: the West is the matrix where the established system of values and norms which are currently regarded as the universal standard for all other countries in the world was historically formed. This can be called the global intellectual hegemony which, on the one hand, maintains the technical infrastructure for global control, and on the other, stands in the center of the dominant planetary paradigm. Material hegemony goes hand in hand with the spiritual, intellectual, cognitive, cultural, and information hegemonies.

In principle, the American political elite is guided precisely by this consciously perceived hegemonic approach, however, it is clearly and transparently spoken about by the neocons, while representatives of other different political and ideological directions prefer more streamlined expressions and euphemisms. Even critics of the unipolar world in the United States do not challenge the principle of the "universality" of American values and the desire for their approval at the global level. Objections are focused around what extent this project is realistic in the medium and long term, and whether the U.S. is able to bear the burden of the global world empire alone.

Challenges to such direct and open American dominance, which seemed to be a fait accompli in the 1990s, led some American analysts (specifically Charles Krauthammer, who introduced this concept) to posit about the end of the "unipolar moment".

But, in spite of everything, it is exactly unipolarity in one or another manifestation – overt or covert, the model of the world order – that became a reality after 1991 and remains so to this day.

In practice, unipolarity stands side by side with the nominal saving of the Westphalian system, which still contains the inertial remains of the bipolar world. The sovereignty of all nation-states is still acknowledged de-jure, and the UN Security Council still partially reflects the power balance corresponding to the realities of the "Cold War". Thus, the American unipolar hegemony is de-facto present, along with a number of international institutions that express the balance of other eras and cycles in the history of international relations. The world is constantly reminded of the contradictions between the de-jure and de-facto situation, especially when the U.S. or a Western coalition directly intervenes in the affairs of sovereign states (sometimes even bypassing the veto of such institutions as the UN Security Council). In cases such as the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, we see an example of a unilateral violation of the principle of state sovereignty (ignoring the Westphalian model), the refusal to take into account the position of Russia (Vladimir Putin) in the UN Security Council, and the loud objections of Washington’s NATO partners (France’s Jacques Chirac and Germany’s Gerhard Schroeder).

The most consistent supporters of unipolarity (for example, Republican John McCain) insist on the enforcement of international order in line with the real balance of forces. They offer the creation of a rather different model than the UN, the "League of Democracies" , in which the dominant U.S. position, that is, unipolarity, would have been legislated. The legalization of a unipolar world and the hegemonic status of the “American Empire” in the post-Yalta international relations structure is one of the possible directions of the evolution of the global political system.

It is absolutely clear that a multipolar world order not only differs from the unipolar, but is its direct antithesis. Unipolarity assumes one hegemon and one center of decision-making, while multipolarity insists on a few centers, herewith none of them having exclusive rights and thus having to take into account the positions of others. Multipolarity, therefore, is a direct logical alternative to unipolarity. There can be no compromise between them: under the laws of logic, the world is either unipolar or multipolar. Thenceforth, it is not important how such a particular model is legally formulated, but how it is de-facto created. In the era of the "Cold War", diplomats and politicians reluctantly recognized the "bipolarity" that was an obvious fact. Therefore, it is necessary to separate the diplomatic language from concrete reality. The unipolar world is the factual world order to date. One can only argue about whether it is good or bad, whether it is the dawn of the system or, alternatively, the sunset, and whether it will last a long time or, on the contrary, quickly end. Regardless, the fact remains fact. We live in a unipolar world, and the unipolar moment still lasts (though some analysts are convinced that it is coming to an end).

The Multipolar World is Not A Nonpolar World

American critics of rigid unipolarity, and especially the ideological rivals of neo-conservatives concentrated in the "Council on Foreign Relations”, offered another term instead of unipolarity - nonpolarity . This concept is based on the suggestion that the processes of globalization will continue to unfold, and the Western model of the world order will expand its presence to all the countries and peoples of the earth. Thus, the intellectual hegemony and hegemony of values of the West will continue. The global world will be the world of liberalism, democracy, free markets, and human rights, but the U.S. role as a national power and the flagship of globalization, according to proponents of this theory, will shrink. Instead of a direct American hegemony, a model of "world government" will emerge. This will be attended to by representatives of different countries, standing together with common values and striving to establish a unified socio-political and economic space in the whole world. Here again, we are dealing with an analog of Fukuyama’s "end of history" described in different terms.

The nonpolar world will be based on co-operation between democratic (by default) countries, but gradually the process of formation should also include non-state actors - NGOs, social movements, separate citizen groups, network communities, etc.

The main characteristic in the construction of the nonpolar world is the dissipation of decision-making from one entity (now Washington) to the many entities of the lower level - right down to online planetary referendums on the major events and actions affecting all of mankind.

The economy will supersede politics and market competition will sweep all the countries’ customs barriers. The state will become more concerned with its citizens’ care than traditional security, and it will usher in the era of global democracy.

This theory coincides with the main features of the theory of globalization and presents itself as a stage towards the replacement of the unipolar world, but only on the conditions promoted today by the U.S. and Western countries in regards to their socio-political, technological, and economic models (liberal democracy). These and their values will become a universal phenomenon, and the need for the strict protection of democratic and liberal ideals will no longer exist – all regimes that resist the West, democratization, and Americanization at the time of the onset of the nonpolar world should be eliminated.

The elite of all countries should be similar, homogeneous, capitalist, liberal, and democratic - in other words, "Western" – regardless of historical, geographic, religious, and national origin.

The project of the nonpolar world is supported by number of very powerful political and financial groups, from the Rothschilds to George Soros and his foundations.

This structural project addresses the future. It is thought of as a global formation that should replace unipolarity and be established after in its wake. This is not an alternative, but rather a continuation, and it will be possible only as society’s center of gravity moves from today's mix of alliance of two levels of hegemony - material (the American military-industrial complex and Western economy and resources) and spiritual (standards, procedures, values) – to a purely intellectual hegemony, together with the gradual reduction of the importance of material domination.

Namely, this is the global information society, where the main processes of ruling and dominion will be deployed in the field of intelligence via the control of minds, mind control, and the programming of the virtual world.

The multipolar world cannot be combined with the nonpolar world model because it does not accept the validity of the unipolar moment as a prelude to the future world order, nor the intellectual hegemony of the West, the universality of its values, or the dissipation of decision-making into the planetary multiplicity regardless of the preexisting cultural and civilizational identity. The nonpolar world suggests that the American melting pot model will be extended to the whole world. As a result, this will erase all the differences between peoples and cultures, and an individualized, atomized humanity will be transformed into a cosmopolitan 'civil society' without any borders. Multipolarity implies that the centers of decision-making must be high enough (but not solely in the hands of one entity - as it is today under the conditions of the unipolar world), and cultural specialties of each particular civilization must be preserved and strengthened (but not dissolved into a single cosmopolitan multiplicity).

Multipolarity is Not Multilateralism

Another model of the world order, somewhat distanced from direct U.S. hegemony, is a multilateral world (multilateralism). This concept is very widespread in the U.S. Democratic Party, and is formally adhered to in the foreign policy of President Obama’s Administration. In the context of American foreign policy debates, this approach is opposed to the neoconservatives’ insistence on unipolarity.

In practice, multilateralism means that the U.S. should not act in the field of international relations relying entirely upon its own strength and putting all of its allies and "vassals" before the fact in a mandated manner. Instead, Washington should take into account the position of partners, persuade and argue its suggested solutions in equal dialogue with them, and bring them over to its side by means of rational arguments and, sometimes, compromise proposals.

The United States in such a situation should be "first among equals", rather than "dictator among its subordinates". This imposes on the foreign policy of the United States certain obligations to allies in global politics and demands obedience to overall strategy. The overall strategy in this case is the West's strategy to establish global democracy, the market, and the implementation of the ideology of human rights on a global scale. In this process, the U.S., being the leader, should not directly equate its national interests with the "universal" values of Western civilization, on whose behalf they act. In some cases, it is more preferable to operate in a coalition, and sometimes even to make concessions to its partners.

Multilateralism differs from unipolarity by the emphasis on the West in general, and especially on its "value-based" (i.e. the "normative") component. Concerning this, apologists of multilateralism converge with those who advocate the nonpolar world. The only difference between multilateralism and nonpolarity is only the fact that multilateralism places emphasis on the coordination of democratic Western countries among themselves, and nonpolarity also includes non-state authorities (NGOs, networks, social movements, etc.) as actors.

It is significant that in practice, Obama’s policy of multilateralism, as repeatedly voiced by him and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, is not much different from the direct and transparent imperialist era of George W. Bush, during whose period the neoconservatives were dominant. U.S. military interventions continued (Libya), and U.S. troops maintained their presence in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.

The multipolar world doesn’t match with the multilateral world order because it opposes the universalism of Western values and does not recognize the legitimacy of the "rich North" - either alone or collectively - to act on behalf of all humanity and serve as the single center of decision-making on most majorly important issues.

Summary

The differentiation of the term "multipolar world" from the chain of alternative or similar ones outlines the semantic field in which we will continue to build the theory of multipolarity. Up until this point, we have talked only of what the multipolar world order is not, denials and differentiations themselves which allow us in contrast to distinguish a number of constituent and quite positive characteristics.

If we generalize this second positive part, arising from the series of made distinctions, we get approximately this picture:

1. The Multipolar world is a radical alternative to the unipolar world (that in fact exists in the present situation) due to the fact that it insists on the presence of a few independent and sovereign centers of global strategic decision-making on the global level.

2. These centers should be sufficiently equipped and financially and materially independent to be able to defend their sovereignty in the face of a direct invasion by a potential enemy on the material level, and the most powerful force in the world today should be understood as this threat. This requirement is reduced to being able to withstand the financial and military-strategic hegemony of the United States and NATO countries.

3. These centers of decision-making must not accept the universalism of Western standards, norms, and values (democracy, liberalism, free market, parliamentarism, human rights, individualism, cosmopolitanism, etc.) and can be completely independent of the spiritual hegemony of the West.

4. The multipolar world does not imply a return to the bipolar system because today there is no single strategic or ideological force that can single-handedly resist the material and spiritual hegemony of the modern West and its leader, the United States. There must be more than two poles in a multipolar world.

5. The multipolar world does not seriously consider the sovereignty of existing nation-states, which is declared only on a purely legal level and is not confirmed by the presence of sufficient power, strategic, economic, and political potential. In the XXI century, it is no longer enough to be a nation-state in order to be a sovereign entity. In such circumstances, real sovereignty may be only achieved by a combination and coalition of states. The Westphalian system, which continues to exist de-jure, no longer reflects the realities of the system of international relations and requires revision.

6. Multipolarity is not reducible to nonpolarity nor to multilateralism because it does not put the center of decision-making (pole) into the world government, nor to the club of the U.S. and its democratic allies ("global West"), the level of sub-state networks, NGOs, and other entities of civil society. A pole must be localized somewhere else.

These six points define the entire range for the further development of multipolarity and sufficiently embody its main features. Though this description significantly moves us towards understanding the point of multipolarity, it is still insufficient to be qualified as a theory. This is merely an initial determination with which the full theorizing just begins.