

Bipolar, Multipolar, Nonpolar All at Once: Our World at the Time of the Russia–Ukraine War

by Nathalie Tocci

We have known for a while that the old order was going. The new century began with the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Especially the latter became associated with the excesses of American hegemony and, consequently, the beginning of its demise. We have known for the last two decades at least that Pax Americana was on its way out. What we did not know is what this would be replaced by.

Only a few years later, beginning in 2008, the global financial crisis and the ensuing Eurozone crisis appeared to provide the first answers. The global financial crisis was a crisis of the West, laying bare the deep vulnerabilities of the hyperliberalism permeating western capitalism. It spurred a debate on multipolarity as an alternative to US unipolarity: groupings such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) were formed, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was established highlighting the reform failures of Western-led international

financial institutions, and new multilateral groupings like the G20 seemed both more representative of the global distribution of power and better equipped to deal with crises in the global economy. The financial crisis also ignited debates about the desirability of unfettered globalisation, which, while reducing inequalities between countries and lifting millions out of poverty, had massively increased socioeconomic disparities within the West.

The financial and economic crisis, especially its mishandling in Europe that culminated in the 2011–2012 sovereign debt crisis, provided fertile ground for a third crisis, that of democracy, accentuated by the so-called migration crisis in Europe. The crisis of democracy, featuring the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit referendum, the nationalist-populist wave in Europe and beyond, from Turkey to Brazil, as well as the rule of law crisis in the EU with Hungary's and Poland's democratic backsliding,

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pointed to a world in which democracy promotion was long gone. Liberal democracies were now in the business of democracy protection, while authoritarian countries like Vladimir Putin's Russia started explicitly portraying themselves as leaders of an illiberal world.

Then came the pandemic crisis that revealed explicitly that the international system was indeed fragmenting once again; rather than a clear multipolar structure, however, a new form of bipolarity was emerging, in which the nature of political systems was central (democracy versus autocracy) and which gravitated around the growing rivalry between the United States and China. The pandemic was often portrayed in terms of competition (which political system is best equipped to deal with major global challenges?), but it also demonstrated that effective results hinge on aggregate effort and multilateral responses. The same is true of other transnational challenges like the climate crisis, artificial intelligence and nonproliferation. The pandemic also highlighted another contradiction: the world was more connected and interdependent than ever, but pushes for deglobalisation, closure, protection, redundancy and the shortening of supply chains were on the rise too.

Finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, by touching on so many dimensions of security, (dis)order and global governance, is laying bare the contradictions of our time in full force. It has shown that the world is bipolar, multipolar and nonpolar all at once. Yes, there is a growing form of bipolarity, with a tightening transatlantic

relationship and cooperation within the G7 Plus, and a strategically diminished Russia increasingly relegated to China's vassal. At the same time, the world has also revealed features of multipolarity, especially the agency of ambitious mid-sized powers that have refused to align with either the West or Russia looking for opportunities from both sides. India, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and to an extent Turkey, rather than fence sitters have all been blade runners intent on fully exploiting the gains accrued by global confrontation. Yet the world has also demonstrated that it is nonpolar. The broad majority of those countries that abstained on UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion essentially wanted to keep clear of the conflict, being primarily concerned with its global consequences rather than its regional causes. These countries, in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, believe they have enough on their domestic and regional plates and are simply unwilling to be dragged into a war which they consider not to be theirs. They are preoccupied with their local affairs and are not bound to one another by a global ideological glue: in this respect, the current fence sitters are fundamentally different from the non-aligned movement of the Cold War.

Relatedly, the war has also revealed that the world is at once more integrated and more fragmented. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is both a European and a global war. What makes it global are both the principles at stake, from international law, colonialism, democracy and rights, and its repercussions, from the energy crisis to food security and nuclear proliferation. The weaponisation of



energy and food has highlighted in their starkest form the security risks of an increasingly interdependent world. At the same time, the war has starkly brought to the fore the reality that universal ideas like sovereignty and territorial integrity have relatively little traction globally, with countries unlikely to be directly affected by the violation of such principles simply not willing to pay the price in their defence. Sad as it is, the war has brought greater honesty to the international debate.

The Russia–Ukraine war, coming on the heels of other crises that have scarred the 21st century, has enabled us to see with greater clarity the world we live in. Yet such clarity has revealed complexity, especially contradictions in the nature and distribution of power as well as in the centripetal and centrifugal forces driving it. These contradictions are nowhere near to be settled, making the search for effective global governance centred on existing, reformed or new institutions, ever more elusive. Reading through the fog of war, we are destined to muddle through for some time still, alternating between competition and ad hoc cooperation, zigzagging as we seek to provide tentative and often suboptimal solutions to the major challenges of our age.

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