



THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL POWER DISTRIBUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTIPOLATORY DEBATES: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE POST-2000 LITERATURE

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Article History

Received: 11.06.2025
Accepted: 03.07.2025
Published: 19.07.2025

Abstract: Academic debates on the structure of the post -Cold War International System, especially since the 2000s, show that global power distribution has been reshaped on the axis of one polarity, two polarity and multipolarity. This study aims to systematically examine the theoretical and empirical literature that develops around the concept of multipolarity. This analysis, which was created by literature screening method, has been shaped on the basic axes such as the theories of power balance, the rise of large powers and the transformation of the international order. China's economic and military rise, Russia's strategic moves and the process of integration of the European Union, such as the integration process of the existing system evolved into very polarity or still exacerbated the discussions of a US -based order. In addition to mainstream theories such as realism, neoliberal institutionalism and British school, this study, which is evaluated with the contribution of critical approaches, comparatively analyzes different academic positions of multiple polarity. Thus, it aims to shed light on the gaps and contradictions in the existing literature of the structure of the international system.

Keywords: Multi -polarity, balance of power, international system, global politics, international relations theories, rise of China, systematic literature screening.

Cite this article:

Sirakaya, Y., Tenlik, O., (2025). THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL POWER DISTRIBUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTIPOLATORY DEBATES: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE POST-2000 LITERATURE. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(7), 49-53.

Introduction

The structural features of the international system have varied throughout history based on the balance of power. While a bipolar world order during the Cold War was dominated, a one -pole structure came to the forefront under the global leadership of the United States (USA) in the post -1991 period (Waltz, 2000). However, especially since the 2000s, actors such as China, Russia, India and the European Union have reconstructed the more decisive roles in the global system in the literature of international relations (Kupchan, 2012; Ikenberry, 2011). Multi -polarity refers to a depth transformation about how these actors affect the normative and institutional structure of the system, which is not limited to the number of actors with power. Neorealist approaches consider multiple polarity as a structure open to production and open to conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001), Neoliberal Institutionalists argue that the need for international cooperation increases in a multi -polar system and the role of institutions has strengthened

(Keohane & Nye, 2011). On the other hand, the British school reads the polarity as an opportunity to produce order by drawing attention to the continuity of the normative order through the idea of international society (Bull, 2002). In the post -2000 period, China's "Generation and Road" attempt, Russia's Ukrainian policy and anti -Western discourses, the economic rise of India and the institutional integration efforts of the European Union brought the diversification of the number and impact power in the system (Buzan & Lawson, 2015). This transformation has raised the birth of a paradigm called "new very polarity" in academic circles. This study aims to systematically analyze how the concept of multiple polarity is handled in the literature of international relations in the post -2000 period. In this framework; Academic debates that develop around key themes such as power balance, hegemony, systemic stability and international norms will be comparable on the basis of theoretical approaches. The main purpose of the study is to provide the theoretical contribution to the



field by revealing the basic tendencies, contradictions and gaps in the literature of multiple polarity.

Aim

The main purpose of this study is to analyze how the concept of multiple polarity is discussed in the academic literature after 2000 at the theoretical and conceptual level. The assumptions that the unilateral structure after the Cold War was changed, especially the rise of China, the strategic moves of Russia, the institutional deepening of the European Union and the increasing influence of regional powers such as India, has brought to the agenda again. In this context, the study aims to reveal how the phenomenon of multiple polarity is conceptualized in the discipline of international relations, in which theoretical frameworks, and the basic tendencies, differences and gaps in this literature. In addition, the study will compare the approaches of mainstream theories such as Realist, Neoliberal and British School and critical approaches on multiple polarity and evaluate power distribution, system stability and normative order relations through the literature. Thus, it is aimed to present a holistic perspective on the scope and limits of the theoretical predictions of the current and future structure of the international system.

Method

This study is based on a systematic literature screening structured within the framework of qualitative research methods. The main purpose of the research is to analyze how the concept of multiple polarity is discussed in the literature of international relations in the post -2000 period. In this study, both the mainstream theories (Realism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, British School) and critical approaches (critical theory, postcapital approaches) evaluations for multipupation were examined. Within the scope of the literature screening, academic studies published between 2000 and 2025 are based on refereed journals and book chapters. In respected academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Jstor and Proquest, it was searched with keypads such as "multolarity", "global power shift", "polarity in international relations", "Emerging Powers" and "Emerging Powers" and "International Order". The inclusion criteria are as follows:

Written within the framework of the theory of international relations,

Directly dealing with the concept of very polarity,

Having a conceptual or theoretical depth,

It is published after 2000 and is a refereed resource.

Exchange Criteria:

Popular publications, blog posts and news content,

Regional analyzes that do not have a direct relationship with the subject,

Weak studies with theoretical framework that only offer empirical data.

The studies obtained were examined by thematic analysis method. In the coding process, the following main themes about multi -polarity have been identified:

Theoretical foundations of very polarity,

Change dynamics in global power distribution,

The role of new polar actors,

Stability of the international order,

Normative and institutional transformations.

In line with these themes, the studies in the literature were classified and comparative analysis was performed. In addition, methodological diversity (quantitative, qualitative, mixed) and regional foci were also evaluated.

Findings

1. International System Theories

How the distribution of global power works and the effects of multiple polarity on the international system are interpreted in different ways depending on which theoretical lens is examined. Three basic theoretical approaches in the discipline of international relations: Realism, neoliberal institutionalism and British school. Each of them conceptualizes the concept of multiple polarity in a specific way within its own assumptions.

Realism-power balance and insecurity wishing: Realist theories define the international system as an anarchic structure. States are rational actors who are constantly struggling for power to ensure their safety (Waltz, 1979). According to Kenneth Waltz's neorealist approach, the number of poles in the system determines direct stability. Although one -polarity provides short -term stability, the tendency of other states to disrupt the status quo in the long term increases. According to realists, multiple polarity is a level where alliances are less predictable, open to false calculations and thus the risk of conflict is higher (Mearsheimer, 2001). According to John Mearsheimer's aggressive realism, in multipolar systems, the great powers are trying to balance each other, competition becomes inevitable and this causes systemic instability. From this perspective, developments such as China's rise increase the likelihood of conflict in the system.

Neoliberal Corporateism-Combination and Institutional Balancing: Neoliberal institutionalism accepts the assumption of the anarchy of realism, but emphasizes that states are actors who want to maximize their economic interests, but also to maximize their economic interests. According to this approach, institutions in the international system can facilitate the interaction between states and reduce insecurity, ensure flow of information and encourage cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 2011). Multi -polarity in terms of neoliberals makes the role of institutions even more important, as more actor has a say in the system. Multilateral institutions such as the European Union, ASEAN and the United Nations gain functionality in providing stability in a multipolar system. Therefore, this approach evaluates the polarity from a more positive perspective than realists.

British School-International Society and Normative Order: The British school center not only the power relations in international relations, but also the concept of international society shaped around norms, values and institutions (Bull, 2002). Hedley Bull's classic work *The Anarchical Society* argues that states can establish an order through common values and rules, even in an anarchic structure. According to this approach, multiple polarity depends not only on the balance of power, but also to the existence of a order based on common norms. The British school argues that with the participation of rising forces such as China or Russia to the system, not only the number of actors but also the normative structure has changed. In this context, very polarity brings with it

normative pluralism; This can make the system more complex but more inclusive.

Other approaches-critical theories and postists: Critical theorists argue that the focus of multiple polar discussions only on military and economic power parameters is a limited reading. These approaches take the center of rising forces to produce discourse, normative opposition and alternative order of order (Cox, 1981). The postularist approaches question the concept of the polar itself; The power is built not only by objective accumulations but also through discourses (Ashley, 1984).

2. Transformation of the Concept of Power: Military, Economic and Soft Power Parameters

In the discipline of international relations, the concept of "power" has been defined for many years based on military capacity and the position of states in the international system has been largely evaluated through this capacity (Morgenthau, 1948). However, while entering the 21st century, factors such as globalization, technology, information revolution and the increase in economic mutual dependence have made the nature of power multidimensional. Today, the ability of states to be effective at the global level is related not only to harsh power elements, but also to soft power elements such as economic capacity and cultural attractiveness (Nye, 2004).

The continuation of military power-classical power: Military power is a parameter, which is located in the center of the theory of realism and is seen as indispensable for the state to preserve its existence in the international system. Defense expenditures, nuclear weapons capacity, military technology and power projection ability are among the classic power criteria (Mearsheimer, 2001). Today, the ability to maneuver in foreign policy, such as the United States, Russia and China, is largely based on its military capacity. However, it is increasingly accepted that military power alone is not enough to establish hegemony.

The new determinant of the economic power-global influence: Economic power is increasingly prominent in determining the position of states in the global system. Gross Domestic Product (GDP), foreign trade volume, investment capacity, energy and technology production are the basic indicators of economic power. China's giant infrastructure projects, such as the rapidly growing economy and "generation and road" initiative since the 2000s, have made this country not only economic but also a strategic actor (Subacchi, 2020). Likewise, the European Union carries out its normative and institutional power projection with economic tools with economic integration model.

Soft Power-Cultural and Normative Impact: The concept of soft power developed by Joseph Nye indicates the capacity to influence others through military or economic coercion rather than military or economic coercion (Nye, 2004). Values such as cultural products, media, education systems, diplomacy, human rights and democracy are the main tools of soft power. With Hollywood and Universities of the United States; With the popular culture of South Korea; The areas of influence created by China through Confucius Institutes are examples of soft power. In the context of multipolarity, soft power plays an important role in the efforts of rising forces to legitimize the system. China's educational scholarships in Africa, India's technology diplomacy, or Turkey's humanitarian aid policies, are in parallel with their soft power strategies (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Integration of intelligent power and power components: The use of soft and hard power elements together and strategically defined by Nye as the concept of "smart power" (Smart Power). In the multipolar system, it is not only a military or economic capacity, but how these elements are combined and in which context and with which tools they are designed (Nye, 2009). This multidimensional understanding of power paves the way for questioning the classical power hierarchies and analyzing the forms of influence of global actors more complex and versatile. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of multiple polarity, it is necessary to reinterpret the transformation of the concept of power at an empirical level as well as theoretical.

3. Theoretical Implications of China's Rise and the US's Relative Loss of Power

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has shaped the international system as the leader of a "one -polar" structure at the global level. However, in the 2000s, China's rapid economic growth, military modernization process and its efforts to increase its global influence led to the questioning of this hegemonic structure. China's rise is not only as an economic success; It also led to the re-discussion of the concept of power, system stability and hegemony cycle in the discipline of international relations (Ikenberry, 2011; Allison, 2017). In this context, the rise of China and the relative loss of power of the United States are interpreted in different ways in the context of different theoretical approaches.

Realist Perspective-Hegemony Struggle and Power Transition: Realist theory, especially within the framework of power transition theory, argues that rising forces threaten the status quo and increase the risk of conflict in the system. Organski's classical power transition model argues that the possibility of war is increased if the dominant power begins to decline and a rising power challenges the system (Organski & Kugler, 1980). In this context, the rise of China is interpreted as a direct challenge to the global superiority of the United States. According to Mearsheimer (2010), the rise of China cannot be peaceful because the great powers are in search of regional hegemony due to their nature, and the US adopts an environmental strategy to balance the influence of China in Asia.

Neoliberal Perspective-Company Dependence and Institutional Integration: Neoliberal institutionalism considers the rise of China as a more harmonious and open to cooperation. This approach considers China's membership to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the integration of the multilateral trade system and its participation in global governance mechanisms as an example of an increase in the system (Ikenberry, 2008). In this context, the relative loss of power of the United States is not an absolute collapse; It is considered as part of a multipolar but cooperation -based order formed by the rise of other actors.

The transformation of the British school-International Society: The British school treats China's rise not only as a change of the balance of power, but also as the transformation of the normative structure of the international community. China's attempt to move its historical values, development model and "Chinese-style modernization" discourse to the global space leads to questioning the Western-Central Normative System (Buzan, 2010). In this context, the relative loss of power of the United States is not only related to material resources, but also with discussions on normative hegemony.

Critical Theories: Crisis of Hegemonic Discourses: Critical approaches evaluate the rise of China and the weakening of the United States in the context of the dissolution of hegemonic discourses. China settles in a central position in the system without fully integrated into the fundamental values of the Western liberal order, thus questioning the “universality of the existing order. This is interpreted as an indicator of the ideological hegemony crisis from the Gramscian perspective (Cox, 1987). At the same time, the United States's credibility over liberal values and multi-sidedness is shaken.

New Paradigms on the road to multiple polarity: China's rise and the relative loss of power of the United States are handled by some academicians as a dynamic at the center of the transition process from one polarity to polarity rather than one polarity. In this context, China also represents the ideological diversity of the multipolar system by offering not only an alternative polar, but also an alternative modernity, development model and governance style (Callahan, 2008).

4. Conflicting Views on Multipolarity in the Literature

In the literature of international relations, multiple polarity is a concept that has been frequently discussed in recent years, but there are serious disagreements on the extent to which this concept has been realized and what kind of international order it has caused. These opposing views in the literature are basically shaped on three main axes: (1) The effect of many polarity, (2) The effect of system stability, (3) Relationship with normative structures. Some academics argue that multiple polar discourse is an exaggerated and early diagnosis. According to this approach, the US military superiority, its central role in the global financial system and its technological leadership are still ongoing. Therefore, despite the existence of rising forces, the system is still uniform (Monteiro, 2014). This perspective argues that countries like China stand out only in certain areas, but have not yet reached the global power projection capacity of the US. On the other hand, those who advocate the view that multiple polarity has already begun, states that more than one actor can affect the global system on the basis of economic growth rates, regional leadership initiatives and normative challenges (Kupchhan, 2012). Especially with the collective influence of China, India, EU, Russia and even regional actors, the concept of asymmetric multipolarity has been put forward (Hurrell, 2006). Realist tradition argues that multiple polarity creates systemic instability. Waltz (1979) emphasizes that alliances are more complex and variable in multipolar systems, and that wrong calculations and security dilemmas may be more frequently experienced. According to this view, very polarity is a fragile order that increases the likelihood of conflict. On the other hand, some members of the Neoliberal and British school argue that the system will become more balanced by institutional density and normative multiplicity (Ikenberry, 2011; Bull, 2002). Since the power in multipolar systems is not focused on a single center, hegemonic coercion may be reduced and new institutional structures can develop between states. According to some critics, very polarity does not only mean the diversification of power, but also brings with it normative diversification. In this context, western-centered liberal values (democracy, human rights, the superiority of law) are eroded and the rise of authoritarian values. For example, China Model (Authoritarian Development) and Russia's efforts to build illiberal international norms are considered as processes that accelerate democratic decline (Diamond, 2015). On the other hand, there are views that argue that this situation can

be read as post-hegemonic plurality. Callahan (2008) argues that multiple polarity actually opens space in non-Western modernity, and that this situation can provide a more inclusive order against the universalist hegemony understanding. Some critical theorists argue that multi-polarity discourse is not only a geopolitical reality, but also a strategic ideological tool. In particular, states such as Russia and China use the discourse of “multipolar world order” as a means of expanding the dominance of the West against the normative pressure of the West (Stuenkel, 2016). In this context, multipolar discourse has become a kind of “counter-hegemonic discurs”. The opposing views in the literature of multiple polarity show how much controversial the issue is both conceptual and normatively. This diversity reveals the uncertainties of the future of the international system as well as reflects intra-disciplinary theoretical plurality. Therefore, multiple polarity is not only an analytical category, but also an ideological, strategic and normative field of discussion.

Conclusion

Discussions on the structural transformation of the international system have been reshaped around the concept of multipolarity, especially in the post-2000 period. This study systematically examined how the changes in the distribution of global power are conceptualized and theoretically handled in international relations literature. The findings obtained are that the academic approach to multiple polarity is not homogeneous; On the contrary, it shows significant differences compared to theoretical perspectives, normative approaches and geopolitical priorities. Realist approaches consider multi-polarity as a structure of systemic instability; Neoliberal institutionalists emphasize the manageability of a multi-polar system thanks to increasing mutual dependence and functionality of institutions. The British school, on the other hand, center the normative structure of the international community, argues that multiple polarity will be shaped not only through the distribution of power, but also through common values and rules. However, critical theories argue that multi-polar discourse is also linked to the search for legitimacy of non-Western actors, argues that this transformation should be read not only with power but also on meanings and identities. In the analyzed literature, elements such as China's economic rise, Russia's revisionist policies, the normative power of the European Union and the strategic position of India are the center of many polar debates. However, whether a multipolar system can be permanent and stable is still theoretical and practical uncertainty. Some studies see multiple polarity as a transition period; Some argue that the multipolar structure has already become dominant. In this context, the most basic conclusion of the study is that multipolarity is not only a distribution of military or economic power, but also a multidimensional transformation due to the reshaping of international norms, institutions and identities. The literature is far from considering about the direction and stability of this transformation; However, the theoretical diversity of discipline on this subject makes it possible for us to discuss the phenomenon of multipolarity in a wider and more depth. The systematic analysis offered by this study contributes to the visible of existing gaps and theoretical tensions in the literature. Future research can be deepened by more specific and comparative studies in the context of the manifestations of multiple polarity at the regional level, the normative effects of rising forces on systemic stability.

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