

Beyond Classical Polarity: Networked Multipolarity, And India's Strategic Autonomy in the Networked Multipolar World in the Twenty-First Century

Rakhi Verma

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the changing nature of global power and argues that the twenty-first-century international order is moving beyond the traditional understanding of polarity. It puts forward the argument that traditional understanding of polarity is insufficient to explain the growing influence of technology, digital networks, economic interdependence and flexible partnerships. To overcome this limitation, the study introduces the idea of networked multipolarity to explain how states, institutions, technology, markets and partnerships are increasingly connected. For the better understanding of this transformation India is taken up as a suitable example that represents the role of other emerging powers. The focus is to analyse India's increased influence particularly through its strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, digital capabilities and wider global engagement. The study also considers the challenges in the path of networked multipolar system.

INTRODUCTION

The international system of the twenty-first century is undergoing a significant transformation. The transforming global order of 21st century cannot be explained only through the traditional ideas of unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity where power is mainly attributed to economic or military factors. It fails to fully explain the complexities of the present order as power today is also shaped by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, global supply chains, financial networks, institutions, and economic influence. Military and economic strength still remain important, but other sources of influence have also become significant. At the same time, countries are increasingly forming flexible partnerships instead of depending on fixed alliances. They work through overlapping partnerships rather than remaining tied to fixed blocs. Such change in power dynamics has given rise to what may be understood as **networked multipolarity**, a more connected form of multipolarity, where power is spread across several centres and operates through interconnected relationships. India as a state is also repositioning itself within this changing landscape. Indian foreign policy today goes beyond trying to join the traditional club of great powers, rather it is learning to operate within this networked global system. Its policy of strategic autonomy, growing engagement with different groups of countries, middle-power diplomacy, enhancing digital capabilities, and expanding geo-economic role is an example of how a country can pursue its interests while working with different centres of power. India's strategic autonomy and multi-alignment represent an adaptive strategy within this emerging order. This paper tries to focus on India's role in today's

networked world. It also tries to develop understanding beyond old ideas of polarity, and analysing a framework that better captures these newer and often overlapping forms of power.

Keywords- Multipolarity, Strategic Autonomy, Power Transition, Balance of Power, Multi-Alignment, Non-state actors, Global Governance.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The existing debate on multipolarity mainly revolves around the emergence of new centres of power and the changing balance between them. The role of digital technology, AI, economic networks, international institutions, and flexible partnerships has been paid less attention. This creates a gap in understanding whether the present world order is simply becoming multipolar or is developing into a new form of networked multipolarity. Acknowledging this changing nature of power is of utmost importance. India provides an important case for understanding this change because its strategic autonomy and multi-alignment allow it to engage with different and sometimes competing centres of power.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does networked multipolarity differ from classical conceptions of unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity?
2. How are digital technology, artificial intelligence, geo-economics and global networks transforming the distribution of power?
3. How does India's strategic autonomy and multi-alignment position it within this emerging networked multipolar order?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To examine the changing nature of the international system and the gradual emergence of networked multipolarity, the study makes use of qualitative and analytical approaches. The study is mainly based on secondary sources such as academic literature, journal articles, policy documents, international reports and official statements. The study also uses comparative and interpretive analysis to connect the traditional interpretations of polarity with the contemporary form of polarity which is the result of the diffused nature of power. Overall, it aims to offer a structured interpretation of how power is shifting in the twenty-first century, and what that shift means for India's position in the emerging global order.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK: REVISITING CLASSICAL POLARITY

The understanding of the polarity as a concept is fundamental to the study of international relations because it provides a way of understanding how power is distributed within the international system at a particular point of time. According to the classical understanding the power distribution and the structure of international system is described on the basis of the distribution of materialistic capabilities. The classical polarity identifies states as the fundamental units of the international system and power is mainly exerted through economic and military capabilities. This assumption was particularly useful during the Cold War period, when the United States and the Soviet Union were two competing blocs based on their economic and military strength. But the post-Cold War period particularly after the advent of globalisation could not be completely understood by the traditional understanding of polarity. The growing influence of new economic powers, regional powers, international institutions, multinational corporations, technological networks, and transnational actors has complicated the relationship between power and

political influence. Therefore, revisiting classical polarity is necessary not because the concept has become less relevant but to understand its limitations and make it more adaptive and relevant to the contemporary global order.

Theoretically, the neo-realist theory of Kenneth Waltz provides for the most basic understanding of polarity as a concept. He states that the overall international system is anarchic, i.e. absence of any central authority above the sovereign states. States are responsible for their own security and survival and for that they continue to increase their capabilities with respect to each other. It is the structure of international system that defines the behaviour of the states. Polarity, therefore, concerns both the number of major power centres and the relative distribution of capabilities among them. Morton Kaplan another renowned scholar tries to understand polarity and international system through systems approach. In his *System and Process in International Politics*, he developed six hypothetical models of international systems: balance-of-power systems, loose and tight bipolar systems, a universal system, a hierarchical system, and a unit-veto system. Kaplan's work is significant for this study because it treated polarity not as a single fixed condition but provided for multiple possible configurations, each with distinct rules of behaviour, conflict resolution mechanisms. Therefore, even the classical literature did not treat polarity as a single, static idea.

Theoretically, we can distinguish into various forms of polarity as follows:

Unipolarity: Unipolarity exists when one state possesses a concentration of capabilities such that no combination of other states can effectively balance against it at that point of time. The end of the Cold War produced the most evident example of a unipolar system. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, bipolarity ended and the United States emerged as the only superpower. Charles Krauthammer has described this situation as a “unipolar moment”. There has also been disagreement among scholars regarding the stability of such system. William Wohlforth argues that unipolarity could be relatively durable because the United States possessed an unusual concentration of military, economic, technological, and geopolitical capabilities. While, Christopher Layne, questioned the durability of American primacy. He argued that the concentration of power in one state would ultimately encourage the other states to enhance their capabilities to restore the balance of power in the system.

Bipolarity: Bipolarity refers to a system dominated by two dominant centres of power whose relative power vastly exceeds that of all other states. The Cold War is the most evident example, with the United States and the Soviet Union occupying the two major poles of the international system. Waltz constantly believed bipolar systems offer greater stability than multipolarity because fewer great powers mean less risks for miscalculation and shifting alliances.

Multipolarity: Multipolarity refers to a system with three or more comparably powerful centres at a particular point of time. Such structure was observed in the nineteenth-century Europe and the contemporary twenty-first-century order. Since power is distributed across several actors it is more prone to shifting alliances, miscalculation, and conflicts over overlapping interests. It is important to acknowledge that multipolarity also provides greater diplomatic flexibility as the states are not necessarily forced to choose between two fixed blocs. But it is important to note that the contemporary multipolarity is different from the classical multipolarity which will be discussed later in this study.

Along with these three most common categorisations of the polarity concept there also exists two other forms of polarity namely tri-polarity and non-polarity. These are less commonly theorised but analytically useful or may be defined as variations of multipolarity itself.

Tri-polarity: Tri-polarity represents a more specific configuration in which three major powers occupy the principal positions in the international system. Some scholars regard it as variation of multipolarity

while some regard it as an individual concept. The contemporary debate about the future distribution of global power has sometimes been framed in terms of a possible three-centre system involving the United States, China and Russia.

Non-polarity: Instead of a system organised around one, two, or several clearly identifiable great-power centres, non-polarity refers to a condition in which power is dispersed among numerous state and non-state actors. The concept is useful because power in contemporary international politics is not confined to military and economic capabilities. International institutions, multinational corporations, financial networks, civil-society groups, and transnational movements can influence international outcomes. Non-polarity should not, however, be confused with the complete disappearance of great powers. It is better understood as a situation in which great powers coexist with multiple additional centres of influence.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF POLARITY

Tracing the historical succession of polarity is crucial to understand why a purely classical framework struggles to describe the contemporary global order. Over the years, with the shifting balance of power, the international system has witnessed different forms of polarity. The Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century provides an early example of a multipolar system where several major powers interacted to prevent any single state from dominating the continent. Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia and France were major centres of power with competing interests. The two World Wars gradually weakened this European balance and led to redistribution of power in a bipolar structure. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two prominent centres of power. This was described as the Cold War era. Later, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought this structure to an end and left the United States the sole prominent power. This system reflected the features of a unipolar system. As the twenty-first century progressed, the economic and strategic rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, emerging economies like India and other regional powers, and the increasing influence of the European Union contributed to renewed debates about multipolarity.

Thus, the transition from the Concert of Europe to Cold War bipolarity and post-Cold War unipolarity to the emerging multipolar order should not be seen as a simple replacement of one system by another. It reflects a continuing redistribution of capabilities among the actors. This historical trajectory provides the basis for reconsidering whether contemporary power can still be adequately understood through the classical idea of distinction among the poles. The contemporary transition towards greater diffusion of power therefore suggests that international order cannot be understood solely through the number of poles.

LIMITATIONS OF CLASSICAL POLARITY

Over the centuries, the classical theories of polarity have provided for the basic understanding of the changing international systems. The classical approach is about counting the number of powerful states. They are primarily concerned with where power is located, rather than how power moves between actors. Realist and neorealist approaches, in particular, have generally associated systemic outcomes with the material capabilities of states, such as military strength, economic resources, population and territory. This framework remains useful, but its explanatory capacity becomes more limited when applied to the international environment of the twenty-first century. International power today is not exercised only through states. International institutions, multinational corporations, financial systems, technological companies, supply chains and digital networks, transnational networks also have influence over global affairs.

Therefore, one of the major limitations of classical polarity is that its primary focus is on material capabilities. In transforming order of 21st century, material capabilities like economy and military still remain relevant but are not the sole drivers of power and influence. Control over technology, data, semiconductor production, financial networks, energy resources and critical supply chains can also create significant strategic influence. Power today is not only about what state has but also about how it is perceived by the global community. Therefore, it does not fit the dynamics of traditional multipolarity. Different countries possess different types of strength. One may be militarily powerful, another economically influential, while another may have greater technological or diplomatic influence. In the globalised and interconnected world today, the power is diffused and there is interdependence among states. Consequently, states compete as well as cooperate at the same time as per their specific interests. The system of alliances has become flexible with no rigid power blocs. The overlapping and interdependence make it different from the traditional multipolarity. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, telecommunications, digital platforms and semiconductor systems depend on international networks rather than on a single state. The international system is increasingly characterised by overlapping relationships among states, institutions, corporations, technologies, financial structures and diplomatic groupings. Therefore, moving beyond the presence of multiple centres of the contemporary multipolarity is about how different centres of power are connected and how influence moves between them.

This paper therefore argues that the contemporary international order requires a broader understanding of multipolarity. This gives rise to the concept of network multipolarity that provides for better understanding of the changing international order. The aim of the paper is to fill the gaps of traditional approaches to better analyse the power shift of today's global order. Traditional models help explain who the major powers are, but they are less effective in explaining how power is connected and exercised in today's international system.

FROM CLASSICAL MULTIPOLARITY TO NETWORKED MULTIPOLARITY

As discussed above, the transforming global order particularly with the increase in number of influential states, provides for the primary evidence for the emergence of multipolar world in 21st century. But this paper tries to address the issue that in the contemporary world, simply counting the major powers does not fully explain how international power works today. This is a major limitation of classical multipolarity. As the states today are increasingly connected through trade, technology, finance, institutions, supply chains and strategic partnerships, the power is not merely distributed among states but also shaped by the relationships between them. There exist simultaneous cooperation and competition. This paper refers to this changing pattern as **networked multipolarity**. The change is not only in the number of powers but the way they interact. Power and influence today not merely rest on military or economic capabilities but are defined by a nation's position within global networks.

CLASSICAL MULTIPOLARITY VERSUS NETWORKED MULTIPOLARITY

Classical multipolarity's understanding of power mainly rests on the four attributes of power; namely; economy, military, territory and population. The primary concern is generally how the multiple powers balance one another and prevent any single state from becoming dominant. Therefore, the concept is state-centred. Networked multipolarity retains this state-centred foundation but broadens the understanding of power. It asks not only who possesses power, but how the power is distributed and through which networks

it is connected, and what are its consequences. Power is now exercised jointly through states, international institutions, and corporations and other non-state actors. Military capability still matters, along with its control over critical technologies, digital infrastructure, financial systems, data, energy routes or supply chains determine the influence that an actor exerts. Occupying important positions within such international networks help states gain influence by controlling or shaping the flows passing through these networks. Therefore, networked multipolarity goes beyond treating states the only actors and treating economy and military the only attributes of power. It includes, other non-state actors and identifies their role in global politics. Simultaneously, recognises the other forms of power and diffused nature of power. Classical multipolarity talks about the fixed and rigid alliances but networked multipolarity is all about flexible and sometimes overlapping alliances. Economic, technological, security and diplomatic relationships may therefore overlap without forming a single alliance structure. States may cooperate as well as compete with each other at the same time based on their specific interests. Interdependence; through trade, finance, and technology has become as important as the balance of power in determining the behaviour of states because the disruptions may have immediate effects on multiple actors. Diplomacy too has become multi-layered, engaging simultaneously through states, regional groupings, technical and regulatory bodies, and international institutions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NETWORKED MULTIPOLARITY

Multiple Centres of Power: Power is distributed across several centres of power rather than clustering around two or three dominant poles. The global positioning and influence of each actor is different and keep on changing. It also gives recognition to the role of non-state actors like international institutions, corporations, non-governmental organisations etc. in defining overall global order.

Flexible Alliances and Partnerships: States actively build relationships across different networks. These ties are not mutually exclusive, meaning a nation can maintain deep connections with competing power centres. There is overlapping in partnerships, for instance; a state can be economically tied to one power, technologically dependent on another, and militarily aligned with a third, all at once. These relationships are generally flexible rather than permanently fixed, giving states greater freedom to adjust their foreign policies according to changing interests. Alignments are fluid, issue-based and based on shared interests rather than permanent ideological loyalty.

Geo-economic Interdependence: Globalisation and advancement in technology has created deeply integrated global trade and financial networks over the years. These create mutual dependencies. Geo-economic interdependence connects strategic power with trade, investment, energy and global supply chains. As a consequence, competition and cooperation coexist; rival powers often remain each other's major trading or investment partners even while contesting influence elsewhere.

Increasing importance of technology: Technology has become an important dimension of power. Control over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, space systems, digital infrastructure and control over data now shapes influence as much as military assets once did. Also, the access to and control over advanced technologies is the primary aspect of geo-political competition. It has become major determinant of power.

Multi-Layered Diplomacy: Cooperation increasingly runs through networks of institutions and diplomatic arrangements. Institutional and diplomatic cooperation occurs across multiple layers. States and institutions cooperate continuously to manage and settle global issues. Diplomacy today means

engaging simultaneously through states, bilateral relations, regional groupings, mini-lateral groupings, technical and regulatory bodies, and international institutions.

Emerging Forms of Power: Networked multipolarity also recognises the emergence of new forms of power and how they are equally relevant as hard power. First one is the growing importance of soft power, the ability to attract and persuade others through culture, education, media, and values. Nye's concept of soft power is useful here because it highlights the importance of attraction as a source of international influence. Secondly, digital power has emerged as a distinct category of its own. It is the capacity to shape global connectivity through control over platforms, data infrastructure, AI systems and cyber capabilities. They spread through networks rather than territory, they can be exercised by non-state actors like technology firms as well as by the governments, and their effects are often felt simultaneously across multiple states. Power becomes more layered and less dependent on a single source of strength.

Analysing these characteristics, we conclude that, networked multipolarity should not be understood as a complete replacement for classical multipolarity. Rather, it offers a way of explaining how multipolarity functions under contemporary conditions of 21st century. The connections between states, institutions, markets and technological systems have become a part of the structure of international system. Such analysis develops the understanding about the paradigm shift from poles to networks. The stability of such a system is not maintained by mere balance of power, but by the resilience of the networks that keep these multiple centres of power bound together.

INDIA AND NETWORKED MULTIPOLARITY

The concept of networked multipolarity treats power as something that flows through relationships, and it about how deeply and in how many directions a state is connected to other centres of power, rather than being a great power in isolation. India as an emerging power in the contemporary global order provides for a case study to understand the overall idea of networked multipolarity. India's foreign policy since independence is not merely about a state trying to find its place between poles, but as a state trying to become a node through which multiple networks pass. India is a great example of how a rising power operates within an increasingly interconnected international order.

India became an independent sovereign state in 1947. Therefore, it becomes important to acknowledge that this period was defined by the Cold War between the United States and the USSR and India had to adjust its foreign policy accordingly. Under such circumstances India opted for the policy of non-alignment. It was not simply a policy of staying away from international politics rather, it was an attempt to preserve sovereignty and strategic autonomy in the bipolar system. It is important to acknowledge that how India maintained relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union at different points, while considering its regional security concerns and its own developmental needs. The central concern was always to preserve independent decision-making.

Post cold war, the world witnessed the emergence of new centres of power and how globalisation as a phenomenon led to dissolution of power. With the emergence of 21st century, new forms of power gained recognition and became key determinants of influence in the global order. This was the time when India switched its policy from non-alignment to multi-alignment. In an interconnected global order, multi-alignment allowed India to maintain simultaneous relation with both the West and the East, with developed as well as developing economies. Such approach helps preserve strategic autonomy along with working in accordance with national interests. It allows for issue-based alliances with overlapping interests that can be bilateral or multilateral in nature. It was not a sudden rejection of earlier foreign-policy principles

but a gradual adjustment to new international realities. India's participation in multiple and sometimes overlapping groupings illustrates this change. It can cooperate with the United States and its partners through the Quad, work with Russia on defence and energy, participate in BRICS and the SCO, and simultaneously strengthen its engagement with the Global South.

Its foreign policy therefore reflects a movement from non-alignment to strategic autonomy through wider engagement. This reflects how India has adapted to this networked multipolar system.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AS INDIA'S RESPONSE TO NETWORKED MULTIPOLARITY

India's strategic autonomy can be seen as a practical response to the emerging networked multipolar order. Instead of joining a fixed power bloc, India maintains relations with different major powers and chooses cooperation according to the issue and its national interests. This approach helps India diversify its strategic options and rather than depending on any single power.

Strategic autonomy as a concept today has moved beyond territorial security and economic superiority. The scope has widened to incorporate technology, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, trade, control over supply chains, and influence in international organisations. India is trying its best to harness the best through these determinants of influence and power. Initiatives such as UPI, Make in India, Aadhar based system, engagement in global AI discussions reflects its intentions to have a voice in shaping emerging technological rules. India's simultaneous engagement with multilateral platforms such as Quad, I2U2, BRICS, ASEAN, SCO, G20 etc. further illustrates its belief in network-based approach. Its G20 Presidency also demonstrated India's attempt to connect development, technology and Global South concerns with wider global governance.

Thus, India's role in networked multipolarity can be understood through the idea of **"autonomy through connectivity."** India does not seek autonomy by remaining outside international networks; rather, it seeks to strengthen autonomy by building connections with multiple centres of power. India's role as an influential player today depends on its ability to act as a connector, partner and bridge across different networks of the emerging international order.

CHALLENGES TO NETWORKED MULTIPOLARITY

As discussed above, networked multipolarity as a concept creates greater opportunities for cooperation and strategic flexibility but it is also subject to criticism on certain grounds. It is not possible without challenges that affect its functioning. For instance, the growing US-China rivalry could pressure other countries to choose sides, the rise of multiple institutions and competing groupings could give rise to multiple rules and standards leading to fragmented global governance. Economic interdependence makes actors more vulnerable to geopolitical tensions. Rapid competition in AI, semiconductors, quantum computing and cyber technologies could create new forms of technological dependence, particularly for developing countries which make create a digital divide. These challenges show that networked multipolarity is not automatically inclusive or stable; its success will depend on how effectively states manage competition, inequality and institutional fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

The primary finding of the study is that the changing global order cannot be explained adequately by the older categories of unipolarity, bipolarity and classical multipolarity alone. The nature of power has increasingly changed and is majorly defined by connections between states, institutions, markets,

technology and global networks. Hence, networked multipolarity as a concept provides a broader way of understanding the international system of 21st century. India provides an important example that tries to adapt to this transformation. Its movement from non-alignment towards strategic autonomy and multi-alignment shows how a rising power can remain connected to competing centres of power while protecting its national interests. In this direction, India focuses on growing digital capabilities, technological ambitions, geo-economic engagement and participation in different multilateral and mini-lateral platforms that further strengthen its position within these networks. But this emerging order is not without challenges. There are growing concerns regarding great-power rivalry, technological dependence, unequal digital capabilities and fragmented global governance. This study opens new dimensions for future research that can examine whether networked multipolarity will lead to greater cooperation or create new forms of competition and dependence. And simultaneously creates scope for analysis of how effectively India can use its growing network of relationships to preserve strategic autonomy while being a prominent player in shaping the global order.

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