

Andrzej DEMCZUK 

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Lublin, Poland

Illusion of Multipolarity: Why the U.S. Remains the Global Superpower

Iluzja wielobiegunowości. Dlaczego Stany Zjednoczone pozostają światowym supermocarstwem

• Abstract •

The main goal of this study is to dispel misconceptions about global power dynamics. The article critically examines the widely held belief in a growing multipolar world, maintaining that the United States remains the global superpower. The author conducts an analysis of the key indicators such as economic strength, military capacity, technological innovation, and diplomatic ability, to challenge the multipolarity narrative, and uses both comparative and quantitative methodologies to do so. The findings show that claims of multipolarity distract from the decisive role the United States continues to play in the international system.

Keywords: multipolarity; the U.S.; China; Russia; international leadership; superpower

• Abstrakt •

Głównym celem niniejszego opracowania jest rozwianie błędnych przekonań na temat globalnej dynamiki władzy. Artykuł krytycznie analizuje powszechnie panujące przekonanie o rosnącej wielobiegunowości świata, utrzymując, że Stany Zjednoczone pozostają światową superpotęgą. Autor przeprowadza analizę kluczowych wskaźników, takich jak siła gospodarcza, potencjał wojskowy, innowacje technologiczne i umiejętności dyplomatyczne, aby zakwestionować narrację o wielobiegunowości. Wykorzystuje w tym celu zarówno metodę porównawczą, jak i ilościową. Wyniki pokazują, że twierdzenia o wielobiegunowości odwracają uwagę od decydującej roli, jaką Stany Zjednoczone nadal odgrywają w systemie międzynarodowym.

Słowa kluczowe: wielobiegunowość; USA; Chiny; Rosja; międzynarodowe przywództwo; supermocarstwo

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the discourse of international studies has been increasingly dominated by the idea of multipolarity, which suggests that the world is shifting from U.S. hegemony to a more decentralized global order in which power is dispersed among several competing nations (Haass, 2017; Kissinger, 2014; Brzeziński, 2012; Kupchan, 2012; Zakaria, 2008). This narrative suggests that rising powers, particularly China, India, and Russia, are challenging the United States' dominant position, leading to the emergence of a multipolar world (Shambaugh, 2020; Khanna, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2018; Allison, 2017). Supporters of this view specifically point to China's rapid economic growth and the relative decline in U.S. global influence. They emphasize that costly military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and internal political polarization showed weakness on a part of the U.S. and have led to its decay.

However, despite the multipolarity narrative, closer examination reveals that the United States continues to occupy an unmatched position as a world power (Ikenberry, 2022). Experts indicate that "the belief that the United States is sliding irreversibly from its preeminent status, is tempting. But such fatalism would be misguided. The United States still retains enviable advantages: a young population, financial dominance, abundant resources, peaceful borders, strong alliances, and an innovative economy" (Campbell & Doshi, 2020). This article challenges the perception of a multipolar world, arguing that claims of a shift away from U.S. dominance are overstated (Gates, 2023). Through an analysis of economic, military, technological, and diplomatic indicators, this study demonstrates that the United States remains the global superpower. As of today, no other nation, even China, can match the U.S. in key areas of power, including economic leadership, military supremacy, technological innovation, and global institutional control. The idea that we live in a multipolar world is more illusion than reality, as the U.S. remains the pivotal actor in shaping international norms, security architectures, and economic frameworks. While rival powers such as China or India rise in certain domains, their influence is limited. By highlighting the enduring nature of U.S. hegemony, this study argues that the global order remains fundamentally unipolar, with the United States at its center.

The structure of the article consists of seven parts. The study begins with a "Methodology" section that outlines the analytical basis. This is followed by a comprehensive examination in "Economic Power", where the economics of these nations are compared. Next, "Military Superiority" investigates into the military abilities of the U.S., China, and Russia. The article then transitions to "Diplomatic

and Institutional Power”, which examines the U.S. role in shaping international institutions like the UN, WTO, and NATO, and compares it with the diplomatic efforts of Russia and China, and the BRICS. “The Limits of Alternative Powers” addresses the economic, military, and political limitations that hinder Russia and China’s ability to challenge U.S. global leadership. The study ends with “Strategic Flexibility”, which analyzes the adaptability of the U.S. compared to Russia and China in responding to global emergencies, showcasing the U.S.’s ability to project power and influence across multiple regions and crises. Finally, the “Conclusion” ties together the findings and suggests future research.

Methodology

A comparison between the U.S. and two rivals, China and Russia, will be conducted to assess whether the U.S. continues to maintain its supreme global reach and influence or if its position is being effectively challenged by these rising powers. The author will apply a multi-method approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide an objective and comprehensive assessment. The study will begin by analyzing key power indicators, such as economic size, military capabilities, and diplomatic as well as institutional leadership, using data from reputable sources such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.

For economic analysis, indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and foreign direct investment (FDI), will be compared across the U.S., China, and Russia. Furthermore, trade volume, as well as export/import balances will be analyzed to assess economic influence. Military capabilities will be evaluated using defense spending, global military presence, such as the number of bases around the world, along with technological sophistication in defense systems and global alliances. This will allow the author for a detailed comparison of global reach, showing how the U.S. maintains military dominance through strategic bases and alliances, while its main challengers – China and Russia – remain largely narrowed to their regions. The study will also include an analysis of diplomatic influence, examining the U.S.’s international leadership in global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and regional organizations like NATO. To strengthen the findings, the study will draw on the example of the U.S. response to Russia’s war in Ukraine. This analysis will highlight how the U.S. has led a global coalition including countries such as Poland and Great Britain to deliver military, economic, and humanitarian aid, illustrating its capacity to mobilize international

support during geopolitical crises. By examining this example, the discussion will highlight the United States' pivotal role in orchestrating collective action in times of instability, reinforcing the argument about its unparalleled international leadership on the global stage. After all, the main indicator of an international leadership is the ability to influence others, as Joseph S. Nye emphasizes: "International leadership is creating a framework that can include the interest of other countries. It is not telling other countries what to do but creating a framework within which they want to do it. Leadership involves getting others to want what you want, and not just telling them what to do" (2023).

Through this comprehensive methodological approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative case studies, the study will demonstrate that the narrative of rising multipolarity is overstated. While China and Russia have seen regional gains in influence, the U.S. remains the superior actor in global affairs across multiple dimensions (economic, military, technological, and diplomatic). This study will thus provide strong evidence that the international system remains predominantly unipolar, with the U.S. continuing to play a central role in shaping global governance.

Economic Power

Reports indicate that in 2024, the United States had the largest economy in the world, with a gross domestic product of just under 29 trillion U.S. dollars (O'Neill, 2024). Furthermore, various analysis conducted by independent institutions indicate that the U.S. economy remains fundamentally strong, and it far surpasses its main competitor China (Gibbard & Kalish, 2024). Based on the reports for 2024, China had the second largest economy, at around 18.5 trillion U.S. dollars (O'Neill, 2024), which is over 10 trillion U.S. dollars less in comparison to the U.S. Experts point to the fact that consumer spending in the U.S. continues to exceed expectations, with a projected increase of 2.4% in 2024, slightly outpacing the 2.2% growth seen last year; business investment is forecasted to grow by 4.2% this year, a dip from the 4.5% increase recorded in 2023 (Gibbard & Kalish, 2024). On the trade front, export growth is expected to slow to 2.2% in 2024 before rebounding in the following year, while imports are projected to rise by 3.8% this year (Gibbard & Kalish, 2024). Government spending is anticipated to increase by 2.9% in 2024. Meanwhile, inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), dropped below 3.0% in July and is expected to decline further to 2.7% by the fourth quarter. Job growth is projected to continue decelerating, with demographic shifts

contributing to a gradual reduction in labor force participation. Last but not least, the unemployment rate has risen to its highest level since October 2021.

In comparison, for 2024, China's economic outlook reflects both growth and challenges: "After years of pandemic lockdowns that brought some economic sectors to a virtual halt, reopening the country was supposed to spark a major comeback. Instead, the recovery has faltered, with sluggish GDP performance, sagging consumer confidence, growing clashes with the West, and a collapse in property prices that has caused some of China's largest companies to default. In July 2024, Chinese official data revealed that GDP growth was falling behind the government's target of about five percent. The government has finally let the Chinese people leave their homes, but it cannot command the economy to return to its former strength" (Liu, 2024).

China's GDP is projected to grow by about 5%, driven by government-led investments in infrastructure and manufacturing. However, scholars indicate that: "There will be less emphasis on building roads and bridges and more on building new infrastructure aimed at developing sectors, such as telecommunications networks, high-speed rail networks, and research and development facilities, which support advanced manufacturing" (Al-Haschimi & Spital, 2024). Nevertheless, in 2024 the growth rate has slowed compared to previous years, partly due to weak domestic demand and economic structural adjustments. Consumer demand is likely to stabilize with retail sales growing by 5.5%, though employment prospects are anticipated to improve as post-pandemic recovery continues. The balance of international payments is expected to improve as global trade grows by about 3%. Reports indicate that "China's exports in June 2024 were up 8.6% from a year earlier, while imports unexpectedly shrank 2.3%, suggesting manufacturers were frontloading orders to get ahead of tariffs from trade partners. The bigger pain point [...] was seen in retail sales, which rose 2.0% year-on-year, missing forecasts and the slowest growth since December 2022" (Yao & Cash, 2024).

Economists emphasize that China today faces three major structural challenges. "First, the consequences of overinvestment and the bursting of the real estate bubble are deep-rooted issues that will require a prolonged period to resolve. Second, the intensifying strategic competition between the U.S. and China limits China's access to advanced Western technology. [...] Third, under President Xi's rule, there has been a shift towards a more state-controlled economic model" (Yu & Nickelsburg, 2024, p. 13). Moreover, scholars believe that these tasks are not temporary but rather point to a potentially grim economic trajectory for China over the coming decade.

Russia's economy is much smaller than those of global powers like the United States and China. In 2024, Russia's GDP ranks outside the top 7 globally, with its economy heavily reliant on natural resource exports, particularly oil and gas

(Global PEO Services, 2024). This reliance on commodities makes Russia vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices, further limiting its economic clout. Western sanctions, imposed after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Ukraine, have significantly restricted Russia's economic growth and access to international markets (Skogstad Larsen, 2021). These sanctions have further reduced its ability to exert global influence, limiting its international partnerships and access to foreign investment and technology. Experts indicate that: "The evolution of the economy between 2014–2015 was extremely negative. GDP growth fell to 2.7% in 2015 compared to previous year, annual consumer price index increased up to 12.9% in December 2015, total capital outflow in 2014 was – 159 billion USD and in 2015 – 60.4 billion USD, depreciation of ruble after 2014 was more than 50% and growing state budget deficit" (Skogstad Larsen, 2021, p. 159).

The U.S. economy, while facing significant challenges, is no longer the giant it once was. Its national debt continues to expand, and policymaking in Washington under President Donald Trump has become increasingly unpredictable. Repeated threats of debt defaults have raised doubts about the safety of U.S. government bonds. The rule of law, the independence of the Federal Reserve, and the system of checks and balances have been eroded in recent years by populist movements that have weakened the country's democratic institutions (Prasad, 2024). Given these factors, one might expect the dollar to be in sharp decline. Yet, paradoxically, the opposite is true: many trends that might be expected to undermine the dollar, including some driven by U.S. policies, are strengthening its global dominance. The dollar remains dominant not only because of the size but also due to the fact that other major economies are doing no better (Prasad, 2024). Scholars indicate that no other currency is positioned to replace the U.S. dollar as the world's dominant reserve currency (Pettis, 2023). When the dollar's dominance eventually fades, it will mark the end of the current global trade and capital framework.

Military Superiority

The military power of the United States is a critical pillar of its global dominance, functioning as a key factor in maintaining its position as the world's foremost superpower. The U.S. military's supreme capabilities, in both conventional and nuclear forces, allow it to project power globally, and shape international security environments. This supremacy is reinforced by its extensive network of over 800 U.S. military bases in at least 80 countries around the world, advanced technologies, and defense alliances such as NATO (Stevenson, 2022). Military bases give the US

ability to rapidly respond to conflicts or crises anywhere in the world. This global presence is a unique feature of American military power and sets it apart from potential challengers like China and Russia, which lack comparable logistical reach. For example, China has only two military bases (Cambodia, Djibouti). However, recent U.S. intelligence reports indicate that “Beijing reportedly is considering pursuing military facilities in multiple locations, including – but not limited to – Burma, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Pakistan, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, and the UAE” (Woody, 2024).

The U.S. consistently outspends all other nations on defense, with a budget of around \$877 billion in 2023, significantly higher than China’s estimated \$225 billion and Russia’s \$86 billion. “The USA remained by far the largest military spender in the world, accounting for 39 per cent of world military spending and allocating three times more than the second largest spender, China” (Tian, 2023, p. 551). A key development in 2022 was the unprecedented scale of military aid provided by the U.S. Congress in response to Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine. The U.S. supplied Ukraine with \$19.9 billion in military assistance, which accounted for approximately 2.3% of the total U.S. defense budget. This marked the largest single-year military aid package provided by any country to a single recipient since the end of the Cold War, underscoring the U.S.’s commitment to supporting Ukraine’s defense and countering Russian aggression (Masters & Merrow, 2024).

The U.S. military leads in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and unmanned systems, ensuring it maintains its edge in future conflicts. “In the year 2022, over \$14 billion has been invested in American AI companies. Congress and the Biden administration have increased the capacity of US’ semiconductor manufacturing and drawn in over \$200 billion in private capital expenditures for semiconductor manufacture through the Chips and Science Act-related efforts” (Zarrar & Kakar, 2024). It needs to be recognized that in 2025, President Donald Trump has announced the \$1 trillion defense budget proposal for year 2026. “Divided across the department, the proposed budget breaks down to \$197.4 billion for the Army, \$292.2 billion for the Navy, \$301.1 billion for the Air Force and \$170.9 billion defensewide” (Olay, 2025).

China is successfully narrowing the gap with the US in the field of AI technology. It is developing the unmanned military systems and has significantly explored the air, ground, surface, and undersea autonomous unmanned vehicles (AUV). The Chinese military and defense industry are investing in robotics, autonomous weapons systems and AI-enabled weaponry systems. “If public contracts reflect how the PLA prioritizes different emerging technologies, then it is likely the PLA spends more than \$1.6 billion each year on AI-enabled systems” (Harper, 2024).

U.S. military strength is further amplified by its alliances. The U.S. is the central power in NATO, a military alliance comprising 32 countries, and maintains close military partnerships with key nations like Great Britain, Japan, South Korea, Poland, and Australia. The strategic advantage provided by these alliances is significant, as they offer the U.S. logistical, intelligence, and strategic support. “By binding itself to the defense of like-minded nations, the world’s sole superpower makes itself all the more effective and influential” (Brands & Feaver, 2017, p. 22). In addition to their military and strategic advantages, alliances offer significant political benefits that strengthen the ability of the United States to project power on the global stage. These alliances boost the legitimacy of American actions in the international community and help acquire broader support from global partners. The primary political value of such alliances lies in their capacity to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of U.S. leadership and initiatives abroad (Brands & Feaver, 2017).

China and Russia lack similar multilateral alliances, limiting their global military influence. Moreover, China’s military alliances differ significantly from those of the U.S., as Beijing tends to avoid formal military alliances akin to NATO. Instead, China focuses on strategic partnerships, regional agreements, and military cooperation, reflecting its principles of non-alignment and non-interference. Nonetheless, its growing influence has led to a variety of military and strategic partnerships aimed at enhancing its global power projection, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) where China engages in security and military cooperation with regional partners, such as Russia, India, and Pakistan. SCO focuses on counterterrorism, military exercises, and intelligence sharing. China has strengthened its military ties with Russia engaging in joint exercises and arms deals. This partnership is often described as a “strategic partnership” rather than a formal alliance. Both nations share an interest in counterbalancing U.S. influence. Similar Russia’s alliances are centered around both formal institutions and strategic partnerships, many of which are driven by shared geopolitical goals and opposition to Western influence, particularly the U.S. and NATO. For example, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which consists of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, was created as a response to NATO.

Finally, as one of the few nations with a significant nuclear arsenal, the U.S. maintains a credible deterrent that underpins global stability. Its nuclear triad – land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and strategic bombers – ensures second-strike capabilities, deterring any potential first-strike scenarios. As of 2024, the United States have a significant military arsenal, with about 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads as part of a total stockpile of roughly 5,500 warheads. The U.S. also consists of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic

missiles. On June 21, 2025, the U.S. demonstrated just how strong its military abilities are by using several B-2 Spirit stealth bombers and submarines in Operation Midnight Hammer to hit three Iranian nuclear sites.

China and Russia, by comparison, are rapidly expanding its nuclear capabilities. In 2024, China was estimated to have around 500 warheads, but projections suggest it could reach 1,500 warheads by 2035. It is modernizing all three legs of its own nuclear triad, although it still lags behind the U.S. in terms of overall stockpile size, technological sophistication, and global deployment capabilities (Kristensen et al., 2024). As of 2024, Russia possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal, with an estimated stockpile of around 5,889 warheads. However, this total includes both deployed and non-deployed warheads. Of these, approximately 1,674 are actively deployed, including those on intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers. It is important to acknowledge that: "Most recently, intelligence reports revealed that Russia is developing a space-based nuclear weapon that could threaten thousands of low-orbit satellites itself a violation of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty which prohibits putting nuclear weapons in space" (Peters & Harding, 2024).

To recapitulate, the analysis of U.S., Chinese and Russian military capabilities indicates that the U.S. holds an overall military superiority in areas such as defense spending, technological innovation, global reach, and alliances. The depth of U.S. military power across these domains ensures that it remains the most dominant global military force.

Diplomatic and Institutional Power

In an international environment characterized by rising multipolarity narratives, the United States remains unparalleled in its diplomatic and institutional leadership. This continued supremacy is not only a function, as indicated, of its economic or military superiority, but also of its extensive involvement in shaping and maintaining the world's most influential international institutions, where the U.S. is the primary institutional donor. Reports indicate that the U.S. is by far the largest contributor to the United Nations and to the World Bank (Brutger & Clark, 2023). The argument that U.S. leadership is fading underestimates the power of its diplomatic network, and the key roles it plays in institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the UN, and NATO. The US has shaped those institutions since World War II, setting norms that govern security and international diplomacy. The U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan emphasized that under President Joe

Biden, the U.S. strengthened and reinvigorated those institutions, “updating them for the world we face today” (2023). Biden proposed “giving developing countries a greater say at the International Monetary Fund” and “has called for far-reaching reforms to the UN Security Council to expand the number of members, both permanent and nonpermanent, and make it more effective and representative” (Sullivan, 2023).

Having said that, it is important to indicate that President Putin is actively working to expand Russia’s global partnerships, particularly with countries in the Global South. Russia has strengthened its ties with nations like Venezuela and Cuba, fostering collaboration in areas such as energy, defense, and trade. Scholars emphasize that: “Currently, Russia is using its ties to Venezuela as leverage against the US to pursue a change of the status quo in international politics to the detriment of the U.S.” (Thoene et al., 2023, p. 637). Furthermore, Russia and Venezuela offer mutual support in key multilateral platforms like OPEC and the UN. Russia also demonstrates its ability to bolster and project military influence across Latin America and the Caribbean, leveraging soft power tools and cultural outlets such as RT and Sputnik television as instruments of propaganda. Simultaneously, Russia benefits economically through revenues generated from oil and mineral resource exploration, refining operations, and oil trading conducted on Venezuela’s behalf (Thoene et al., 2023). The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has also brought new dynamics to Havana–Moscow relations. The bilateral relationship remains politically advantageous for both nations, with each offering mutual support in global platforms like the UN General Assembly (Bain, 2023).

Additionally, Russia has increased its engagement with BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), positioning itself as a prominent player in advocating for a multipolar world order. This engagement reflects an effort to contest Western dominance and align with nations seeking alternatives to U.S.-led institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. There is an opinion that the expansion of BRICS could present a growing security challenge to the West (Katz, 2024). On the other hand, it is crucial to recognize that BRICS has never been a fully unified group due to significant differences among its founding members. The inclusion of new members in the expanded BRICS only increases these divisions (Katz, 2024). Moreover, there is a clear distinction within BRICS between countries that are strongly opposed to the West, particularly the U.S. (such as Russia, China, and Iran), and those that, despite having disagreements with the West, also maintain substantial cooperation on shared interests (Brazil and India). For example, India and South Africa frequently collaborate with Western nations on trade, security, and development issues. This internal fragmentation within BRICS complicates its

ability to function as a unified counterweight to Western power, even as it expands in membership and scope. Western policymakers must remain attentive about the group's evolving dynamics while recognizing that its internal divisions may limit its collective efficacy.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that: "By addressing global matters cooperatively, the BRICS alliance strengthens its effectiveness in negotiations outside and enhances its power at institutions such as the IMF and WTO. If BRICS nations boost investment between them while reducing trade difficulties, economic integration may grow" (Moch, 2024, p. 97). Additionally, by advocating for a more inclusive and multipolar system of global governance, BRICS challenges the dominance of the G7. Initiatives such as the New Development Bank demonstrates how BRICS is creating alternatives to Western-led financial institutions (Moch, 2024). While the G7 remains politically unified, BRICS wields significant economic influence, largely driven by the rising power of China and India. This economic clout positions BRICS as a pivotal force in shaping the future of global governance.

However, one could argue that despite BRICS's strengths and aspirations, its ability to redefine the global order and establish a truly multipolar system remains questionable. While the alliance "has achieved a remarkable level of institutionalization within the landscape of emerging countries, notably through the establishment of a long-term strategy" (Rached & Rodrigues de Sá, 2024, p. 32), significant obstacles hinder its cohesiveness and effectiveness. This raises doubts about whether multipolarity can realistically replace the current global structure, dominated by the U.S. and its allies.

The Limits of Alternative Powers

An examination of China's internal economic and political challenges shows significant limitations that undermine the notion of a truly multipolar world where China could rival U.S. hegemony. As of 2024, studies indicate that despite being the second-largest global economy, China's growth has been decelerating (Bradsher, 2024; Hale, 2024). China's economy expanded by 0.7 percent in the second quarter compared to the previous quarter, falling short of most economists' forecasts (Bradsher, 2024). This translates to a growth rate of approximately 2.8 percent, which is less than half of the pace recorded in the first quarter of the year. Scholars emphasize that "China faces important structural issues today, such as slowing productivity growth and an aging population that threaten future growth prospects – beyond the recovery from pandemic-induced shocks and a severe contraction in its construction

sector” (Fang, 2023). China’s demographic trajectory is a serious barrier to its global ambitions. With a rapidly aging population and declining birth rates, the country faces long-term demographic decline (Yang, Guo, & Cao, 2024). This shrinking workforce makes sustaining high economic growth more difficult, and it weakens China’s ability to fund its military expansion and social programs.

Politically, China under President Xi Jinping has led to “internal instability”. According to scholars: “The reinvigorated party-centric nationalism justifies the demolition of churches or mosques, the internment of Xinjiang Muslims and the prosecution of members of Hong Kong’s political opposition” (Tsang & Cheung, 2022, p. 233). While the Communist Party holds firm control, political repression and increasing authoritarianism have led to unrest. Surveys show that if individuals were given a choice between living in China or the United States, a significant majority would prefer the U.S. due to higher living standards, and the global perception of democratic values. For instance, a 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that more people across various countries view the U.S. as a more desirable place to live compared to China (Silver, 2024). “People in the surveyed countries also tend to have more confidence in U.S. President Joe Biden than Chinese President Xi Jinping to do the right thing regarding world affairs. A median of 43% of adults across 34 countries (excluding the U.S.) have confidence in Biden, compared with a median of 24% who have confidence Xi. [...] Malaysia, Singapore, Tunisia and Turkey are the only surveyed countries where more people have confidence in Xi than Biden” (Silver, 2024). This suggests that democracy continues to be seen as more “attractive” than authoritarianism, particularly in terms of personal freedoms and economic opportunity. Consequently, China’s soft power remains weak relative to that of the U.S., particularly due to its handling of human rights issues, which undercuts its global image. Scholars indicate that China’s political image worsened among U.S. audiences due to key events that clashed with American values. These included China’s increased pressure on democratic Taiwan, its hardline response to Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests, the mass detention of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, and mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak. Each of these actions underscored China’s authoritarian nature, further straining its global image (DeLisle, 2020).

Russia’s image worsened as well. Consequently, there is “a transition from a soft power to a sharp power agenda” (Glazunova et al., 2023, p. 3293). Unlike soft power, which builds positive influence through cultural and educational outreach, sharp power seeks to exploit societal divisions and delegitimize institutions (Glazunova et al., 2023). Soft power and smart power are valuable to governments like the U.S. that try to gain an advantage within the existing rules-based international world order. “By contrast, the Putin regime, which is now openly rejecting the rules of global

cooperation, can no longer hope to attract broad international and especially western sympathy and support [...]. Sharp power, exercised in the current context especially through online and social media, is a central tool for this purpose” (Glazunova et al., 2023, p. 3309). Russia’s soft power has significantly declined following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Brand Finance, 2023). The war has eroded Russia’s global image and damaged its credibility limiting its ability to project influence globally. Having said that, it is important to indicate that the U.S. response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has strengthened its soft power, particularly in Europe and among democratic nations (Brand Finance, 2023). By promoting a message of solidarity, freedom, and democratic values, the U.S. has managed to rebuild its image as a global leader after a period of declining influence during Trump I.

Strategic Flexibility

The United States’ ability to maintain strategic flexibility and adapt quickly to various global emergencies has been a basis of its international leadership. This is evident in the U.S. reactions to various economic and security crises across the globe, showcasing its skill to act decisively. This adaptability is key to maintaining its global influence, particularly when contrasted with the strategies of its rivals: Russia and China. For example, the U.S. has responded to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. When Russia launched its invasion in 2022, the U.S. quickly assembled a coalition of NATO allies and global partners to impose severe sanctions on Russia and supply Ukraine with critical military aid. The sanctions included freezing Russian Central Bank assets and cutting Russia off from the SWIFT banking system. The sanctions also targeted Russian oligarchs, government officials, and key sectors such as energy, aviation, and defense, which weakened Russia’s economy and its war machine. In addition to economic measures, the U.S. mobilized considerable military aid to Ukraine, with contributions worth tens of billions of dollars since the war began. This included critical equipment like Javelin anti-tank missiles, HIMARS rocket systems, air defense systems, artillery, and ammunition. Reports indicate that as of April 2024, the U.S. military aid to Ukraine had surpassed 180 billion dollars, the largest military assistance package given to any country in modern history (Masters & Merrow, 2024). This response showcases the U.S.’s ability to mobilize economic, diplomatic, and military resources quickly, as well as its capacity to adapt its strategies to the evolving nature of the conflict.

However, it is important to acknowledge there are opinions the U.S. “has overlooked crises elsewhere” (Stewart, Petkun, & Revkin, 2024). In Sudan, for instance,

the ongoing civil war has resulted in the deaths of approximately 15,000 people over the past year, while more than eight million civilians have been displaced. Despite the severity of the crisis, Washington has not provided sufficient emergency aid, nor has it exerted meaningful pressure on the United Arab Emirates – an important U.S. ally – to halt its involvement in the conflict, particularly through illicit arms sales that continue to fuel the violence (Stewart et al., 2024). On the other hand, in defending U.S. actions, it is important to recognize that the U.S. cannot respond with equal power to every crisis, given the complexity of global affairs.

In contrast, Russia and China's military engagements tend to be more regionally focused. Russia's military interventions have predominantly been concentrated on former Soviet states and regions like Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Its actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and support for regimes in Belarus, and Kazakhstan highlight this pattern. Moscow's primary concern has been protecting its sphere of influence and preventing NATO's expansion into these areas. However, Russia has also extended its military reach beyond these regions, notably through its involvement in Syria. Since 2015, Russia has provided significant military support to the Syrian government, helping to bolster Bashar al-Assad's regime through airstrikes, logistical aid, and the deployment of troops (Zisser, 2021). This intervention underscores Russia's broader ambition to assert its influence on the global stage and challenge Western dominance in geopolitically strategic areas.

Beijing's military activities are concentrated in the Indo-Pacific, with a particular focus on asserting dominance in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and around Taiwan. China's military strategies, such as constructing artificial islands and militarizing the South China Sea, are central to its efforts to expand regional influence. These actions highlight China's intent to project power but also expose the geographic limitations of its military reach. It must be acknowledged that the infrastructure developed on these artificial islands, including runways, radar installations, and air defense systems, has significantly bolstered China's operational capabilities in the region. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that these facilities not only reinforce its military presence but also function as strategic assets for exerting control over vast maritime territories and their rich natural resources. However, experts claim that: "The islands do not in themselves bring China close to militarily dominating most, let alone the entirety, of the South China Sea" (Pasandideh, 2021, p. 2), suggesting that while these islands enhance China's military posture, they do not, by themselves, enable Beijing to dominate the entire South China Sea militarily.

Conclusion

While discussions of an emerging multipolar world order have gained importance, this analysis reaffirms the enduring global supremacy of the United States. For a system to be multipolar, at least three major powers must be roughly equal. While the U.S. and China are undeniably dominant, no other country, such as France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, or the UK can match their power, undermining claims of true multipolarity (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). The US economic and military strength far surpasses that of its closest competitors, and its unmatched diplomatic influence and leadership within international institutions continue to define global governance. China's internal challenges significantly undermine its capacity to rival U.S. hegemony in any meaningful way. Additionally, the United States' ability to swiftly adapt to global crises solidify its position as the leading global power in a world order that is still largely unipolar.

Nevertheless, the future of this unipolar system is not guaranteed. Shifting global dynamics, such as technological competition, may introduce difficulties that challenge U.S. dominance and its role as an international leader (Saifullah & Ahmad, 2020; Prantl & Goh, 2022). Future research should examine predominantly the impact of emerging technologies on global power balances (Suleyman & Bhaskar, 2023). Additionally, exploring the long-term effects of climate change on global security could provide insights into how this may reshape geopolitical influence (Campbell et al., 2022).

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