The Impact of Power Shifts on Reshaping the International System and Global Balances of Power

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the impact of shifts in geopolitical, economic, and technological power on the restructuring of the international system and global balances of power. It seeks to understand how the rise of emerging powers, such as China and Russia, and the relative decline of traditional powers, are influencing the mechanisms of international relations and the future of global security and stability. By examining theoretical literature and analyzing data, the article aims to provide an in-depth perspective on the ongoing transformations and their implications for various international actors.

Keywords: *Power Shifts; International System; Balance of Power; Multipolarity; International Security.*

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Introduction:

The recent decades have witnessed radical changes in the international landscape, characterized by profound shifts in global balances of power. Following a brief period of American hegemony in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the world has been experiencing the rise of new, multi-dimensional powers that challenge the traditional model of global leadership. These transformations are not merely a change in the ranking of powers, but a reconfiguration of the international system itself, raising questions about the future of security, economy, and the values that govern interstate relations.

The significance of this study lies in its endeavor to shed light on the complex dynamics driving the contemporary international system. Understanding these shifts is essential for policymakers, researchers, and anyone concerned with international affairs, as it helps in anticipating future challenges and opportunities.

The study aims to Understand the nature and key drivers of power shifts, Analyze the impact of these shifts on the international system and the balance of power and Present potential scenarios for the future of the international system.

Research Problem:

Based on the above, this study attempts to address the following central problem:

what extent do the fundamental shifts in the nature and sources of international power lead to a restructuring of the international system and a redefinition of the balance of power?

Sub-questions:

This main problem branches out into the following sub-questions:

- What is the theoretical framework that explains the shifts in the concept of power in contemporary International Relations?
- What are the most prominent manifestations of the transition of power from the unilateral military form (hard power) to multi-faceted forms (soft power and smart power)?
- How do the strategies of rising powers (China and Russia) contribute to the erosion of existing power centers and reinforce the trend of the system towards multiplolarity?

Hypothesis:

The shift from reliance on military power (hard power) to the growing importance of soft power and smart power leads to the erosion of unipolar hegemony and fosters a multipolar international system.

1. **The Theoretical Framework of Power Shifts and the International System**

a. Concepts of Power in International Relations

Power is one of the central concepts in the field of International Relations and, within it, foreign policy. The definitions of this concept have multiplied, as is the case with other concepts in the social sciences, and it has been the subject of extensive debate regarding the developments it has undergone since the realist perspective. Realism viewed International Relations as a struggle among international units, represented by independent nation-states, to acquire power—which was primarily embodied in military power that served as the primary metric for measuring the strength of the nation-state in world politics. (Khairallah, 2019, p. 160)

The variation in defining power is linked to the evolution of the concept itself within the nature of interstate relations, dependent on the characteristics of the era, circumstances, and our perceptions. Whereas the concept of power was historically associated with an era where the risks of armed conflict were the hallmark of international relations, it is a concept that is ill-suited to the new international system. This new system is characterized by the globalization of political and economic problems, the globalization of trade, the declining role of the state, cultural shocks, and the disaggregation of the elements of state power. This raises the problematics of power, particularly concerning its elements. Hence, Bertrand Badie states, "As the twentieth century nears its end, it is no longer possible to view power merely as a voluntary act intentionally directed towards others." The ideas of Joseph Nye reflect the ongoing developments in defining the concept of power and its elements. Nye defines power as: "the ability of an actor to influence the outcomes it desires and to change the behavior of others when necessary to make that happen." An actor's ability to achieve desired outcomes is often associated with its possession of certain resources. Therefore, in short, power means possessing relatively large quantities of elements such as population, geographic territory, natural resources, economic power, and military power. (Khairallah, 2019, p. 161)

The concept of power is defined in the Al-Kayyali Encyclopedia as: "The totality of pressure, coercion, destruction, and construction utilized by political will and intelligence, which are grounded in institutions and groups, in order to control other forces and compel them to accept a specific system, or to break a resistance or threaten it, or to resist an enemy force, or to reach a settlement, or to achieve a balance among the existing forces on the scene." (Al-Kayyali, 1993, p. 359

The concept of power and its importance have been linked to the evolution of international relations across various stages. This concept has dominated traditional studies, particularly classical realist theory and neoclassical realism. There are several definitions, among the most important of which are: (Khalif, 2020, p. 7)

•Hans Morgenthau defines power as a decisive factor in human behavior.

•Whereas Raymond Aron defines power as the ability of a state to impose its will on others.

•Robert Dahl, views power as compelling others to do what they otherwise would not have done.

Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan defined the concept of power as the total capacity of any actor in the international system to participate in the decision-making process with other actors, characterized by its scope, domain, and weight. The study of power has been central to the core contributions of the Realist School. Conversely, Karl Deutsch defined it as both a means and an end simultaneously. It is a means to obtain things of value, and the desire to obtain any value implies the desire to use power to acquire it. A state spends its power on values that result in further power. (Abdelaziz, 2011, p. 271)

Hans J. Morgenthau identified eight elements of national power: 1) Geographical Location, 2) Natural Resources, 3) Industrial Capacity, 4) Military Preparedness, 5) Population, 6) National Character, 7) National Morale, and 8) the Quality of Diplomacy.

In contrast, K. J. Holsti elaborated on the concept of power based on a threefold distinction: Capabilities, Actions, and Reactions. (Abdelaziz, 2011, p. 272)

•Capabilities encompass the human, material, and other resources employed to influence other actors.

•Actions refer to the strategies and relationships with actors that are designed to influence the behavior of other actors.

•Reactions denote the measures or actions taken in response, aiming to exert influence.

In strategic thought, state power refers to a state's effectiveness and weight in the international arena, which result from its ability to mobilize the sources of power at its disposal to impose its will, achieve its national objectives and interests, and influence the will, interests, and objectives of other states. In this sense, state power is determined by two elements: the sources of power and the process of managing and deploying those sources. Therefore, none of the sources of power gains weight and influence merely by existing; rather, this weight and influence are linked to the conscious intervention required to convert available sources of power into an effective force and a potent instrument. (Milish, 2014, p. 72)

b. The Theory of Power Transition

Two major power shifts are occurring in this century: the transfer of power among states from the West to the East, and the diffusion of power from governments to non-state actors, driven by the global information revolution. The concept of Power Transition refers to the dominant power losing its leadership

position to a rapidly growing newcomer, making the latter a veritable shadow of the dominant state. For a power transition to occur, the newcomer must acquire sources of power greater than those of the dominant power, or at least achieve a parity in national capabilities to the point where their respective capabilities approach near-equality. (Al-Aqqad, 2024, p. 408)

This theory is founded on the hypothesis that the dominant power loses its position to a rapidly growing newcomer, rendering the latter a virtual shadow of the dominant power. For a power transition to occur, the newcomer must acquire sources of power surpassing those of the dominant power, or at least achieve parity with its national capabilities, to the extent that their respective national capabilities approach near-equality.

Introduced by A.F.K. Organski to explain shifts in the balance of power among states and their impact on the stability of the international system, this theory is based on a core assumption: the stability of the international system depends on the distribution of power among states and their level of satisfaction with the status quo. The theory remains testable and possesses high predictive validity. Organski classified states based on their degree of power and satisfaction—a taxonomy with significant political and strategic implications, as follows: (Boulenouar, 2025)

- **Powerful and Satisfied States**: This category comprises states with sufficient political, economic, and military power to protect their interests, and which benefit from the prevailing international order.
- **Powerful and Dissatisfied States**: This category constitutes the greatest threat to international stability. It includes states that possess significant power but are dissatisfied with the current distribution of influence and status in the international arena. These states often seek to alter the international system to their advantage through economic and political competition, or even military confrontation.
- **Weak and Dissatisfied States**: This category includes states that lack power but are dissatisfied with the current international situation for political, economic, or historical reasons. However, they do not pose a direct threat to the international system due to their lack of resources and capabilities to effect substantive change.
- **Weak and Satisfied States**: This category consists of states that lack power but benefit from the status quo, either through protection from powerful states or through a global economic system that enables them to advance their interests.

According to Organski, it is from this category that competitors emerge who seek to change the status quo and establish a new international system. These are the powers that have declined and accepted a secondary role in the international

system they once sought to overcome. While Organski applied these propositions to post-World War II Germany, they may be even more applicable to the current positions of Russia and China. (Al-Aqqad, 2024, p. 408)

2. Forms of Power in International Relations

There are three main types of international power: Hard Power, Soft Power, and Smart Power.

a. Hard Power

In the context of international relations, Hard Power is defined as a state's ability to influence and control various spheres, whether political, economic, or military. The definition of Hard Power relies on a set of factors including economic and technological capability, and military strength. It reflects a state's capacity to effectively achieve its interests and shape the course of international events. This power can stem from a state's ability to achieve economic development, provide solutions to security challenges, effectively employ technology, and offer political leadership. With the development of modern technology, the basis of power has shifted away from military strength. The existence of nuclear weapons is among the reasons for this shift, as demonstrated by the Cold War, given that nuclear weapons are terribly destructive and lethal to the extent that they have become largely immobilized and excessively costly, and should only be used in extreme cases. (Mahmoud, 2025, p. 112)

The decline in the role and efficacy of Hard Power in international relations can be analyzed through the impact of several major international transformations, namely: (Mahmoud, 2025, pp. 114-115)

- **Transformations in the Global Economy:** The shift of the global economy towards a knowledge and innovation-based economy, where states strong in technology and innovation have become the major powers. Additionally, increased economic integration and the formation of economic alliances have reduced the importance of traditional Hard Power.
- **Technological Shift and Cyberspace**: The spread and advancement of cyber technology have enhanced the influential capacity of states with high innovation and advanced technology. This has played a vital role in international relations, making cyber power a key factor in determining a state's position on the international stage.
- **Growing Importance of International Institutions and Organizations in achieving global security and stability.**
- **International Pressures for Human Rights and Peace:** Increased international pressures to respect human rights and maintain world peace

mean that the excessive use of Hard Power can face international backlash and negative consequences.

The definition and importance of Hard Power are changing with the world's rapid developments and transformations, making understanding its role vital for analyzing contemporary international relations. Overall, cyberspace has enhanced the influential capacity of leading states in this domain and has also contributed to shaping the international landscape in a way that reduces the effectiveness of Hard Power in favor of Soft Power in determining the directions of international relations, which we will address later.

b. Soft Power

Soft Power is the ability to attract and co-opt, leading to acquiescence. It is embodied in an actor's capacity to influence the perceptions, preferences, calculations, and behaviors of others, relying more on intangible resources related to mechanisms of persuasion and attraction. In terms of behavior, it is defined as attractive power; as for resources, they are the assets that produce such attractiveness. (Marjouneh, 2025, p. 17)

Joseph Nye, in 1990, defined Soft Power as follows: "Soft Power is essentially the ability of a specific nation to influence other nations and guide their public choices based on the attractiveness of its social system, culture, value system, and institutions, rather than relying on coercion or threat." This attractiveness, as the American scholar notes, can be disseminated through various means: popular culture, public and private diplomacy, international organizations, and the totality of operating commercial companies and institutions. The American researcher confines the Soft Power of any major active state on the global stage to three essential elements: first, the public culture and whether it is attractive or repulsive to others; second, political values and the seriousness of commitment to them, both domestically and internationally, in peace and war; third, the foreign policy pursued and its degree of legitimacy and voluntary acceptance by the world's states and peoples. (Studies C. f., 2020, p. 3)

Nye believes that the role of Soft Power in achieving a state's interests has grown, especially since international relations have become more complex and interconnected to the extent that the international reality, in his words, "resembles a three-dimensional chess game." Its dimensions are represented in: (Al-Aidi, 2023, p. 192)

- The Economic Dimension: From an economic perspective, Nye argues that we are facing an international order with multiple economic poles.
- The Military Dimension: Here, according to Nye, the United States of America is the sole polar state in a unipolar order under its leadership, due

to the superior military capabilities it possesses, which exceed those of any other state on the international stage.

- The Dimension of Transnational Issues: These are issues that do not concern a single state alone but whose effects extend to the entire world, such as: climate change, terrorism, global pandemics, etc.

Nye further developed his concept of Soft Power, now viewing it through three determinants or variables:

- The actor who possesses power and the relationship between the parties of power.
- The scope of power.
- The topics involved.

c. Smart Power

Smart Power has been defined as power that combines both Soft Power and Hard Power; that is, it links tolerance with severity. Through Soft Power, desired goals can be achieved via inducement, attraction, and the ability to co-opt and persuade, utilizing the state's cultural, political, or media appeal, among others, to build relationships with allies, provide economic aid, engage in cultural exchange with other countries, and create favorable public opinion. Whereas Hard Power, whose military translation is generally overt warfare, its political translation is harassment through international and regional bodies, and its economic translation is means of pressure, boycott, and blockade—often exercised by one state upon another, or compelling others to exercise it—is always accompanied by the constant hint of the potential use of force. (Ighwan, 2019, p. 289)

The concept of Smart Power emerged primarily in connection with the review of U.S. foreign policy following the failure of American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, global criticism of American Hard Power on one hand, and the inability of American Soft Power to yield the desired results for achieving U.S. foreign policy objectives on the other. It was emphasized that successful security policies in our era fundamentally depend on a smart strategy for combining the tools of both Soft Power and Hard Power together, rather than relying on one without the other. This era is no longer the age of military power alone; alongside that military power, the power of attraction and persuasion has proven its ability to influence hearts and minds. The concept of Smart Power found a wide echo among American politicians. The concept appeared during President Barack Obama's presidential campaign and was discussed by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in January 2009. She mentioned the importance of Smart Power for U.S. foreign policy to achieve its goals, viewing it as the smart use of all available means—including the ability to persuade and communicate through economic and military capabilities, and the

credibility of leadership. It means combining principles and pragmatism based on facts and events, not emotions and value judgments. (Abdel-Hay, 2014, p. 64)

The Obama administration announced a foreign policy based on multiple tools of power—diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural—by blending these tools to achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives and working to restore the standing of Soft Power after military power had predominated during the previous President Bush's term. This was to be achieved by accomplishing national security and foreign policy goals through diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign aid, development, and confronting external challenges, foremost among them international terrorism, via Smart Power strategies that combine different power tools. Consequently, the United States moved to review its foreign policy within the framework of the Smart Power concept, amid criticism from American thinkers and politicians of foreign policy strategies based primarily on the military dimension. (Abdel-Hay, 2014, p. 65)

Agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), think tanks, and research centers are considered among the largest and most important Smart Power institutions due to their ability to set priorities for engaging with international parties or non-state actors, anticipate failures affecting such policies, address gaps, correct errors in comprehensive and general strategies, and simulate incidents and crises with various predictable variables. This is a skill mastered by major powers and is one of the key objectives of global leadership that American hegemony aspires to maintain and preserve in the short and medium term, by studying problems and simulating weaknesses and their potential locations, especially economic decline after the global crisis. Based on the foregoing, the concept of 'Smart Power' can be defined as the ability to combine stringent material power (Hard Power) with the power of soft attraction (Soft Power) into a single effective strategy or policy that achieves goals with lower cost, faster time, and more precise selectivity. (Al-Harmazi, 2016, pp. 73-74)

3. Transformations of the International System

the manifestations of the transformation of the international system through the following: (East., 2025)

A Shift in Power Equations on the Global Stage: The beginnings of this shift appeared with the decline of American hegemony. However, the United States still maintains its position as the leading global power by a wide margin from its closest competitors. Evidence of this is that it remains the only power capable of executing a large-scale military deployment covering all parts of the world—a strategic advantage it still monopolizes to this day. Furthermore, the scene cannot be simplified by stating that the United States is in a state of complete decline; rather, what is happening is that American power is gradually losing the singular hegemony it clearly exercised in the period following the end of the Cold War.

The Proliferation of International Competitors: Foremost among these competitors is China, which is no longer merely a rising economic power but now aspires to lead the global technological revolution, particularly in the field of Artificial Intelligence—a field that undoubtedly constitutes one of the most important elements of future power. Additionally, Russia is attempting to reposition itself in spheres of international influence despite significant challenges, alongside the rising roles of middle and small powers on the international stage.

a. The Deconstruction of American Hegemony and the Inevitability of Power Transition in the International System

The United States rejects the establishment of a multipolar world. After the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama presented his thesis on the end of history, and President George H.W. Bush declared his intention to establish a New World Order under U.S. leadership, promoting a Pax Americana. However, theoretically, there are two perspectives on the possibility of continued American hegemony in the 21st century. The first, advocating for the continuity of American hegemony, is represented by Robert Kagan, Joseph Nye, and William Wohlforth. The second foresees the decline of American hegemony and is represented by Stephen Walt and Robert Gilpin, who believe the United States is facing a gradual decline and erosion of its hegemony alongside the emergence of international powers capable of changing the international system. The debate over hegemony and its future intensified with Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021), his initiation of reforms to U.S. foreign policy, and his warnings about the fate of the liberal international order—the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II—raising questions about the future of American hegemony amid competition with revisionist powers like China and Russia. (Hadhafani, 2024, p. 139)

The Barack Obama administration (2009-2017) had indeed tried to halt China's rise and contain Russia through the Trans-Pacific Partnership and intensifying diplomatic and military presence in Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. In the 2016 elections, Donald Trump's proposal differed from Hillary Clinton's, who stated that the U.S. could not solve the most pressing problems alone—aligning with Joseph Nye's argument that the U.S. problem lies not in declining power but in not understanding that even the strongest nation cannot achieve its goals without cooperation. Trump, in contrast, considered this approach defeatist and insisted on military, economic, and political power capable of disciplining allies and opponents through negotiations or economic sanctions. (Hadhafani, 2024, p. 140)

b. Active Actors on the International Stage

Russia:

Although "Russia is not like any European country," it remains a major power on the European stage. Europe cannot ignore Russia; it is too close, possesses

nuclear and military capabilities, is rich in resources, and harbors a sense of grievance and a desire to restore its lost status. Therefore, it is not in Europe's interest to provoke Russia, especially since Russia has acquired a fundamental role in the Middle East after the Arab Spring events, and its positions and policies have become more open, influential in global events, and competitive with major powers, including America. (Tayfour, 2021, p. 394)

According to the Power Transition Theory introduced by Organski in 1957, Russia is classified among the powerful and dissatisfied states that seek to change the status quo in the international system, thereby challenging the hegemony of the powerful and satisfied state which has an interest in maintaining the current international order under its domination—represented by the United States of America.

Russia has been considered a revisionist power of the international system since the 1990s. However, its revisionist tendencies during this period were "peaceful" until they transformed following the Russian military attack on Ukraine in February 2022 into those of a "vengeful" revisionist state, due to the negative impacts and significant threat this crisis poses to international peace and security.

The manifestations of Russia as a revisionist power in the international system are evident through a set of indicators. The foremost relates to its strategy and external behavior in the sphere of influence where the Soviet Union was previously active, namely Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region. In 2014, Russia militarily annexed Crimea, which was part of Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia again militarily intervened in Ukraine. All this confirms the aggressive revisionist policy adopted by Russia. (Memmad, 2023, p. 389)

China:

The U.S. administration's National Security Strategy document, issued on October 12, 2022, identified China as the most significant and dangerous challenge, possessing both the intent and, increasingly, the capability to reshape the international order in its favor. Consequently, China is a revisionist power seeking to occupy an influential position within the established international system. What amplifies the threat China poses to the U.S.-led hegemonic system is its status as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so." Similarly, the U.S. Pentagon describes China as a "revisionist power that seeks to reorder the region in its favor by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations."

China believes in the necessity of reshaping the international order, transforming it from a U.S.-dominated system into a multipolar one. From the Chinese perspective, the shift towards a multipolar world is an "irresistible trend" that will ultimately lead to global peace. Based on this outlook, China views the

structural transformations occurring in the post-Cold War international system as a transitional phase, heralding the system's evolution from U.S. hegemony to a multipolar order where the roles of several major powers, including China itself, become prominent. (Memmad, 2023, p. 392)

c. Potential Future Scenarios for the Structure of the International System

Forecasting the future of the international system constitutes one of the most critical pursuits in International Relations in the 21st century, particularly amidst rapid geopolitical, economic, and technological transformations that are affecting the foundations of the global distribution of power and influence. Analysis no longer stops at describing the current reality but has expanded to attempt building future scenarios based on a systematic reading of current trends and the interactions of major powers.

First: Continuation of American Hegemony with Adjustments

Some analysts argue that the world order will continue under American leadership, with adjustments to accommodate the rise of new powers. Ikenberry suggests that "the U.S.-led liberal order possesses significant adaptive and absorptive capacity, achieved by expanding participation in global decision-making while preserving core rules and principles." (Eid, 2025)

Since the end of World War II, the United States has been the dominant power in the international system, based on a set of structural foundations that enabled it to exert influence on political, economic, military, and cultural levels. These foundations were not limited to military or economic superiority alone but extended to include tools of soft power and technology that allowed it to manage the international system within the rules of international liberalism. (Mohamed, 2025, p. 147)

The scenario of continued American hegemony, also known as Sustained Unipolarity, represents a forward-looking vision that rejects the notion of Washington's inevitable decline and emphasizes the depth and stability of its comprehensive power foundations.

Second: A Balanced Multipolar System

The second scenario is a shift towards a more balanced multipolar system. Levy predicts that "the world is moving towards a multipolar system comprising the

United States, China, the European Union, Russia, and India as major powers, with increasing influence from regional powers like Brazil, Turkey, and Iran." He cautions that "historically, multipolar systems have been more prone to instability than bipolar or unipolar systems, requiring new mechanisms for managing relations among major powers." (Eid, 2025)

Third: Chaos and Disintegration of the World Order

The third and most pessimistic scenario is the disintegration of the world order and its slide into chaos. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) warns that "escalating competition among major powers, coupled with weak international institutions and increasing transnational challenges, could lead to the disintegration of the world order and the emergence of competing spheres of influence with minimal global cooperation." The report adds, "This scenario would be the most dangerous for addressing shared global challenges like climate change, pandemics, and cross-border terrorism, which require unprecedented international cooperation." (Eid, 2025)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it becomes evident that the power shifts witnessed in the international system are not merely marginal changes in the balance of power, but rather a process of radical and fundamental restructuring of the entire global geopolitical context. The decline of traditional unipolar hegemony and the rise of emerging powers led by China, coupled with the growing role of non-state actors, have deconstructed the simplistic picture that prevailed after the Cold War. A multipolar system is no longer just a theory; it has become a tangible reality characterized by a more complex and intertwined distribution of power and influence.

This transition from the centralization of power to its plurality imposes new dynamics. Consequently, it can be argued that power shifts are pushing the world towards a more dynamic, yet also more turbulent, international system, where the future is the product of the interaction of multiple forces. This necessitates a high degree of flexibility, diplomacy, and wisdom from all actors to achieve stability and prosperity in this changing landscape.

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