Chapter 2
American Strategy and the Liberal International Order

Zack Cooper

Abstract Is the world unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar? This is a fundamental question for international relations scholars, many of whom stress the importance of structure on patterns of state behavior (see, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* Waveland Press (1979)). But on this critical issue, Americans are deeply divided. Furthermore, there are substantial differences between the views of Americans and those of key allies and partners abroad. As a result, there is a growing divide between how many Americans see the world—as either unipolar or bipolar—and how it is perceived by most others: increasingly multipolar. This has substantial implications for U.S. strategy. Most importantly, it will impede efforts to build strong and sustainable coalitions, which are necessary to bolster the liberal international order.

Differing Views of Power and Influence

Americans tend to be convinced that maintaining a military edge is important and are relatively confident in the U.S. military's current edge. In 2022, 51% of American said the United States is number one in the world militarily, while 47% said it was one of several leaders.[1] Furthermore, 68% called it important that the United States be top in the world militarily. A 2019 poll reflected similar figures, with 61% of Americans saying that U.S. policies should try to keep America the only military superpower.[2] Notably, this was a more popular view among conservatives (80% of whom supported the proposition) than liberals (only 40% of whom agreed). These

[1] "U.S. Position in the World," Gallup (2022) https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx.

[2] Pew Research Center (2019).

Z. Cooper (✉)
American Enterprise Institute, Princeton University, Princeton, USA
e-mail: zack.cooper@aei.org

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numbers suggest that a majority of the American public not only believes in the importance of American military primacy, but also believes that it still exists.

The economic situation is viewed more pessimistically by Americans.[3] Only 16% of Americans said that the United States has the world's top economy in 2022, compared to 82% who responded that the United States is one of several leading economic powers.[4] And a slim plurality of 50% of Americans say it is important for the United States to remain number one in the world economically, compared to 49% who responded that it was not that important as long as the United States remains among the leading economic powers. Yet, despite these figures, confidence in U.S. economic staying power is substantial. In 2021, more Americans said the United States would be the world's leading economic power in 20 years than thought it was the leading economic power at the time.[5] This is remarkable optimism given economic trends over the past few decades.

When foreign experts are asked to rate American military and economic power, they tend to be far more skeptical. Trans-Atlantic polling shows that European allies see China and the European Union as more influential than do their American counterparts.[6] Nonetheless, 59% of those polled in Europe still expect the United States to be a stronger power than China in ten years.[7] But the picture is worse for the United States in other regions. For example, only 29% of Southeast Asian experts see the United States as having the most political and strategic influence in their region.[8] The figure was even lower—just 9%—when asked whether the United States has the most economic influence in Southeast Asia. Surveys on U.S. influence in African countries often reflect similar dynamics.[9] In short, outside the United States there is more skepticism about America's level of power and influence abroad—in fact, many think Washington's time in the sun has already passed.

The Dangers of Misdiagnosing Polarity

Does it matter that American views of U.S. power and influence differ from those abroad? After all, one can make an argument for either a unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar world. Indeed, the United States remains by far the world's largest economy, suggesting to some that a unipolar order still exists. For example, the United States is first in accumulated wealth, with an estimated $126 trillion for 2020, compared

[3] See, for example, Smeltz et al. (2021).

[4] "U.S. Position in the World," Gallup.

[5] "U.S. Position in the World," Gallup.

[6] "Transatlantic Trends 2021," The German Marshall Fund of the United States and Bertelsmann Foundation (August 2021) https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/TT2021_Web_Version.pdf.

[7] Krastev and Leonard (2021).

[8] Seah et al. (2022).

[9] Ward et al. (2021).

to China with $74 trillion.[10] These two figures together account for 48% of global wealth. No other economy comes close, with Japan next at $27 trillion (6.5% of global wealth), followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, each with $15–20 trillion.

These figures suggest that the United States and China are clearly the world's two largest economies (although China still stands at only 58% of U.S. wealth). Yet, this still does not mean that the world is either unipolar or bipolar. Europe, if aggregated, still has roughly $100 trillion in wealth—roughly on par with the United States and China. With many European leaders calling for greater autonomy—effectively greater distance from the United States—many in Europe argue that it must be recognized as a separate pole. The same could be true of India, which is still seeking an approach that allows it substantial flexibility, as well as a number of other major countries from Japan to Russia.

This creates an unusual situation in which many of the leading powers disagree not just on their relative power, but on the very polarity of the system itself. Such differences should come as no surprise to international relations scholars, since assessments of one's own power are often overly optimistic, even far after the point at which one's relative power has peaked and started to decline.[11] Leaders and their publics tend to focus on the metrics that show their country is powerful and influential over those that suggest weakness and decline.

For all these reasons, many Americans still view the United States as the world's leading (or only) superpower, while many abroad see the world as increasingly multipolar. But China has been catching up quickly in recent decades, implying that a bipolar world may be emerging. To the extent that Americans recognize other great powers, they are therefore likely to identify China as the main (and often only) real rival to the United States. Yet, few abroad share this diagnosis, and even some leading Americans are now starting to question whether we are in or entering an era of multipolarity.[12]

There is a growing risk that American policymakers will view competition with China through the lens of bipolarity, while their counterparts abroad perceive an increasingly multipolar world. The Trump administration talked frequently about the need to focus on "great power competition" in which the countries recognized as great powers tended to be the United States, China, and Russia.[13] The Biden administration has abandoned this terminology but embraced "strategic competition" and cited China as the "pacing challenge."[14] Both these approaches suggest that

[10] Shorrocks et al. (2021).

[11] Edelstein (2020).

[12] Haass and Kupchan (2021).

[13] "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," U.S. Department of Defense (2018) https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

[14] "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," The White House (March 2021) https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf.

the United States sees itself and China (and less frequently Russia) as the main protagonists on the international scene.

The problem with these framings is that they downplay the role of other key countries, including a number of U.S. allies—such as Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France—that are crucial players in their own right. By suggesting that the world is bipolar, American leaders effectively deprive these allies of agency. Furthermore, this framing undermines what makes an American-led world most attractive to others: the notion that the United States has adopted a more inclusive approach to order-building (especially when it comes to other leading liberal states) than most previous hegemons.[15]

(Mis)Managing Multipolarity

The reality is that the current order is multipolar and growing more so by the year. Gone is the unipolar moment in which the United States had no serious challenger.[16] China's rapid economic development and military modernization have catapulted it to the level of a superpower. Moreover, a number of the world's other great powers are increasingly seeking more autonomy from the United States and China, rather than alignment with either of these powers.[17] Unlike the Cold War when most of the world's top economies were clearly aligned with either the United States or the Soviet Union, circumstances today are far different. Few countries are openly aligned with the United States or China—most are trying to maintain the ability to adjust their policies and alignments as their interests demand. This bears all the hallmarks of a multipolar system.

How must the United States alter its approach if it is to adapt to this more multipolar world? Most importantly, U.S. leaders must look to build coalitions rather than attract countries into the U.S. orbit.[18] Many U.S. allies and partners are willing to cooperate with the United States when their interests demand it, but few are willing to "choose" between the United States and China. Most countries want to maintain good relations with both Washington and Beijing.[19] The key question, therefore, is not how the United States can convince other countries to join its side in a bipolar rivalry. Instead, Washington will have to accept that different countries will align on different issues at different times.

The central challenge in the years ahead will be managing shifting coalitions composed of various poles. The United States cannot do this coalition-building on its own. After all, U.S. objectives will shift with American elections, so relying on

[15] John Ikenberry (2019).

[16] On definitions of unipolarity, see Monteiro (2014).

[17] Lim and Cooper (2015) https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636412.2015.1103130?journalCode=fsst20.

[18] Brands and Cooper (2020).

[19] Loong (2020).

Washington alone will inhibit a robust international architecture. Instead, the United States needs a small handful of countries that share its interests and values, not in one domain but in many. The United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are all well-positioned to provide guidance as part of a central "steering group" that might advise the United States on how best to approach this coalition building effort.

But in many ways, Japan is an even more obvious strategic partner. Japan is the most capable U.S. treaty ally in the most important part of the world. Japan boasts the world's third largest economy. Japan is a technology leader. And Japan holds similar views on a range of global governance issues. For all these reasons, Japan is perfectly positioned to help the United States develop and build the coalitions needed for managing an increasingly multipolar system. Japan can help guide the United States when it needs advice, and pick up the pieces (as with the Trans-Pacific Partnership) when it missteps. But this will only be possible if U.S. leaders recognize the need to devolve more power and responsibility to other poles in the system.

The word "multipolarity" does not appear in the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, but the reality is that the world is increasingly multipolar. The faster U.S. leaders recognize and accept this reality, the sooner they will be able to develop strategies designed not to maintain a unipolar moment that has passed or win a mischaracterized bipolar competition, but adapt the liberal international order for the new reality of emerging multipolarity.

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