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Bipolarity or Multipolarity?

CHINESE PERSPECTIVES ON
THE FUTURE OF WORLD ORDER

Wang Zhen & Tian Hong'yu

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Abstract

How do competing frameworks of bipolarity and multipolarity shape contemporary debates on the future of world order? In what ways does China's historical experience, cultural philosophy, and foreign policy practice inform its vision of a multipolar world, and how does this vision contribute to global debates and interact with broader international theoretical debates on polarity? In recent years, the unipolar order that emerged after the Cold War under U.S. hegemony has come under mounting strain. With China's rapid rise—particularly after it became the world's second-largest economy in 2010—debates within the international community over whether the United States and China are moving toward a new “bipolar” configuration in global politics have intensified. Our conceptual analysis demonstrates that such assessments rely predominantly on economic indicators and lack a comprehensive evaluation of overall national power. From a multidimensional perspective, China continues to face significant structural constraints, suggesting that the “new bipolarity thesis” has neither fully materialized nor gained broad acceptance internationally. At the same time, China consistently advo-

cates a vision of a multipolar world order grounded in equality and stability, seeking to advance a fairer and more just international system—a community with a shared future for humanity—anchored in “true multilateralism” as its institutional framework. This position is deeply rooted in China’s historical experience, cultural traditions, and philosophical foundations, while also reflecting its contemporary international standing and strategic interests.

Keywords

bipolarity; Chinese foreign policy; conceptual analysis; multipolarity; world order

Introduction

The world is undergoing a major change that has not been seen in a century, with profound adjustments in the balance of international power and evolution of the international structure. Thus, the debate on whether the future international structure is “bipolar” or “multipolar” has lately become one of the hottest topics in the international relations community. This debate not only informs perceptions of the current international environment but also shapes the diplomatic strategies and policy choices of states. In this context, one should highlight that China's role on the international stage is becoming increasingly prominent as an emerging global power, and this ascendance is of great significance to the rethinking and reshaping of the world order.

In the early years following the end of the Cold War, the United States had emerged as the sole superpower due to its overwhelming strength, with the “unipolar” thesis dominating the international discourse. However, with China's rapid development, the rise of other emerging economies, the “multipolarity” thesis has gradually replaced the “unipolarity” thesis, becoming the mainstream understanding of the future international pattern in the international community. In recent years, moreover, as the gap in strength between China and the United States in economic and military fields has narrowed further, coupled with the increasingly evident

competitive nature of US-China relations after 2017, the “bipolarity” thesis has once again entered the public eye, challenging the understanding of the multipolar trend.

In this context, conducting an in-depth exploration of the connotations, characteristics, and developmental trends of “bipolarity” and “multipolarity” undoubtedly holds significant theoretical and practical significance. Using the method of conceptual analysis, this study aims to address the following questions: How do competing frameworks of bipolarity and multipolarity shape contemporary debates on the future of world order? In what ways does China’s historical experience, cultural philosophy, and foreign policy practice inform its vision of a multipolar world, and how does this vision contribute to global debates and interact with broader international theoretical debates on polarity? Here, conceptual analysis is understood as a methodological approach that investigates the meaning and application of abstract terms by breaking them down into their defining features and examining the different ways they are interpreted. Rather than generating new data, it sharpens how concepts—such as multipolarity—are understood, distinguished, and used in intellectual debate (Foderaro, 2023; Gürcan, 2022). Therefore, conceptual analysis is applied to the core concepts of polarity and world order by specifying their defining attributes and tracing how “bipolarity” and “multipolarity” are interpreted and operationalized across Chinese and international scholarship and policy discourse, thereby clarifying the terms on which China’s role in the emerging global configuration can be evaluated. Within this framework, the present study first clarifies the conceptual relationship between polarity and world order, then revisits the emergence of the new bipolarity thesis, assesses China’s material and non-material capacity to act as a pole, critically examines the limitations of bipolar interpretations, comparatively evaluates bipolarity and multipolarity within broader international debates, and finally situates China’s evolving vision of multipolarity within its historical, cultural, and policy trajectories.

“Polarity” and the World Order

Before discussing the “bipolar” or “multipolar” world orders, it is essential to define “polarity” and “world order,” and then clarify the logical relationship between these concepts.

The concepts of “polarity” and its root word “pole” in the context of international relations are concepts borrowed from physics by scholars of international relations. A “pole” usually refers to the specific endpoint of an object such as the Earth, a magnet, or a charged object. In the context of international relations, it carries the connotation of the “highest,” referring to major powers that occupy a dominant position in the international power structure. These major powers behave in ways that are distinct from those of other states.

Jack Levy (1983, pp. 11–19) argues that great powers differ from other states in three key respects: (1) their high levels of military capability render them strategically self-sufficient and capable of projecting power beyond their borders; (2) their expansive conception of security entails close attention to regional and/or global balances of power; and (3) they enjoy greater discretion than weaker states in defining and defending their interests. In this context, polarity not only reflects the positive and negative attributes of electromagnetism but also denotes “mutual exclusion” in the context of international relations, used to describe the form of the international system. Specifically, it refers to the number of actors and the distribution of their power, reflecting the structure of the international system. Therefore, it is also commonly used to describe the international structure during periods of transition or when the international system has not yet been established.

Neorealist or structural realist theorists believe that only the distribution of national power can explain the issue of war and peace. In other words, only the most powerful states can determine whether the international structure is “unipolar,” “bipolar,” or “multipolar.” For example, Edward Mansfield (1993) argues that major powers are typically not symmetrical in terms of power, and if there is an imbalance of power among the major powers, war may break

out. Therefore, the number of poles and the power gaps between them are decisive factors in determining war and peace.

Although the concept of “polarity” has long been used to describe the international system, there is still no consensus among academics on the criteria for measuring “poles.” Chinese scholar Yan Xue'tong (2008, p. 42) believes that the academic community has not clearly defined whether “poles” should be calculated based on individual countries or groups of countries (such as the EU and NATO). Liang Shou'de and Hong Yin'xian (2004, pp. 142-143) explicitly oppose the use of “pole” to describe the international system, citing the following reasons: (1) it overemphasizes the role of major powers while neglecting the strength of smaller ones; (2) it overemphasizes opposition and conflict while ignoring dialogue and cooperation; (3) it overemphasizes military means while downplaying the competition of comprehensive national power. Nevertheless, in most cases, the academic community still regards dominant great powers that hold a dominant position within a certain timeframe as “poles”.

Another Chinese scholar, Xu Lan (2013), defines world order as “the relatively stable structural configuration formed by major actors in international relations—such as states or groups of states—that play a pivotal role within a given historical period through their mutual relationships, constraints, and interactions.” The basic elements constituting the world order include actors, their mutual strategic relationships, and the relatively stable relational structures between these actors. Among these structures, “the balance of power between major powers and groups of major powers constitutes the basic structure and core of the international system, determining the fundamental content of international relations, such as war and peace, peace and development (Xu, 2013).” The significance of these structures lies in their concrete influence on, and constraints upon, the world order within a given historical period (Xu, 2013).

In short, polarity reflects the distribution of power among the main actors, while world order refers to the regular patterns of relationships that arise from this power distribution. Therefore, polarity

is a structural prerequisite for world order, but not its complete determinant. In this study, we define a “pole” as a group of states or nation-state actors that play a dominant role in international relations during a certain period. The relatively stable balance of power and interdependence structure formed by these dominant states constitutes the international pattern, and the rules, norms, and mechanisms that ensure the functioning of this international pattern constitute the international order or interstate order of that period. This includes both regional order within a certain scope and global order on a larger scale.

Revisiting the New “Bipolarity” Thesis

For most of the period following the end of the Cold War, the debate over “unipolarity versus multipolarity” was seen as the primary contradiction and focal point in conceptualizing the international system. With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries embarked on a difficult process of development and transformation. At that time, emerging economies such as China and India had not yet risen to prominence. The United States thus became the world’s sole superpower in the world, with national strength far surpassing that of any other country.

At the same time, liberalism gained widespread popularity globally, not only in the West but also in many other developing countries around the world. Multipolarity was merely a marginal issue at the time, appearing to be far removed from the realities of international politics. Given the United States’ firmly established hegemonic position, the international system was widely perceived as unipolar, a perception reinforced by notions such as “Pax Americana” and the theoretical framework of hegemonic stability.

With the turn of the new century, the rapid rise of China, the reemergence of Russia as a major power, and the continued growth of other emerging economies increasingly challenged U.S. hegemony, rendering the unipolar configuration of the international system progressively more difficult to sustain. As a result, debates

over unipolarity and multipolarity re-emerged as a central focus of scholarly inquiry into the future of the international system.

However, the emergence of the “bipolar theory” soon broke this. With the collective rise of a group of emerging non-Western countries in the post-Cold War era, the share of the United States and its allies in the global economy began to decline steadily. In 1994, the G7 countries accounted for 67% of the world's GDP, but by 2024, this proportion had fallen to 44%. (CFR, 2025) As the economic strength of developing countries rapidly increased, they also began to demand a greater role in global governance and international politics. In this process, China's rapid development has put it far ahead of other countries, especially after China's GDP surpassed Japan in 2010, making it the world's second-largest economy. Against this backdrop, more and more scholars began to focus on how to deal with this new historical phenomenon of the rapid rise of non-Western countries, particularly China, whose historical and cultural traditions are vastly different, and began to discuss the possible “bipolar world” of the future and related theories.

The concept of a contemporary bipolar structure between China and the United States first emerged around 2010. This assessment was based on the rapid rise of China, primarily using hard power indicators, particularly China's enormous economic size. In 2007, Ferguson and Schularick (2007) proposed the concept of "Chimerica," arguing that a "symbiotic economic relationship" existed between China and the United States, where abundant Chinese labor increased the global return on capital. This was one of the earlier attempts to address the issue of Sino-US relations and the global order from an economic perspective. In his 2011 book *On China*, Kissinger proposed the idea of building a Pacific community, exploring a Sino-US-led international relations framework from the perspective of regional order. In Chinese academia, Yan Xuetong was one of the earlier scholars to propose the bipolar structure perspective. Similarly, Lin Limin and Wang Xuan (2019) began to explore the economic conditions necessary for the formation of a bipolar structural world. In their research, they proposed that a bipolar world is formed when the sum of the economic output of

the two largest economies exceeds twice the economic output of the third largest economy.

Does China Possess the Capacity to Act as a “Pole” Power?

At the core of debates over the perceived bipolarity lies the assessment and comparison of national power, a task that has long posed significant challenges in international politics. From a hard-power perspective, a bipolar configuration appears to exhibit some preliminary features, a pattern that becomes more evident when comparison focuses on three core variables: economic capacity, technological capability, and military strength.

Economically, the gap between the economies of China and the United States has narrowed substantially and has become comparable. In 1984, China's GDP was only 7.7% of the United States, 24% of Japan, 43.3% of West Germany, 67.6% of the United Kingdom, and 59.8% of France. By 2024, this proportion has risen to 64.4% of the United States, 4.5 times that of Japan, 4 times that of Germany, 5.3 times that of the United Kingdom, and 6.3 times that of France. China's growth rate in the past two decades has been particularly outstanding. In 2004, China's GDP was 16.5% of that of the United States. 20 years later, China's GDP rose to more than 64% of the United States. This shows that China and the United States, as the world's first and second largest economies, have a total economic output far exceeding that of other economies. In 2024, the world's economic scale has reached about 109.4 trillion US dollars, of which the United States accounts for about 26% and China accounts for about 17%. The total economic output of China and the United States accounts for about 43% of the world; In international trade, China's total import and export volume in 2024 will be about 6.54 trillion US dollars, accounting for 21.51% of global trade, and the United States will account for 20.5%. The total trade volume of the two countries accounts for more than 2/5 of the total global trade (General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of

China, 2025; World Trade Organization, 2025; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025).

In the field of science and technology, especially in the new round of technological revolution, China and the United States are also leaders in the world. Taking artificial intelligence as an example, the number of artificial intelligence talents and enterprises in the United States and China ranks first and second in the world respectively (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, 2024). China ranks second in the world after the United States, but the number of artificial intelligence patents in China is six times that of the United States (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2024). In the field of digital economy, China and the United States account for much higher proportions in blockchain, Internet of Things, cloud computing and other fields than other countries. In 2024, all the top ten Internet companies in the world are American and Chinese companies, of which 7 are from the United States and 3 are from China (S&P Global Market Intelligence & Definitive, 2024). The new technological revolution shapes the direction of world economic development and will also become an important way to increase world wealth, indicating that the status of China and the United States in the future world economic landscape will be more prominent.

In the military field, China and the United States maintain the largest and most advanced military forces. In terms of military expenditure, China and the United States are far ahead of other countries. In 2024, the United States will spend \$996 billion on its military, while China will spend \$296 billion, followed by Russia at \$109 billion, India at \$84.9 billion, Saudi Arabia at \$76.8 billion, the United Kingdom at \$74.8 billion, Germany at \$73.6 billion, Japan at \$59.7 billion, France at \$59.3 billion, and South Korea at \$48 billion (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024). In terms of military industry and equipment, China and the United States also maintain a large naval force and have the most advanced new generation of stealth fighters and unmanned combat systems.

However, such a comparison remains fundamentally static.

While it may capture the growth of China's material capabilities, it is insufficient for assessing China's relationship to a prospective bipolar system. There are several reasons for this. First, a hard-power-centered assessment overemphasizes material factors while overlooking the United States' substantial advantages in international institutions, global agenda-setting, and discursive influence. Second, although China's military capabilities have developed rapidly, it remains the only major power that has not yet achieved complete national unification, meaning that its military priorities are primarily oriented toward domestic territorial consolidation rather than the assumption of expansive international obligations or interventionist roles. Third, whereas the United States maintains an extensive global network of military bases and alliances, China continues to pursue an independent, non-aligned foreign policy and lacks a comparable alliance system. Fourth, while static measures of hard power may be useful for assessing past and present capabilities, their value for evaluating future trajectories of national power is inherently limited. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, China itself demonstrates limited interest in becoming a pole or hegemon, a position shaped by its historical experience, cultural traditions, and diplomatic philosophy. For these reasons, hard power indicators alone offer limited insight into China's willingness or behavior with respect to participation in a bipolar system.

Beyond New Bipolarity: Assessing the Structural Limits of Sino-U.S. Power in the Contemporary International System

Even if one sets aside disputes over how to assess the relative power of the "two poles" and the empirical identification of such a structure, the new bipolarity thesis still confronts a series of unresolved questions. These include: (1) whether China's capabilities are sufficient for it to constitute one of the two poles in a future world order; (2) whether a Sino-U.S. bipolar configuration would exert enough influence to become the dominant framework of the international system; and (3) whether such a bipolar arrangement would push

Sino–U.S. relations toward a Cold War–style confrontation akin to that between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Regarding the assessment of China's power, the factual basis of the new bipolarity thesis mainly relies on static hard power analysis. However, in addition to the three core indicators of economy, technology and military, the comprehensive power of a country is also reflected in its ability and influence to realize its international political intentions. Although China has developed rapidly in recent years, there is still a certain gap compared with the United States. For example, China currently lacks a universal value system that is broadly appealing to the world, a stable and reliable system of partners and allies, and its international discourse power is very weak. It also lacks institutional influence in most international organizations. It is worth noting that due to the arbitrary hegemonic and bullying behavior of the United States, and the double standards of some Western countries in areas such as human rights, climate change, and free trade, the main value system of the Western world is currently facing a serious credibility crisis. In contrast, China's peaceful diplomacy, development initiatives, and Oriental wisdom are receiving increasing attention.

Because of some historical reasons, the headquarters of the world's most important multilateral mechanisms are located in European and American countries. In the International Monetary Fund, although China's share rose from 3.996% to 6.394% after the reform in 2016, jumping from the original sixth place to the third place, the United States has a voting right of 17.4%, and also has a veto right within the organization (International Monetary Fund, 2024b). In international currency reserves, the US dollar accounts for as high as 58%, and the RMB accounts for only about 2% (International Monetary Fund, 2024a). In addition, measured by the United Nations Human Development Index, China's level is not very high. In the 2023 United Nations Human Development Index, China ranks 78th among 193 countries and regions (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). It can be seen that China's domestic development task is very arduous, and this will also be a major challenge facing China in the long run. In addition, for many

newly wealthy Chinese people, their interest and concern in their own livelihood issues far exceeds external affairs, and it is difficult to imagine that they will support actively intervene in foreign affairs for the sake of international influence.

The degree of influence of China and the United States on the world is naturally a key factor in determining whether a new bipolar system is established, but the core issue is whether the bipolar system is the only center of international relations today, or the dominant pattern in the international system. Most people are accustomed to using the US-Soviet bipolarity during the Cold War as a reference. In contrast, the status of the Sino-US bipolarity in the international system is significantly lower, and its influence on the world is also significantly smaller.

Under the bipolar system between U.S. and Soviet Union, almost the entire world was divided into two halves or coerced by it. The world revolved around the two power poles, and the two poles influenced the whole world agenda. Whether from the perspective of constructive or destructive impact on international affairs, Sino-US relations have the greatest impact on the international community. However, the Sino-US bipolarity does not represent the world, nor can it lead the world. The current Sino-US bipolar structure has not yet reached such a height. Sino-US relations are undoubtedly one of the most important bilateral relations in the world today, but it is completely different from the zero-sum relationship of mutual isolation and confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the West, some people often portray themselves as the ultimate winners of the Cold War, so they may have the historical and psychological inertia of restarting the Cold War to obstruct China's development. However, the Chinese people's memory of the Cold War is often about war, poverty, isolation and backwardness, and they do not believe that there will be any real winner in a Cold War. Therefore, they have no interest in participating in any Cold War confrontation and are highly vigilant about it.

In this sense, what currently exists is a bipolar configuration in terms of the relative international status of China and the United

States, rather than a fully formed bipolar world order. Sino–U.S. relations have not divided the world into opposing camps, nor do they constitute the organizing principle of the global system. Claims in some Western media of a China–Russia–Iran alliance amount largely to speculative exaggeration. To date, none of the three countries has expressed any intention to form a formal alliance; on the contrary, each has publicly stated that its cooperation with the others is not directed against third parties. While China and Russia do engage in cooperation in various forms, both are major powers with strong traditions of strategic autonomy. A reconstruction of the Cold War–era Sino–Soviet alliance is therefore highly unlikely.

Compared with the Cold War period, today's world is markedly more diverse. The distribution of international power is flatter and more decentralized, with multiple centers of influence pursuing distinct identities and interests. Moreover, the international system now encompasses a wider array of actors—including regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations—all of which play increasingly significant roles in global affairs. Small and medium-sized states have likewise become more autonomous and self-reliant, and are no longer willing to function merely as passive objects of great-power politics.

Bipolarity or Multipolarity: A Comparative Assessment

The prospect of a bipolar trajectory in the future world order would pose a significant challenge to the concept of multipolarity. In this context, the emergence of the new bipolarity thesis has fundamentally reshaped debates over the international configuration in the post–Cold War era. The central theoretical contention in international system analysis is no longer between unipolarity and multipolarity, but rather between bipolarity and multipolarity.

Multipolarity emerged as the Cold War was nearing its end and became a widely accepted trend after its conclusion. Therefore, efforts to pursue multipolarity have, from the outset, carried the connotation of opposing hegemony and seeking equality and

democracy in international politics. It is both a manifestation of the democratization of international relations and a reflection of the interests of emerging nations. Therefore, for most countries, multipolarity holds greater political appeal in a certain sense. Additionally, the overall trend in the post-Cold War international pattern has been a gradual shift from unipolarity toward multipolarity, which has further consolidated the international community's perception of multipolarity as a dominant mindset regarding the realities of international politics.

At its core, the multipolarization of world politics is not primarily a matter of normative justification or moral preference; rather, it concerns the distribution of international power. By rejecting unipolar hegemony and expanding the range of choice and influence available to other major powers or groupings of states, multipolarity can enhance their international standing and agency, thereby incorporating elements of fairness and democratic pluralism. Nevertheless, multipolarity does not constitute an inherently equal system. It remains a power configuration centered on a limited number of major actors, even as the number of such actors expands beyond a single dominant power. As a result, the normative justifiability associated with multipolarity is necessarily relative rather than absolute.

To secure a position within a multipolar system, a country must first qualify as a pole in the international system. In today's global order, actors considered capable of attaining "pole" status include not only the traditional Western industrialized states and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, but also a range of emerging powers and regional actors, such as India, Brazil, Türkiye, South Africa, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Although most medium-sized and smaller states are unlikely to become poles on their own, a multipolar international system nonetheless offers them comparative advantages. In principle, such a system expands the political space available to medium and small states, granting them greater autonomy as well as increased flexibility in diplomatic choice and maneuvering.

In a multipolar system, although the number of major powers is

not fixed, the system ultimately consists of a limited set of relatively powerful states and cannot encompass all countries. A multipolar world without numerical boundaries would, in effect, be a world without the power of poles, rendering the concept of multipolarity analytically meaningless. While multipolarity may suggest greater fairness, rationality, and democratic potential, it does not constitute an inherently equal international society. Although all states are formally equal in principle, stronger and weaker states inevitably assume differing responsibilities and obligations in international affairs according to their relative power. Functionally, a multipolar configuration may help constrain hegemonic behavior and contribute to systemic balance and stability. Nevertheless, multipolarity offers no automatic guarantee of international peace, nor does it provide a panacea for global problems—a lesson underscored by the tragic historical experiences surrounding the First World War.

There is no single, absolute standard or paradigm for multipolarity. Whether bipolar or multipolar, such configurations are analytical abstractions and interpretive frameworks rather than direct representations of reality. In general terms, multipolarity refers to the existence of multiple centers of power. More importantly, however, the character of the international system depends on the relationships among these power centers, as these interactions determine whether a multipolar structure is orderly or conflictual. The structural form of the international system does not exert a linear or deterministic effect on its political character or on global outcomes. A multipolar configuration is therefore not inherently cooperative; under certain conditions, it may also intensify strategic competition among major powers. At the same time, relative balance and mutual restraint remain core features of a multipolar system, though these do not necessarily imply equal power among individual states. Power asymmetries may instead encourage weaker actors to form alliances in order to counterbalance stronger ones. Consequently, even in the presence of significant power disparities among major states, a multipolar system can still emerge and endure through dynamic processes of balancing and mutual constraint, albeit with persistent internal tensions.

As summarized by Gürcan and Otero (2024), the literature on multipolarity reflects a wide spectrum of perspectives, ranging from realist and liberal to critical and Global South approaches. Huntington's (1999) uni-multipolarity highlights U.S. primacy tempered by secondary powers, while Kupchan's (1998) notion of regional unipolarity envisions American decline offset by regional stabilizers. More differentiated accounts include Geeraerts's (2011) multilayered polarity, dividing the system into global and regional tiers, and Kausch's (2015) competitive multipolarity, where regional rivalries and non-state actors fuel instability. In contrast, liberal and reformist views, such as Efstathopoulos's (2016) reformist multipolarity and Hadano's (2020) multilateral multipolarity, emphasize cooperation and rule-based governance. Critical and globalization-oriented accounts—Pieterse's (2018) multipolar globalization, Weaver's (2011) balanced multipolarity, Acharya's (2009) regiopolarity, and Garzón's (2017) decentered multipolarity—stress structural shifts in trade, norms, and regional agency beyond Western dominance. One should also add that Gürcan and Otero's (2024) critical- Global South framework also seems to lend support to this assessment that multipolarity reflects a distribution of power among several major states that can expand opportunities for smaller countries, while its stability and fairness depend on the dynamics between power centers and may foster either balance or conflict.

Chinese Version of a Multipolar World

Chinese perspectives on multipolarity are less familiar in Western academia, which is why it is worthwhile to extend our discussion to the case of China, which stands as a key agent of multipolarity. After the gradual breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1960s, China not only began openly opposing US and Soviet hegemony and the bipolar order pattern they represented, but also independently put forward its own vision of international order.

At the end of February 1974, Chairman Mao, in a conversation with African revolutionary leaders such as Kenneth Kaunda and Houari Boumédiène, first proposed the concept of the “three

worlds” (Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2013). In April of that year, Deng Xiaoping, in his speech at the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly, defined the term superpower as an imperialist country that perpetrates aggression, interference, control, subversion, and plunder against other countries, seeking world hegemony. He pointed out that the United States and the Soviet Union were two superpowers that “want to dominate the world. They each seek, in various ways, to bring the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America under their control, while also bullying less powerful developed countries.” According to him, China is a developing country belonging to the Third World, and “China is not and will not be a superpower.” If China ever changes its color and becomes a superpower, bullying, invading, and exploiting others, then the people of the world should “expose it, oppose it, and, together with the Chinese people, overthrow it (Deng, 1974).” Thus, the opposition of Chinese leaders to the US-Soviet bipolar system during this period was driven primarily by the desire to oppose hegemony, imperialism, and colonialism. The methods and language used in their opposition also bore the very radical characteristics of the Cultural Revolution.

After China began its reform and opening-up policy, criticism of hegemony, imperialism, and colonialism gradually declined. Until the 21st century, China's focus remained on domestic economic development. During this period, China began to emphasize fostering a favorable external environment for its modernization drive, consistently adhering to the principle that “peace and development are the two main themes of our times.” For example, in his report to the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, President Jiang Zemin (1992) stated: “We must adhere to an independent and peaceful foreign policy and strive for a favorable international environment for our country's modernization drive.” He also stated: “Opening up to the outside world is indispensable for reform and construction. We should absorb and utilize all the advanced civilizations created by countries around the world, including developed capitalist countries, to develop socialism. Isolation can only lead to backwardness (Jiang, 1992).”

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese economy has entered a period of rapid growth, and China's interest in and demand for the outside world has gradually increased. During the Hu Jintao administration, the Chinese government clearly formulated a “going global” strategy, encouraging Chinese companies to enter international markets and integrate with the international community. In March 2013, during his visit to Moscow, President Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” and subsequently proposed the renowned “Belt and Road” initiative. In a sense, both the “community with a shared future for mankind” and the “Belt and Road” initiative are not simply economic development plans, but rather China's initial vision for the future world order and global governance.

On September 26, 2023, China officially released the white paper “Working Together to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: China's Initiatives and Actions,” which systematically expands on China's vision for “building a community with a shared future for mankind.” China explicitly opposes the Cold War or a “new Cold War,” believing that “small-circle multilateralism” constitutes bloc politics, “national-first multilateralism” is unilateral thinking, and “selective multilateralism” is double standards. This means that China does not support the bipolar pattern of the Cold War system. Regarding the issue of “pole,” it advocates that “major powers should prioritize the future and destiny of humanity and shoulder greater responsibility for world peace and development, rather than relying on their power to monopolize regional and international affairs.” In the area of great power relations, it advocates “practicing true multilateralism” and “promoting the democratization of international relations and promoting global governance in a more just and reasonable direction.” At the same time, China's vision for the future international order remains grounded in the existing post-World War II international system. For example, China advocates upholding “an international system with the United Nations at its core,” “an international order based on international law,” and “the basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter (The

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023).”

In December 2023, Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of “equal and orderly multipolarization” at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference of the Communist Party of China (Cao, 2023). In his speech, he stated: “In response to a series of major issues and challenges facing the world today, we advocate equal and orderly multi-polarization and inclusive economic globalization. An equal and orderly multi-polarization means upholding the equality of all countries, big or small, opposing hegemony and power politics, and effectively promoting the democratization of international relations. To ensure the overall stability and constructiveness of the multi-polarization process, we must jointly abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, uphold the universally recognized basic norms of international relations, and practice true multilateralism (Cao, 2023).” In September 2025, Chinese leaders officially put forward an initiative on global governance, this is the fourth global initiative proposed by China in recent years. In a sense, these four global initiatives are a further refinement and extension of the concept of a community of shared future for mankind, demonstrating that China is becoming more proactive in presenting its vision for the future world order to the international community. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2025).

These policy statements and the ideas behind them not only demonstrate China's vision for the future world order, but also express China's specific policies regarding the future international system and global governance. Although, in terms of hard power, China will have sufficient strength or immense potential to become a true “pole” power in the future, while in terms of international governance and cooperation, China remains committed to pursuing a multipolar world order. This is not only because China has long opposed hegemonism and has no intention of becoming a new hegemon, but also because a multipolar world is more conducive to the democratization of global governance, which is more consistent with China's historical and cultural traditions and diplomatic practices.

Conclusion

As China rises as a global power in recent years, the international community is increasingly interested in its vision of the future world order. The Chinese understanding of a “multipolar” or “bipolar” world is deeply rooted in their own historical experiences and cultural philosophies. For most external observers, however, accurately grasping China’s vision of the future international order remains challenging. Differences in language, culture, political thought, historical experience, philosophical traditions, and social structures—combined with the absence of clear and systematic public articulations of this vision—have constrained the international community’s understanding of China’s prospective worldview.

The Chinese vision of a multipolar future has complex ideological roots. First, the traditional Chinese worldview of “Tianxia” (all under heaven, 天下) is a crucial foundation of Chinese political thought. The concept of “Tianxia” represents a Chinese-style inclusive universalism, which refers to a political world with universally effective institutions, governed by these institutions for universal peace and cooperation (Zhao, 2011, p. 57). Furthermore, the deeply ingrained concept of “harmony in diversity” in traditional Chinese philosophy also makes it difficult for the Chinese to accept a confrontational “bipolar” pattern.

Second, modern Chinese revolutionary thought, particularly the egalitarian ideals formed during the socialist revolution, is also an important source in China’s view of world order. The pursuit of relatively thorough, even somewhat radical, social equality was an important goal in early Chinese social revolutions, and has now evolved into a tradition and ideology in Chinese society. Reflected in foreign policy, since 1949, China’s diplomacy has consistently adhered to the principle of “all countries, regardless of size, are equal.” In fact, the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” based on this principle, remain a core value of China’s current foreign policy. Regardless of national strength, since 1949, China has not initiated provocations or aggression against other small or medium-

sized countries. Unless it perceives itself to be under serious threat, China will not proactively provoke or attack other countries for pure ideological reasons.

Third, China's semi-colonial history and diplomatic practices since modern times have also influenced the Chinese perspective on the international order. On the one hand, it has made Chinese people extraordinarily sensitive to and protective of their sovereignty and independence. To this day, most Chinese people have a very profound memory of the humiliating history of that period. On the other hand, the diplomatic experience accumulated by China through continuous contact with Western countries since modern times, particularly since 1978, has enabled Chinese policy-makers, while continuing to adhere to the aforementioned more idealistic principles, to clearly recognize that international politics is a differentiated system with unequal power distribution. Therefore, China has had to pragmatically address these differences and accept the necessity of certain compromises.

Finally, discussions about the relation between China and the world order cannot be separated from the evolving process of the current international order and the broader international debate. On the one hand, for both China and other countries, China's resurgence in the world in recent years and its impact on the global landscape are entirely new phenomena. Therefore, factors such as China's unique historical experience, philosophical traditions (e.g., the concept of "Tianxia" and the idea of harmony in diversity), revolutionary egalitarian ideals, and pragmatic diplomatic practices, which have a profound impact on the future multipolar world, deserve greater attention. On the other hand, due to the West's immense advantage and dominant position in media and academic discourse, international academia has not adequately studied the influence of Chinese traditional culture, philosophical thought, and diplomatic traditions. These aspects are often overlooked or misinterpreted through the lens of Western cultural and historical philosophies, which often very different from China's own historical and cultural traditions. In this sense, China's evolving vision of an "equal and orderly multipolar world" demonstrates that multipo-

larity is not only a geopolitical state but also a controversial process influenced by social factors—it both reflects and reinforces the crisis of hegemony and the search for a more inclusive and equal global order.

As a global power, China's interdependence with the outside world has reached an unprecedented level. Consequently, China's demand for knowledge about the outside world, including its awareness of how to respond to the other countries' concern, is also growing. From Mao's "Three Worlds" theory to Xi Jinping's proposals for a "community of shared future for mankind" and "an equal and orderly multipolar world," China's understanding of international order is constantly evolving. China has shifted from its earlier focus only on domestic economic development to a more confident and proactive engagement in shaping the future international order. However, it is clear that China is not an experienced and well-prepared major power. Therefore, when understanding China's discussions on "bipolarity" and "multipolarity," we need not only patience but also a thorough understanding of its historical, cultural, and logical foundations underlying China's view of the future world order.

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