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*Would it be possible to maintain a
multipolar world order? Analytical
approach of an international system led by
several superpowers*

Abstract

Throughout history, diverse power structures have emerged and evolved. The Peace of Westphalia established a new state order, and the Cold War consolidated the United States as a leader. However, the recent strengthening of other emerging powers presents the possibility of reorganising the current system towards a multipolar one.

The analysis is conducted from the perspective of realist and neo-realist theories of international relations. Classical realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, consider that multipolarity offers greater stability, while neorealists, proponents of Kenneth Waltz, argue that it is less stable due to superpower competition and difficulties in terms of cooperation.

The article explores key concepts such as multipolarity, hegemony and world order, and examines the historical role of superpowers. It considers scenarios in which the international system is led by superpowers and exposes and analyses the debate as to whether a multipolar system could maintain a stable world order or would rather lead to chaos, to global disorder.

Keywords

World disorder, International stability, Polarity, Hegemony, International system.

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I. Introduction

Throughout history, power structures have succeeded one another on an international scale, shaping varied and changing systems and altering the predominance of each state over time. Within this spiral of change, the post-Cold War role of the United States as a leading power may be undermined by the strengthening of other major powers and the consequent reorganisation of the structure, thus causing the international system to drift into chaos or, in other words, into what is often referred to as global disorder (Murray & Brown, 2012).

The international system is on the verge of change and, as such, predictions regarding the outcomes of these changes have flooded the field of international relations. At the start of the 21st century, in 2008, the US National Intelligence Council had already assessed the prospects of a multipolar system arising from globalisation, economics, developmental differences between nations, and the rise of emerging powers (National Intelligence Council, 2008).

Multipolarity has become a widely discussed scenario as a plausible successor to the current international system, raising the question of whether such a change would be capable of sustaining a lasting world order.

To answer this question, different approaches have been adopted by authors of the realist school of thought within international relations. On one hand, classical realists who follow the doctrine of Hans Morgenthau (1948) consider the multipolar system to provide the greatest stability to the international system. Morgenthau supports the theory that international politics is based on the struggle for power and international relations on the search for a balance of power, which, according to him, is more feasible in a multipolar system than in a bipolar one. On the other hand, neo-realists who are successors of Kenneth Waltz (1979) consider multipolarity to be a less stable structure. Their stance is rooted in the realist idea of anarchy between nations and the security dilemma it poses. They suggest that a multipolar system would eventually lead to competition between the dominant superpowers and a regionalisation of the inner workings of the international system, making cooperation less feasible and international engagement easily reversible, leading to a slow build-up of global disorder.

This article explores the question of multipolar international systems based on Waltz's neorealist theory of the unstable nature of multipolarity, and it specifically seeks to elucidate how this multipolar system governed by numerous superpowers would, over time, encounter obstacles to ensuring world order and ultimately lead to global disorder. To this end, the first part of the article will discuss, through the lens of neorealism as opposed to classical realism, the specific nomenclature involved in the dichotomous question of multipolarity and world order: the concepts of multipolarity, superpower, hegemony and world order, to better understand the question behind this study and to understand possible future scenarios. The second part will address the role of superpowers in maintaining a multipolar world order by examining their

historical presence through the Industrial Revolution and the Cold War. The analysis will focus on demonstrating the compatibility, or lack thereof, of superpowers and their chances of survival in a multipolar system, through both a historical and a theoretical approach. The third and final part of the analysis will draw conclusions based on the discussion, as well as possible future outcomes to be expected from the changing world order.

2. Conceptual framework: multipolarity, world order and hegemony

In order to explore the question of multipolarity and world order, it is worth analysing the meaning of both concepts. The concept of multipolarity was first introduced in *The New York Times* in the late 1960s and early 1970s and is linked to the foreign policy of US President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (Wardhani, 2021: 106-111). Aware of the ongoing changes in the international system, they theorised about the prognosis of a shift from a bipolar to a multipolar system. According to Waltz (1988), the concept of multipolarity refers to an international system in which more than two rival states coexist. On the other hand, Raymond Aron (1962: 95-115), 20th century philosopher, sociologist and political commentator, defines the multipolar system as a system composed of several rival countries with more or less equal capabilities. For the purposes of this article, a multipolar system will be considered as a system with more than two rival states with similar capabilities.

The concept of world order has been widely used in the history of international relations. The Peace of Westphalia, signed in 1648, is commonly referenced as a turning point in the world order, transforming it into a pragmatic order as opposed to the ideological order prevalent in Europe in previous centuries (Kissinger, 2016). Although it is a recurring concept in international relations theory, its meaning is subject to debate.

It was the US President Woodrow Wilson (1918) who first referenced this order after World War I in his defence of the Fourteen Points before the US Congress. However, in this call for peace, mention was made of the international order. This multiplicity of similar concepts has also given rise to debate among academics. Robert Cooper (2002: 103-112), a British diplomat, distinguishes between world order and international order on the basis of the referenced era rather than their meaning, and reference to the structure and distribution of power. According to him, the international order existed prior to the Peace of Westphalia in which the order was the empire, and the world order began its development with the balance of power and globalisation. Like Cooper, other authors such as Kissinger make no conceptual distinction between world order and international order.

The theorist and philosopher Hedley Bull (1977) considers the concepts of international order and world order to be distinct. According to the author, the international order is the system shared by countries in which there are common rules and expectations based on the limitation of violence, respect for agreements and

respect for sovereignty. He refers to a pattern for achieving the goals of human society, built through a pattern of activity aimed at fulfilling “elementary or primary goals of the society of states”. The main goal of human society is security: security against violence and death, security of possessions, security of agreements, and security against constant and unlimited challenges. These aspirations transcend the state level and are transformed into the state rules and expectations mentioned above. On the other hand, he perceives the world order as a counterparty system based on the relationship between individuals (Bull, 1977). Despite the ambiguity of the concept of world order, an appropriate definition can be drawn from the contributions of these authors for the purposes of this article. Here, world order is thus defined as the pattern of state behaviour driven towards limiting violence, respecting agreements and sovereignty, and ultimately fulfilling the goals of human society.

Throughout history, the international system has experienced attempts to establish a multipolar structure. The 19th century, for example, was characterised by its multipolar arrangement, in which various European powers such as Germany and Britain, together with emerging Asian powers such as Japan, supported the international system and shared status with the eventual leader, the United States. Two centuries later, with the rise of Russia and China, and a flourishing India, the prospect of a world system with several major powers at the forefront becomes feasible. The real question is not only whether a multipolar international system is possible, but also whether it would be effective in maintaining world order or whether it would lead to global disorder.

In order to answer this question, it is important to carefully consider the status of the rival states that make up multipolarity. Being a leading nation in a multipolar system means being at the head of the international system, exerting influence and strength over the rest of the countries, but without being the exclusive holder of power in the system, *i.e.*, not a hegemon. The concept of hegemony began to gain ground in the field of international relations in the early 20th century when the Marxist philosopher, politician and theorist Antonio Gramsci (2023) questioned why capitalist countries in particular were the most developed in the West. The definition proposed by the author focused on social classes rather than states and referred to the strategy of a certain social group that, through persuasion and consensus, achieves the acceptance of its ideas and interests by other social groups, thus being the ideological leader among all groups. Robert Keohane (1988), professor and political scientist, focuses his definition of hegemony on nations. He establishes hegemony as the juncture at which a country with superior resources and capabilities is powerful enough to guarantee the rules governing international relations and is willing to uphold them. Taking Keohane as a reference, it is understood that the leadership of a single country makes the existence of more than one hegemon impossible and, therefore, that the multipolar system does not admit the concept of hegemony.

It is clear, therefore, that being a leading state in a multipolar system does not mean being a hegemon, it means being a superpower. The term superpower was coined by international relations lecturer and theorist William. T. R. Fox in 1944 to define the superiority of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, nations which, at the Yalta Conference, laid the

foundations for the end of the Second World War and the structure that would remain in place during the Cold War. Fox's defined these leading countries as superpowers, states with great power and great capacity to implement this power, and which are essential for maintaining peace (Calduch, 1991). Prior to that, they had all been considered great powers, a concept that seemed insufficient as their superior status amongst other great powers demanded a greater distinction (Bull, 1971).

The neorealist author Barry Buzan shares and expands the definition of a superpower. He believes that a superpower must have first-rate military capabilities, but its power is not reduced to this aspect only. It must have a wide range of capabilities that it exercises globally, such as political and negotiating influence in the international system. It must also have the economic power to back up its capabilities and to gain the support and recognition of other states for its superpower status. This primordial position in the international system requires a superpower to be an active player in securitisation and desecuritisation processes around the world, as well as a source of universal values that give shape and cohesion to a specific international system (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). According to this author, the international system refers to a group of countries where the behaviour of each country is a necessary factor determining the behaviour of other states, and where the participants in the system share a set of rules and institutions that they seek to uphold in order to safeguard common interests (Buzan, 1993).

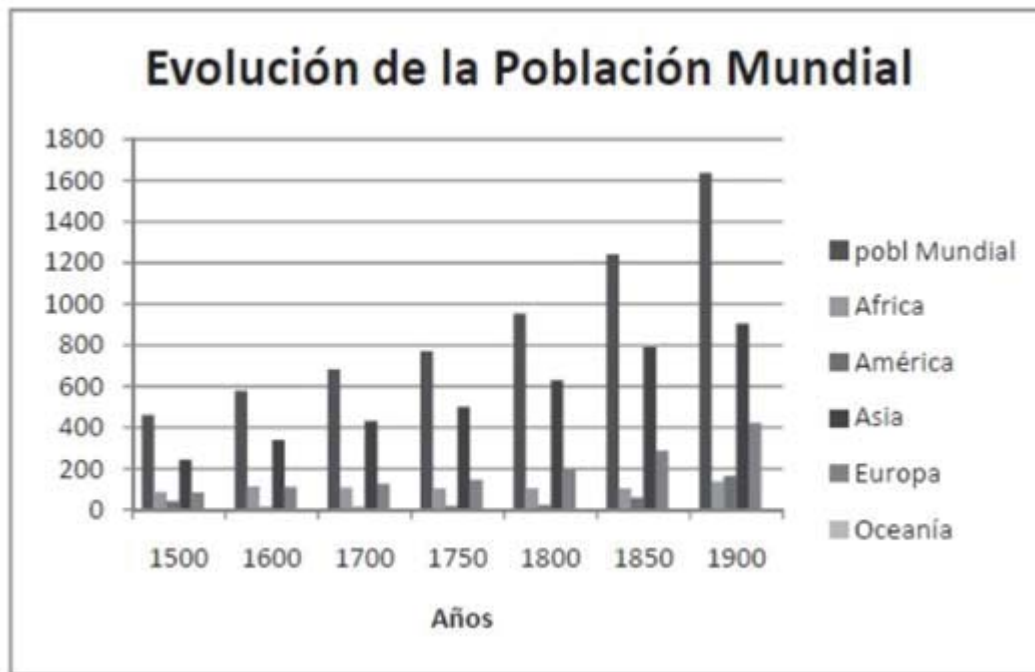
Hedley Bull (1971) also discusses superpowers, adding that they are also major players within an international system. Thus, the author endows these superpowers with a leading role in the creation of the world order or its failure.

3. The question of the coexistence of various superpowers

Already in the 19th century, following the industrial revolution, the emergence of the concept of the nation-state, and population growth (see figure 1), major social inequalities arose. On one hand, numerous jobs were replaced by new machinery, leaving a large part of society impoverished, while on the other hand, technology served to enrich a few entrepreneurs (Varela Ferrio, 2021).

At the same time, inequalities between states emerged, leaving power unbalanced and concentrated in a small number of nations. Britain, France, Germany, the United States, Russia and Japan are the few great powers that benefited from and led the international system during the second half of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century (Buzan, 2012).

The concept of the superpower is the successor to these great European powers which, thanks to technological advances and globalisation, opened up an entirely new power status unimaginable during the post-revolutionary multipolar system. Although similar, the possible multipolar system encompassing several superpowers cannot be studied as a replica of 19th century multipolarity. The key point of the matter must be the fact that the superpowers run the system.



Graph I. Demographic evolution. Alcañiz, M. (2008). Cambios demográficos en la sociedad global. *Papeles de población*, 14(57), pp. 227-255

According to the above definition, there is also no indication of the difficulty or impossibility of coexistence between superpowers, as demonstrated during the Cold War. Superpowers gain prominence just after the decline of the great powers as leaders of the international system, or possibly they inherit and foster this power. During the First and Second World Wars, especially the latter, states begin to gravitate towards the United States or the then Soviet Union. And, with them, so did the great powers, which ended up being absorbed by one of the two blocs, or poles, that fought the Cold War. Throughout this period, two superpowers coexisted in the international system, suggesting that they can remain together. The question, again, is whether such a situation is sustainable while maintaining a world order.

PAÍSES	PIB (bill. de USD corrientes en 2011)	PODER MILITAR Presupuesto en defensa (mill. de USD corrientes en 2011)	POBLACIÓN (previsión CIA para julio de 2012, en millones)	EXTENSIÓN GEOGRÁFICA (miles km ²)
EEUU	15.065	692.000	314	9.629,09
CHINA	6.988	100.000	1.343	9.598,09
INDIA	1.843	50.400	1.205	301,32
RUSIA	1.884	56.000	138	17.098,24
BRASIL	2.517	27.120	206	8.514,88
JAPÓN	5.855	70.495	127	377,91

Graph II. Superpowers. Source: author's own. Data from Wrana, J. (2024). Superpotencias y países emergentes. *Mediterráneo Económico*, 22, pp. 19-25

Barry Buzan (2003) believed that a superpower required political-military capabilities and the economic stability to sustain them. The exercise of these capabilities in the international system as a whole, however, may appear challenging, as they may come into conflict at any given moment. However, this plausible question does not limit the scope of the capabilities. A superpower is expected to be able to influence and exercise its powers within the international system, including other superpowers, regardless of the circumstances or the quality of said influence and exercise. The capabilities of each superpower may be exercised when they enter into conflict with the capabilities of other superpowers—or other actors—without any of them being automatically downgraded from their status. A clear example of this are the recent sanctions issued by the United States against Russia following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The exercise of US economic powers against Russia has not diminished the latter's superpower status.

Another requirement for superpower status according to Buzan, and one that may be examined when analysing the possibility of the coexistence of several superpowers, is the configuration and dissemination of universal values around the concept of international society. Thus, an international society exists when a number of states share common institutions or values, as well as a cultural substratum. According to Bull (2005), it is this latter characteristic that distinguishes an international society from an international system, with the former concept denoting a deeper and more complex union. These institutions are order, justice, peace, prosperity, and most notably, according to the author, the idea of a State and the understanding of sovereignty (Bull, 1971). Therefore, superpowers, as long as they are the sources of such values, of the comprehension of a state and sovereignty, are legitimised and able to maintain their superpower status. Thus, simultaneously calling several countries superpowers once again appears plausible. The dilemma, thus, lies in the possibility of the dichotomy explored in this article, namely whether a multipolar system of superpowers is compatible with the stability of the world order.

4. Superpowers in a multipolar system: scenarios for stability

The stability of multipolarity has been widely examined, and authors differ on whether it is a better or worse system for maintaining security and achieving the inherent goals of human society. As mentioned above, realists consider it to be a more orderly system, while neo-realists disagree. However, they note the possibility of multipolarity being able to provide stability to the international system, conditional on the protagonism of a hegemonic-type power among the leading states of the multipolar system, on the dominance of one of the superpowers. However, as discussed above, a multipolar system is not compatible with the existence of a hegemonic country. Nevertheless, different scenarios may be explored for a multipolar system led by superpowers. On one hand, and considering the points outlined so far, one situation worth studying would be an international system in which the leading superpowers would have the same capabilities, with no different measure of power. On the other hand, the other

possibility is that superpowers, while sharing the central characteristics for superpower status, vary in their power.

The first of the possible scenarios is the equality of all ruling superpowers, that they all have the same means, the same power. Hedley Bull (1971) argues that, if this were to happen, order could not be maintained, since, if nations were equal in power as well as in law, conflict resolution would be difficult to achieve, since the process of creating alliances or agreements would lead to perceptions of inferiority on the part of some countries involved, and, for this very reason, the claims of each state could not be brought to fruition. Equal power would make it very difficult for superpowers to cooperate to maintain world order, as alliances, agreements or rules would be almost impossible to enforce. Neither superpowers nor other countries of lower status would be able to achieve the primary objectives of sovereign states and, as a result, the ultimate objectives of human society would also not be met, thus failing to maintain the world order. This approach to the coexistence of several superpowers is developed as a utopian outcome.

Another of the two possible scenarios in a multipolar system led by superpowers is a situation where these powers are different in means, influence and other capabilities, in which a priori there is no dominant or hegemonic power. On an abstract basis, this poses the best chance to maintain the world order within a multipolarity of superpowers. To finally arrive at the analysis of whether the revealed system has the capacity to maintain a lasting world order, the implications of it being a system based on polarity and led by equally strong superpowers must be examined more closely.

The concept of polarity was applied long before it was used in the field of international relations. Geography, Geometry and Magnetism are some fields of knowledge that first studied polarity. Later, it was used in international relations metaphorically, giving the Cold War superpowers the title of poles. All of the above disciplines define poles, in a general sense, as opposing points on an axis, and socially, the term pole has also been commonly used to define opposing or contradictory principles or positions. Polarity is also described as a situation of two opposing positions. De Keersmaeker (2017) considers polarity as “the state of having two opposite or contradictory tendencies, opinions or aspects”. The author summarises the definitions based on international relations in three main points. First, it considers the poles as key elements of the social structure, regarding the great powers —or superpowers in contrast to lower status nations— as organisers of the structure in the international system. Secondly, there is the axis configuration of the poles, towards which the weaker powers are drawn and around which they revolve. And thirdly, the existence of poles leads to polarisation and hostility between these poles or positions (De Keersmaeker, 2017: 14-17).

The definitions given fall within the field of study of international relations, in a stricter sense in the bipolar system, and more metaphorically in the multipolar system. Despite their metaphorical character, they undoubtedly reveal some of the problems that arise when considering a multipolar international system. The existence of different superpowers, which would function in the system as poles, would mean

that each of them would defend or embody a certain set of ideas and principles. These principles would run counter to the ideas of other superpowers, leading to a collision of ideological positions and making it increasingly difficult to reach common ground when it comes to cooperation, conflict resolution or agreements. This theory is reflected in the United Nations, especially considering the Russia's veto power, one of the three superpowers with this power in the UN (China, Russia, and the United States). Since the organisation's birth in 1945, Russia has exercised its veto power more than 100 times (United Nations, 2024), preventing numerous resolutions from being adopted. The most recent ones concern non-proliferation and the responsible use and exploitation of outer space, and the war in Ukraine. The latter resolution condemned Russian actions and called for the withdrawal of its troops from Ukraine. This resolution was vetoed by Russia and, consequently, the war continues.

Moreover, each superpower within a multipolar system has a larger number of competitors with a similar range of capabilities, there are a variety of poles, of power centres with similar resources that compete to lead agreements, to be on the winning side of conflict resolution, or to extend their scope of influence over other situations in which competition is unavoidable (Murray & Brown, 2012). Hedley Bull (1971) argues that states direct their efforts towards achieving preponderance over other countries and, with it, the fulfilment of their ambitions, which will not necessarily bring about international or world order. The author states that "it cannot be denied that the world order that is sustained by the cooperation of the superpowers is an order in which the superpowers have a special interest", i.e. when this cooperation takes place, there is a disguised self-interest behind the actions of each state, even if it is aimed at maintaining the world order. Regardless of any hidden motivations, this cooperation may be successful in achieving order. However, it would be a superficial order, due to the aforesaid desire for preponderance and the previously discussed impasse between states when striving to reach agreements.

Alliances would also be difficult to form and, if successful, would hardly be able to maintain an orderly system. According to the paradox of alliances, developed by political scientist and lecturer Patricia A. Weitsman (2004), the more an alliance develops its internal security and achieves greater peace and cohesion internally, the more difficult it becomes to maintain it externally, as the allegedly imposing capabilities of the alliance would increase insecurity within the international system. This theory is reflected in the not-so-distant events that engulfed the European Union (EU) during the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In 2022 the EU named Ukraine as an official candidate in view of the insecurity that the incipient war was causing both for Ukraine and, potentially, for the EU's own borders. Possible Ukrainian integration, however, was received in Russia as a threat to its borders. The process of promoting UN internal security thus resulted in a complication of maintaining peace with states outside the organisation.

The difficulty faced by superpowers in cooperating and creating alliances outlined above is based, as previously explained, on the fact that superpower rivalry is inexorable,

a rivalry that arises not only because of the disparity of certain ideas and principles, but also, and more specifically, because of the security dilemma.

Therefore, while being a beacon of values is a pillar that builds a superpower, its capabilities —political-military, economic, etc.— are crucial for achieving an orderly international system. In the scenarios on superpower coexistence outlined above, it has been shown that the balance of material power is decisive when achieving order or disorder.

5. The role of a leading superpower within a multipolar system in maintaining world order

As clarified above, the primary objective of the state is to safeguard the security of its society and, to that end, to maintain its own sovereignty. This implies that all nations, including superpowers, would do what is necessary to protect this primary objective, and rival powers are aware of it. Thus, these competitors would also be ready to protect their own needs, creating a spiral of insecurity, fear of losing sovereignty and having their security violated, and thus enhancing their power and readiness to fight for their needs (Weitsman, 2004). This security dilemma leads to increased tensions between superpowers, which would then direct their efforts towards achieving preponderance over other superpowers to achieve security, and the multipolar system would become unstable and increasingly insecure.

The aforesaid dilemma may also be affected by a situation of mutual deterrence that would aggravate the spiral of insecurity into which, as stated above, the international system would eventually drift. Mutual deterrence occurs when there is a prevailing perception that the rival superpower has the capabilities and the will to retaliate directly and inflict serious damage on the civil society of the aggressor state if attacked (Bull, 1971). This deterrence might cause superpowers to avoid and reject the use of violence, or perhaps, more likely, given the ultimate intention is to maintain state sovereignty, to protect the goals of human society and, in an effort to gain preponderance among the superpowers, these nations would work to strengthen themselves and their security through empowerment.

The concept of state autism introduced by Barry Buzan (2018), is largely expressed in this circumstance. In human beings, autism causes an overwhelming response to outside stimuli and leads to challenging social interactions. Extrapolated to the state level, Buzan considers that “autism may be understood as a reaction to external stimuli much more based on internal state processes than on rational, fact-based assessment and engagement with the other states and societies that constitute international society”. This translates into increased internal concerns and a greater pursuit of self-interest, making cooperation and agreement among powers highly difficult. It especially affects the strongest powers, raising concerns about whether superpowers would be able to fight for world order if they neglected this responsibility.

These new obstacles would add force and danger to the security dilemma, further destabilising the international multipolar system and, at the same time, endangering the world order.

In this polar system, superpowers become increasingly unpredictable, so that cooperation and diplomacy become more important, but also more complicated. This deterioration in the capacity for agreement stems both from the polarisation of ideas and principles between superpowers and the increase in the number of fronts open to each superpower. In the absence of a single hegemonic power or leader, there is no single country capable of advocating compliance with international consensus or norms, no global policing role in the international system to watch over international society or human society.

By focusing excessively on their own survival and dominance in the international system, superpowers fail to pay attention to minor internal and external threats, both man-made and non-man-made —epidemics, climate change, resource scarcity, etc.— that may accrue and worsen, and eventually disrupt the goals of human society, driving the international system into global disorder.

6. Conclusions

Initially, this article questioned the possibility of a multipolar system in which several superpowers run the international system. Referring to the above analysis, the plausibility of more than two superpowers coexisting in the same system is a sound approach to elucidating the prospects of the current international system. With the expectation of a number of potential superpowers, such as the United States, Russia, China, India, Japan, or Brazil, this analysis is relevant in order to shed light on a possible future in which these superpowers become responsible for maintaining an orderly world.

The study has exposed the existence of a variety of views on the stability of different polar systems in schools of thought within international relations. Realists believe that the multipolar system is the most stable, while neorealists consider it highly unstable.

This article has attempted to shed light on this debate by examining whether this system would be capable of maintaining a lasting order or, on the contrary, would drift towards global disorder. As discussed above, world order is built on the basis of the state's security and ultimately, of human society. It therefore means that the fulfilment of this group's primary objective will determine whether an international system is orderly or not. Bearing this in mind, a multipolar system led by superpowers would entail several problems in dealing with order in the system. In this multipolarity, mutual deterrence would be accentuated, state autism would become a major feature of superpowers and, as a result, security dilemmas would emerge as a major cause of conflict and ineffective international relations. Thus, the multipolar system would eventually lead

to the breakdown of cooperation, agreements would become increasingly difficult to reach, and negotiations for conflict resolution would be futile.

This scenario would set the stage for the rise of various violent actors, boosted by rapid globalisation and technological advances, meaning that borders are slowly dissipating, information and communication are spreading easily, and weaponry is becoming increasingly accessible to individuals and organisations.

Inevitably, the authority hitherto held by states would be weakened in these circumstances and, along with it, their ability to fulfil human society's goal of preserving its bodily and moral security. It is therefore understood that a multipolar system led by superpowers over time would fail to provide the desired state security, and with it, human security. Thus, superpowers would be transformed into diminished authorities in the system, unable to maintain stability and eventually causing the international system to drift towards global disorder, thereby forcing a return to the debate on the optimal polarity for achieving world order.

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