

# The Weakening of the Unipolar Configuration

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The United States has been the only superpower since the end of the Cold War, but its global domination has been weakened since the financial crisis of 2008. The current international configuration is likely to transition from unipolarity with the US as an absolute leading actor to bipolarity with China rising in the next ten years to become a less powerful counterpart to the US.

The power disparity between China and the US is narrowing. In 2011, China's GDP was around half of the US's GDP. If China's GDP continues to grow at 8.5 percent and US GDP grows at less than 3.8 percent, the current disparity between the two powers will level out within the coming decade. Meanwhile, in the next ten years, the economic disparity between these two nations and the other major powers will continue to widen. In the next five years, only the US and China will be able to spend more than \$100 billion on defence annually, increasing the power gap between them and the others. Thus the international configuration will not be characterised by either unipolarity or multipolarity. In terms of economic power, the trend towards multipolarity is fading as the world moves towards a bipolar structure.

However, from the perspective of strategic relations, the US is still the world's only superpower. President Barack Obama replaced the unilateralism adopted by former President George W. Bush with multilateralism, and thus effectively improved US ties with traditional allies and acquired their support. In particular, the US has improved its strategic relations with France, Germany, India, and Japan in the last four years. Since 2010, US "smart diplomacy" has outmanoeuvred China's policy of non-alignment. It is obvious that China and Russia do not have enough strategic partners to challenge the unipolar configuration at this moment. Although China may be able to change the major power structure in the next ten years, it will be unable to shift the world from unipolarity to bipolarity unless it forms a formal alliance with Russia.

## THE NORMALISATION OF INTERVENTION DIPLOMACY

Many developing countries are now adopting the norm of intervention. For example, in December 2011, leaders from 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean formally established the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States as the new leading regional bloc. They agreed the Caracas Declaration, which commits all signatories to intervene in other member states in case of regime change through a military coup. In March 2011, the 22-member Arab League called on Western powers to establish a "no-fly" zone in Libya.

In response to the Syrian domestic military conflicts, the Arab League also suspended Syria's membership in the body and imposed economic sanctions on it in December 2011. China voted yes to the United Nations Security Council resolution imposing sanctions and establishing the "no-fly" zone in Libya. The world may see a competition between principles of intervention and non-intervention in the near future. The principle of intervention will have a chance to emerge as the new international norm while the non-intervention principle persists as the dominant

norm.

More than 2,600 years ago, in China, the norm of intervention was established by the Kui-Qiu Alliance. Members of this alliance were forbidden to conduct a number of illegitimate activities: changing the line of succession, demoting a wife to a concubine, and allowing women to participate in politics. Such interference was the international norm for thousands of years. In 1647, the Treaty of Westphalia developed the concept of sovereignty, which subsequently became the norm. The modern international norm of non-interference was formally legitimised by the UN Charter in 1945 and consolidated by the practice of the UN members.

During the process of moving towards a bipolar structure, it is possible to see the weakening of the principle of non-interference. As the role of global power declines, regional powers will seek regional domination and will thus exert their influence on the domestic politics of other regional states. In the foreseeable future, the principles of interference and non-interference will co-exist. Since the establishment of the UN, the norms of national unity and national self-determination have co-existed and both of them have guided the foreign policy of nation states.

#### EMPTY TALK FROM INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The ability of international organisations to steer world affairs is waning. The rules of international organisations were designed according to their members' capabilities after World War II. As time passed, the capabilities of members became very different from the time when they were established. Although some members' capabilities diminished, they remain the primary decision-makers and determined the foundational principles of these organisations. For example, the permanent members of the UN Security Council have not changed. Similarly, the president of the World Bank is traditionally an American and the managing director of the International Monetary Fund is traditionally a European.

As the global power structure shifts towards a bipolar configuration, these international organisations will become less effective in dealing with international conflicts. It is more difficult for two superpowers to agree with each other on a solution to international conflicts than for a single superpower to dominate the policymaking in international organisations. During the Cold War, permanent members of the UN Security Council exercised their vetoes more frequently than after the end of the Cold War. The power transition from unipolarity to bipolarity could generate more frequent vetoes in the UN Security Council than in the last two decades.

When faced with a crisis, international organisations will more often talk about problems than solve them. There is a growing demand for the establishment of new international institutions that can produce practical solutions to resolve global crises. For example, when the G8 failed to resolve global economic issues, the G20 was founded. Faced with difficulties in establishing an East Asian Economic Caucus, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was established. Faced with impedance from APEC, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and other Asia-Pacific countries established the 10+1, then the 10+3, and then the 10+8.

Along with the increase in the number of international institutions, the number of international

summits has increased. The declarations agreed at these summit conferences are becoming ever longer and more convoluted. However, after a consensus is reached, no further action is taken to implement the consensus or to promote co-operation. International organisations are thus progressing towards issuing opinions rather than solving practical problems.

#### A GROWING DEMAND FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS

The principles of fairness and freedom are in direct competition. After the Cold War, liberalism became the mainstream school of political thought internationally. Recently, however, liberalism's dominant position has been challenged by the principle of fairness. After the EU and the US lost their trade advantage, they began to promote fair trade, while ignoring the superiority of the free trade that they had advocated for several decades. In the environmental realm, confronted with the challenge of reducing carbon emissions, newly emerging economies proposed common but differentiated responsibilities for emission reductions. This approach embraces the principle of fair reduction such that developed countries should bear a larger share of the responsibility.

The principle of fair reduction is based on the concept of historic responsibility. Developed countries finished industrialising first. Thus, over the last 60 years, the developed countries, which represent 17 percent of the world's population, have been responsible for 70 percent of carbon emissions. The developed countries should adjust for this disparity accordingly. In contrast, developing countries, which represent 83 percent of the world's population, have contributed only 30 percent of total carbon emissions over the past 60 years. It is therefore fair to give developing countries more leeway to produce carbon emissions. Citing the principle of freedom, fairness in trade and carbon emissions is promoted. However, true fairness would be reflected in a differentiated responsibility system.

The demand for fairness in the international arena has started to challenge the paradigm that economic growth is the top priority. The world's production capacity has far exceeded demand, resulting in a global surplus. However, due to inequality in distribution, problems of poverty and hunger still persist. Globalisation has spurred development but at the same time exacerbated the polarisation between the haves and the have-nots. This is why people in both developed and developing countries are now demanding social justice more than economic development.

As living standards rise, people have become increasingly intolerant of social injustice. The Arab Spring, the Occupy movements, the European protests against austerity plans, and the Russian protests against electoral fraud are all indications that social priorities are shifting from economic development to social justice. The international trend towards bipolarity is weakening the US's international dominance as well as the traditional US idea of free competition, which is challenged by calls for social justice and fairness.

#### CONTINUOUS REFORM

The evolution of the international system sometimes proceeds slowly with sudden bursts of change. The international system is made up of actors, configuration, and norms. Changes of any of these elements may affect the entire system. The current trend of bipolarisation, the emerging

norm of interference, and ineffective international agencies are indicators of changes in the international system. The increasing demand for fairness and social justice could be a major social force driving this shift.

In order to protect its national interests, China's diplomatic principles need also to keep pace with the changing times. The Book of Songs says that "although the Zhou Dynasty remains the same country, it has been changing continuously", meaning that the Zhou Dynasty can continue for hundreds of years because it keeps continuous reform. The Book of Rites says that "if you want to see something new every day, you must reform every day". China needs to embrace these principles and ensure that reform does not stop. If we believe that China's economic achievements over the past 30 years are the result of continuous policy reform, the same principles must also be applied to China's diplomacy.