

Chapter 2

Political Flux in a Nonpolar World

A Nonpolar World?

The gradual emergence of a multipolar world is likely to continue in the decade ahead. The age of Cold War bipolarity has ended even though serious tensions among the major powers remain. The myth of unipolarity was derived through a process of subtraction while the world succumbed to the sway of multiplication, which gave rise to aspiring and new centers of power. But the advent of a functioning multipolar world in all probability will take years to realize.

Today, the world is more nonpolar than multipolar, with no one power capable of mobilizing others around its agenda. The world also remains nonpolar in that most powers are reluctant to assume the role of global leader or security guarantor outside their borders. Even internationalist Europe is constrained by its lack of political consensus and its limited capacity to act decisively. Within these centers of power the general predilection, at least by default, is assigning the global security role to the United States, albeit in a fashion that suits their common norms and interests.

While political power has fragmented, emerging or resurgent powers—China, Russia, India, and Brazil—do not possess the determination or capacity to take on the mantle of global leadership. Even though America is the strongest military power in the world, military power alone cannot be used outside of a political context.

When considering the global, regional, and local political environment, military strength can become as much a liability as an asset. Moreover, the Nation does not have the capabilities to act as the principal security guarantor, at least on the level seen in past decades. Among other realities, the post–World War II security system is on its last legs, unable to keep astride of traditional threats as well as emerging threats of the 21st century.

While America will remain the single most important actor, especially militarily, its relative power has declined together with its political and moral influence. Thus, even though the Nation is

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unmatched in terms of military power projection, it has had difficulty translating its power into influence. The perception that the United States may contribute more to instability than to efforts to resolve it has eroded its claim on legitimacy and raised the transactional cost of action.

Some may regard U.S. military preponderance as inhibiting, but the fact is that America spends about 50 percent more on defense than China, Japan,

India, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom combined. The global economic slowdown and looming world recession, however, may well start to reduce this asymmetry, but it is unlikely to change rapidly. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine any other nation or group of nations providing nearly the number of boots on the ground that the United States can mobilize in conflict and peacekeeping zones. No other country has provided even 10 percent of the deployed forces that America has in recent years. The next most significant troop contributor, the United Kingdom, labors under severe pressures and is hard pressed to honor its commitment in Afghanistan. Even if Europe contributes larger expeditionary forces, their impact will be qualitative and not quantitative. While China and other Asian powers maintain large armed forces, they are unlikely to commit large numbers of them far afield.

Europe is the obvious alternative center of power, with leaders in Paris, London, and Berlin proposing new ideas and in some cases making bold statements on the role that their nations, individually and as part of the European Union, can play in addressing traditional and nontraditional security challenges. France appears to be working in concert with rather than competing against U.S. power, and Britain remains focused on the long haul in Afghanistan even while it pursues a vital role in a global agenda centered on economics, energy, the environment, trade, and development. For all the concern expressed in recent years over the fact that Europe lacks a serious capability to intervene militarily outside its borders, the countries of Europe manage to deploy almost half the number of troops abroad as the United States, and with less than half the defense spending. Although European nations are well positioned to assume some of the security burdens that America is currently shouldering, the political will and popular consensus lag behind.

The resurgence of Russia has been focused on presenting a counter to American leadership, in particular through military posturing and leveraging energy supplies to reclaim authority in the so-called near abroad. While the conduct of Moscow can be explained, its willingness to resolve international security challenges outside its immediate sphere of influence is questionable given its ambivalence toward joining with Europe, the United States, and to a certain extent even China in cooperating on critical issues such as the disputed Iranian nuclear program. Defining a realistic, limited strategic partnership with Russia may prove to be as difficult as it is important. Some consider the ascent of China as a global power to be an alternative to American influence in the world. Even if such a transfer occurred, and assuming that China embraced the values of the Enlightenment, Beijing definitely is not about to seek, accept, or be given chief responsibility for global security leadership in the foreseeable future. China's decision to help combat piracy by sending ships to the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea is a potential

barometer of its willingness to contribute more to international security, as well as of the international community's willingness to make room for that role. As China's stake in the global economy has grown, so has its awareness that it has a common stake in protecting sea lines of communication that are vital for trade and energy supplies. But fathoming China's long-range intentions is difficult, and the direction of the People's Liberation Army may or may not be on the same trajectory as a cautious Communist Party or a more mercurial Chinese society. The meteoric rise of China since Deng Xiaoping opened the country in 1978 to impressive economic growth and created a challenging range of domestic environmental, social, and political concerns. The downturn in the global economy has deeply influenced the views of the Chinese leadership, which is hopeful but no longer supremely confident that tapping into huge cash reserves and pushing more competitive exports will circumvent systemic trouble.

Other emerging power centers such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, Indonesia, and even Iran are flexing their muscles, but none is able to secure peace within its respective region on its own, and in the case of Iran, peace may not be the objective that some leaders have in mind—all of which underscores that the United States remains unique in its military prowess. But even though there is still no alternative to America as the leading enforcer of the world order, it would be risky to assume that it will take on international security missions simply because others will not or cannot. The United States has too many challenges to cope with and too few resources to apply to them. Redefining complex problems,

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exercising strategic restraint, mobilizing new power centers, and employing more leverage strategies will be crucial if the United States is to help balance its ambitious objectives with more constricted means. In the decade ahead and most likely beyond, the United States will be the dominant military power on the international stage. But dominance is not what it used to be; the ability of military power to address modern security challenges is open to debate, and America has had difficulties in converting preponderance into influence. The change in Presidential administrations might turn the tide with regard to American legitimacy, but whether such a reversal of fortunes can be held together by a limited political consensus around the world remains to be seen. To the extent that the failure of the United States to achieve its security objectives has been the result of a breach of moral legitimacy among its closest allies, especially in Europe, there is an opportunity to mobilize international support around a common goal. As Sir Michael Howard opined:

American power is indispensable for the preservation of global order, and as such it must be recognized, accommodated, and where possible supported. But if it

is to be effective, it needs to be seen and legitimized as such by the international community. If it is perceived rather as an instrument serving a unilateral conception of national security that amounts to a claim to world domination . . . that is unlikely to happen.

The evolving relationship among the major powers, the role of power centers and institutions in grappling with various traditional and global issues, the ability of nation-states to be effective political actors, shifting political norms, and the impact of religion and transnational forces are all salient issues that national security decisionmakers and military planners will be called upon to confront in the future. Some of the major questions that arise from a world in political flux are the following: how an expanding concept of responsible sovereignty may be useful in fashioning greater multilateral cooperation to tackle transnational challenges; the continuing relevance of shifting international norms; the evolving role of the nation-state and nationalism; the relationship between politics and religion, particularly Islam; and the complex political challenge posed by the fundamental problem of food security. The contributions that follow highlight these and other key issues.