

Opinion – Is Multipolarity Destined to Destabilize the World?

Written by Andrew Latham and Raymond Yu

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ANDREW LATHAM AND RAYMOND YU, DEC 12 2024

Concerns about the shifting global order have grown as we transition from a unipolar world, dominated by the United States since the end of the Cold War, to a more fragmented, multipolar landscape. The rise of new powers—China, India, Turkey, and Iran among them—has ushered in what many see as an era of multipolarity. For some, this raises hopes for a more balanced international system, while others fear multipolarity will unleash instability, as competing interests collide without a single guiding hand. The question isn't just whether multipolarity is inevitable; it's whether it's inherently destabilizing. The history of multipolar systems is mixed at best, often marked by conflict and competition. However, the historical precedent of the "Concert of Europe" offers an intriguing model for managing today's emerging multipolarity through a balance of power, cooperation, and, critically, restraint. A modern concert of powers could help the world's leading states coexist without the endless interventionism that risks turning multipolarity into a dangerous free-for-all.

To understand today's instability, it's worth reflecting on the unique conditions that arose after the Cold War, when the U.S. became the world's unrivaled superpower. America's unipolar moment spread liberal democratic values and market capitalism across the globe, fueled by the optimism of a new world order. But while the West celebrated the "end of history," these values met resistance in many parts of the world. Efforts to universalize Western norms—from open markets to democratic governance—often clashed with traditional or authoritarian structures, sparking pushback from states that saw these changes as incompatible with their own interests.

This cultural wave of globalization produced complex reactions. In developing countries, some embraced Western symbols of success, while others saw them as foreign impositions. Nationalist movements gained traction, often reacting to a sense that global integration disproportionately benefited elites while leaving others behind. The internet intensified these divides, empowering leaders to rally their populations around nationalist or anti-Western narratives. This has fractured the global landscape, pushing the world closer to a multipolar configuration. The problem, as history suggests, is that multipolarity often invites instability. When multiple powers jockey for position without a single dominant leader, rivalries deepen, alliances form, and miscalculations become costly. The tangled alliances that led to World War I are a classic example. A complex web of bilateral commitments among powers like Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, France, and Britain created a fragile system where a single incident—the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand—ignited a global war. Today, similar bilateral arrangements are emerging as states like China and Russia favor selective, strategic partnerships over universal alliances, adding to the risks.

Yet, history also provides a model for managing multipolarity without falling into the trap of inevitable conflict: the Concert of Europe. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the great powers of Europe established a framework for balancing power and resolving disputes, aiming to prevent any single power from dominating. For nearly a century, the Concert of Europe preserved a relative peace on the continent, providing a forum where states negotiated interests and resolved conflicts without resorting to war. The concert was not perfect—ultimately, it unraveled—but it shows that multipolarity can be managed if powers commit to cooperation, balance, and mutual respect. This concept of a "concert of powers" is well-suited to today's world, with its diffusion of power centers and complex rivalries. A modern concert of powers, rooted in restraint, could offer a pragmatic framework for multipolar stability. Rather than relying on global institutions or ideological crusades, it would emphasize cooperation among major

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powers, encouraging states to respect each other's spheres of influence and avoid unilateral interventions. In this model, restraint would become a guiding principle, limiting conflicts and encouraging diplomatic solutions.

One of the key challenges of multipolarity is that international institutions often struggle to keep pace with fragmented power structures. The United Nations and the European Union were designed for a world of shared commitments, yet as powers prioritize their national interests, these institutions become less effective. For example, during the Syrian Civil War, competing agendas among states sidelined multilateral solutions, and within the EU, countries like Hungary and Germany have diverged from collective policy to protect their national interests. A concert of powers would recognize these limitations, providing a forum where the most influential states negotiate directly, balancing interests without expecting all actors to adhere to a universal standard.

Multipolarity also fosters a new kind of cultural competition, as rising powers assert their own values and priorities. China's actions in the South China Sea, for example, are rooted in a drive to assert regional dominance, while Turkey's military actions against Kurdish groups showcase how national interests often override broader stability. In a concert of powers framework, restraint would mean that each power respects the core interests of the others, avoiding policies that provoke antagonism. A multipolar system without restraint risks escalating these cultural and territorial conflicts, but a concert approach could mitigate such dangers by emphasizing pragmatic boundaries. Another destabilizing factor in multipolarity is the tendency of states to legitimize their rule by framing external powers as threats. Turkey's balancing between NATO and BRICS, for example, strengthens its regional influence while casting Western alliances in a skeptical light. China's rhetoric about sovereignty in Taiwan and the South China Sea consolidates nationalist support by framing foreign powers as existential threats. A concert of powers approach, however, would encourage transparency and dialogue among the leading states, reducing the need for adversarial posturing and helping to maintain stability.

Historically, multipolarity has often led to large-scale conflicts, but a concert of powers offers a way to break this cycle. By fostering direct communication and cooperative problem-solving among the world's leading states, a concert could prevent rivalries from spiraling out of control. The aim would not be to avoid competition altogether—competition is inevitable in international relations—but to manage it without allowing tensions to escalate into open conflict. Restraint, in this context, involves limiting intervention to cases of clear national interest, rather than reacting reflexively to every global crisis. In a concert, major powers could focus on supporting regional stability without encroaching on each other's spheres of influence. This would require a fundamental shift away from the global policing reflex that has characterized much of the post-Cold War era, toward a more measured, regionally focused strategy.

A modern concert of powers would also encourage strategic flexibility in alliances. Rather than locking themselves into rigid commitments, states could form partnerships that allow room for compromise and de-escalation. China's foreign policy provides an example of how this might look; it engages with states on a case-by-case basis, maintaining relationships without binding itself to every dispute. In a multipolar age, such flexibility prevents the formation of hostile blocs and gives powers the breathing room to manage tensions.

Multipolarity, balanced by a concert of powers and a commitment to restraint, could even create new avenues for cooperation. The idea that one state must decline for another to rise is outdated; multipolarity suggests that multiple powers can coexist and advance concurrently. Studies in game theory and international relations suggest that multipolar systems can foster cooperation when states recognize mutual interests. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the risks and the opportunities of interdependence. By coordinating to tackle shared challenges like global health crises or climate change, a concert of powers could transform multipolarity into a stabilizing force, rather than a catalyst for competition.

Multipolarity poses real risks, but it also offers a chance to build a more balanced international system. The alternative—an escalating cycle of rivalry and intervention—will likely lead us back to the instability that characterized previous multipolar eras. With the right approach, multipolarity could evolve into an era of constructive engagement, where powers balance their ambitions with a sense of responsibility. At this critical juncture, the world's major players face a choice: will they let multipolarity descend into chaos, or will they revive the spirit of the Concert of Europe,

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fostering a concert of powers grounded in restraint and mutual respect? In a multipolar age, the measure of a great power may lie not in its ability to dominate, but in its willingness to exercise restraint.

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