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From Unipolarity to Bipolarity: Systemic Transformation and the Emergence of Post-Unipolar International Politics

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Abstract: With the decline of U.S. unipolarity and the rise of Sino-American bipolarity, this article explores a conceptualization of systemic transformation in international politics and its implications for outcomes in state behaviors during the transition. Neorealist theory, which emphasizes the impact of relative power redistribution among great powers, provides a valuable framework for understanding these changes. While often criticized for being overly static and limited in scope, the theory contains a subtle theory of change that can be leveraged to offer new insights into the ongoing transformation of the international system. The article develops four propositions from neorealist theory: disruptions in system-wide patterns of interstate rivalry and conflict, general realignment, increased occurrences of state “births and deaths,” and waves of political regime changes, including de-democratization in the present case of emerging Sino-American bipolarity. These propositions are applied to the current transition, with preliminary evidence suggesting that neorealism can serve as a powerful analytical lens to further our understanding of the transformation toward a new bipolar world.

Keywords: international polarity, armed conflict, alignment, state formation, democratization

Introduction

Throughout the 2010s, it was hotly debated whether and when the American-led rules-based world order had an expiration date.¹ However, it is now evident that the U.S. order is in crisis (Mearsheimer 2019; Ikenberry 2020; Sakwa 2023). This was made particularly clear by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, in gross violation of international law and breaching nearly thirty years of interstate peace in Europe. In addition, the hyperglobalization of the 1990s and 2000s is reversing, while the spread of liberal democratic norms,

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1 For arguments that the unipolar world would come to an end sooner rather than later, see e.g. Waltz (1993, 2000), Layne (2012, 2018, 2020), Mearsheimer (2010, 2014, 2019). For the contrary view see esp. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 2016a, 2016b, 2023) and Beckley (2012, 2018b).

which had strong momentum in the 1990s, is rolling backward.² Importantly, the crisis in the U.S.-led world order has been accompanied by the erosion of the unipolar international position of the United States, a mainstay of the post-Cold War era. Although still hotly debated among scholars, the international system is most likely undergoing a transformation to a structure defined by several competing great powers and, most likely, to a bipolar system with China and the U.S. as roughly equal poles.

Periods of systemic transformation following changed configurations of great powers have typically been accompanied by upheaval, crisis, and deep uncertainty (cf. Gilpin 1981; Kennedy 1988). It raises the key question of what international outcomes we can expect from this process and how to explain them. Although academic interest in grand theory has waned among international relations scholars (cf. Lake 2013), to understand, explain, and prepare for the challenges ahead, we must, arguably, return to general theories of international politics because as we move into uncharted waters, theories of how the international system responds to changing antecedent conditions are our best guides to an unknown future (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 436–37). A useful theory is also of practical importance because it allows expectations to be formed about likely outcomes of state behaviors, helping policymakers assess, prepare for, and hopefully better manage future challenges.

While leading scholars in the liberal tradition of international relations have generally been optimistic about the long-term viability of the U.S.-led liberal, rules-based order (e.g., Fukuyama 1992; Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Ikenberry 2001),³ scholars in the neo-realist theory (cf. Waltz 1979) have, in contrast, consistently argued that the liberal world order rested on the hard foundations of a unipolar distribution of power favoring the United States.⁴ They have insisted that new great powers would eventually emerge and push back to redress the unipolar imbalance and, by implication, undermine U.S. liberal hegemony (cf. Waltz 1993, 2000; Layne 1993, 2012, 2018; Mearsheimer 2001, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2019).⁵ With the accelerating crisis of the U.S. world order as major states such as China and Russia have begun to seriously challenge U.S. dominance, neorealist theory thus presents itself as a perspective with enduring relevance.

Yet, as a purely systemic approach that highlights general trends in state behaviors with varying “market” structures given specific numbers of system-dominant great powers,

2 See the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), Freedom House (2023), and V-Dem (2024). On the surging waves of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s, see Huntington (1993) and Doorenspleet (2000, 2005).

3 A key proponent of the liberal world order, Ikenberry in his later work has taken a more nuanced view that accounts for emerging geopolitical realities and internal weaknesses within the liberal order e.g., Ikenberry (2020, 2024).

4 Neorealism is often considered the primary theoretical alternative to liberalism and the core tenet of the broader perspective of structural realism.

5 Specific neorealist models of unipolarity have been developed to extend Waltz’s original formulation, see e.g., Birthe Hansen (Hansen 2000, 2011) and Monteiro (2014).

skeptics have argued that neorealism is too general, static, and limited in scope to be of much utility (see e.g., Schweller 2003; Wivel 2005; Wohlforth 2011; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Thus, although scholars in neorealism may have correctly predicted the return of great power politics and, with it, the demise of the liberal U.S. order, it may nevertheless be of little use in explaining the post-unipolar transformation.⁶ On the contrary, I find merits in revisiting neorealist theory in light of the ongoing post-unipolar transformation. Arguably, neorealism inheres a subtle theory of international change which, added a specific conceptualization of systemic transformation, may be leveraged to reveal new insights about the implications of significant shifts in the configurations of the great powers.

I outline my argument in two steps. In the first section, I briefly introduce the neorealist model, focusing on its core concept of international structure or polarity. Although scholars disagree on the current polarity of the international system, assessments based on aggregate relative major power capabilities and historical great power thresholds indicate that unipolarity has been replaced by emerging Sino-American bipolarity, signaling the onset of a systemic transformation. Next, I present a neorealist framework for systemic transformation and derive four key propositions about international outcomes in aggregate state behaviors likely under the current shift in great power configuration. These include 1) disrupted system-wide patterns of interstate rivalry and conflict, 2) general realignment, 3) increased frequencies of state “births and deaths,” and 4) a wave of political regime change with de-democratization in the present case. I apply this framework to the ongoing transformation, and although my goal is primarily theoretical, I discuss the preliminary evidence.

Neorealist Theory and the Shift From Unipolarity

The neorealist model views international politics as a fiercely competitive arena due to the lack of a reliable international authority able to enforce global rules and provide states with protection. Because of this anarchic organization among states, they must take care of themselves to ensure their survival and other important interests, and they are free to use whatever means are at their disposal, including force if deemed necessary (Waltz 1979, 107; Mearsheimer 2001, 30–33). Uncertainty about other states’ intentions exacerbates this self-help predicament since states cannot predict with certainty whether today’s benign neighbor will become tomorrow’s dangerous aggressor (Rosato 2015, 2021). Given this bleak portrayal of international politics as an insecure and perilous environment, the neorealist analysis leads to the expectation that states will care deeply about their relative power because they ultimately must depend on themselves. To improve their chances of survival, states are therefore expected to be motivated to at a minimum keep pace

6 Waltzian neorealist theory is the most widely debated theory in the field of international relations. Key critical statements are Keohane (1986); Wendt (1992); Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993); Schroeder (1994); Schweller (1996); May, Rosecrance, and Steiner (2010). For Waltz’s replies, see Waltz (1986, 1996, 1997, 2003).

with their competitors in relative strength including imitating key practices of the leading states, mobilizing their resources, and uniting with others to counterbalance stronger states that can threaten them (Waltz 1979, chap. 6). They are equally motivated to try to beat the competition and seek to gain an edge in security by maximizing their relative power when opportune (Mearsheimer 2001, chap. 2).⁷ Given persistent anarchy, this tug-of-war in the ever-present shadow of the possible use of force leads to the expectation of perennial security competition among states, limiting while not eliminating their willingness to cooperate (Grieco 1990).

Neorealism, however, qualifies the expectation of intense security competition due to the distribution of power among system-dominant great powers – i.e., by the system's structural polarity. For example, neorealist theory views the pre-1945 era as exceptionally unstable and dangerous due to its multipolar power structure. With many great powers competing for advantage, the coherence and strength of balancing coalitions are difficult to assess in a fluid multipolar context ripe with collective action problems that encourage buck-passing and undermine effective balancing. Thus, the complexity of multipolarity is believed to seriously increase the risks of miscalculation and escalation to great power war (Waltz 1979, chap. 8; Mearsheimer 2001, chap. 9).⁸ In contrast, risks of great power war in bipolar systems, such as during the U.S.–Soviet Cold War, are believed to be more manageable. In bipolarity, two great powers, without depending on allies, can more accurately assess the balance of power and determine the red lines of the other. The risk of miscalculation, therefore, poses less danger (Waltz 1979, chap. 8). Finally, the dangers of great power war diminish entirely in unipolarity. Thus, during the unipolar moment after the Cold War, no other state could seriously challenge the United States, giving it abundant security and freedom of action in world affairs (Wohlforth 1999; Hansen 2000, 2011; Monteiro 2014).

Given neorealism's emphasis on polarity in explaining general outcomes in aggregate state behaviors, a key question concerns the polarity of the current international system. Is the system still unipolar with the U.S. towering above everybody else? Or has the system shifted to multipolarity, or as I contend, to bipolarity? Despite the centrality of this issue, scholars disagree on the current system structure. One view emphasizing actual

7 I view Mearsheimer (2001, 2014) as refining Waltz's original formulation of neorealism rather than defining a distinct "offensive neorealist" theory by showing that the anarchic international structure equally encourages states to pursue "relative gains" when opportune as the flip side of Waltz's emphasis on balancing dynamics. Both theorists agree that states are encouraged to maximize their relative security in anarchy and seek to maintain their relative positions as a minimum. They also agree that anarchy encourages states to pursue relative gains vis-à-vis their rivals when opportunities arise. Waltz, however, believes such opportunities rarely arise due to strong system-induced incentives for balancing, while Mearsheimer emphasizes that buck-passing tends to prevail among egoistic security maximizers, especially in multipolarity, allowing more room and opportunity for the pursuit of relative gains. Nevertheless, both agree that a run for hegemony is fraught with dangers of counter-hegemonic backlash and seldom succeeds (see Toft 2005).

8 Analyzing pre-1914 European great power alliance politics, Glenn Snyder (1997) demonstrates the case.

military capabilities holds that multipolarity has replaced unipolarity with China and Russia joining as great powers (Mearsheimer 2019, 2023; Motin 2024). Others, taking a more broad-based view on aggregate relative capabilities to qualify as great powers, contend that unipolarity has been replaced by Sino-American bipolarity (see e.g. Maher 2018; Tunsjø 2018; Kupchan 2021; Lind 2024). A third view emphasizes power parity for peer competition and maintains that American unipolarity persists (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016a, 2023; Beckley 2018b; Brands and Beckley 2022). The disagreement largely reflects varying criteria for defining great powers and, by extension, the measurement of states' relative capabilities, an unresolved question that has plagued the discipline of international relations for decades (Beckley 2018a).⁹ Jennifer Lind (2024), however, proposes a promising solution to reconcile divergent views on current polarity. Instead of deductively specifying a great power definition or method of aggregate capability measurement, she offers an alternative inductive approach to determining great power status. Lind begins with the surprisingly broad consensus among scholars about who the historical great powers were, contrasting with disagreement about the current configuration (see e.g., Kennedy 1988). Moreover, she observes that scholars generally agree that great powers should excel in both military and economic resources relative to the leading state, despite disagreement about factors, weighting, and optimal measurement. Accordingly, she analyzes the military and economic capabilities of historical powers relative to the leading great powers. This method allows the establishment of indicators and thresholds that reliably distinguish great powers from non-great powers and align with the historical consensus. Lind also shows that weaker great powers have engaged in intense security competition without needing parity in capabilities with the leading power.

Based on this approach, Lind (2024, 43–44) concludes that the United States and China now stand alone as great powers. At 133 percent of the U.S. in terms of total GDP (in purchasing power parity) and 42 percent of the U.S. level in per capita adjusted terms, China well exceeds the historical normal range in economic capability. Moreover, it is clearly within the normal range in military spending at a third of U.S. expenditures and ahead of the U.S. in military personnel. Russia straddles the fence, but at only a fifth of U.S. GDP (nine percent in adjusted GDP), and 8.8 percent of the U.S. level in military spending, despite equaling the U.S. in military manpower, Russia ultimately does not reach the normal great power range across all economic and military indicators. Other major powers like India, Japan, and Germany also fall short of the threshold on military capability (see Annex 1).

To be sure, Lind's suggested method is not a silver bullet to resolve the polarity debate. It struggles to measure and set thresholds in non-material yet crucial capabilities such as technological prowess or political competence. However, using key quantifiable economic and military power parameters, which most structural realists consider central to

9 For a range of views on how great power and polarity should be determined, see, e.g., Waltz (1979, 131), Schweller (1998, Annex), Mearsheimer (2001, chaps. 3–4), Brooks and Wohlforth (2016a), Beckley (2018a).

great power status, her approach to establishing a reliable great power threshold indicates that only the U.S. and China currently qualify. Moreover, Lind's conclusions align with Tunsjø's (2018, chaps. 3–4) in-depth analysis of contemporary great power capabilities. Tunsjø finds that China has moved much closer to the U.S. in relative capabilities than the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. But he also argues that any definition of polarity must also consider the gap between the top and the next powers. Like Lind, he finds this gap so vast that only China can currently qualify as a great power, along with the U.S.

The turn to bipolarity does not mean that other major powers do not have clout.¹⁰ Especially with its attack on Ukraine in 2022, Russia has been able to apply military force to change the post-Cold War European status quo. However, while this aggression may obscure power realities, the war also exposes Russian limitations. Despite Ukraine's pre-war economy and military spending being only about one-tenth of Russia's, Moscow has struggled to achieve a decisive victory in a prolonged war of attrition, an ultimate test of national power.¹¹ This indicates that Russia is likely unable "to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world," which is Mearsheimer's definition of great powers (cf. Mearsheimer 2001, 5). In short, despite scholarly disagreement, the international system has likely shifted from unipolarity to bipolarity during the late 2010s. Accordingly, what international patterns and outcomes can we expect during the post-unipolar transition, and why? In the subsequent section, I propose some theoretical answers rooted in neorealism.

Systemic Transformation Toward Sino-American Bipolarity

As noted in the previous section, neorealism is a systemic theory. It generates expectations of broad, predictable ranges in the outcomes of aggregate state behaviors, such as a tendency for anti-hegemonic balances to form and recur, and how security competition varies with different international structures. Importantly, neorealism is not a theory of specific state responses to their external environment (Waltz 1996). Moreover, as Schweller (2003, 313) has noted, because "neorealism's causal variable (polarity) has changed only twice ... this severely limits its applicability to historical cases." This limited relevance to foreign policy decisions and the rarity of shifts in the independent variable, polarity, has led to critiques, as mentioned in the introduction, that neorealist theory is simply too abstract, general, static, and limited in scope to be useful in explaining pressing questions of day-to-day international affairs.

10 Lind notes that Germany and Japan would breach the great power threshold if they mobilize their military potential (Lind 2024, 50).

11 Ukraine has received approximately EUR 250 billion in economic and military aid from Western donors – roughly 2.5 times its prewar GDP. Despite this aid being crucial for Ukraine's continued resistance, it has not fundamentally altered the military balance. For estimates of Western aid see the Kiehl Institute, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

On the contrary, I find it helpful to revisit neorealism in light of the ongoing systemic transformation for two main reasons. First, a systemic approach is useful when the question, as here, is about broad-based, system-wide disruption and adjustments in aggregate state behaviors with the deepening crisis of the receding U.S. world order and the emergence of a new Sino-American order. A systemic approach accounts for changes in external pressures during systemic transformations that states face and must deal with, and how these structural incentives encourage new international outcomes from state interactions. Second, neorealist theory is less static than has been claimed. Although not an everyday occurrence, polarity shifts and subsequent systemic transformations have taken place four times since 1900: after both World Wars, after the Cold War, and another transformation is arguably yet again ongoing. Moreover, while systemic transformations occur once in decades, they are momentous events in international politics, and they cast long shadows over the following decades. In short, neorealism may provide an important overall analytical first cut to understand adjustments to a changing world order.

However, the theory has lacked a specific conceptualization of systemic transformation. Its proponents have primarily, as critics note, been focused on exploring the impact of relatively fixed states of international polarities.¹² Nevertheless, I contend that neorealism holds promise in shedding light on important aspects of international change as it inheres a subtle theory of systemic transformation through its attention to how shifts in great power reconfigurations alter the security conditions across the international system from the top down (Toft 2022). As is clear, neorealists and structural realists, more generally, view shifts in polarity as momentous events with far-reaching consequences (Gilpin 1981, 43). As Birthe Hansen (2000, 12–14) notes, shifts in great power configuration undermine and destabilize the security arrangements of all states, as these arrangements are fundamentally shaped by the existing international structure. Therefore, systemic transformations are expected to revolutionize entrenched international patterns – what Gilpin termed “interaction change,” including interstate rivalries and patterns of conflict, alignments, distribution and control of territory, and political regime change (Gilpin 1981, 43–44).

However, while systemic transformations are watershed moments, the impact of changed systemic incentives and pressures seldom materializes overnight but trickles through gradually, typically over roughly a decade. As Hansen (2000, 12–13) suggests, systemic transformation can be understood as an incremental, stepwise process beginning with the initial breakdown of the prior great power configuration. As Gilpin notes, such breakdowns have often been triggered by hegemonic wars that catalyze fundamental shifts in

12 Robert Gilpin (1981) proposed a multifaceted framework for explaining international change that shares many key assumptions with neorealist theory. But, although inspirational, Gilpin ultimately charted a different realist theory of hegemony that seeks to explain the causes of international change rather than its impact. These are found partly in the material drivers of differential growth rates shifting the balance of power and in the motivations of rising great powers to pursue a different international pecking order or when established hegemons seek to prevent it, as he ultimately sought to explain the circumstances making destructive hegemonic wars most likely.

the balance of power, such as the world wars. However, as seen with the Soviet Union's collapse at the Cold War's end, they can also result from peaceful changes in the configuration of great powers, particularly under nuclear deterrence (Hansen 1995, chap. 1). As the old structure fades, the following key phase of system-wide adjustment begins. This stage is characterized by the break-up of established geopolitical patterns and is followed by an extended period of adaptation where new patterns and trends in state behaviors take shape, reflecting the emerging polarity's specific dynamics and characteristics. Finally, consolidation occurs, where new international patterns become dominant and entrenched (Hansen 2000, 12–13). By applying the neorealist concepts of imitation, security maximization, and polarity, it is possible to derive at least four general expectations of international outcomes that are likely to occur during the adjustment phase to new structural dynamics, such as the current transition toward Sino-American bipolarity replacing the dynamics of U.S. unipolarity. These include: 1) system-wide disruption in patterns of interstate rivalry and conflict, 2) general realignment, 3) increased frequencies of state “births and deaths,” and 4) a wave of political regime change. I discuss each of these generally expected outcomes with systemic transformations below and how emerging Sino-American bipolarity may shape them.

Disrupted System-Wide Patterns of Rivalry and Conflict

That the end of unipolarity would lead to resurgent great power rivalry after more than three decades of U.S. primacy has long been a core expectation among neorealist thinkers, as noted in the introduction. Since neorealist theory implies that the absence of great power rivalry during the height of the U.S. world order was rooted in the unipolar structure of international politics, a change to post-unipolarity would be expected to lead to new patterns in great power interactions. Neorealist expectations about resurgent security competition and rivalry between the U.S. and an emerging Chinese great power appear corroborated by rapidly deteriorating Sino-American relations in recent years, coinciding with the shift from unipolarity to bipolarity. This outcome is likely due to the systemic change, given the relative stability of the two powers' political systems, ideologies, forms of government, and national goals. The key change is the shift in the distribution of world power.

Scholarly debates on the end of unipolarity have mainly focused on the risk of resurgent great power rivalry and its impact on international stability (Mearsheimer 2014, chap. 10; Allison 2017; Tunsjø 2018; Layne 2020; Brands and Beckley 2022; Motin 2024). Yet, while great power conflicts are undoubtedly the most worrisome kind of interstate conflict, the conceptualization of systemic transformation offers a broader perspective, considering how structural change may catalyze disruption throughout the entire international system. A key concern is how systemic transformation may impact the risk of armed conflict not only among the great powers but across the system (cf. Hutto 2023). Not least, smaller, local conflicts have the potential to create instability that may escalate to involve major powers.

Notably, the neorealist model suggests that fundamental changes in the distribution of power lay the groundwork for intensified security competition among states with increased risks of military confrontation. This is a system-wide problem since systemic change affects the relative positions, not only of the great powers but of all states, due to the outsized role of great powers. First, if a great power suffers a steep decline, its minor allies' relative positions also weaken. Due to the incentives for self-help and balancing imperatives in anarchy, these minor allies are encouraged to rebalance by seeking new alliances, rearming, or even launching preemptive strikes. At the same time, states in anarchy, having limited information about others' intentions, tend to view such defensively motivated moves as inherently threatening.¹³ Second, due to the cut-throat competitive pressures of anarchy under the shadow of an uncertain future, relative winners who have benefited from their rivals' sudden weakening have incentives to consolidate and attempt to improve their relative positions further while their opponents are weak. Third, as the great powers reconfigure, ambiguity about their future support increases for all other states in a new geostrategic landscape, further complicating judgments about relations of relative strength and raising the risk of serious miscalculations. As Blainey (1988, chap. 8) has noted, rational actors should avoid costly military confrontations when the outcome is reasonably predictable.¹⁴ However, when the credibility of great power support and relative positions of states shift rapidly, the outlook for victory becomes clouded, thus increasing the likelihood of trials of strength (cf. Waltz 1988). In short, neorealist analysis leads to the expectation that when relations of relative power become especially ambiguous, this heightens the risks of military confrontation. Since such ambiguities grow particularly with systemic transformations, these are high-risk periods for military conflict (Hansen 2000, 14).

In the present case of emerging Sino-American bipolarity, ambiguities about the balance of power may nevertheless not be acute between the superpowers owing to the relative clarity of bipolarity (Kupchan 2021). Compared to multipolarity and unipolarity, in emerging bipolarity, complete peripheral attention gaps are also less likely, as both great powers, being each other's primary security threats, will be expected to closely monitor each other's moves everywhere. Some geographies will nevertheless be strategically more critical in the emerging bipolar rivalry. Accordingly, core regions are less likely to be prone to destabilizing ambiguities about relative strength as both great powers have incentives to actively engage to redress emerging imbalances and make firm commitments to counter the risk of the other increasing its influence and strategic position. This was the case in the early stages of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union quickly

13 This is the famous security dilemma in international politics coined by John Herz (1950).

14 James Fearon (1995) expanded Blainey's basic point exploring how interstate conflicts of interests may be resolved with the use of force even under fully rational actor assumptions, which is not assumed in Waltzian neorealism. According to Fearon rational actors may end up fighting if: 1) either party has private information about the balance of power leading to misaligned views on the outlook of successful use of force, 2) because of commitment problems in anarchy and incentives to misrepresent relative strength, and 3) because an issue of contention may be truly indivisible making a compromise untenable.

intervened in Europe and, after that, in Northeast Asia, as these highly industrialized regions were perceived to be of vital strategic importance. Thus, they quickly turned Europe into a frozen conflict along the Iron Curtain and committed to stabilizing Northeast Asia after the Korean War (Kennedy 1988, 481–509). In contrast, the superpowers were initially much less engaged in the more peripheral so-called Third World, including South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (Kennedy 1988, 489–94).

Similarly, in the developing Sino-American bipolarity, doubts about existing U.S. commitments in the emerging bipolar periphery appear to grow as the United States pivots to the Indo-Pacific in response to the specter of rising Chinese dominance in that key region. Growing ambiguities of relative power in emerging non-core areas of the new bipolar structure such as Europe, the Greater Middle East outside the Persian Gulf, and Africa is, in theory, raising the probability of armed conflict in these regions. Historical precedent is notable as prior polarity shifts of the 20th century were followed by elevated rates of armed conflict among secondary states e.g., in post-WWI Eastern Europe, in post-WWII Southeast and South Asia, and the Middle East, as well as on the fringes of Europe and in the Middle East after the Cold War.¹⁵

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that several international wars have been fought in recent years on the emerging bipolar periphery, two on the fringes of Europe between Azerbaijan and Armenia (2020–23), the war between Russia and Ukraine (2022–), and the Gaza War in the Greater Middle East (2023–). Not being a theory of foreign policy, neorealism is ill-equipped to offer particular explanations of any of these conflicts; each has its specific causes. However, neorealist theory, added a concept of systemic transformation, can help explain the elevated frequency of international wars in the emerging periphery. This explanation is rooted in the dangerous dynamics set in motion by major shifts in the international distribution of world power, with system-wide repercussions for the security conditions of all states. Although it is still too early to reach firm conclusions on whether the current post-unipolar transition is significantly associated with an increased frequency of interstate armed conflict compared to business as usual, it is noteworthy that three major international wars have been fought over a short period, coinciding with the transformation. This contrasts with the low frequency of wars among secondary states during established unipolarity, roughly 2000–2019, and marks a distinct

15 After WWI, several minor wars broke out in Europe, including the Polish–Soviet War (1919–21), the Greco–Turkish and Franco–Turkish wars (1919–22) and wars between Soviet Russia and newly established Baltic states. WWII was followed by wars in Asia, including the Korean War (1950–53) and anti-colonial wars such as the Indochina War (1945–54) and the war for Indonesian independence (1945–49), in addition to the India–Pakistan War (1947–48). Moreover, wars in the Middle East erupted between the Arab states and Israel (1948), and the Suez war (1956). After the Cold War, wars broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia (1992–93) and among former Yugoslav republics (1991–92) as well as the Kosovo War (1999). Also, in the Middle East, Iraq invaded Kuwait (1990), leading to the U.S.-led Gulf War (1991) and eventually to the invasion of Iraq (2003), while India and Pakistan fought the brief Kargil War (1999).

break from unipolar patterns when interstate military operations were primarily led by the United States.¹⁶

General Realignment

With systemic transformation, a trend of realignment across the international system is also a key expectation. This is because, as noted in the previous section, the foundations of states' security alignments with great powers are disrupted by significant shifts in the balance of power. For instance, the shift from bipolarity after 1989 undermined the security strategies of the global network of Soviet allies as the USSR withdrew in the late 1980s and collapsed by 1991. However, non-aligned states in the Third World were also impacted because they had based their strategies on Cold War neutrality and the possibility of aligning with either superpower. Even America's European core NATO allies had to reassess the credibility of U.S. security guarantees in the new unipolar environment (Hansen, Toft, and Wivel 2009, chap. 3).¹⁷ This contrasted sharply with the Cold War, where secondary states could have greater confidence in superpower support due to their intense bipolar zero-sum competition for global influence. However, the post-1989 era left only the United States capable of providing great power security guarantees. And with the Soviet threat gone, the U.S. had diminished incentives to support its allies. The shift to unipolarity, moreover, made it riskier to antagonize the sole remaining superpower. During the Cold War, secondary states that clashed with one of the superpowers had the option to seek refuge with the other. But this double option vanished with unipolarity. So, although alignment with the U.S. unipole offered less utility, secondary states nevertheless faced strong incentives to remain on good, or at least acceptable, terms with the U.S.

16 The Russo–Georgian War (2008) is an exception, while Russia's Crimean annexation (2014) is a borderline case. The U.S. initiated multiple major military campaigns during the unipolar moment, most notably in Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), and launched air strikes against Libya (2011) and Syria (2014).

17 General realignment is observable following the systemic transformations of 1918 and 1945. After the Armistice in November 1918, the wartime great power alliances (Triple Alliance and Triple Entente) dissolved, and new alignments took shape in the early 1920s with the French-led alliance network and the Little Entente in Central and Eastern Europe. The transformation following WWII also saw general realignment with the dissolution of the Grand wartime alliance and formation of the Soviet alliance network in Eastern Europe culminating with the Warsaw Pact (1955) preceded by the formation of U.S.-led NATO (1949), as well as realignments in East Asia with the U.S.–Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan alliances in the early 1950s and Soviet security pacts with China (1950) and North Korea (1950/1961). After the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved as did most other Soviet security pacts whereas NATO was transformed and expanded into Eastern Europe, increasing the membership circle from 16 in 1990 to 30 by 2020.

to avoid retaliation or isolation. Thus, as noted by Hansen, flocking around the unipole among secondary states is a core expectation in unipolarity (Hansen 2000, 65–67).¹⁸

As China has risen to great power status, however, the bipolar dual option for great power security guarantees re-emerges since the U.S. and China will have firm incentives to maintain and recruit allies to counter each other's global influence. In particular, secondary states in the Indo-Pacific, the emerging core strategic region of the Sino-American rivalry, are likely to receive intense attention for inclusion into the superpowers' networks. Compared to unipolarity, in the new bipolarity, the risk of abandonment will thus be lower, and the expected utility of superpower alignment rises. The flip side is that regional states in key geostrategic regions will face less flexibility of alignment and increased risks of entrapment in the superpower's rivalry.¹⁹ Nonalignment and hedging strategies will, therefore, also become harder to sustain in core geographies. Nevertheless, abandonment remains a significant risk beyond key world areas in emerging bipolarity. As the U.S. and China are likely to primarily focus on the Indo-Pacific, attention to non-core areas is set to diminish, at least initially. Cold War lessons illustrate the point. In the early years, the U.S. and USSR quickly built extensive alliance networks in Europe with NATO (1949) and the Warsaw Pact (1955), and they committed to Northeast Asian alliances as well. In contrast, Third World regions took second priority, although the lateral spread of the superpower rivalry drew them into the U.S.–Soviet rivalry later on (Kennedy 1988, 480–509). Thus, even on the emerging periphery, a shift to bipolarity likely diminishes the risk of abandonment over time due to the logic of zero-sum competition. But abandonment remains a tangible danger in the early phases of systemic adjustment, and some geographies will likely stay on the outskirts of the central rivalry.

Evidence of general realignment in the current post-unipolar transformation is increasingly visible. In the Indo-Pacific, the strengthening of the Quad security cooperation between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India is notable. The Quad has evolved into a closer security cooperation based on shared threat perceptions of China and, importantly, links India with existing U.S. regional allies (Pandalai 2024; Carafano 2024). The establishment of AUKUS in 2021, aligning the U.S., United Kingdom, and Australia, with the primary goal of providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines to deter China, represents another recent strengthening of U.S.-led security ties to the region (Wilkins 2021). Neither of these arrangements reaches the level of new formal alliances. Still, they

18 Scholars argue that “soft balancing” is a viable security strategy compatible with overall flocking as secondary states use international institutions to offer issue-based opposition to the unipole without outright hard balancing against it, see e.g., Pape (2005), Paul (2005), Hansen, Toft, and Wivel (2009), Paul, He, and Wivel (2025). For critical assessments of the soft balancing concept see Brooks and Wohlforth (2005), and Liff (2016).

19 Glenn Snyder (1984) coined the alliance security dilemma between entrapment and abandonment.

signify new developments in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.²⁰ Another example is the Philippines' U-turn under President Marcos Jr., since 2022 reversing previous Philippine hedging attempts between China and the U.S. with an upgraded defense agreement that increases the number of Philippine military bases accessible to U.S. rotating forces from five to nine, all facing north toward China, the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait (Harding 2024).

China is also increasingly active in forming alignments with Indo-Pacific states, departing from its traditional non-aligned policy. This includes China's growing security cooperation with Cambodia and the Solomon Islands, both strategically located in the Indo-Pacific.²¹ China's longstanding security collaboration with Pakistan also appears to have strengthened over the last decade, reaching the level of a "threshold alliance" (Lalwani 2023). By contrast, evidence of any revitalization of the existing Chinese-North Korean alliance is mixed (Fong 2024). But most importantly, China's alignment with Russia has deepened. Gradually developing since the early 2000s (Wilson 2004), China's strategic partnership with Russia has proved crucial for the Russian war effort in Ukraine. Thus, China has defied U.S.-led sanctions to isolate Russia and actively supported Moscow through continued access to critical technologies and through the continued imports of Russian oil and natural gas.²² Another indication of an emerging pattern of realignment is Russia and North Korea's formal alliance established in 2024, after which North Korean troops were sent to the frontlines in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (Bowen, Manyin, and Nikitin 2025).

The expectation of general realignment is also reflected in recent European alliance diplomacy. Thus, Sweden's and Finland's swift decisions to join NATO marked a sharp break with both countries' long-standing policies of official nonalignment. These moves were prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (cf. Walt 2022). But given the dynamics of ambiguous shifts in relative power with systemic transformation and rising credibility concerns of great power alignments, they add to a broader emerging trend of realignment. At the same time, this latest expansion of NATO comes at a pivotal moment where the longer-term survival of the transatlantic alliance itself has been questioned by the second Trump administration. This has led European NATO members to acknowledge that European security is no longer a top U.S. priority.²³ In short, an emerging cumulative trend of a realignment with emerging bipolarity appears to take shape, an expected outcome, and

20 The U.S. already has long-standing formal alliances with both Australia, since 1951, and with the United Kingdom, a core NATO-member since 1949.

21 China and Cambodia have engaged in increased security cooperation with the expansion of Cambodia's strategic Ream Naval Base, which now hosts Chinese warships (Strangio 2024). Moreover, the Solomon Islands, a key strategic Pacific archipelago, concluded a security treaty with China in 2022 allowing China to make naval forces transits and to deploy police forces (O'Brien 2022).

22 In a recent report, the Bank of Finland Institute shows how Russia's foreign trade has diverted from Europe towards China after the Ukraine invasion (see Korhonen et al. 2025).

23 The Trump Administration has since President Trump's second inauguration repeatedly undermined the credibility of NATO's Article 5 and challenged the sovereignty of NATO-members including Canada and Denmark, see, e.g., Associated Press (2025).

one that also represents an important break with established unipolar patterns of unipolar flocking giving way to a burgeoning bipolarization of international politics, especially in core strategic areas such as the Indo-Pacific.

State Birth and Death

My third expectation of systemic transformation is an increased frequency of states appearing and disappearing. A neorealist perspective on systemic transformation emphasizes the birth and death of states due to the close connection between the distribution of territory and the international distribution of relative power. As Gilpin (1981, 37) notes, “International political change has historically been primarily about the redistribution of territory among groups or states following the great wars of history.” This remains true in the twenty-first century. While territorial control has become less crucial for national strength in industrial societies, it still underpins essential components of national power, such as population size and natural resources (Gilpin 1981, 23). In an anarchic self-help world, territorial control also retains its importance for strategic value, including access to essential raw materials and global markets. Consequently, who commands and controls what territory is a key issue that affects the distribution of global power.

In the literature, the emergence of modern nation-states is often linked to the ideology of nationalism, elite mobilization, and decolonization (Cederman 2024).²⁴ However, as Hansen (2002) notes, new states have also formed independently of nationalism, and buffer states, in particular, have disappeared, irrespective of the presence of nationalism (Fazal 2007). Importantly, states have oftentimes emerged and disappeared as a result of great power politics and major wars (see e.g., Tilly 1992).²⁵ Specifically, a great number of states have appeared or disappeared in clusters associated with shifts in polarity, such as after the World Wars and the Cold War. For instance, the Versailles settlements after WWI aimed to curb Austro-German-Ottoman power by redistributing territories among new

24 Seminal statements on nationalism include Gellner (1983), Anderson (1983), Hobsbawm (1992), and Breuilly (1994).

25 The post-WWI transformation saw the collapse of the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian empires and the rise of new states including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Austria, the three Baltic states and Finland. In addition, Ireland gained independence from Britain as did the four British dominions. Moreover, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Mongolia became independent states around 1920. The post-WWII transformation also proved fertile for new states. Resurrected European states reappeared from Nazi-occupation and Iceland declared independence from Denmark. Also, the post-1945-era saw a prolonged wave of decolonization in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa from the late 1940s and into the 1960s. Also, the aftermath of the Cold War gave rise to 15 new independent states replacing the collapsed Soviet Union, the two Germanys merged in 1990, Czechoslovakia broke up in two new states, and independent post-Yugoslav states emerged in the Balkans. Outside Europe, Cambodia was resurrected from Vietnamese occupation, and the two Yemens merged. Kuwait disappeared with Iraq's 1990-invasion and was resurrected with the 1991-U.S.-led Gulf War while Iraq and Afghanistan disappeared as fully independent states with U.S. occupations of 2001 and 2003. Moreover, during the 1990s six Pacific islands nations gained independence. For an overview, see the Correlates of War Project (2017).

states and League of Nations mandates (Kennedy 1988, 355–57). Similarly, Allied victories in WWII restored Nazi-occupied European states and led to the division of Germany and Korea (Rich 2003, 330, 356–59). Moreover, decolonization after 1945 was supported by both superpowers (although most energetically by the USSR). Finally, after the Cold War, the Allied powers of WWII permitted Germany's reunification (Rich 2003, 537–38). In short, while decolonization and nationalism have been important drivers in specific state formation, varying rates of state birth and death also likely reflect broader systemic changes, although structural change, a facilitating condition, should neither be understood as a direct nor a sufficient cause of state birth and death.

The ongoing shift to a new bipolar world has, however, so far not greatly affected the rate of new state appearance or dissolution. The U.S. departure from Afghanistan in 2021, ending its 20-year military occupation, constitutes one potential case of state resurrection as the U.S. departure restored full political autonomy to Afghanistan and led to the U.S.-sponsored government's swift collapse. Gaza, controlled by Hamas since 2007, may represent another borderline case, this one of state death with Israel's retribution after the Hamas terrorist attacks in October 2023.²⁶ Beyond these borderline cases, no new states have as yet emerged or disappeared in the present transition, even as many nations actively seek statehood with violent or peaceful means, including Palestinians, Kurds, West Papuans, Bougainvilleans, Tigrayans, West Saharans, Scots, Catalonians, and Greenlanders, to mention just a few. At the same time, there are numerous failed states ripe for dissolution and with the potential to give rise to new states. The Bosnian Federation, created by the Dayton Accords after U.S. military intervention in 1995, remains deeply divided by ethnic tensions. Similarly, Kosovo declared independence in 1999 but lacks recognition from Serbia and its Serb minority. Taiwan faces growing military pressure from China to end its autonomy and de facto statehood, while Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia struggle with dysfunction and deep-seated internal divisions.

The proposition of state formation and state death remains a prediction rooted in theory and historical experience. But we are yet to see clear evidence of an increased frequency of state births and deaths with the emerging Sino-American bipolarity. A qualification of the proposition may be that systemic transformations in the 20th century were catalyzed by systemic great power wars (hot or cold) that involved the collapse of multinational empires. This was the case after WWI with the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman and with the French and British empires after WWII. Similarly, the Soviet imperial collapse after the peaceful end of the Cold War precipitated a flurry of state births and deaths. This supports the subsidiary hypothesis that systemic transformations involving dissolving empires are likely to spawn more state births and deaths, whereas systemic transformations without such collapse could see fewer, if any. The rise of China as a great

26 Despite lacking international recognition, Gaza functioned as a state in the minimal Weberian sense since 2007.

power, unlike the imperial collapses of past 20th-century transformations, offers an opportunity to test this qualified hypothesis.

Waves of Regime Change: Toward De-Democratization

The final proposition derived here from a neorealist concept of systemic transformation is that waves of political regime change are linked to shifts in international polarity, as past such waves have aligned roughly with reconfigured numbers of great powers (Hansen and Jensen 2006, 2012).²⁷ A neorealist perspective on systemic change thus suggests that waves of regime change are driven not only by domestic politics but also by shifts in the structure of the international system.

This is important because scholars emphasize the role of political regime types in foreign policy and international stability.²⁸ As research has shown, polities in domestic political transition tend to be especially volatile and prone to failure (Goldstone et al. 2010), and such failures may spark international security crises. Major social revolutions, in particular, often lead to international instability and war (Walt 1996).

Scholarship on democratization readily acknowledges structural forces (Doorenspleet 2005; Coppedge et al. 2022, chap. 4). However, it rarely considers the impact of reconfigurations among the great powers on waves of regime change, including reverse waves of democratization. From this perspective, two dynamics can be highlighted. First, with a changed polarity, a new configuration of great powers may leverage their asymmetric advantage in relative power to overtly promote their preferred political-economic systems abroad, using methods ranging from military coercion to economic incentives. Great powers may be driven to impose their domestic systems and ideologies abroad, viewing it as a public good (Mearsheimer 2018) or, as Owen (2021) notes, to install friendly regimes overseas, which potentially helps them gain greater influence and control over their strategic environment. Events following WWII demonstrate the logic as the USSR leveraged the Red Army to establish Communist puppet regimes in the Eastern Bloc. In turn, the United States promoted an “empire by invitation” and stabilized Western Europe’s democracies through the Marshall Plan and NATO, which tied economic and military aid to liberal democratic norms and supported pro-democratic forces (Lundestad 2005; Ken-

27 Huntington (1993) identified three waves of democratization with a prolonged wave after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, a renewed wave after WWII, and again, another wave in the late 1970s–1980s. Doorenspleet (2004, 2005) showed however, that with a more accurate coding of democracy, four waves can be identified in the 1920s, late 1940s and 1950s, 1980s, and especially in the 1990s.

28 For instance, democratic peace scholars claim that democracies conduct foreign policies of peaceful conflict resolution vis-a-vis each other (Russett 1993; Doyle 1986; Owen 1997). Scholars in neoclassical realism posit that domestic regime characteristics are an important modifier of pressures from structural incentives in international anarchy (Rose 1998; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Constructivists argue that the norms and shared identities harbored by states have an important bearing on their conduct of foreign policy (Wendt 1999).

nedy 1988, 464–66). In particular, post-war France and Italy had popular communist parties, raising concerns in the Truman administration about their possible alignment with the Soviet bloc (Leffler 1992, 157–64). As noted by Mearsheimer (2019), unipolarity, in particular, offers a unique opportunity for spreading the sole great power's values overtly because the unipole can export its preferred ideology without concerns for competition from rival great powers. In contrast, multipolar and bipolar structures are less favorable to overtly exporting ideology, as great powers must compete intensely for allies.

But, second, waves of political regime change may also arise indirectly from the competitive pressures of international anarchy. Neorealist theory suggests that states prioritize self-help to survive and seek to maintain their relative positions as a minimum. As argued by Waltz (1979, 73–77), these pressures drive states to imitate the practices of the system's most successful states. By definition, the most successful and secure states are the great powers, and they are therefore likely to be imitated in key respects, such as in military doctrine, weaponry, and internal organization more broadly.²⁹ Thus, even without overt pressure, other states are incentivized to imitate the great powers, including their political and economic organization.³⁰ With a different configuration of great powers to imitate with systemic transformation, the competitive pressures of international politics, therefore, encourage the system-wide adoption of different sets of political-economic systems.

In addition to imitation, forces of socialization may further stimulate political regime changes. Waltz (1979, 68–70) argued that international structural pressures encourage states to socialize to norms that enhance their chances of survival. Thus, other states are encouraged to adopt norms and organizational ideas promoted by great powers, not necessarily out of preference, but as a strategy for survival. As Waltz observed (1979, 75), “In spontaneous and informal ways, societies establish norms of behavior. A group's opinion controls its members. Heroes and leaders emerge and are emulated. Praise for behavior that conforms to group norms reinforces them.” Thus, just as deviance from the norm carries the risk of exclusion in social settings, deviance from the norms promoted by the

29 It can be argued that the most successful political-economic formula is liberal free market democracy, because the leading great powers in the modern age e.g. Great Britain and the United States have been liberal and democratic market economies. Based on the neorealist concept of imitation, all countries should, in principle, emulate this model. However, this view is too simplistic. As noted by Kennedy (1988) and Tilly (1992), the key to survival in international anarchy is the optimal mix of coercion and wealth. While liberal free market democracies are clearly superior at creating wealth, they are not necessarily superior at creating the means of coercion. The classic example of ancient Athens's struggle with Sparta is instructive. While Athens, as the more democratic trading nation, was clearly superior in wealth creation, it was not as efficient as Sparta in the realm of coercion and, as Thucydides recounts, ultimately lost the Peloponnesian War. Moreover, as Schweller (2006, 2009) has argued, an executive's resource extraction problem may be greater in democracies than in authoritarian systems and can hamper democratic states in responding optimally to external security threats.

30 This proposition is consistent with the findings of Doorenspleet (2004, 2005) who finds that peripheral states in the World System, least likely to democratize according to the World Systems hypothesis, in fact democratized at significant rates in the fourth wave of the 1990s.

great powers carries the risk of isolation and punishment in international politics. In this sense, adopting a particular political-economic model is a message of allegiance.

Again, a transition to unipolarity stands out as it is expected to encourage an especially high rate and a relatively one-sided type of regime change, with only a single model to follow. In contrast, bipolarity offers two options, while multipolarity potentially provides a diverse range of models to imitate (Hansen 2022, 41). Thus, the systemic transformation after the Cold War implied that the U.S. was the “only game in town.” With a distinctly liberal-democratic and free market model, the shift to U.S. unipolarity thus implied strong structural encouragements to imitate key aspects of the U.S. political and economic formula (Hansen 2022, 33). No doubt, there were genuine desires for political and economic freedom among the emerging democracies after 1989. But even in hard autocratic regimes in the Middle East, political opening gathered pace with time (Hansen 2022, chap. 2). Moreover, reflecting the push from structural incentives, most countries moved to open markets after 1989. Even die-hard Marxist-Leninist states like China, Vietnam, and Laos pursued economic opening, though political opening has been limited.

In contrast, the current shift from unipolarity to bipolarity aligns with an accelerating trend for de-democratization, which can be observed since at least the mid-2010s. As evidenced by indices for democracy, liberal democracies are declining globally, including within core democratic regions such as the EU (V-dem Institute 2024).³¹ Furthermore, a series of military coups have swept transitional democracies in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years.³² Moreover, attempts to establish democracy in the Middle East and North Africa during the “Arab Spring,” perhaps the last ripple of the “fourth wave,” have failed. The explanation advanced here is that emerging bipolarity, with China as a rising superpower, now offers an alternative path to successful survival in international politics, making the incentive to imitate the U.S. less clear than during unipolarity. Not only does an authoritarian, state-capitalist Chinese model appear as a competitive formula to advance national capabilities. Countries gravitating toward the Chinese pole may also find it useful to signal their adherence to the Chinese side by leaning toward an authoritarian form of government. At the same time, the U.S.’s appetite for overt democracy promotion may be waning. Even if the U.S. remains committed to spreading democratic norms overseas, in competition with China, the U.S. may find it more important to retain and recruit allies than to secure politically palatable regimes. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt said of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza García in 1934: “He is a bastard, but he is our bastard.” In short, the transformation towards Sino-American bipolarity is consistent with a reverse wave of democratization.

31 V-dem (2024, 11–12) reports that the number of liberal democracies peaked in 2008–12 at 44 and have since declined to 32 whereas the closed autocracies numbered 22 in 2012 and have increased to 33 by 2023.

32 Coups have been attempted in Burkina Faso (2022), Chad (2021), Gabon (2019), Guinea (2021), Mali (2020, 2021), Myanmar (2021), Niger (2021, 2023), and Sudan (2019, 2021), see Powell and Thyne (2025).

Conclusion

Despite continuing debate, the international system is allegedly undergoing a transformation from unipolarity, the defining structure of international politics for over three decades, to emerging Sino-American bipolarity. This transformation, like previous ones, is accompanied by upheaval and uncertainty as an old *status quo* dissolves and a new geopolitical landscape takes shape. Based on a neorealist conceptualization of systemic transformation, this study considers four international outcomes we can expect from the transition to post-unipolarity and why. These include disrupted system-wide interstate rivalries and military conflict, general realignments, elevated frequencies of state births and deaths, and waves of political regime change – outcomes that also recurred in 20th-century systemic transformations of the 1920s, late 1940s to early 1950s, and in the 1990s. The theory attributes these outcomes to shifts in the structure of international politics as reigning great power polarity undergoes significant change. Such shifts undermine existing security arrangements and shape new conditions for state survival that promote ripple effects across the international system.

With the ongoing transformation, there are indications that predictable historical patterns are repeating themselves. Established geopolitical arrangements of U.S. unipolarity have been disrupted by resurgent interstate rivalries, and several interstate military conflicts have occurred in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, we can observe accelerating realignments in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. In addition, a wave of autocratization has reversed the 1990s surge of democratization, a key feature of the U.S. order. Meanwhile, it remains to be seen whether the ongoing systemic transformation will also see elevated numbers of new states and the dissolution of existing ones, as occurred in the wake of prior polarity shifts, which were characterized by collapsing empires.

My argument about predictable outcomes of state behavior during systemic transformations has implications for both theory and policy. Theoretically, it strengthens the case for neorealism against critics who find its relevance lacking. By introducing the concept of systemic transformation, I demonstrate that it is possible to expand the empirical content of the theory. However, while I find my propositions about the impact of the ongoing systemic transformation to be promising given current international developments, they remain tentative. We are in the infancy of the post-unipolar systemic transformation, and more time is needed before we can determine with greater certainty whether the expectations presented here are proven correct. Future research should be able to reach firmer conclusions with additional empirical analysis, including statistical analysis and comparative case studies of previous systemic transformations. Nevertheless, my expectations provide a theoretically grounded first-cut explanation for key ongoing international developments and trends.

Refining and assessing theory is not merely of academic interest. We cannot overstate a sound theory's value for policy, as it helps make sense of seemingly disparate events and forecast new challenges. This is especially true in times of great upheaval and uncertainty.

Armed with a credible and relevant theory, practitioners can formulate policies that are more likely to achieve their intended goals and improve planning and policy effectiveness. However, although there is potentially much to be gained from a systems theory of international politics, such as neorealism, the theory cannot help with specific predictions about foreign policy choices. Nonetheless, it can support careful analysis and preparation for emerging security challenges by alerting us to the increased likelihood and risk of certain types of international outcomes.

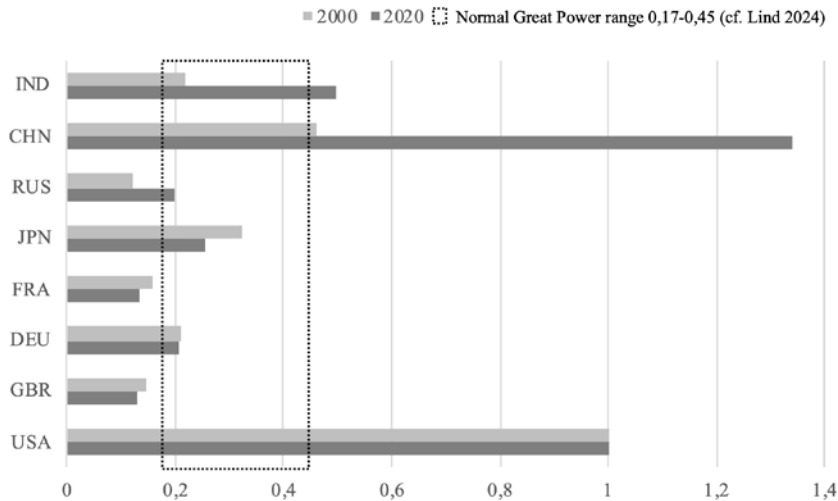
But while neorealist theory is primarily descriptive, aiming to explain rather than prescribe policy, it does, as Rosato and Schuessler (2011) observe, offer significant guidance to policymakers: to act prudently in international affairs and to employ force extremely selectively, only when core national interests are at stake. This becomes particularly relevant during systemic transformations marked by ambiguity and disruption that may prompt intervention at the risk of both miscalculation and overreaction. This may lead down a path of wasted efforts at best or toward escalating spirals of conflict at worst. In short, from a neorealist standpoint, policymakers should thoroughly evaluate potential challenges and pitfalls in an international system undergoing rapid transformation and carefully consider their implications for core national security when calibrating their responses.

Acknowledgements

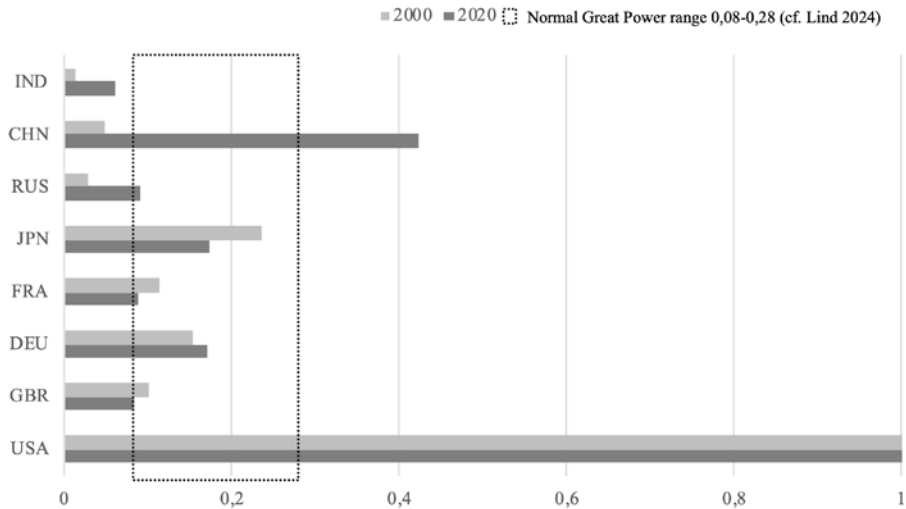
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Annex 1

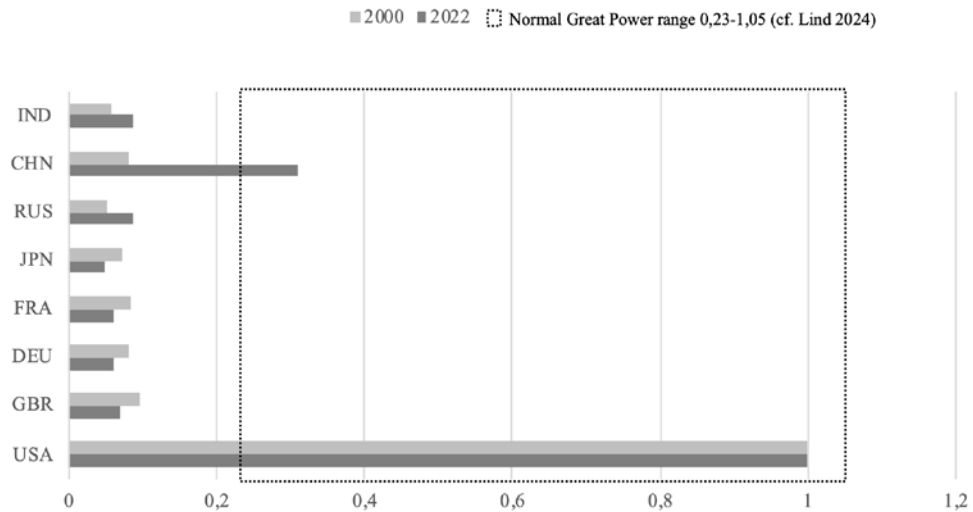
Total GPD (PPP) Ratio to leading State (USA)



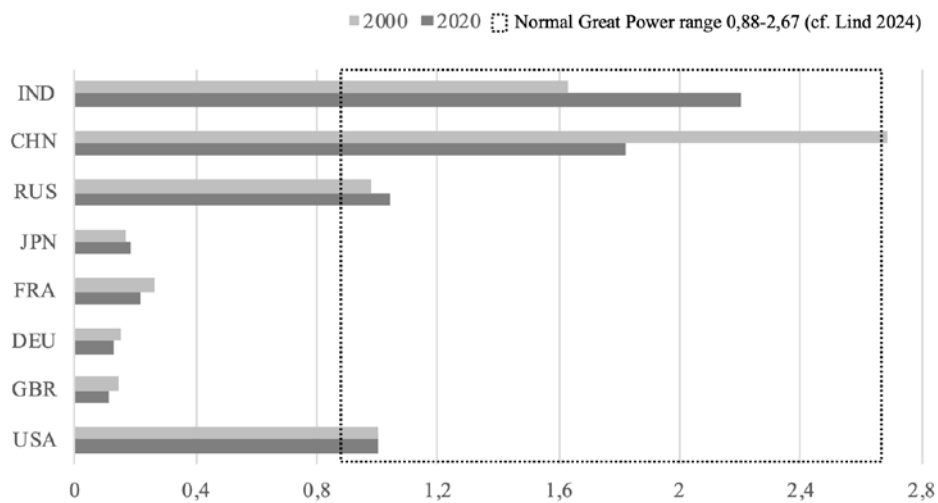
GDP per capita adjusted, composite GDP (PPP) Ratio to leading State (USA)



Military Expenditure Ratio to leading State (USA)



Military Personnel Ratio to leading State (USA)



Note: Normal ranges of great powers (1st – 3rd quartiles) are adapted from Lind (2024).

Sources: GDP figures (in PPP, 2011 int. dollars) are from the Madison Project Database v. 2023 (Bolt and van Zanden, 2025). Figures on military expenditure are from SIPRI (2025) in constant 2023 USD and market exchange rates. Figures on military personnel are mobilized personnel from the World Bank/IISS (2025) – latest statistics from 2020.

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