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The Unipolar Sunset

Navigating a Bipolar Dawn with Multipolar Characteristics

BY
DAVID SANTORO AND AKHIL RAMESH



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

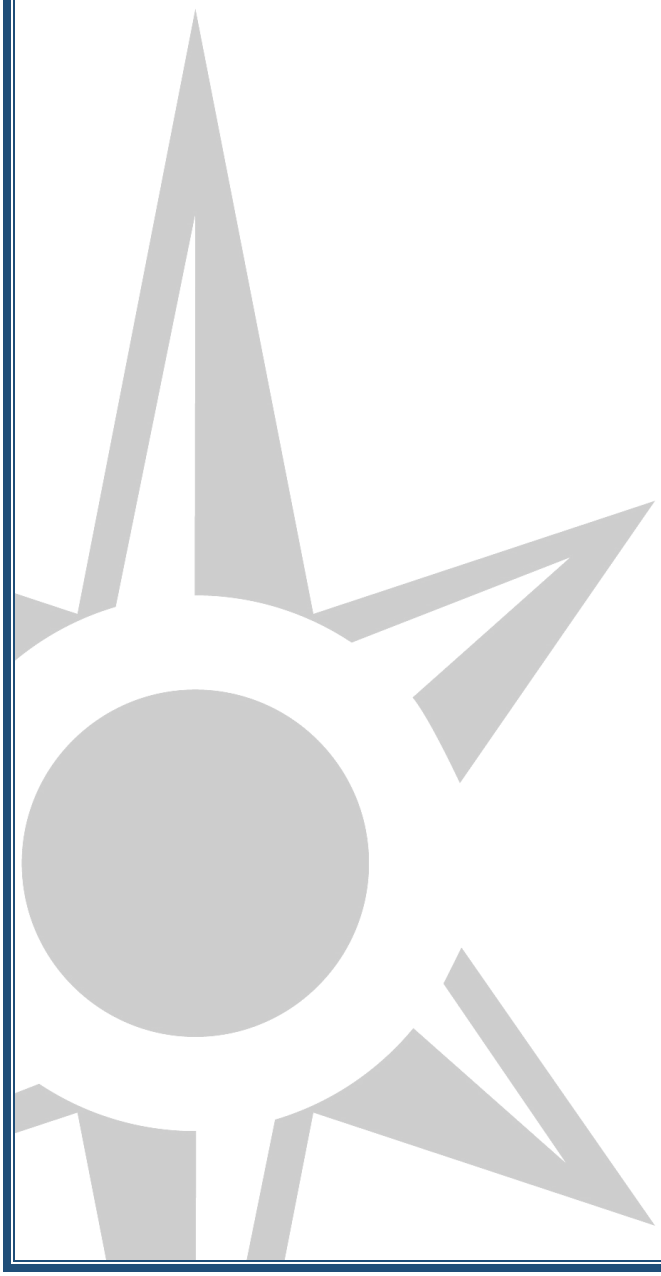
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	2
A BINARY CENTER WITH MULTI-ACTOR AGENCY	3
THE NEW PHYSICS OF MILITARY MASS AND THE DIGITAL STACK	4
THE COMPLEX REALITIES OF ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE	6
MINILATERALISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF GOVERNANCE	8
AMERICAN STRATEGY IN A CROWDED SYSTEM	9
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	12

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Executive Summary

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The "unipolar moment" of American primacy was, by definition, transient. As the illusion of permanent global hegemony shatters, the international system is shedding its temporary unipolar skin and returning to its natural historical baseline: a more congested, highly competitive multi-actor architecture. Today's order is settling into a sophisticated binary core anchored by two superpowers—the United States and China—overlaid with robust multi-actor regional agency. Together, Washington and Beijing command nearly half of global GDP and over half of worldwide research and development and military spending. Yet several increasingly powerful countries, through aggressive multi-alignment and strategic maneuvering, are now able to leverage US-China friction to maximize their autonomy and assert some degree of localized dominance. What's more, unlike the mid-20th-century Cold War, hyper-dense interdependencies bind the United States and China together, creating a shared financial life-support system that deters total war and prevents complete decoupling. Meanwhile, as traditional universal institutions like the UN face paralysis, global governance is migrating toward agile mini-lateral coalitions and high-velocity nonstate actors, from tech conglomerates to frontier AI laboratories. To thrive in this crowded, multi-orbital ecosystem, the United States must adapt, pivoting toward low-cost asymmetric military scaling, calibrating economic statecraft, forging pragmatic partnerships with middle powers, and leading agile mini-lateral technology pacts.

I. Introduction

The "unipolar moment" was never intended to describe a geopolitical constant. When Charles Krauthammer coined the phrase in his seminal 1990 *Foreign Affairs* essay, he marked a transitory zenith—a fleeting historical byproduct of the Soviet Union's fall.[1] He cast the United States as the lone superpower of the immediate post-Cold War era but his thesis contained an expiration date: He understood that rival centers of power would coalesce, generating their own strategic leverage and forcing an eventual re-centering of global affairs. The architecture of international relations, he implied, is predisposed toward a balance of power, meaning any singular concentration of authority inherently triggers counter-balancing behaviors from dissatisfied or rising countries.

Yet over the ensuing three decades, a profound and pervasive delusion took root within the US foreign policy establishment. Because the United States stood as an asymmetric giant—unrivaled in economic output, military reach, technological dominance, and cultural hegemony—many policymakers and theorists assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that unipolarity had become the permanent organizing principle of international relations. To them, the laws of strategic nature had been defied. They rejected the axiomatic geopolitical truth that no single state, no matter how dominant, can permanently maintain uncontested centrality in the friction-filled arena of global politics.

This blindness led to a series of strategic overreaches, carried out for different reasons but at root because the foreign policy apparatus operated under the assumption that American power was able to reshape domestic political landscapes across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe without inducing severe systemic friction or accelerating the rise of peer competitors.

The hubris persisted, however, because the belief was that the "end of history" had been reached.[2] In this framework, initially conceptualized by Francis Fukuyama and redefined by others, Western liberal democracy and American primacy were viewed not as a temporary alignment of forces, but as the final, immutable benchmark of human governance.[3] The unipolar configuration would thus endure into the far future, perhaps indefinitely, and the consolidation of global institutions, from the World Trade Organization to the expansion of Western security alliances, was interpreted as the quasi-permanent making of an international order backed by American kinetic power. This perspective treated competing ideological frameworks and regional power structures as mere historical relics destined to be absorbed by the inexorable march of Western modernization and integration.

Recent shocks have now shattered that illusion, even as some continue to insist that the global architecture remains a unipolar monopoly.[4] Yet the systemic shifts are no longer marginal or localized; they are now foundational, structural, and accelerating. The rapid expansion of foreign symmetric capabilities designed to challenge US power projection across Asia and Europe, the accelerating erosion of the US dollar's dominance in international settlements, the institutionalization of assertive regional blocs like the expanded BRICS network, and the rise of non-Western diplomatic mediation offer undeniable evidence of an emergent multipolarity.

These developments represent a predictable systemic transition: a return to the congested, highly competitive system that has always characterized global affairs. Rather than an unprecedented breakdown of international law or a chaotic deviation from global norms, it is a return to historical normality. From the state-systems of classical antiquity, such as the warring Greek poleis or the competitive dynamics of the Spring and Autumn period in China, through the balance-of-power mechanics of the Peace of Westphalia and the 19th-century Concert of Europe, the standard baseline of global history has been a multi-actor system. This system depended on a delicate, often volatile balance between peer competitors, where survival dictated a constant recalibration of alliances and a deep distrust of any singular authority.

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[1] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1990, pp. 23-33.

[2] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[3] Fukuyama believed that the liberal democratic model would be the yardstick against which other models would be assessed. He did not believe, however, that the American or Western style of liberal democracy would be the reference, nor did he believe that American primacy would be permanent. That did not stop many to use his "end-of-history" concept to advance these ideas in the public discourse.

[4] See, for instance, Michael Beckley, "There Is Only One Sphere of Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 4, 2026, or C. Raja Mohan, "The Multipolar Delusion," *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 17, 2026.

Seen through a historical lens, both the bipolarity of the Cold War and the unipolarity of the late 20th century are thus anomalies and, in historical terms, exceptionally short. The Cold War lasted just over four decades, and the unipolar moment proved even briefer, dwarfed by the 200-year Pax Romana or the Confucius regional order the Ming and Qing dynasties, which endured for more than 500 years. They were always bound to be transient. The concentration of global capabilities into one or two poles suppressed the natural diffusion of regional power, creating an artificial stability that masked underlying historical, ethnic, and geopolitical rivalries. Today's increasing friction between colliding spheres of influence, the competitive scramble for critical mineral supply chains, and the explicit refusal of rising regional powers to orbit a single American hegemon do not represent a descent into meaningless chaos. They are a restoration of the historical mean. The international system is shedding its temporary unipolar skin and returning to its natural state of competitive complexity.

II. A Binary Center with Multi-actor Agency

We are not, however, drifting toward a completely fragmented, chaotic, or atomized world order where power is distributed across scores of competitive actors. Instead, the contemporary international system is settling into a sophisticated binary configuration overlaid with distinct, highly active multipolar dimensions.

The global architecture is increasingly anchored by two immense, competing poles: the United States and China. These two systemic titans possess a mass that separates them qualitatively and quantitatively from all other countries, drawing global flows of capital, intelligence, and resources into their respective strategic ambits.

Yet this binary core is also wrapped in a vibrant multi-actor layer characterized by regional autonomy. Middle powers are no longer helpless satellites or passive proxies trapped in the unyielding trajectory of a single superpower's preferences. Instead, countries like Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Turkey, or the United Arab Emirates have evolved into autonomous centers. They are increasingly capable of generating their own localized influence, setting regional regulatory agendas, conducting independent security operations, and charting autonomous paths through the international system without seeking the prior endorsement of Washington or Beijing.

The binary center

Together, the United States and China exert an overwhelming pull that dictates the global flows of capital, advanced technology, and security frameworks. This material reality is backed by staggering macroeconomic data: The two superpowers account for nearly half of global gross domestic product, command over half of the world's research and development expenditures, and comprise more than half of total global military spending.[5] This dual concentration of capabilities means that while middle powers exercise significant diplomatic and regional leverage, the rules governing the global digital economy, international maritime transit, and international finance are still influenced by the choices made by Washington and Beijing.

The two superpowers, however, possess and deploy their immense power through radically different modalities, reflecting their unique domestic political economies and strategic cultures.

This divergence is most starkly visible in their respective mastery of artificial intelligence ecosystems.[6] The United States maintains unmatched brilliance in what can be termed the digital loop: the capacity to design foundational frontier models, monopolize cloud computing architectures, control advanced software ecosystems, and harvest global data for continuous algorithmic refinement. The American model thrives on an open venture capital ecosystem, decentralized corporate innovation, and a global magnetic pull for elite scientific talent.

Conversely, China has perfected the physical loop. Beijing has integrated AI into the marrow of industrial manufacturing, automated supply chains, smart port logistics, and advanced robotics. Guided by state-directed industrial policy and heavy capital subsidies, the Chinese model excels at translating algorithmic breakthroughs into concrete physical hardware and industrial scaling.

[5] National Bureau of Statistics of China/US Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Comparative Macroeconomic Indicators and Global GDP Shares*, 2025/2026 data.

[6] Lee, Kai-Fu, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

An asymmetric interdependence has thus formed between the two poles. While the United States owns the intellectual brain of the digital era, China controls the physical nervous system of the global factory floor. This reality complicates any simplistic notion of containment, as the digital loop of the West remains reliant on the physical loop of the East to manufacture the actual hardware that powers global commerce.

Multi-nodal agency

The US-China binary center is not the sole defining feature of the international order. The more transformative variable is the distinct agency displayed by contemporary middle powers.

Middle powers can leverage their regional weight and strategic position to navigate the superpower standoff using strategic nonalignment and diplomatic balancing. In physics, balanced forces cancel each other out. In geopolitics, middle powers identify analogous coordinates: zones of maneuvering room where the competing pressures of Washington and Beijing neutralize one another, allowing them to maximize their sovereignty, diplomatic flexibility, and freedom of action.

Saudi Arabia offers a masterclass in this balancing behavior.[7] Riyadh maintains a tight, institutionalized orbit around the United States when it comes to security guarantees, joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and the procurement of advanced defense hardware. Simultaneously, the kingdom has deepened its economic ties with Beijing, positioning China as its primary crude oil export market, partnering with Chinese state-owned enterprises to build out its domestic telecommunications infrastructure, and exploring the integration of Chinese surveillance systems within its smart city projects. By refusing to isolate either partner, Saudi Arabia forces them to continuously bid for its alignment, extracting concessions from each.

India mirrors this multi-nodal balancing act.[8] New Delhi continues to strengthen its security and technology partnerships with Western powers via mini-lateral arrangements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), designed to maintain a maritime balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India leverages its foundational membership in the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization to deepen continental trade ties, expand its engagement with the Global South, and maintain a pragmatic energy relationship with Russia, ignoring Western sanctions regimes to import discounted crude oil.[9]

Neither Riyadh nor New Delhi is interested in choosing a permanent side. Rather, they occupy a deliberate coordinate of maximum national utility, demonstrating that strategic nonalignment has been replaced by a doctrine of aggressive multi-alignment.

Much like spacecraft using gravity assists to gain velocity, middle powers can also use the strategic friction between Washington and Beijing to propel their own national interests. For example, by openly engaging with competing telecommunications infrastructure providers or digital current initiatives, a middle power can execute a diplomatic slingshot. This maneuver is designed to extract higher-tier technology transfers, advanced semiconductor manufacturing offsets, or enhanced intelligence-sharing agreements from a concerned United States or China.

This dynamic multi-polarizes what would otherwise be a rigid bipolar conflict, turning the superpower rivalry into a resource to be exploited by smaller, more agile actors. It demonstrates that in a binary system, the most agile actors are those who can navigate competition without becoming collateral damage.

III. The New Physics of Military Mass and the Digital Stack

Within this emerging multi-orbital landscape, hard military capability remains a foundational force, even as the power of new technologies is changing key dynamics.

The continued centrality of military power

The United States continues to wield unmatched kinetic power worldwide, maintaining a footprint

[7] Minas Lyristis, "Riyadh's Strategic Hedging: Survival in a Multipolar Middle East," *Strategy International*, Feb. 17, 2026.

[8] C. Vinodan and Anju Lis Kurian, "Strategic Autonomy and India's Hedging Policies in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 475-495.

[9] See, for instance, Bhumika Sevkani, "Leveraging BRICS & SCO for India's Energy Security Strategy," *Takshashila Issue Brief*, Version 1.0, October 2026.

that no other country can replicate.[10] Relying on its blue-water naval dominance across critical maritime chokepoints, a vast network of hundreds of global military bases, and a commanding grip on key space-based intelligence, surveillance, and orbital reconnaissance assets, Washington exerts an unparalleled global reach. This kinetic capability allows the United States to act as the guarantor of maritime security and global supply lines, project power across multiple theaters simultaneously, and underwrite the security of its multiple allies.

China's kinetic reach remains more regionally concentrated, but its capabilities are expanding at a rate that has altered the regional strategic calculus, especially in the Western Pacific. Beijing is engaged in one of the most ambitious conventional and nuclear military modernization programs in modern history, rapidly expanding its naval tonnage, deploying sophisticated hypersonic cruise missiles, and upgrading its cyber warfare capabilities.[11] This buildup is guided by a clear institutional mandate: to possess a "world-class military" capable of fighting and winning regional high-intensity conflicts, deterring external superpower intervention, and asserting sovereignty over its contested maritime periphery by 2049, the centennial anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.[12]

While their military expenditures are dwarfed by the two superpowers, middle powers have developed consequential kinetic gravitas of their own. The proliferation of sophisticated anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) weapon systems, mobile anti-ship cruise missiles, precision-guided artillery, and advanced, low-cost drone fleets has allowed these regional actors to construct formidable defensive shields. These localized bubbles raise the costs of external superpower intervention, altering the risk-reward calculus for Washington or Beijing and enabling middle powers to assert unprecedented regional dominance. Military mass is no longer measured solely by the number of carrier strike groups or strategic bombers, but by the density and sophistication of a country's localized denial capabilities.

Turkey provides an excellent case study of this defensive insulation and strategic autonomy.[13] By integrating imported Russian-made S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile batteries with its rapidly expanding indigenous defense industry, most notably its combat-proven Bayraktar drone lines and long-range precision strike cruise missiles, Ankara has established a robust A2/AD shield across the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.[14] This military mass forces both its NATO allies and external competitors to treat Turkey not as a subordinate proxy or a predictable flank state, but as an independent security actor that must be negotiated with on a peer-to-peer basis. Turkey's ability to project military power into North Africa, the Caucasus, and the Middle East demonstrates how localized kinetic gravitas can be converted into broad diplomatic leverage.[15]

The power of the technological ecosystems

Today, however, kinetic military mass is increasingly bound to a technological ecosystem: a pervasive, interconnected framework dominated by two hardening, noninteroperable technology stacks.

By monopolizing the advanced photolithography machines required to print cutting-edge circuitry, the highly specialized semiconductor foundries that forge advanced chips, and the massive data centers that train next-generation algorithms, both Washington and Beijing construct sovereign technological fields.[16] These high-fenced ecosystems function as rigid structural cores, designed to restrict the flow of dual-use intellectual property and lock third-party countries into long-term technological dependencies. Their consolidation marks the definitive end of the post-Cold War era of technological globalization and neutrality, replacing it with a regime of techno-nationalism where every line of code and every microchip carries geopolitical alignment. Third actors are increasingly blocked from mixing components, forced instead to orbit one of two competing technological architectures.

[10] Robert Peters, Daniel R. Green, and Wilson Beaver, *2026 Index of US Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2026).
[11] *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of War, 2025).
[12] For details, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's 'World-Class Military' Ambitions: Origins and Implications," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2020, 85-99.
[13] Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Turkey, *Strategic Framework for Long-Range Air Defense and Indigenous Unmanned Aerial Systems in the Black Sea Basin*, Ankara, 2025.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Nikolaus Lang, Sylvain Duranton, Vladimir Lukic, Matt Langione, Rodrigo Ortiz Mena, Jona Lampert, and David Zuluaga Martinez, *The Great Divide: How the US and China Are Splitting the AI World* (Boston: The Boston Consulting Group, 2026).

Even the most diplomatically agile middle powers find themselves caught in these digital gravity wells. A country may possess the localized kinetic mass to defy US or Chinese military pressure, but escaping the structural pull of their underlying digital infrastructure is proving far more difficult, if not impossible. The choices a country makes regarding its telecommunications infrastructure, cloud storage providers, and smart-city software create long-term dependencies that shape its strategic alignment for decades. The deep integration of software architectures means that once a country adopts a specific technology stack, the institutional, financial, and operational costs of switching to a competitor's system become prohibitively high.

The United Arab Emirates illustrates this vulnerability.[17] Abu Dhabi has sought to leverage its immense sovereign wealth to cultivate world-class, indigenous AI platforms, such as its open-source *Falcon* large language models. But to train, execute, and sustain these models, the United Arab Emirates remains tethered to the high-fenced semiconductor supply chains controlled by the United States, which commands the export of critical graphic processing units and holds the intellectual property keys to advanced machine learning software.

As these advanced AI architectures increasingly integrate into the United Arab Emirates' domestic defense grids, automated smart cities, automated financial hubs, and intelligence infrastructure, Abu Dhabi's ability to remain technologically nonaligned evaporates. To introduce a Chinese-manufactured hardware compute stack or a Huawei-backed data center network into its national infrastructure would be to inhale a digital atmosphere that is toxic to US security protocols. Doing so would trigger immediate American technology sanctions, the revocation of export licenses for critical microchips, and the loss of access to Western software updates.

Because the capital and operational costs of switching a country's entire digital infrastructure are prohibitive, a stark reality emerges: Middle powers can increasingly assert regional kinetic control, but the hardening of the US and Chinese technological stacks forces even the most autonomous countries to manage their digital alignments carefully.

IV. The Complex Realities of Economic Interdependence

Despite intensifying geopolitical competition and sharp technological bifurcation, the contemporary US-China rivalry is not a simple mirror image of the 20th-century Cold War. The oft-used "New Cold War" label suffers from a fundamental analytical flaw.[18] It fails to account for the defining feature of 21st-century global macroeconomics: the dense commercial network tying the two superpowers together. This density changes the nature of great power competition, introducing a systemic friction that limits the utility of traditional containment strategies and prevents the formation of separate, isolated geopolitical blocs.

The decoupling illusion

Unlike the mid-20th century where the Western alliance and the Soviet bloc operated within almost entirely separate, self-contained economic ecosystems with negligible cross-border trade, today's international system functions inside a hyper-dense, highly integrated web of shared economic interests. Within this network, the United States and China are not distant, isolated antagonists operating on separate planets. They are binary economic engines locked in a continuous, turbulent, and inescapable relationship. They share the same vital economic material: deeply integrated global supply chains, cross-border capital markets, complex manufacturing networks, and massive mutual debt holdings. The drag of this interdependence makes wholesale economic decoupling an existential risk for both actors, as any sudden break would trigger a catastrophic deflationary spiral across both domestic economies.

This entanglement creates an ongoing policy paradox for strategists in both Washington and Beijing. What contemporary Western policymakers term "de-risking," "friend-shoring," or "decoupling" often amounts to an attempt to re-engineer the laws of gravity within a highly dense commercial network. The surgical separation of these supply chains is something the system's sheer density and complexity may not permit. The international division of labor has become so granular that attempting to isolate a major economic actor leads to unintended systemic

[17] Ministry of Cabinet Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, *Strategic Report on Sovereign AI Clusters and Advanced Microchip Dependencies*, Abu Dhabi, 2025.

[18] See, for instance, Dan Green, "The New Cold War with China," Heritage Foundation, May 23, 2025.

blowback, as alternative supply lines frequently wind their way back through the very jurisdictions policymakers are attempting to avoid.

For example, even as Washington injects hundreds of billions of dollars in domestic subsidies through legislation to foster a self-sufficient American electric vehicle and clean energy sector, these domestic manufacturing hubs remain tethered to the broader Chinese economic network.[19] American-assembled EVs still rely heavily on upstream Chinese mineral refining networks for lithium, cobalt, manganese, and graphite, as well as Chinese-manufactured battery cells, anodes, and sub-components. A complete break of the supply chain would cripple the manufacturing capacity Washington is trying to build, demonstrating that Western green industrial policy remains dependent on Chinese manufacturing dominance.

Global financial markets exhibit an identical reality. When the US Department of the Treasury implements outbound investment screening mechanisms or restricts Western capital flows into sensitive Chinese high-tech sectors like quantum computing, biotechnology, or AI, it often triggers an immediate kinetic kickback.[20] These regulatory blocks can depress the valuations of Chinese tech firms, which in turn devalues the global investment portfolios of the large Western pension funds, asset managers, university endowments, and venture capital firms that underwrite American innovation ecosystems. The integration of global finance means that hurting the economic core of a competitor results in the self-inflicted liquidation of one's own domestic capital reserves.

A stabilization boon?

Crucially, this economic density serves as a major stabilizer for the international order. It places an unprecedentedly steep price tag on outright military conflict for both Washington and Beijing. Because these binary economic giants share a common pool of global liquidity, corporate revenues, consumer markets, and intellectual property inputs, a kinetic strike by one superpower against the core interests of the other becomes an exercise in mutual financial liquidation. Paradoxically, the same economic interconnectedness that generates daily trade friction, tariff disputes, and currency wars also functions as a powerful anchor: While the US-China relationship is highly volatile, it is held in place against the pull of total war by the shared costs of systemic disruption.

Middle powers thrive inside this interstitial space between interdependence and competition. Because they do not gravitate toward a single superpower, they occupy the gaps, advancing their own developmental goals while acting as the connective tissue that prevents systemic collapse. They position themselves as alternative manufacturing hubs, financial clearings, and diplomatic backchannels, absorbing the capital and trade flows that are diverted by superpower tariffs and regulatory restrictions. By serving as bridges within the network, these countries enhance their own strategic value while reinforcing global stability.

Singapore provides a compelling example of this systemic stabilization.[21] The city-state hosts critical US naval logistics infrastructure at Changi Naval Base, supporting the American forward military presence and maritime surveillance operations in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Singapore serves as a premier offshore clearinghouse for the Chinese renminbi, a primary regional hub for Chinese tech giants expanding into Southeast Asia, and as a safe haven for Chinese corporate capital.[22] By positioning itself as an indispensable node within both the Western security architecture and the Chinese economic ecosystem, Singapore reaps immense financial rewards. Concurrently, it serves as a stabilizing force, reminding both superpowers that a kinetic conflict would incinerate the shared commercial, financial, and digital infrastructure that sustains them both.[23]

The economic network, therefore, is both a highly competitive marketplace and a global life-support system. While the rhetoric of a new Cold War implies a clean break and a clear division of the world into distinct camps, the material reality of 21st century forces a deep, continuous convergence. As long as the

[19] See Sidley Austin LLP, "Impact of US Outbound Investment Rules on Loan Transactions in China and Practical Considerations," March 14, 2025, and "US Outbound Investment Regulations: Lessons and Takeaways Six Months In," July 14, 2025.

[20] Department of the Treasury, *Report on Outbound Investment Restrictions and Financial Market Integration with the People's Republic of China*, Washington, DC, 2025.

[21] See, for instance, Joseph Chinyong Llow, *Threading the Needle: Singapore in an Age of Great Power Competition* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center, April 2026).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

particles of trade, technology inputs, capital markets, and industrial supply lines remain shared, the network will endure as a check against great power conflict, transforming raw competition into a tightly managed corporate and geopolitical dance.

V. Minilateralism and the Evolution of Governance

Concurrently, the center of global governance is shifting, pulling the management of the international system out of its traditional, post-World War II institutional orbit. The traditional international institutions—the United Nations system, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and their associated multilateral organs—is increasingly sidelined by bureaucratic inertia, deep geopolitical polarization, and veto-driven paralysis within the United Nations Security Council. These broad, universal bodies are struggling to address modern security crises, regulating emerging technologies, or managing global economic imbalances. As a result, power has migrated toward more agile sector commands and the unpredictable friction of nonstate networks.

As universal international organizations see their influence wane, flexible minilateral constellations are filling the governance vacuum. Unlike the broad, highly rigid, and ideologically driven alliance systems that defined the 20th century, modern minilateral groups are small, issue-specific, and highly adaptable coalitions of the willing. They focus on targeted security, technological, or economic problems, bringing together unique combinations of countries that possess the specific capabilities required to address a concrete issue. These arrangements prioritize functional utility over institutional permanence, allowing countries to collaborate without the burden of expansive treaty obligations.

Often initiated, designed, or steered by assertive middle powers, these constellations set regional regulatory agendas and coordinate practical actions on the ground. These developments force the American and Chinese superpowers to participate as equal partners or negotiate with these blocs as single entities, rather than dictating terms as imperial commanders. Influence within these minilateral formats is earned through joint infrastructure projects, capital contributions, technical expertise, and resource-sharing, rather than dictated by absolute military weight or ideological alignment. Middle powers, as a result, see their voice amplified and their ability to shape global standards increase in ways that were impossible under a rigid unipolar or bipolar architecture.

Brazil's recent strategic leadership within the G20 and its aggressive expansion of the Biofuture Platform demonstrates this dynamic with exceptional clarity. [24] By organizing a highly specialized coalition of countries focused on scaling up advanced biofuels, establishing global bioeconomy standards, and creating new frameworks for sustainable agricultural trade, Brasilia has dictated the orbital path of international energy transition and carbon accounting policies. [25] This initiative has compelled both the United States and China to negotiate within a technical and regulatory framework that they did not design themselves, demonstrating how a middle power can use minilateralism to project global power. [26]

Beyond these national orbits lies a dense, chaotic, and high-velocity field of nonstate actors that possess rapidly expanding influence in international affairs. Entities such as multinational technology conglomerates, frontier AI research laboratories, decentralized cyber-syndicates, and transnational activist networks now exert a pull capable of deflecting the national security policies and grand strategies of superpowers. These actors operate across borders, leverage vast computational and financial resources, and move at speeds that oftentimes outpace the regulatory and defensive capabilities of traditional bureaucratic countries.

These nonstate asteroids do not play by traditional Westphalian rules or respect territorial sovereignty. A single private AI lab can release an open-source foundational model that disrupts global labor markets, alters the digital disinformation landscape, or democratizes dangerous cyber-warfare capabilities overnight. [27] Similarly, a private satellite communications network like SpaceX's Starlink can single-handedly dictate the communication capabilities, operational visibility, and target acquisition potential of a live battlefield, completely

[24] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federative Republic of Brazil, *The Biofuture Platform and G20 Sustainability Metrics*, Agenda Secretariat, Brasília, 2025.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] See, for instance, Harry Booth and Billy Perrigo, "The Most Disruptive Company in the World, *Time Magazine*, March 11, 2026.

independent of the Pentagon's formal commands or international humanitarian treaties.[28] The decisions made by a single corporate executive can alter the outcome of a military campaign or a national election, challenging the country's traditional monopoly on violence and information.

The power wielded by these nonstate actors is highly asymmetric, nonlinear, and difficult to deter through traditional kinetic means. Through AI-orchestrated cyber operations, control over critical low-Earth orbit satellite constellations, or ownership of the undersea cables that carry global data, they can disrupt the grand strategies of both Washington and Beijing. The result is a high-velocity strategic environment where traditional, slow-moving diplomatic statecraft struggles to keep pace, forcing countries to develop new modalities of public-private alignment to protect their core security interests. Countries, plainly, must now learn to negotiate with corporate actors as sovereign entities, acknowledging that power has leaked out of formal government structures.

The most striking irony of this institutional fragmentation and nonstate proliferation is that the volatility of these networks is occasionally forcing the United States and China into a reluctant, functional partnership. To prevent a catastrophic kinetic collision—such as an accidental war triggered by an unaligned cyber-syndicate's provocation or an unaligned AI system's false alarm—the two superpowers have begun discussing the establishment of bilateral AI safety hotlines, regular scientific working groups, and maritime de-confliction protocols.[29]

Global governance, therefore, is no longer about maintaining top-down geopolitical control or spreading a universal ideological framework. It has transformed into a pragmatic exercise in managing the friction of an increasingly fragmented world to ensure that the system does not collapse under its own complexity.

VI. American Strategy in a Crowded System

The transition from a unipolar world to a bipolar system with multipolar dimensions does not imply that the American global influence is entering a period of irreversible terminal decline. While the brief unipolar moment has passed, the United States remains the single most massive, dynamic, and resilient power in the international system. The total heat death of American global influence is nowhere to be seen, despite the predictions of declinist theorists. Instead, there is a diffusion of power, where the vacuum of space has become crowded with the arrival of other capable actors, transforming the global system from an empty theater into a dense and complex ecosystem.

The United States remains dominant because its foundational strengths are peerless, rooted in a unique combination of geographic insulation, institutional transparency, demographic resilience, and an unparalleled capacity for economic self-renewal. While China has accelerated its technological and military propulsion systems to close the capability gap, the United States still maintains global military reach that can project decisive, multi-domain power into any quadrant of the international system. No other country possesses the logistical capacity to sustain high-intensity operations across multiple oceans simultaneously, backed by an institutionalized command structure and decades of operational experience.

More critically, the United States continues to control the primary financial life-support systems of global commerce. While it faces localized challenges from alternative payment mechanisms, bilateral currency swaps, and de-dollarization initiatives within the BRICS bloc, the US dollar's status as the undisputed global reserve currency continues to function as a protective economic shield. This financial insulation allows the United States to borrow at lower rates, deploy devastating economic sanctions against its adversaries, and shield its domestic consumers and capital markets from the worst solar flares of global economic volatility. The deep liquidity of US capital markets remains an unmatched vacuum, drawing in global savings and underwriting the next generation of technological innovation.

Furthermore, and significantly, the United States sits at the center of a vast, institutionalized network of alliances and partnerships that amplifies its power. Unlike its primary competitors—which lack deep institutional friendships or relying on brittle,

[28] Congressional Research Service, *Report on Private Satellite Constellations and Asymmetric Military Operational Impact*, Library of Congress, 2025.

[29] See details in White House, "Fact Sheet: President J. Trump Advances a Fair and Reciprocal Relationship with China While Hosting Historic State Visit," Washington, DC, Sept. 25, 2026.

transactional partnerships—Washington serves as the barycenter for a dense, interconnected network of partner countries across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. These alliances are built on shared values, institutional interoperability, and mutual security guarantees, providing a force multiplier that China or Russia cannot replicate.

The end of US hegemony, therefore, does not mean the collapse of American power. It only shifts America's status from being the sole superpower to being the leading anchor in a crowded cluster of increasingly influential countries.

Still, to navigate this crowded landscape, maintain its relative advantage, and secure its long-term national interests, the United States should execute a four-pillared operational strategy.

First, the United States should maintain its unrivaled military edge by shifting away from an exclusive focus on legacy hardware platforms—such as massive aircraft carriers and traditional manned fighter jets, which are increasingly vulnerable to A2/AD missile fields—toward a more flexible force posture that integrates autonomous systems, hypersonic strike weapons, decentralized cyber defense, and space-based defense networks.[30] To achieve this posture, defense planners should then prioritize the rapid industrial scaling of low-cost, high-volume asymmetric systems over traditional major defense acquisitions. Modernizing the defense industrial base to produce these low-cost, high-volume asymmetric systems at scale is especially critical. Maintaining a qualitative military edge ensures that American diplomacy is backed by credible strength, providing the security shield under which open global commerce, international law, and maritime freedom can continue to function.

Second, Washington should recognize that a guarantor of power in a technological age is the capacity to out-innovate its rivals, while prudently managing economic interdependencies. To sustain a competitive, resilient economy, the United States should fund state-backed research and development, particularly in foundational sciences, while expanding international talent recruitment by loosening high-skilled visa restrictions to attract and retain global scientific expertise, and simultaneously reforming economic restrictions to prevent self-inflicted capital flight. This imperative is underscored by recent macroeconomic data showing that AI-related investments alone contributed nearly 1% to total US GDP growth in 2025.[31] At the same time, economic statecraft should be refined: Washington should calibrate investment screening and export controls to target strictly narrow, critical national security sectors, preventing self-defeating financial isolation while securing critical supply chains. By remaining the primary global launchpad for breakthroughs in commercial fusion energy, quantum computing, advanced biotechnology, and semiconductor manufacturing, the United States will secure its position as the hub of the global economy, regardless of shifting political tides or regional alignments.

Third, the United States should treat modern diplomacy as a complex multilateral negotiation, abandoning the rigid, moralistic rhetoric of the past. Doing so means seeking pragmatic, issue-specific docking points with influential middle powers rather than demanding that they enter an exclusive, binding American orbit by diplomatic or economic force. Washington should accept that countries like India, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia will maintain independent relationships with China and Russia. Building resilient, voluntary, and flexible partnerships with these actors ensures long-term systemic stability. This requires offering genuine joint industrial co-production and technology-sharing frameworks rather than treating middle powers as passive diplomatic instruments. This approach creates a durable network of mutual interest that outlasts any brittle, forced alliance.

Fourth, and finally, the United States should cultivate high velocity minilateral constellations, particularly to secure the high ground of critical emerging technologies and supply chain security. By prioritizing small, highly specialized, and agile working groups—such as the recent US-Japan-South Korea trilateral pledge on shared AI and quantum computing standards—the United States can bypass the diplomatic gridlock and institutional paralysis characteristic of large, slow-moving global

[30] David Santoro and Kimberly Lehn, "The Attrition Advantage: How the United States Can Win Through Precise Mass," *National Security Journal*, June 7, 2026.

[31] Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business: Digital Economy Contributions to United States GDP Growth in 2025*, US Department of Commerce, January 2026.

federations.[32] These agile technological partnerships, including the newly launched Pax Silica framework, allow the United States and its closest, most technologically advanced partners to establish the global technical benchmarks, data privacy rules, and export control regimes for dual-use technologies well before its strategic competitors can catch up.[33]

Implementing these four strategic shifts will ensure that the United States maintains a powerful, stabilizing presence within an increasingly crowded, multipolar international system, turning systemic complexity into enduring strategic advantage.

[32] The White House, *Joint Statement on the Trilateral Pledge for Quantum-Centric Supercomputing and AI Integration (US-Japan-Korea)*, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, DC, March 2026.

[33] For details about Pax Silica, visit https://www.state.gov/pax-silica. For an analysis, see Akhil Ramesh, "Pax Silica and the Case for Bringing Industry Back into Foreign Policy," *National Interest*, January 2026.

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