

WIKI n°16: Is the World Moving Towards a Multiplex or Apolar Order?

The early 21st century saw a profound redefinition of the global geopolitical landscape. Regionalization, across various forms, has emerged as a major trend that, instead of opposing globalization, appears to mitigate its negative effects or even neutralize some of its most harmful aspects. This is the claim made by states within groups such as BRICS+⁶⁷.

This reconfiguration, far from univocal, reflects both a fragmentation of the traditional international system and a quest for autonomy from hegemonic powers. One manifestation is the emergence of alliances aiming for future multipolarity. The true nature of this global change is still a subject of reflection.

Is the world becoming multiplex?

The concept of a "multiplex world," introduced by Amitav Acharya in *The End of American World Order*, refers to a world where various actors operate in parallel on different global stages, each pursuing their own objectives. It signifies the steady decline of Western hegemony and the notable rise of regionalism globally.

This more decentralized world, conducive to structured cooperation around recognized regional powers, promotes the search for solutions adapted to regional realities, in a spirit of shared leadership.

This conception of global configurations is based on "interaction capacity," defined as the scope and intensity of agreements or treaties a country enters into with the rest of the world. Morocco's new positioning on the African stage, with its return to the African Union, includes the signing of over a thousand cooperation agreements with other African nations.

Conversely, from 1945 to 2000, the United States accounted for 40% of all treaties signed globally. From 2006 to 2017, this share dropped to 22%⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ Along these lines, China maintains that it does not aspire to supersede the United States as the global leader, but rather to assume the economic, political, and military role commensurate with its existing and increasing power. This is the essence of the statement by former South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor, who asserted that the BRICS do not intend to supplant the UN (and its specialized agencies), recognizing its significant role in globalization.

⁶⁸ Acharya, A., Estevadeordal, A., & Goodman, L. W. (2023). Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order. *International Affairs*, 99(6), 2339-2365. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad242>.

In this multiplex world, influential actors emerge not only among nation-states but also among multinationals (MNCs), NGOs, social movements, and radical groups, all seeking to reshape power and influence global dynamics.

A defining feature of the multiplex world is the growing interdependence and interaction between nations. Faced with global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and economic crises, collective responses are essential, making multilateral cooperation indispensable. However, political tensions often undermine and even halt such cooperation, as evidenced in the strained relations between the United States and the European Union on one side and Russia and China on the other, as well as between the Global South and Global North within UN institutions. International actors disagree on the meaning and modalities of cooperation—some clinging to traditional models, while others advocate for new approaches.

Multiplexity offers opportunities by fostering innovation and creativity in addressing global challenges. Digital platforms, for instance, enable the rapid dissemination of ideas and best practices, strengthening collaboration among diverse actors. Some actors however leverage multiplexity to preserve their hegemony. The reality of multiplexity is nonetheless an undeniable reality for all nations.

The trend towards a multiplex world presents significant challenges for effective international cooperation. It increases the complexity of international relations, exacerbates conflicts of interest, and complicates decision-making. Additionally, it appears to encourage the rise of nationalism and populism in many countries, prompting governments to prioritize national agendas over cooperative and balanced international partnerships.

... Or is it drifting towards becoming apolar?

An apolar world is defined as the absence of poles in the world system. In this context, power is dispersed rather than concentrated and the power of states is dwindling, while the influence of certain non-state actors⁶⁹ is on the rise⁷⁰.

This concept was articulated by Richard N. Haas in 2008 in his article "living in a non-polar world"⁷¹, where he argued that the world has become apolar due to:

- The state no longer holds a monopoly on power. It is now shared with non-state actors (global and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations NGOs, multinational corporations MNCs, militias, etc.), whose influence on the global order is steadily increasing.

⁶⁹ Analysis of governance stakeholders has revealed that a power imbalance exists between states, with some holding significantly more influence than others, including so-called "emerging" economies. Furthermore, certain private sector actors, most notably Multinational Corporations, wield greater power than some states, whereas other actors, including trade unions and NGOs in general, have seen their influence diminish. Finally, other actors, such as certain citizen movements, are gaining traction.

⁷⁰ Haas Richard N. The Age of Nonpolarity [Journal]. - 2008.

⁷¹ Richard, Haass. 2008. "The Age of Nonpolarity." ForeignAffairs, 3 mai. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2008-05-03/age-nonpolarity>.

- Military force, once a cornerstone of traditional state power, has become less effective and is increasingly overshadowed by new instruments of power, including soft power.
- The emergence of several regional powers, such as South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Egypt, India, Nigeria, and Turkey. However, many of these powers face challenges in managing regional conflicts with varying degrees of success.

These findings neither confirm nor infirm trends towards apolarity or multipolarity. Instead, they suggest a simultaneous emergence of two distinct geopolitical processes.

In an "apolar" world, states would experience a decline in influence in favor of non-state actors, fundamentally altering the global order. International institutions would struggle to establish effective frameworks for interstate cooperation, increasing the potential for global disagreements, conflicts, and even wars.

Consequently, states cannot function optimally in an apolar world. They require a stable global system to maximize the effectiveness of their regional and international strategies.