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Can America Embrace Multipolarity?

Zack Cooper

SYNOPSIS

Today's world order can be described as "fragmented multipolarity" — which resembles unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity simultaneously — and the United States under incoming president Donald Trump is well positioned to take advantage of this new reality but will need to engage in trade-offs and flexible coalition building. The new Trump team will need to tailor the breadth, depth, and scope of each coalition to its objectives. The shift in mindset to accommodate the reality of fragmented multipolarity will not be easy or uncontested, but it can be an opportunity for American renewal.

COMMENTARY

Donald Trump's return to the White House brings with it the potential for major changes in US foreign policy. Trump has put forward an America First strategy, which demands that other countries step up and rely less on the United States. One way to trigger this shift would be for the United States to devolve responsibility for regional security to some of its allies and partners around the world. Doing so would be an admission that the world is becoming more multipolar and that the United States must preserve its power for the regions and moments in which it is most needed. But what would it mean for the United States to embrace multipolarity? This commentary argues that managing multipolarity is at its core about building flexible coalitions — a task for which the United States is well equipped, but which will require tough trade-offs from the new Trump team.

From the Unipolar Moment to a Multipolar Reality

American foreign policy experts are deeply divided about the state of the world today. The Biden administration's National Security Strategy stated that "our world is at an inflection point", but exactly what this portended remained unclear. Some hoped for

the return of America's unipolar moment. Others foresaw a global struggle between democratic and autocratic blocs. Still others believed the world was already multipolar and growing more so by the day. In fact, all three of these views have some merit, depending on the issue and region under study.

Today's world resembles unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity simultaneously. The United States remains the most influential global player, but China has caught up quickly in certain areas. Traditional European and Asian powers continue to play critical roles in their respective regions, yet they do so alongside rising powers from India to Brazil and beyond. This emerging system might therefore be described as one of fragmented multipolarity.

Although many Americans remain wary of any erosion of US power, the Trump administration has openly acknowledged this reality. What's more, Washington is well positioned to benefit from fragmented multipolarity. Multipolar systems require agile coalitions, and US leaders have decades of experience in building partnerships and sustaining alliances. But while Cold War alliances were largely fixed, these new coalitions will be smaller and more flexible. To manage multipolarity, US leaders will have to unearth the art of coalition building.

Fragmented multipolarity differs in two key respects from the preceding system. First, it will not be ordered around one or two dominant countries. Second, it will not be governed by fixed alliances and institutions. Instead, the resulting system will be characterised by shifting issue-specific coalitions. New groups like the Quad, BRICS, AUKUS and many more will emerge and coexist alongside legacy institutions. Experts and officials have described the resulting combination of minilateral and multilateral groupings as hubs and spokes, webs or latticework.

This does not imply that treaty alliances and multilateral institutions will disappear; path dependency makes these groups remarkably sticky. Even defunct international organisations are seldom discarded outright; they tend to slowly fade into irrelevance. Outdated institutions will instead find themselves competing for time, attention and resources with newer counterparts. The institutions that survive will need to demonstrate real value rather than serve as "talk shops".

For rising and non-aligned powers, such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and South Africa, the rise of coalitions presents many opportunities. As these countries grow, some will emerge as international heavyweights. Regional networks will centre around these rising powers, and their neighbours will increasingly look to them for leadership. Few, if any, of these players will want to consider formal alliances, but flexible alignments will present opportunities to attract support without sacrificing autonomy.

For traditional powers, such as the United States, fragmented multipolarity may be disconcerting. With the passing of the unipolar moment, few foreign leaders are willing to bet their future entirely on Washington. A recent poll of 16 advanced economies found that two-thirds of those surveyed said the United States does not consider their interests when making foreign policy decisions, or only does so in a limited way. Thus, uncertainty about America will drive even its closest friends to pursue autonomy and deepen ties with other partners.

Yet all is not lost. The United States has decades of experience in building alliances and partnerships, which is already proving vital. Washington has capitalised on this expertise by helping to construct the Quad, AUKUS and other groups. This complex web of issue-focused coalitions will augment existing alliances and institutions, offering faster progress towards specific objectives.



Embracing a multipolar world can be an opportunity for American renewal. *Image from Unsplash.*

Three Tough Coalition-Building Trade-offs

At its core, coalition building is about managing complex trade-offs. Coalitions must be built to deal with specific challenges at specific times. Three trade-offs are central to coalition building.

The first consideration is the *breadth* of a coalition, which refers to the size of its membership. Over time, organisations tend to grow — but this is not always a good thing. Large coalitions can accomplish more expansive objectives, but they are also harder to coordinate. In fact, coordination challenges tend to increase exponentially with size, resulting in lowest common denominator deliverables. As a result, bigger is not always better when it comes to coalition building.

The second factor is the *depth* of a coalition, which describes its degree of institutionalisation. Highly institutionalised coalitions may be necessary to coordinate complex tasks, establish clear expectations and lock in future decision makers. Flexibility, however, also has its upsides. More flexible organisations are better able to respond quickly, by adjusting their membership, altering meeting schedules or even updating their focus to meet emerging challenges.

The third aspect is the *scope* of a coalition, which tends to be either regional or functional. Every coalition is brought together by some common objective among its members. Security and economic coalitions are often regional since security threats and economic opportunities tend to be geographically limited. Governance and technology coalitions, on the other hand, tend to be functionally delimited, permitting cooperation among countries spread across the globe.

Although the breadth, depth and scope of each coalition must be tailored to its objective, there are four types of coalitions which each share similar characteristics. Security coalitions tend to be small, formal and regional. Economic coalitions are usually large, formal and regional. Technology coalitions are typically small, flexible and functional. Governance coalitions are usually large, flexible and functional. Each requires different approaches to build a successful coalition.

The Trump team wants to take a different approach to coalition building that is more focused on specific ally and partner contributions than universal and all-encompassing alliances. This approach is a good fit for today's multipolar world. The alignment decisions of third countries will determine success in this new era and while coalitions of like-minded states can reinforce US aims, they will also decrease US control.

The incoming Trump administration is in a unique position to embrace these changes, but the shift in mindset will not be easy or uncontested. As America transitions from central hub to one of many, it will have to be more flexible. Nonetheless, it is clear that a fragmented multipolar world is emerging regardless of US actions so it is time for leaders in Washington to embrace this change. Multipolarity need not be a death sentence; it can be an opportunity for American renewal.

Zack Cooper is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a visiting fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). This commentary builds on a recent report on "Managing Multipolarity" that he co-authored with Connor Fiddler, Allison Schwartz, Emily Young Carr and Ben Noon.