

IS THE EMERGING GLOBAL ORDER BIPOLAR?

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December 01, 2023 01:16 am | Updated 07:53 am IST

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President Joe Biden greets China's President Xi Jinping at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California on November 15, 2023, on the sidelines of the APEC conference. | Photo Credit: AP

The world has witnessed several disruptions in recent years. China's phenomenal rise has unleashed a superpower competition between Washington and Beijing. Russia is challenging the post-World War security architecture in Europe through military means. In West Asia, Israel is engaged in a brutal war with Hamas. The world is also witnessing the rise of several middle powers such as India. Is the emerging global order bipolar? **B.K. Sharma** and **Swaran Singh** discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Stanly Johny**. Edited excerpts:

Some say that the global order today is economically multipolar, but militarily unipolar. Some say there is multipolarity, while some others argue that we are back to bipolar rivalry between the U.S. and China. What is your take on the emerging global order?

B.K. Sharma: Everything is in a state of flux. I would look at the present world order as one of asymmetric bipolarity in which the U.S. still remains a pre-eminent power, but China is closing in very fast. Meanwhile, there are other power centres emerging and they will play a significant role in the balance of power. I'd say an asymmetric, diffused world order is taking shape. With the passage of time, maybe these contours will be clearer.

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Professor, let's look at China, which has seen a phenomenal rise economically and militarily over the past four decades. How is China's rise affecting the global order?

Swaran Singh: In the last 40 years, if you have to identify a single factor influencing international order, China stands out. Its GDP in 1990 [was] \$300 billion, [moved] to \$1 trillion-plus at the turn of century and is now \$19.3 trillion. That is an unprecedented event or process to take place in human history. And the fact that China is controlled by one party and virtually one man makes this economic lever particularly powerful in redefining the order.

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But let me also mention here that power has been the defining feature of how world orders have

been built and destroyed over the years, and this power has often been military at its core. And if you use that yardstick, you will see that in the 19th century, countries that developed steam engines and developed naval fleets, [that is] small European countries, became great powers. In the 20th century, we had nuclear evolution, so we devised a new concept called superpowers. Great powers could control multiple events around the world and superpowers could control multiple events around the world simultaneously.

The 21st century is one of people's power. The connectivity that the world sees today is unprecedented. That results in interactions, sometimes even interdependence, to some extent global integration, and therefore there could be bipolar impulses.

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But they [China] are never likely to produce a rigid bipolar world because the world is much more interdependent and integrated now.

General, you are now in Moscow attending the Primakov Forum. The war in Ukraine has been going on for the past 20 months. Do you think the war has driven Russia deeper into China's embrace? What are the implications for India?

B.K. Sharma: Before 2014 (when economic sanctions were imposed on Russia), the Russians were extremely circumspect about having close ties with China because of their memories of the Cold War during which the Chinese had sided with the U.S. But with the imposition of economic sanctions, Russia was not left with many choices and gravitated towards China. Then the invasion of Ukraine took place and a second set of economic sanctions was imposed on Russia. But let me tell you, the Russians are extremely conscious of the fact that they cannot put all their eggs in one basket. There are still simmering undercurrents of mistrust between the two sides, particularly regarding the balance of power in Central Asia. The relationship looks cosy from the outside now, but deep down, there are misgivings on both sides. Therefore, Russia would not like to go the whole hog into the Chinese orbit.

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There are enough signals from Russia that in pursuance of its policy, or pivot to Asia, it would like to diversify its relationship, particularly in terms of energy, with the developing economies of Asia, especially East Asia and India. The Russians are seriously looking at reinventing their ties with India. There are two important corridors which will give some gravitas to the relationship. One is the International North-South Transport Trade Corridor and the other is the Chennai–Vladivostok Maritime Corridor. Once we are able to make these corridors operational, Russia's dependence on China will probably reduce. And this is the direction in which we should be.

Professor, India has very good ties with both the U.S. and Russia. But at the same time, it has a testy relationship with China. If the great power competition heats up between China and the U.S., and between Russia and the U.S., do you think India's options will shrink further?

Swaran Singh: There is often a temptation to view India's relations with the U.S. and China in contrasting terms, which makes it easier to highlight the differences. But all is not hunky dory [with the U.S.]. India and the U.S. had signed a joint statement in July 2005, which opened up a new relationship and a nuclear deal was finally signed in 2008. And India was supposed to get six nuclear power reactors from the U.S. These have not come yet. So, it's not that everything is fantastic. On the other hand, China's has a trade of \$138 billion with India, so it's not that in China's case we only have difficulties. With both countries, relations are complex because India,

just like China and the U.S., is a major global player. Indeed, if the competition between China and the U.S., and Russia and the U.S., heats up, it does reduce the manoeuvrability of India in terms of how to manage good relations with Russia, China, and the U.S. At the same time, I don't see those heating up to the extent that our options get closed completely because these countries are enormously dependent on each other. So, I don't see a rigid bipolar system happening in the future.

General, what in your view should be India's strategic approach towards a rising China?

B.K. Sharma: First, we have to acknowledge the fact that China is going to be a long-term competitor in Asia. And the border is just one of the pressure points that China uses against India. In the foreseeable future, I do not visualise any major breakthrough on the border aspect. We also have to recognise that there is a huge power asymmetry between India and China. And with time, this will remain, if not grow. Therefore, fundamental to India's dealing with China is the growth of our own comprehensive national power. India is going to be the third largest economy perhaps in a decade or more. With that economic clout, India has to spend more on military modernisation, with the added focus on disruptive technologies.

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The second issue is about internal balancing. We have fault lines. Rather than mending those, those fault lines get accentuated because of political calculations. Societal cohesiveness is important. [We need to] particularly bring about peace and tranquility in the border States.

Then, as part of our external balancing, I think we need to balance our relations with the U.S. so that in some form we are able to perpetuate China's two-front dilemma: the Western Pacific on one hand and the Line of Actual Control on the other.

Professor, we have a war in Eastern Europe and one in West Asia. In Eastern Europe, the U.S. is supporting Ukraine against Russia, and in West Asia, it is supporting Israel in its attack on Gaza. How do you look at the global security situation?

Swaran Singh: These wars have become televised now and the world is far more aware of what is happening. But if you look at the last 100 years of inter-state wars, most of them ended up in fatigue. Some of that is happening in the case of Ukraine. [U.S. President Joe] Biden's support to Israel is partly driven by the fact that Republicans stand by Israel. So, there are political compulsions that make leaders do that. I think the deeper point here is the military-industrial complex. Industries are producing destructive weapons all the time, and they're spreading their instruments of death and destruction around the world. That is a deeper question that needs to be addressed. So, violence is going to be widespread because there is a huge military-industrial complex behind it.

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General B.K. Sharma is Director General of the United Services Institution of India; Swaran Singh is Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

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