

CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER AND POWER REALIGNMENTS IN SOUTHWEST ASIA (ECO REGION)

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Abstract

The global political and economic system is undergoing radical transformations, which might not be as obvious, but they are fast changing the existing global order. The weakening of US global hegemony, the gain of Chinese economic might and its increasing influence, the establishment of right-wing populist governments across the world, the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East, the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the recent Ukraine crisis have caused governments to re-assess their foreign policy priorities and to realign themselves in the changing global order. For Russia and China, the emerging new global order should be based on multipolarity and allowed to be developed in different ways. The region of Southwest Asia, as a subset of the international system, is restructuring and realigning itself with the changing geopolitical realities to bring coherence and stability within and across the region. This paper argues that the region's geostrategic importance is instrumental in facilitating the emergence of multipolar global order. Moreover, the new political arrangements also allow the regional states to look beyond western dominance and realign themselves for greater cooperation and stability. There have been predictions that the ECO region could become a centre of global power struggle and play a key role in transforming the global order from unipolar to multipolar.

Keywords: Global Order, Power Realignments, Connectivity, ECO, Multipolarity.

We are living in interesting times; many happenings around the globe, including political, economic and social. The most significant is the mass shifts within global political and economic power structures associated with the East's relative rise and the West's comparative decline.¹ These shifts have been ongoing for some time, but recently, they have become more prominent as new geopolitical alignments are evident. In parallel, new global and regional powers, such as China, Russia, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia and Turkiye, are emerging with their own world views and challenging the existing global order. The escalation of China and Russia on the global political stage is setting the precedence that the world is moving towards multipolarity with exclusive zones of influence.

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Many perceive China as a different type of power than the one we have seen in the last century. Analysing China's power using western experience as a measure is not helpful. China's rise needs to be understood in its peculiar terms.² China is making alliances with its western neighbours through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and getting closer to Russia. China and Russia are challenging the liberal world order supported by the western alliance by using their spheres of influence. The Southwest Asian states, as part of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), are playing a pivotal role at the crossroads of South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Apart from being a central strategic struggle and influence for the global powers due to its strategic location, the Southwest Asian region is a potential nexus for trade, transport, and energy transit, particularly for China and Russia. These are among the vital driving factors behind attempts to enhance cooperation with Southwest Asia for geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons. The region also plays a vital role in the changing global world order.

In this context, the study intends to conduct a detailed analysis of the nature of the changing geopolitical world order with the rise of China, Russia and other regions and to investigate how the emerging world order will be different from the existing one along with the policy choices for Central and Southwest Asian states to realign themselves. The following research questions would help to put forward the study to its conclusion: How has China's economic and political rise and other regional powers in the last few decades transformed the world order from unipolarity to multipolarity? How is the emerging global order creating its sphere of influence? How are the ECO states realigning in the global power struggle?

Changing Global Order from Unipolarity to Multipolarity

International relations experts are pointing towards a defining moment in our recent history in which they proclaim the end of one era and the beginning of another. They further claim that the contemporary world is undergoing profound changes, and therefore, it will be divided between unipolar and emerging multipolar world order structures with different power centres. The indication of this proclamation has been evident for the last many years. It is also evident that the international orders or historical eras do not hinge on singular events if they change, as they are firmly entrenched to change them rapidly. Therefore, it is imperative to identify the transitional moments or periods contributing to the rise and fall of specific international orders. When a transition occurs, the elements of old orders remain visible, though they function below their marked position, while the new order features become more prominent and play a more significant and influential role.³

A similar situation exists today. The international order that emerged after World War II, primarily constructed and dominated by the US, is still manifest. However, the global distribution of power is inexorably shifting with the rise of new powers like China and Russia playing an influential role in global politics. Likewise, they want to adopt their own rules of global politics and change the existing power

structure into inclusiveness and multipolarity.⁴ It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, the US is reluctant to bear the cost of being the sole superpower and, on the other hand, unwilling to share its world leadership role. China, Russia and other regional, small but significant, powers are exploiting that situation in their favour. They have been more pronounced in recent years asserting their influence to undermine US authority in world politics.⁵

Georg Sorensen defines world order as “a governing arrangement among states meeting the current demand for order.”⁶ John Ikenberry has defined the existing world order “as open and rule-based relations enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism.”⁷ In what sense world is ‘open’ and what are the ‘rules,’ this leads to further discussion. Ikenberry commented that the nature of the existing world order is liberal; for the last seven decades, it has been dominated by the US and its allies. They have built a multifaceted and multi-layered world order organized around economic openness, security cooperation, and multilateral institutions. In the security realm, NATO has been expanded, WTO was launched to create economic openness, and in the political arena, G20 took centre stage.⁸ He further observed that the current liberal order is in deep crisis.

There are many reasons why this liberal order is going through fundamental changes. The NATO-led wars around the world have exhausted the US and European states economically and politically. Britain’s decision to leave the EU mark an end to the greater union, which has global ramifications. Recently, the trade war between China and the US, the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine crisis suggest that the existing world order is no longer relevant and fading its strength. The crisis the liberal world order is facing is both internal and external. Internally, the rise of nationalist leaders and weak domestic economies due to prolonged wars have weakened its adherents. Externally, the rise of new regional powers has diminished the role of existing power structures.⁹

In the economic sphere, China has already surpassed the US. After the end of World War II, the US accounted for half of the world's GDP. With its economic dominance, the US laid the foundations of a liberal economic system and created financial institutions like IMF, World Bank, and the GATT trading system. However, for the first time in more than 140 years, the US is no longer the biggest economy in the world.¹⁰ The Chinese economy has grown faster than any other economy over the last three decades. In purchasing power parity (PPP), China’s economy is 15% larger than the US.¹¹ China has already become the production hub and replaced the US as the primary global growth engine. Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris argued, “China is the world’s leading practitioner of geo-economics.”¹² According to the World Bank, in 1981, half of the world’s citizens were impoverished, whereas today, only one-fifth of the world is impoverished. It represents a 40% drop in global poverty, and most of the poverty reduction is in one country, i.e., China. In 1981, China had 41% of the world’s poorest people. South Asia (29%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (11%) trailed behind China.¹³ The south Asian poverty rate jumped to 42% in three decades, and Sub-Saharan Africa

tripled from 11% to 34%. The World Bank data demonstrates that China lifted 680 million people out of poverty in the last three decades.¹⁴ That economic growth led China to advance its mega BRI project to invest in the infrastructure development of developing states. China established its financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Silk Road Fund and BRICS, which fund infrastructure projects worldwide. China has often been accused of a debt trap through financing these infrastructure projects in developing states. The fact is that the loan provided by Chinese banks are without conditions and incur less interest. China has become the leading trading partner of most developing states.

Military might also be an essential component of national power, and major states use that power to create their influence on weaker states. According to the Global Firepower report, the US is the world's strongest country in terms of defence capability, followed by China and Russia. The US spends \$770 billion on the defence budget, China ranks second with \$293 billion, and Russia spends \$154 billion on defence.¹⁵ According to a recent global military spending report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the total global military expenditure increased by 0.7% in 2021. The largest spenders, including the US, China, India, UK and Russia, spend 62% of the total military expenditure.¹⁶

Throughout the 20th century, the US remained the dominant military power. However, long continuous wars in different parts of the world have affected its overall domination. Although the data shows that the US is still the leading military power, other major powers are also emerging as potential rivals. In the political realm, the new international players are challenging the US political values of democracy and human rights, and it seems that these values are no longer valid and losing their legitimacy. New regional and financial forums are emerging that counter the influential role played by US-dominated international forums and organizations.

Power Realignments in Southwest Asia (ECO Region)

As mentioned above, the nature of the world order is becoming multipolar with different centres of power. With the changing world order, smaller states are rethinking their global and regional roles and realigning themselves. The Southwest Asian region also plays a pivotal role in global politics because of its significant geographical position at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa. The ECO region consists of ten-member states: Pakistan, Iran, Turkiye, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Historically, these countries played a pivotal role in the Old Silk Road trade and used to connect China with the rest of the world. They had power alignments with major global powers. However, in the changing global political environment, ECO member states can realign themselves to play their role in shaping the new world order. Because of its strategic position, the region can either be a regional time bomb for the major powers or act as a regional pivot for the major political players depending on cooperation and economic development. Their advantageous position as the centre of continental trade

flows in energy, goods, and ideas could be undermined if they cannot realign themselves according to the changing geopolitical realities of the world.

Central Asia and the Caucasus

Central Asian states and Azerbaijan (a Caucasus state), being part of the ECO region, have always been at the centre of influence and power struggle due to their geostrategic location. Central Asia and Caucasus's proximity to two rising world powers, Russia and China, and their nearness to Afghanistan, which is at the centre of global power struggle, make their importance obvious. China, Russia and the US perceived the region according to their strategic interests. For the US, the regional states remained important in the war against terrorism. The US also considers the region a critical theatre where it can counter the influence of Russia and China.¹⁷ Russia views Central Asian Republics as a vital locale for defending its domestic interests. After the independence of Central Asian states, they remained under Russian influence. Russia always undermined any attempt of these states to affiliate with the US or other European powers. Therefore, Russia formed Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to prevent former member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States from aligning themselves with NATO.¹⁸ For China, the region is important mainly for two reasons. Firstly, Central Asia is an important BRI partner as its two economic corridors are going through this region. Secondly, the region's proximity to Xinjiang also leads Beijing to view it from a security lens.¹⁹

Recently, the region has become a vital area for China-Russia interaction. Russia is collaborating in the political and security domain, whereas China is leading in the region's economic development without questioning Russia's traditional role. China has become an important trading partner for Central Asian states, and these states are also part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Sino-Russian cooperation in the region is also evident at the intersection of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), comprising the BRI territories. This cooperation is usually known as the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership.'²⁰

China's SREB, launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, offers a multi-billion-dollar investment in the transport and energy sector as a vision of free trade across the region. Many projects related to SREB are undergoing in the Central Asian states. Many transport infrastructure development projects have already been completed, which impel regional states to come out of their landlocked situation and enhance connectivity within and across the region.²¹ Russia-led security mechanism provides security to China's economic and development projects in the region, framing extensive cooperation. The BRI-EAEU cooperation links with other regional organizations like SCO. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which are not part of EAEU, rely on the SCO's support to finance BRI projects. Including Central Asian states in BRI, EAEU and SCO provide alternative opportunities for their economic development.²² Without

unbalancing their traditional cooperation with Russia, these states have aligned themselves with another economic power, China, for their economic benefit.

Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan remains highly uncertain. The country has been ravaged and destroyed by continuous wars and oppression. After the September 11 attacks, the US and NATO-led coalition invaded Afghanistan and deposed the Taliban government. The war continued for twenty years, killing thousands of civilians and crippling the country's social, economic and political structure. However, after the Doha peace talks in 2021, NATO forces left the country, and the Taliban returned to power. The events unfolding in Afghanistan have important geopolitical bearings for the regional and extra-regional powers, and they have again placed Afghanistan at the centre of power competition among big players. The withdrawal of NATO forces offered China and Russia to play their role in the country's stability, and it also showed that the west could not offer stability and economic development in the region.²³

Afghanistan's future is subject to the role of regional powers and the realignment of the Taliban government with regional stakeholders. China and Russia are using the power vacuum left by the US and its allies to expand their positions.²⁴ From the Chinese perspective, the stability in Afghanistan is essential to avert the spillover effect on Xinjiang, which could potentially rise from radical jihadist groups like ISIS. The security situation in Xinjiang is one of the main concerns for Beijing. China is pursuing its mega infrastructure project in Central Asia, and the stability in the Central Asian states and Afghanistan is paramount for China to implement the project successfully.²⁵ China also intends to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan to connect it with Central Asian states. China has sought dialogue with the Taliban at different bilateral and multilateral forums. The Taliban representatives visited China and met Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, to discuss future cooperation with the Chinese government.²⁶ Russia also has a convergence of interests with China in Afghanistan. Moscow wants to prevent Afghanistan's instability from spreading beyond its borders into Central Asia. The danger of destabilizing Central Asian states is the primary concern for the Russian government. Like Central Asian states, the situation also offers Russia to consolidate its position as a security guarantor for Afghanistan. So that the Chinese offered infrastructure projects can be implemented successfully.²⁷ In 2022, the Chinese Foreign Minister visited Afghanistan to discuss the prospects of Afghanistan's role and cooperation in BRI.²⁸

China and Russia have aligned their interest in Afghanistan to form coordination to bring stability to the region. In 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Russian counterpart, "China is ready to strengthen coordination with Russia to handle the issue of Afghanistan jointly."²⁹ This form of power alignment has also offered Afghanistan government alternative options to exploit their resources and geographical position for the betterment of their country. The Russian government is

likely to offer a security mechanism to Afghanistan as it lacks the economic strength to build the country's infrastructure intensively. China may fill the economic gap through its economic integration within the framework of BRI.

Pakistan

Since its independence, Pakistan has always been vulnerable to the international power structure. During the bipolar era, Pakistan had to make a tough choice to align itself with one of the opposing camps led by the US and the Soviet Union. However, a paradigm shift is occurring at the beginning of the 21st century. Pakistan is again at a point of decisive factor to rethink its position in the evolving global order. Pakistan's strategic position at the centre of Southwest Asian connectivity renders its significance in the emerging multipolar system.

Recent events, such as border skirmishes between China and India, NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, China's growing economic and political influence on its western neighbours, and the Ukraine crisis coupled with trade war and increasing animosity between China and the US have placed Pakistan at the centre of the great power competition.³⁰ The US has repeatedly mentioned that its relations with Pakistan are vital for its regional interests, particularly in bringing stability to Afghanistan. China also understands and gives importance to its strategic ties with Pakistan in projecting China's political and economic goals in the region. China intends to connect the Southwest Asian region through BRI. The Sino-Russian nexus and the US efforts to remain relevant in regional politics have increased complexities for Pakistan to make a transition or realign in the declining hegemonic power of the US and the emerging role of Russia and China in world politics.

Pakistan and the US have a long history of perplexing relations. Pakistan remained a close ally of the US in the war on terrorism. Moreover, the US is Pakistan's biggest trading partner and used to be a defence assistance provider. Pakistan also played a pivotal role in the peace negotiations between the US and the Taliban.³¹ However, the US administration still seeks Pakistan's role in dealing with regional complexities after the drawdown of NATO forces from Afghanistan. The US had also signed a strategic partnership deal with India to contain China, which has repercussions for Pakistan's security.

Pakistan's relations with China have always been cordial. Both countries have always supported each other in different global forums. Beijing has always supported Islamabad in building energy and transport infrastructure and cooperated in the defence sector. The signing of CPEC further deepens the relationship. Through CPEC, China wants to connect Pakistan with Central Asian states via Afghanistan. The development of Gwadar port as part of CPEC would provide a land route to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asian states and the shortest alternative route to Chinese energy needs.³² Pakistan's relations with Russia have also entered a new cooperation era. As mentioned, China and Russia have overlapped strategic interests in the region,

providing greater connectivity to regional states through different projects. Pakistan is an energy-starved country, and Russia has offered an alternative source to provide cheap oil. Pakistan also looks for Russian investment in CPEC and other energy infrastructure projects.³³

The 21st century multipolar world order provides alternative options to the policymakers of Pakistan. The situation offers ample opportunities for Pakistan to realign itself concerning its strategic interests and play a pivotal role in connecting the region by cooperating with China and Russia. Moreover, the situation is challenging as Pakistan may not afford to become a battleground for the rivalry of big powers. The geostrategic and political realignment of Pakistan with China and Russia may help the country defuse India's hostile diplomatic posture towards Pakistan. Likewise, the infrastructure projects of CPEC have helped the country to diminish the impression that Pakistan has limited geoeconomic choices.³⁴

Iran

Although Iran is a middle power country, its alliance with any significant power could somewhat influence the balance of power in the region. Iran shares the same anti-hegemonic multipolar world order perspective as Russia and China.³⁵ Since the Iranian Revolution, Iran's relationship with the West, particularly the US, was estranged. Recently, the Iranian nuclear program and consequent economic sanctions imposed by the US have further derailed the relationship. The US has accused Iran of developing an illicit nuclear bomb. In 2015, a nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed between Iran, the US, and several other world powers to restrict Iran's nuclear program. In 2018, however, the US withdrew from the deal on the pretext that Iran was continuing with its proxy warfare in the region. The US reinstated the devastating economic sanctions on Iran. Since then, Iran's economy has been badly affected as Iran cannot sign deals with foreign companies to export oil. Iran's GDP contracted by 4.8% in 2018, and the unemployment rate rose to 16.8% in 2019.³⁶ Iran has suffered the worst economic sanctions imposed by western states.

Nevertheless, Iran's growing relations with Russia and China are significant as both countries have a permanent status in the UNSC. Both Russia and China supported Iran in striking the nuclear deal. Later, the abrogation of the JCPOA by the US and the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran elevated the importance of Russia and China in the Iranian foreign policy calculus. Iran is using the SCO platform at the regional level to engage with Russia, China, and other regional states.³⁷ In 2005, Iran obtained observer status in SCO and became a permanent member in 2022 at the SCO summit in Samarkand. Due to its strategic geographic position, Iran has assumed a prominent place in fostering regional connectivity with Russia and China. Russia sees Iran's potential as a geographic bridge connecting Eurasia with the Middle East and beyond.

Iran is also adamant about regional initiatives to promote regional connectivity through BRI and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).³⁸ Moscow and Beijing have also linked their goals of BRI and EAEU “to create an interconnected network encompassing free trade zones, inter-bloc trade and economic partnerships, and regional integration processes.”³⁹ Iran is at a crucial junction of merging BRI and EAEU by building Caspian port infrastructure and overland transport routes. Moreover, Russia, China and Iran seek financial independence from the US dollar. Furthermore, in 2021, China signed a 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership deal with Iran. Although the agreement’s details are not published yet, it is believed to render cooperation in political, economic, and security dimensions. China will invest \$400 billion in multiple sectors of Iran, including energy, transport and telecommunication.⁴⁰ In the changing world order scenario, the convergence of interest provides Iran with an opportunity to develop its relations with China and Russia for greater regional integration. The SCO platform has provided a multilateral forum to Iran for engagement with China, Russia, and other regional states.

Turkiye

Turkiye has been closely associated with western states through the security alliance NATO, and it has a greater desire to become a part of the EU. However, the developing security situation in the region and emerging power dynamics globally have compelled Turkiye to adjust its international position. In recent years, Turkiye has developed closer political, economic and strategic ties with China and Russia. Like other middle-power states of the region, Turkiye is determined to bring a new world order more representative of the current power distribution and reflect the norms and preferences of the emerging powers.⁴¹

The US-Turkiye relationship has been awful for an accumulated series of crises in recent years. Turkiye bought a Russian-made-S400 missile defence system for which the US imposed sanctions on Turkiye. There is also a grievance over the US coordination with the People’s Protection Units, which Turkiye considers a part of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, a terrorist group declared by the US. Turkiye also thinks that the US was involved in the 2016 *coup d’état* that killed 249 people, orchestrated by self-exiled Fethullah Gulen, whom the US had also refused to extradite.⁴² These developments have worsened Turkiye's broader relations with the West.

Turkiye is looking for alternative options in the current geopolitical decoupling. The purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia was not solely a defence-motivated consideration but illustrated Turkiye’s realignment away from NATO and its dependency on US defence procurement. It also has a geopolitical motivation. With the purchase of the Russian defence system, Turkiye has moved towards strengthening Turkiye-Russia relations, particularly in Syria. Besides that, Turkiye is also getting close to China and cooperating on numerous mutual interests, particularly in BRI. Turkiye signed an MoU in 2015 to align its Middle Corridor with

BRI to develop connectivity with China via Central Asia and the Caucasus region.⁴³ Through this cooperation with China and Russia, the Turkish government has signalled to the West that they have other allies if western partners are unsupportive. It also suggests that *Turkiye* is an independent actor willing to make counter-decisions to the traditional alliance once part of it.

The Asian hinterland looked different during the years of bipolarity, it looked different during the years of US unipolarity, and it looks different today. From Pax Britannica to Pax Americana, the ECO member states witnessed westernization as synonymous with development and modernization. Today it does not. The northern tier of ECO states is still linked with Russia, but Russia is far from Soviet-style communism. The southern tier of ECO states links with the world economy, driven by western global institutions, but they are also members of SCO, AIIB, and other Asian transnational institutions. The world is undoubtedly in the twilight zone but not permanent. Instead, it is a move to the future in Asia and a harbinger of aberrations for the West. How this plays out in domains of defence and development will be seen simultaneously and gradually.

The ECO region viewed the former USSR as a usurper of northern lands and the West as the colonial and neo-colonial infiltrator of ECO southern states. The independence of Central Asian Republics, thus, led to a non-colonial and non-predatory relationship with USSR descendant, modern Russia. In contrast, states like Pakistan are searching for a balance between East and West. Afghanistan has ousted the US-led coalition, Iran dismissed the pro-US regime long ago, and *Turkiye*, despite NATO membership and EU applicant, is defying the West in one way or the other. All this signifies a shift from the unipolar American moment to a multipolar Asian moment.

The Asian multipolar moment rests on a few things. First is the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war, which is being fought on the eastern fringe of Eurasia. Second is Taiwan's impending crisis, in which China seems poised and determined to weed out US influence from the East China Sea. The third is the Afghanistan situation. Afghanistan still needs to eliminate proxies, face monetary sanctions and improve its human rights situation. However, Pakistan is moving towards an independent foreign policy. Asian multipolarity, connectivity, and a greater level of integration in defence and development seem apparent in the region. Within the framework of this new multipolarity, there is a core, and there is a periphery. China and Russia are the core of this multipolarity, while ECO states are the periphery. India is trying its best to be respectably accepted in the comity of Asian nations while placating the West, but it is challenging, if not impossible, to do. Anyone who knows about the consequences of alliance-making with the US knows that zero-sum thinking of the West may doom India into oblivion later.

Conclusion

The world's major powers are radically transforming the existing world order with far-reaching consequences for the future. However, the drivers of this change are diverse, and understanding these forces is imperative for global leaders and policymakers. The existing world order is showing signs of decline, and the reconfiguration of emerging powers on the global stage is pronounced. The deteriorating relationship of the West with Russia over the issue of Ukraine is the latest example that transgressions over the past few decades have weakened inter-state conduct. Moreover, China's economic rise and military power are other potent factors responsible for the world changes in the current balance of power and the transformation of the geopolitical map. Russia and China are countering the established global order and struggling to bring their own rules to the great global game. This situation allows small but critical regional players to realign their powers with emerging political players. Southwest Asian states, as part of ECO and partners in BRI, are looking for alternatives in the form of China and Russia. They no longer want to be part of the western-led liberal world order that plunged the region into war and instability for extended periods. Nevertheless, the emerging global order is at its culmination stage, and Southwest Asian states can play a significant role in its making and implementation.

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