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ABSTRACT

The adaptation of land forces to the new multipolar order is essential for understanding the current dynamics of the International System. This essay analyses the relationship between shifts in global polarity and the reorganisation of land forces, investigating whether strategic competition is driving a return to a conventional era. The research findings indicate that the unipolar era favoured disarmament policies, whereas multipolarity has intensified geopolitical tensions, making military power a central element of state security. The rise of revisionist powers, such as Russia and China, has reinforced the need for conventional rearmament. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine exemplifies this transition, highlighting the renewed relevance of land forces and conventional logistics. A mechanised, division-level military structure has replaced the expeditionary model of the unipolar era. It is concluded that multipolarity drives conventional militarisation, although other factors may also influence this trend.

Introduction

The significance of this paper within the field of International Relations stems from its engagement with the evolving dimensions of power in a context increasingly shaped by realist assumptions. As global governance moves from normative idealism to strategic pragmatism, influence shifts from norm-based soft power to hard power grounded in control over data, resources, and institutional agendas (Mearsheimer, 2003). This transition underscores how evidence-based policymaking becomes not merely a technical exercise, but a contested space where states and actors assert authority and redefine legitimacy in the international arena (Barnett and Duvall, 2005).

The International System is a complex, self-organising system that exhibits cycles of stability and change, growth and decline, competition and cooperation, but which often goes unnoticed by ordinary citizens. Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought renewed attention to changes in the international status quo, which had been unfolding geopolitically and geostrategically since at least 2014 (Oliveira, 2016: 41–43). Russia's use of hybrid warfare delayed the international response, which only reacted when the prospect of a new Cold War triggered alarm within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its armed forces — still anchored in the assumptions of a unipolar order.

In this context, the theme of the adaptation of ground forces to the new multipolar order is highly relevant to understanding contemporary international affairs. This paper examines whether shifts in polarity influence how the main powers structure their ground forces, and whether the emerging

competitive environment signals a return to a conventional era. To guide this analysis, the following research question is proposed: In what way has the new multipolar order forced the ground forces into a new conventional era?

In his research, the author conducted a basic historical and deductive investigation, using an extensive bibliographic documentary analysis, but also a case study, with a qualitative approach in both techniques. The essay is organised into nine sections, beginning with an introductory section that outlines the central research question and methodological approach. Section two explores the multifaceted dimensions of power, providing the conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis. Section three builds upon this by examining the relationship between power and the role of superpowers in the International System. In section four, the focus shifts to the historical evolution of international polarity, setting the stage for section five, which investigates the rise of new and emerging powers. Section six offers a comparative characterisation of ground forces across different historical periods, while section seven addresses disarmament within the framework of the idealist notion of perpetual peace. The eighth section presents a case study on the Ukrainian War, serving as a practical application of the theoretical concepts discussed. Finally, section nine concludes the essay by synthesising the main arguments and offering reflections on the broader implications of the study.

The Dimensions of Power in the International System

The concept of power¹ is a fundamental pillar of International Relations, playing a central role in explaining the political and strategic dynamics of states. In its most basic form, power is understood as the ability of an actor, usually a state, to influence the behaviour of other actors in the International System to achieve its objectives (Nye, 2004: 53-55). Taking this definition into account, power can be analyzed from various dimensions that encompass essential factors, including military, economic, technological, diplomatic and normative power, which have already been widely identified in the specialist literature, as well as other strategic factors, such as territory, demography, natural resources and nuclear power (Tareco, 2014: 5).

International Relations theories present different interpretations of the concept of power. Realism, one of the most influential schools, understands power mainly in material and military terms (Morgenthau, 1948: 80-91). The liberal approach, on the other hand, interprets power more broadly, incorporating economic power and institutional influence as crucial instruments for promoting international cooperation and a rules-based order (Nye, 1990: 163-164). Constructivism, in turn, gives primacy to the ideational dimension of power, stressing the importance of norms, ideas and identities in the construction of political realities (Wendt, 1999).

In the field of the dimensions of power, military power remains the most traditional factor for measuring the strength of a state, reflecting the ability to project force and defend national interests (Waltz, 1979). Economic power, according to Susan Strange (1996), makes it possible to influence other actors by controlling financial and commercial flows, as demonstrated by the economic supremacy of the United States (US) or the growth of China. Technological power is becoming increasingly important, especially in the field of information technology and artificial intelligence (AI) (Clarke and Knake, 2019). Finally, although it belongs to the ideological-normative dimension²,

¹ Epistemologically, the word power derives from the Latin *potere*, a term related to the concept *potentia*. This notion was addressed by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, where he presents power as the capacity to transform potentiality into reality — that is, to exert influence or control over circumstances, resources, or individuals (Ross, 1924).

² According to Holsti (1964), power can be distinguished between material dimensions—such as military, economic, and technological—and ideational or normative ones, reflecting the existence of multiple forms of power within international relations.

diplomatic and normative power allow the shaping of international norms and the promotion of values, as illustrated by the role of the European Union (EU) (Manners, 2002).

However, other strategic factors are equally important: territory, due to its strategic location; demography, due to the size and structure of the population; natural resources, due to the control of strategic elements such as oil and gas; and nuclear power, due to the capacity for deterrence and the influence it confers on nuclear powers (Waltz, 1979: 131).

In short, power in the International System must be analysed from a multiplicity of dimensions, which include both material capabilities and ideational aspects. Understanding these dimensions and linking them to the main theories of International Relations is essential for a comprehensive and coherent analysis of the behaviour of states and global dynamics.

The Superpowers and Their Power Relations

The concept of superpower emerged in the context of International Relations to describe states with the capacity to project power on a global scale, directly influencing the International System in multiple dimensions such as military, economic, political and ideological (Huntington, 1999).

Historically, the term was first used to refer to the USA, the Soviet Union (USSR) and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom in the post-World War II (WWII) period (Fox, 1944). These superpowers have shaped the International System through military, economic, technological, diplomatic and normative power, supported by strategic factors such as territory, demography, natural resources and nuclear power (Tareco, 2014: 5), decisively influencing the global balance. According to Huntington (1999), a superpower must meet three essential criteria, namely global military power, significant economic power and political and ideological leadership.

The relationship between superpowers and power is dynamic and reflects the evolution of the International System over time. During the Cold War, the two superpowers resulting from the end of WWII - the USA and the USSR - rivalled each other in all these dimensions, with nuclear capability and conventional forces playing a central role in defining this superpower status, leading to a bipolar division of the world (Waltz, 1979). The International System was then structured by the logic of mutual containment and balance of power, with the influence of the superpowers being exerted through alliances, such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and proxy conflicts in various regions of the globe (Gaddis, 2005).

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the USA became the only global superpower, ushering in the so-called unipolar era (Krauthammer, 1990). During this period, American hegemony was consolidated through unmatched military capabilities, economic dominance, and the global dissemination of democratic and neoliberal values. However, this unipolar moment was not without constraints. The US often engaged in selective multilateralism, embracing international institutions and norms when they aligned with national interests, while circumventing them in other contexts (Clement, 2003). Additionally, the rise of soft balancing strategies by other powers—through diplomatic coalitions, institutional mechanisms, and regional partnerships—highlighted growing resistance to unchecked US dominance (Alexander and Lieber, 2005). These dynamics foreshadowed the gradual erosion of unipolarity and paved the way for an increasingly multipolar international order, driven by the reassertion of actors such as China and Russia.

Evolution of the International System Polarity

The evolution of the international order reflects the transformations in the global balance of power over the last few decades. From the bipolar era of the Cold War, through the unipolar American

hegemony in the post-Cold War period, to the emergence of a new multipolar order, the International System has been marked by structural changes that directly influence the way states define and project their power.

The Cold War period (1947-1991) was characterised by the division of the International System into two rival blocs, led by the USA and the USSR, giving rise to a bipolar order. The structural realist theory, proposed by Kenneth Waltz (1979), offers a solid explanation for the relative stability of this period, arguing that the balance of power between the two superpowers prevented the outbreak of a global war, being maintained by the logic of containment and the threat of mutual nuclear destruction (Waltz, 1979). However, this stability was maintained at a high cost, with regional conflicts by proxy, such as the wars in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan, which functioned as arenas for indirect confrontation between the two blocs (Gaddis, 2005). In addition to military power, the rivalry also extended to economic power, where the USA promoted a capitalist model based on a market economy, in contradiction to the Soviet model, where, through a planned economy, the USSR placed the state at the centre as the economic engine (Gaddis, 2005).

Ideology also played a central role in defining the competition between the superpowers, where the USA promoted a liberal democracy and the USSR defended the communist branch of the socialist model, creating a global ideological divide (Gaddis, 2005). The collapse of the USSR in 1991 opened the door to a unipolar era, dominated by the USA, characterised by hegemony in all dimensions: military, economic and ideological. The concept of unipolarity was popularised by Charles Krauthammer (1990), who argued that the USA had become the only global superpower, with an unprecedented capacity for power projection, based on a combination of military and soft power, through the promotion of international institutions and the spread of democratic and neoliberal values (Nye, 2004). The military interventions in Kosovo (Cunha, 2019), Afghanistan and Iraq (Nuruzzaman, 2006), illustrate the USA's attempt to shape the global order according to its interests and values, albeit with often contradictory results. Theoretically, the unipolar period was marked by the predominance of liberalism, which supported the idea that economic interdependence, international institutions and the spread of democracy would promote lasting peace (Ikenberry, 2001).

In recent years, the growing contestation on the part of emerging actors has led to a reconfiguration of the international order, making it increasingly multipolar, with an increase in the relative power of states such as China, Russia, India and other regional powers. This transition challenges unipolar logic, promoting a more balanced distribution of global power (Hurrell, 2006). Offensive realism, defended by John Mearsheimer (2003), offers a useful perspective for interpreting this new phase, suggesting that states seek to maximise their power to ensure their security in an anarchic international environment. From this point of view, the emergence of new powers inevitably intensifies competition and systemic instability.

While Russia seemingly seeks to revive its imperial ambitions based on its military power, China and India stand out due to their distinctive regional strategies and instruments of influence. China has developed a multifaceted approach, combining military modernisation with economic statecraft, most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which extends its geopolitical influence across Asia, Africa and Europe (Callahan, 2016). Additionally, China has invested heavily in regional institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and seeks to reshape global governance norms to reflect its interests. India, while also asserting itself as a regional power, adopts a different trajectory, focusing on strategic autonomy and partnerships within the Global South. It promotes multilateralism through forums such as BRICS and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and increasingly engages in minilateral security dialogues like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), aimed at balancing China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific (Pant, 2022).

The emergence of a multipolar order thus brings with it new dynamics of cooperation and conflict. While some analysts argue that multipolarity enables a broader diversity of approaches to global challenges, others highlight the potential for renewed instability reminiscent of the fragmented balance of power that preceded WWII. The differentiated strategies of China and India illustrate that multipolarity is not merely a redistribution of capabilities, but also a rearticulation of normative and institutional preferences in the global arena.

This new reconfiguration of the international order highlights the emergence of technological power as a distinct and increasingly central dimension of global influence. Unlike traditional forms of power, which are often territorial or resource-based, technological power operates across borders and exerts influence through control over digital infrastructure, innovation ecosystems, and standards-setting in emerging technologies. Its significance lies not only in its own capacity for projection but also in its transformative impact on other dimensions of power.

Technological capabilities serve as critical amplifiers of both military and economic power. Cyber capabilities, more precisely, have become a core instrument of statecraft, enabling offensive and defensive operations in a new domain of conflict (Clarke and Knake, 2019; Rid, 2020). Simultaneously, advancements in AI, semiconductors, and the digital economy increasingly shape the competitiveness of national economies (Bresnahan and Trajtenberg, 1995; Mazzucato, 2018). Moreover, strategic investments in space exploration — such as satellite constellations and lunar missions — illustrate how space is becoming both a commercial and military frontier (Dolman, 2002). As Gartzke (2013) argues, control over technology infrastructures and innovation trajectories constitutes a new form of "latent power" that can determine outcomes across all areas of global politics.

The New Emerging Powers

The transition to a new multipolar order is marked by the emergence and consolidation of new superpowers — notably China, Russia, and India — that challenge the Western-led status quo and the foundations of American hegemony. These states possess a diverse range of power dimensions (Tareco, 2014: 5) in varying degrees of maturity, reinforced by distinct strategic factors. Yet, as Acharya (2014) argues, the emerging global order is not simply a redistribution of material capabilities, but a "multiplex world order" in which actors pursue divergent trajectories, norms, and institutional preferences.

China exemplifies a comprehensive strategy that combines rapid economic growth with military modernisation and normative assertiveness. Economically, it has become the world's second-largest economy, with a development model based on infrastructure megaprojects, industrial upgrading, and technological innovation (Shambaugh, 2013). Through the BRI, China seeks to build a transcontinental infrastructure and trade network, extending its geopolitical influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Callahan, 2016; Rolland, 2017). Militarily, China has invested in a modern naval fleet, long-range missile systems, and cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence and cyber capabilities, reinforcing its deterrence posture. Normatively, it promotes alternative models of global governance, notably through institutions like the SCO and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Russia, by contrast, reasserts itself primarily through military power and energy leverage, often adopting a revisionist posture. After a period of decline following the Cold War, Moscow has returned to the international stage by demonstrating a willingness to use force, as seen in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria, and Ukraine (2022). Russia remains a major nuclear power, and its vast territory and energy resources enhance its strategic reach, especially in Europe and Central Asia (Rumer, 2019). Rather than engaging in norm-building, Russia contests the existing order through

hybrid warfare, disinformation campaigns, and the projection of military strength, aiming to undermine Western unity and institutions.

India follows a distinct trajectory, seeking strategic autonomy and regional leadership without directly confronting the liberal order. Its sustained economic growth and demographic weight have increased its global relevance, while its military modernisation enhances its regional deterrence posture. Diplomatically, India promotes multilateralism through forums such as BRICS and the SCO and engages with like-minded democracies through initiatives like the Quad, aiming to balance China's rise in the Indo-Pacific (Ganapathi, 2017; Pant, 2022). Its foreign policy emphasises flexibility and partnerships across ideological divides, positioning India as a bridge between North and South, East and West.

Comparative Evolution of Ground Forces from the Bipolar Era to the Multipolar Era

As previously established, military capabilities constitute one of the fundamental dimensions of power that define the status of superpowers, alongside economic, technological, and diplomatic-normative capacities. Within this framework, the evolution of ground forces — an essential component of military power — can be interpreted as both a consequence and an indicator of shifts in military doctrine among the principal global actors. These doctrinal transformations are closely tied to changes in the structure of the International System and are further influenced by accelerating technological developments, which have redefined operational capacities and the very concept of warfare. This chapter systematically contrasts the doctrinal and organisational orientations of ground forces across the bipolar, unipolar, and multipolar eras, focusing on four key analytical axes: strategic context and threat perception; operational doctrine; organisational structure; and technological evolution.

Strategic Context and Dominant Threat Perception

During the bipolar era (1947–1991), the International System was defined by the symmetrical rivalry between the US and the USSR. The dominant threat was a large-scale conventional war in Europe, prompting doctrines of mutual deterrence and military preparedness (Scales, 1994).

The unipolar era (1991–c.2010) saw a shift in strategic concerns. With the collapse of the USSR, the probability of inter-state war diminished, giving way to interventions in failed states, peacekeeping operations, and counterterrorism. The threat environment became asymmetric, involving irregular combatants and non-state actors (Johnson and Metz, 2001).

In the multipolar era (c.2010–present), the return of strategic competition among several actors (US, China, Russia, EU, India) has led to a dual-threat environment. Ground forces must now respond to both conventional scenarios (e.g., Eastern Europe) and hybrid threats (e.g., cyber, disinformation, paramilitary forces) (McMaster, 2020).

Operational Doctrine and Strategic Orientation

In the bipolar context, military doctrine is centred on large-scale confrontation. NATO developed the AirLand Battle doctrine in the 1980s to counter Soviet advances in Central Europe. This doctrine emphasised integration of ground and air assets and anticipated deep strikes using precision munitions and advanced command and control (C2) systems (Freedman, 2003; Scales, 1994). It replaced the inadequate Active Defence doctrine, reflecting the need to confront a mechanised and

numerically superior adversary (House, 1984). Doctrine was based on Combined Arms³ principles — tracing back to Jomini's (2008) 19th-century articulation — emphasising the coordinated use of infantry, tanks, artillery, and air defence systems to generate synergy on the battlefield (Linn, 2007; Scales, 1999).

The unipolar period witnessed a doctrinal shift to expeditionary and counterinsurgency operations. NATO and US forces developed doctrines focused on peace support, stabilisation, and humanitarian interventions (e.g., Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan). Asymmetric warfare⁴ and urban operations became dominant, alongside doctrinal frameworks for peace support operations⁵ (Diehl and Druckman, 2010) and asymmetric conflict (Johnson and Metz, 2001). With the emergence of new threats, the doctrine has adapted to irregular challenges. The US Army transitioned to Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) — modular, scalable, and rapidly deployable formations designed for stabilisation and counterinsurgency (Nagl, 2002; Ucko, 2009).

In the multipolar era, doctrinal responses have become more complex. The US adopted the Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) doctrine⁶, aiming for convergence of effects across land, air, sea, cyber, and space domains (Csengeri, 2021). Russia, on the other hand, refined its hybrid warfare⁷ approach, combining kinetic action with information operations and cyber warfare (Galeotti, 2017). China's strategy has embraced smart warfare⁸, emphasising AI, quantum computing, big data, and autonomous systems (Kania, 2019).

Organisational Structure of Ground Forces

The bipolar period was marked by a reliance on division-level formations. In NATO and Warsaw Pact forces, units were built around mechanised divisions capable of sustained, high-intensity conflict. The US Reorganisation Objectives Army Divisions (ROAD) included Infantry, Tank, Mechanised, and Airborne divisions with integrated support elements (Rocha, 2015: 38). The USSR relied on Motorised Rifle and Tank Divisions as core operational formations. NATO's strategic

³ The concept of Combined Arms is often attributed to Antoine Henri de Jomini (2008), for his approach to the subject, "in which he explains in detail the integration of the three dominant arms of his time, Infantry, Artillery and Cavalry" (translated by the author) (Rocha, 2015: 5).

⁴ The concept of asymmetric warfare refers to a type of conflict in which there is a significant difference between the adversaries in terms of military, technological and strategic resources, usually involving conventional forces and insurgent groups, paramilitaries or terrorist organizations, which resort to unconventional tactics to compensate for their inferiority in means and capabilities (Johnson and Metz, 2001).

⁵ The military concept of peace support operations refers to a set of actions aimed at preventing, mitigating or resolving conflicts, promoting stability and security in regions affected by crises or wars. These operations can be carried out under the mandate of international organizations, such as the United Nations, NATO or the EU, including different types of interventions, from interposition missions to reconstruction and stabilization efforts (Diehl and Druckman, 2010).

⁶ MDO Doctrine - Operational doctrine developed for military forces to operate in an integrated manner in multiple domains-land, air, sea, cyberspace and space-in order to achieve superiority over technologically advanced adversaries. It is based on three fundamental principles: convergence of effects, real-time synchronization and multidimensional maneuver, allowing land, air, naval, cyber and space units to act in a coordinated manner to dismantle enemy capabilities (McMaster, 2020).

⁷ Hybrid warfare - Conflict that combines conventional tactics, irregular operations, cyber warfare, disinformation and other non-military means to achieve strategic objectives without resorting to a formally declared war (Hoffman, 2007).

⁸ Smart warfare highlights the importance of automation, predictive analysis and integration of intelligent systems to achieve strategic superiority on the battlefield (Fravel, 2019; Kania, 2019). China has invested in smart warfare doctrine, which emphasizes the fusion of cyber capabilities, AI and conventional operations, creating a highly technological model of land warfare (Kania, 2019). This approach is reflected in the growing investment in unmanned ground vehicles, electronic warfare and AI-based command and control capabilities.

concept of flexible response⁹ sought to ensure balanced deterrence and provided political space for negotiation (Arsénio, 1992).

During the unipolar era, major armies underwent force reductions and reorganised into more agile and modular brigade-level units. The US BCTs exemplified this shift, optimised for rapid deployment and flexible task organisation. This is also reflected in a strategic alternation between conventional units and lighter force types, such as special forces and special operations forces (SOF). Russia, following its 2008 military reform, developed Independent Brigades for faster operational responsiveness (Galeotti, 2017). China replaced division-based structures with Combined Brigades, aligned with its informatized warfare vision (Fravel, 2019).

In the multipolar era, the brigade model persists but is increasingly hybridised. Russia has reintroduced divisional formations in selected theatres (e.g., near NATO borders) for added firepower and endurance, alongside Tactical Battalion Groups that blend conventional and irregular capabilities (Bartles and Grau, 2016). Western forces emphasise integration of cyber, electronic warfare and SOF units into conventional frameworks. NATO's reactivation of heavy armoured forces in the Baltic States and Poland reflects a partial return to Cold War postures (MacFarland and Watling, 2021).

Role of Technology

In the bipolar system, technological superiority was measured in conventional terms—main battle tanks, aircraft, and artillery. Precision munitions and C2 systems began to shape battlefield dynamics, especially from the 1980s onwards.

In the unipolar moment, the revolution in military affairs (RMA) was driven by network-centric warfare, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, and electronic surveillance (Alberts and Hayes, 2006). Technological asymmetry allowed dominant powers to project force with lower risk and higher precision.

The multipolar environment is defined by digitalised conflict. AI-driven command systems, first-person view (FPV) drones, unmanned ground vehicles, and cyber-electronic warfare are now central to land power. Smart warfare concepts prioritise integration of intelligent systems for real-time decision-making and predictive analytics (Kania, 2019; Panella, 2025).

In summary, the evolution of ground forces across the bipolar, unipolar, and multipolar eras reflects a shift from massed conventional formations to flexible, modular and technologically integrated units. Each doctrinal cycle corresponds to transformations in the International System's polarity, shaping how major powers conceptualise military effectiveness. The contemporary trend points toward a hybridised model: retaining the robustness of conventional force structures while embedding them in a digital and multi-domain operational framework.

Idealism and the Utopia of Perpetual Peace

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the belief in the possibility of perpetual peace and the progressive reduction of military capabilities gained renewed prominence. This vision was deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition of idealism, particularly Kantian thought, and was further developed through

⁹ "The strategic concept of 'flexible response', contained in NATO document MC 14/3, was essentially based on political principles advocating a military balance between the two blocs as a basis for negotiations on arms control and reduction, as well as for the establishment of mutual confidence and security measures" (translated by the author) (Arsénio, 1992: 96).

the liberal assumption that democracy, international institutions and economic interdependence could pacify the International System (Doyle, 1986). Idealist optimism was mirrored in a wave of diplomatic initiatives and arms control efforts aimed at consolidating a cooperative and rules-based world order.

The intellectual foundations of idealism in International Relations can be traced to Immanuel Kant's seminal work *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), where he envisioned a peaceful international order grounded in a federation of republican states, the renunciation of aggressive war, and the facilitation of free trade. In the post-Cold War context, Kant's principles gained new relevance, serving as normative inspiration for Western foreign policy, particularly in the US and the EU. These ideas helped frame a narrative in which liberal democracies would not only be more peaceful but also serve as pillars of a stable International System. This renewed idealism emerged, in part, as a reaction to the realism of the Cold War period — focused on power, anarchy, and deterrence, but which struggled to fully account for the normative and systemic changes that led to the peaceful end of bipolar rivalry. The tension between realism and idealism, long established since the first 'Great Debate' in the discipline of International Relations, thus resurfaced with new intensity, now in the context of an unipolar and seemingly liberal international order.

A central tenet of post-Cold War liberal thinking was the theory of democratic peace, articulated by Michael Doyle (1986), which posits that liberal democracies are unlikely to wage war against one another. This claim became a normative and strategic rationale for promoting democracy abroad, as a pathway to global stability. During the 1990s and 2000s, it underpinned a range of Western interventions — often led by the US — under the assumption that democratisation would reduce conflict and consolidate a liberal international order. However, this assumption increasingly came under scrutiny, especially as interventions in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and beyond exposed the fragility of externally imposed democratic models and the resilience of geopolitical rivalries.

The belief in perpetual peace was accompanied by a series of international disarmament and arms control initiatives. Nuclear arms control treaties, such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, were seen as fundamental steps towards reducing the risk of global conflict and promoting stability (Korda and Kristensen, 2021).

In addition to nuclear weapons, there were efforts to limit the development of chemical and biological weapons, as well as to regulate the sale of conventional weapons. The creation of nuclear-weapon-free zones in various regions of the world was an attempt to consolidate the idealistic vision of a peaceful and cooperative international order.

Despite its prominence in post-Cold War discourse, idealism soon revealed its limits as power rivalries re-emerged. While Kantian idealism envisions peace as a moral goal rooted in reason, liberal institutionalism operationalises this through democracy promotion and international regimes. Yet critics from both realism and the English School challenged these assumptions. John Mearsheimer (2003) warned that liberal efforts to reshape the International System often provoke instability, while Hedley Bull (1977) argued that, even within an international society, the system remains anarchic and order depends on prudence and restraint, not shared liberal values. The failures in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), alongside the assertiveness of Russia and China, exposed the fragility of liberal internationalism and reaffirmed the enduring relevance of power politics.

Case Study: The Ukrainian War

The Ukrainian War constitutes a critical inflection point in the contemporary International System, profoundly impacting European security and reshaping the strategic posture of both the EU and NATO. Initially triggered by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and drastically intensified by the

full-scale invasion in 2022, the conflict has reinforced the strategic relevance of conventional military power while simultaneously accelerating the integration of hybrid warfare techniques.

Russia's actions must be understood within the broader context of resurgent geopolitical rivalry and mounting tensions between Moscow and the West. The annexation of Crimea and the clandestine support to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine constituted a direct assault on the European security order established after the Cold War, undermining the principle of territorial integrity and challenging the norm of inviolable borders (Mearsheimer, 2014).

The large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a dramatic escalation of the conflict and a turning point in the European security architecture. This act of aggression prompted the most extensive military mobilisation on European soil since World War II. It also acted as a catalyst for the adoption of the EU's Strategic Compass (2022), a pivotal document aimed at strengthening the Union's defence capabilities and enhancing its strategic autonomy. The war exposed critical shortfalls in the EU's military readiness, spurring renewed investment in land forces, capability development, and intra-European defence coordination (EU, 2022).

The Strategic Compass underlines the need for a comprehensive approach to security, integrating conventional military capabilities with new instruments to address hybrid threats such as cyberattacks, disinformation, and energy coercion (EU, 2022). In parallel, the war also triggered a significant revision of NATO's Strategic Concept, adopted during the 2022 Madrid Summit. This document reaffirms the centrality of collective defence and explicitly identifies Russia as the principal threat to Euro-Atlantic security. In response, NATO reinforced its eastern flank by deploying additional ground forces to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — a clear demonstration of deterrence through forward presence (NATO, 2022).

Beyond conventional deterrence, the Strategic Concept emphasises the development of capabilities to counter hybrid challenges, including cyber operations and information warfare. In this regard, NATO's internal coordination has been critical in supplying Ukraine with advanced weapons systems, such as long-range artillery, armoured vehicles, and modern air defence platforms (NATO, 2022).

The Ukrainian War has functioned as a live testing ground for the evolution of Russia's hybrid warfare doctrine. Prior to and during the invasion, Moscow employed a multidimensional strategy combining cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping public perception, and energy blackmail to erode European unity and resilience (Galeotti, 2017).

Despite the central role of hybrid tactics, the conflict has simultaneously reaffirmed the enduring relevance of conventional military power. The sustained use of artillery, mechanised units, and air defence systems has reminded European governments of the imperative to maintain land forces prepared for high-intensity warfare (Hackett and Nagl, 2024). Accordingly, many European states have prioritised the strengthening of conventional capabilities, notably through increased defence spending and the launch of ambitious modernisation programmes (EU, 2025).

Equally significant has been the transformative role of new technologies in shaping the modern battlefield. Satellite-enabled surveillance, tactical drones, and AI-driven threat analysis have enhanced situational awareness and accelerated decision-making processes (Hambling, 2015). Among these innovations, unmanned aerial systems (UAS) have had particularly disruptive effects. Their continuous deployment has minimised operational pauses and enabled Ukraine to offset its numerical disadvantages in both manpower and ammunition. These systems have inflicted substantial damage by disabling or destroying enemy naval vessels, ground vehicles, and aircraft, and have contributed to heavy personnel losses among Russian forces (Panella, 2025).

Conclusions

During the unipolar era, idealism and the belief in perpetual peace underpinned disarmament and stabilisation policies. This approach was rooted in the assumption that the spread of democracy and economic interdependence would ensure a peaceful international order. However, the emergence of new powers and the transition to a multipolar era have fueled the resurgence of geopolitical tensions. This shift requires significant strategic adaptation.

The multidimensional approach to power in the International System presupposes that economic, technological and diplomatic instruments can influence the balance of power. However, these instruments have shown clear limitations when confronted with immediate security challenges, namely, the rise of new threats and the ongoing rivalry between the great powers. The crisis of multilateralism¹⁰, the insufficiency of technological deterrence¹¹, and the inefficiency of economic mechanisms¹² in preventing aggression have led states to increasingly rely on military capabilities.

In the absence of alternative coercive instruments, military power re-emerges as the ultimate means of securing national interests, both for projecting influence and deterring revisionist powers such as Russia and China. This strategic shift has renewed the relevance of conventional military capacity, particularly within land forces. In the new multipolar era, characterised by strategic competition among multiple centres of power, ground forces have undergone a doctrinal transformation — returning to a model prioritising territorial defence, conventional rearmament, and preparation for high-intensity conflict, strongly influenced by a renewed technological component.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates this evolution. It shows that large-scale operations employing conventional land forces and logistics remain decisive for power projection (Fink and Kofman, 2022). Consequently, the predominantly expeditionary model of the unipolar era is giving way to a posture reminiscent of the bipolar era, where the principles of manoeuvre and firepower once again favoured heavy, mechanised and divisional echelon capabilities as the primary element of manoeuvre.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that shifts in global polarity shape the strategic behaviour of great powers, particularly in the military domain. It established that increased systemic competitiveness — typical of a multipolar order — correlates with a renewed emphasis on conventional land power. By analysing the Ukrainian War as a case study, the research highlighted the limits of economic, technological, and diplomatic tools in deterring aggression, underscoring the strategic return to traditional military capabilities. This reinforces the study's original contribution: identifying the reorientation of land forces as a structural response to the dynamics of emerging multipolarity.

While this study establishes a link between global polarity, military competitiveness, and the resurgence of conventional land power, it does not consider the potential disruptive effects of emerging technologies. Developments in AI and robotics — already visible in the Ukrainian War through first-person view drones, autonomous evacuation vehicles, and low-signature systems —

¹⁰ International law and multilateral institutions have also been challenged by the inability to prevent large-scale conflicts and by growing geopolitical fragmentation (Acharya, 2014).

¹¹ Emerging technologies, such as AI and cyber capabilities, particularly taking advantage of the hybrid warfare doctrine, do not replace the need for a physical military presence on the ground (Bauer et al., 2019). Even technological dependence because of globalism can be mitigated by policies of internal substitution and diversification of suppliers, as demonstrated by China in the semiconductor sector (Bitzinger and Raska, 2020).

¹² Economic sanctions, for example, have limited effectiveness in the short term and can be circumvented through new trade networks and alternative agreements (Farrell and Newman, 2019).

may soon favour smaller and more agile units over large mechanised formations, as seen in the beginning of the conflict. As battlefield visibility and precision improve, flexibility and dispersion could outweigh mass and firepower. Future research should examine how such innovations might reshape force structure and challenge the conventional trends identified here.

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