Unilateral America in a Post-Unipolar World

Mains: *GSII – International relations*

Why in news?

The 9/11 attacks occurred when the U.S. was at the peak of its unipolar power. The subsequent "Global War on Terrorism", regime changes generated unintended geopolitical consequences that have constrained U.S. strategic freedom.

How the Global War on Terrorism altered U.S. strategic position?

> *The 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 caused the USA to launch the "Global War on Terror", initially targeting al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan*

- **Strategic overstretch** – Prolonged military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq consumed American military, financial and diplomatic resources.
    - The U.S. became increasingly trapped in conflicts that lacked clear political end states.
- **Rise of new terrorist networks** – The Iraq invasion created conditions for the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS.
    - The collapse of Libya contributed to arms proliferation and the spread of jihadist groups across the Sahel.
    - Terrorism became more decentralised and geographically dispersed.
- **Strengthening of Iran** – The removal of Saddam Hussein eliminated a major regional counterweight to Iran.
    - Shia political forces with links to Tehran gained greater influence in Iraq. Iran consequently expanded its regional strategic footprint.
- **Opportunity for strategic rivals** – While the U.S. remained engaged in West Asia, China expanded economically and militarily.
    - Russia exploited opportunities to challenge the U.S.-led security order, particularly in Europe.
- **Chain conflicts** –
    - US withdrawal from Afghanistan,
    - Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and
    - Intensifying instability in West Asia after 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, further complicating U.S. strategic repositioning.

What are the Factors Driving this Post- Unipolar World Transition?

- **Reduced credibility in intervention** – Long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq diverted American resources.
  - Regime-change interventions produced instability rather than durable political settlements.
  - Prolonged conflicts reduced the credibility of unilateral interventionism.
- **Rise of China** – China transformed its economic strength into growing military and technological capabilities.
  - Its emergence as a systemic competitor has challenged U.S. primacy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.
- **Russian resurgence** – Russia has sought to revise the post-Cold War European security architecture.
  - The Ukraine conflict represents a direct challenge to the U.S.-led European order.
- **Changing West Asian balance** – Iran expanded its influence following the Iraq War.
  - Continued instability involving Israel, Iran and regional actors has complicated U.S. strategy.
- **Declining western influence in Africa** – Instability following the Libyan intervention contributed to arms proliferation and terrorist expansion in the Sahel.
  - Western influence has consequently faced growing challenges in parts of Africa.

Emergence of a Post-Unipolar World	
Earlier Unipolar Order	**Emerging Post-Unipolar Order**
U.S. as unrivalled power	China emerging as a second pole
Limited strategic challengers	Russia actively challenging Europe’s security architecture
Predominantly U.S.-led interventions	Greater geopolitical competition
Stronger western influence	Declining western influence in parts of Africa and West Asia
Liberal interventionism	Increasing emphasis on sovereignty and strategic autonomy

What are its Implications for India?

- **Strategic autonomy** – India must avoid excessive dependence on any single power while maintaining partnerships with the U.S., Russia, Europe and others.
- **Multipolarity** – A fragmented global order creates greater space for India to emerge as an independent pole of influence.
- **West Asian stability** – Conflicts involving Israel, Iran and Gulf countries can affect India's energy security, diaspora and trade routes.
- **Terrorism** – The decentralisation of terrorist networks requires stronger international intelligence-sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation.
- **Indo-Pacific** – The rise of China makes the Indo-Pacific increasingly central to India's strategic calculations.
- **Global governance** – India can advocate reform of multilateral institutions to make

them more representative of contemporary power realities.

What could be done?

- Shift from unilateral military intervention towards diplomacy and coalition-building.
- Strengthen multilateral **conflict-resolution mechanisms**.
- Address root causes of terrorism, including state fragility and governance deficits.
- Rebalance commitments between Europe, West Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

What lies ahead?

- The War on Terror demonstrates that military superiority cannot by itself guarantee strategic success.
- The U.S. must adapt its foreign policy to an increasingly multipolar world where influence depends increasingly on partnerships, diplomacy and legitimacy.

Conclusion

- The emerging order is neither completely multipolar nor dominated by a single power.
- It is a fluid and contested post-unipolar system, requiring major powers to rely increasingly on multilateralism rather than unilateral action.

Reference

The Hindu| Unilateral America in a Post-Unipolar World

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