

The Architecture of Modern Stability: Multipolarity and the “Economic Cage” in the 2020s

Yasin Zhalgasbaeva
yasin.zhalgasbaevaaa@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines whether contemporary multipolarity is structurally more vulnerable to great-power war than the international systems of the twentieth century. It develops a qualitative comparative historical analysis of four periods: pre-1914 multipolarity, Cold War bipolarity, post-Cold War unipolarity, and contemporary multipolarity in the 2020s. The article argues that present-day multipolarity is not inherently peaceful, but that two structural mechanisms reduce the strategic attractiveness of direct war among major powers. The first is deep global value-chain interdependence, described here as the “Economic Cage.” Unlike many of the commodity and manufactured-good networks that characterised earlier international trade, contemporary production depends heavily on specialised and geographically dispersed inputs, including advanced semiconductor technologies (Jacks, 2024; OECD, 2025). The second mechanism is expanded informational visibility produced by commercial satellites, open-source intelligence, and near-real-time monitoring. This visibility does not eliminate uncertainty, deception, or miscalculation, but it makes large-scale military preparation more difficult to conceal and may create additional opportunities for crisis management. The article does not claim that economic interdependence makes great-power war impossible. Instead, it argues that deep production-chain dependence raises the expected economic costs of direct conflict and constrains the range of strategically viable choices available to governments. The article’s novelty lies not in introducing the general claim that interdependence can promote peace, but in combining the depth and technological specificity of global value chains with informational visibility in a comparative framework that distinguishes contemporary multipolarity from the pre-1914 system. By combining these perspectives, the article shows how regional rivalry and economic pressure can continue even when direct war between major powers becomes less strategically attractive.

INTRODUCTION

The international system of the 2020s is increasingly characterised by the coexistence of several major centres of economic, technological, military, and diplomatic power. The post-Cold War period of relatively concentrated American primacy has not simply been replaced by a new bipolar order. Instead, the contemporary system combines United States power with the growing economic and technological

influence of China, the continued military importance of Russia, the rising weight of India, the institutional activity of the European Union, and the expanding diplomatic and economic role of other states in the Global South.

This transformation raises a familiar question in international relations: does multipolarity increase the likelihood of major war? Classical realist scholarship has often treated systems with several powerful actors as vulnerable to misperception, shifting alignments, and uncertainty about the intentions of rivals (Mearsheimer, 1990; Waltz, 1979). The pre-1914 European system is commonly used as a warning that complex power distributions can generate instability when alliances, military planning, and national ambitions interact under conditions of incomplete information. (International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2024; Levy et al., 1991). By contrast, scholarship on economic interdependence argues that trade and cross-border production can create incentives for restraint, particularly when military conflict would destroy valuable economic relationships.

This article asks whether contemporary multipolarity differs structurally from earlier forms of multipolarity. Its central argument is not that the contemporary system is peaceful or that major war has become impossible. Rather, the article argues that two features of the present international economy and information environment raise the costs of direct great-power conflict: deep global value-chain interdependence and expanded informational visibility.

The first mechanism is referred to as the Economic Cage. The term describes a structural condition in which states depend on geographically dispersed and difficult-to-replace production networks. In such a system, military conflict may damage not only the target state but also the aggressor’s own access to critical goods, technologies, markets, and financial channels. The concept builds on earlier theories of commercial peace and complex interdependence, but it also incorporates a realist insight: interdependence is not merely a source of cooperation; it can also generate vulnerability and coercive leverage. (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The second mechanism is informational visibility. Commercial satellite imagery, digital communications, publicly available databases, and open-source intelligence have made some forms of large-scale military movement more observable than they were in the early twentieth century (Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). This development does not eliminate the “fog of war.” It may, however, reduce uncertainty in particular domains, improve warning, and create additional opportunities for diplomatic signalling.

The article makes three contributions. First, it places the contemporary debate about multipolarity within a structured comparison that includes pre-1914 multipolarity, Cold War bipolarity, post-Cold War unipolarity, and the international system of the 2020s. Second, it clarifies the relationship between economic interdependence and security by distinguishing mutual economic constraint from the coercive use of network centrality. Third, it proposes that the interaction between deep production-chain dependence and informational visibility helps explain why the contemporary system may experience intense regional rivalry without necessarily producing an open war among the major powers.

The novelty of this article does not lie in claiming that trade, interdependence, or informational transparency have been ignored in international relations scholarship. These ideas have been examined extensively in research on commercial peace, complex interdependence, and network power. The more specific contribution of this study is to show how the depth and technological specificity of contemporary global value chains interact with expanded informational visibility to distinguish twenty-first-century multipolarity from the multipolar system that preceded the First World War.

The argument is deliberately limited. Economic interdependence does not eliminate nationalism, ideology, territorial disputes, domestic political pressures, or security dilemmas. Nor does informational visibility prevent cyber operations, deception, accidental escalation, proxy war, blockades, or limited military clashes. The more modest claim is that these two mechanisms increase the economic and political costs of direct great-power war and thereby reduce its strategic attractiveness under many conditions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural Systems and War

Structural realism treats the distribution of capabilities among major states as a central determinant of international outcomes. Kenneth Waltz argues that the number and relative strength of great powers shape the incentives and constraints under which states operate (Waltz, 1979). In a bipolar system, the existence of two dominant powers may make the distribution of capabilities comparatively clear. In a multipolar system, by contrast, states must assess several major actors simultaneously, and the possibility of changing alignments may increase uncertainty.

The relationship between polarity and stability remains contested. Some scholars argue that bipolarity is more stable because it reduces uncertainty about the identity of the principal competitors. Others contend that multipolarity may create more opportunities for balancing, bargaining, and diplomatic flexibility. (Deutsch & Singer, 1964; Mearsheimer, 1990; Waltz, 1979). The debate cannot therefore be resolved by counting poles alone. A systemic analysis must also examine the economic, technological, informational, and institutional conditions in which polarity operates.

Interdependence and Commercial Peace

The claim that economic relations can reduce the likelihood of war has a long intellectual history. Commercial peace arguments suggest that trade creates opportunity costs for military conflict and encourages states to preserve mutually beneficial economic relations. Keohane and Nye’s (1977) concept of complex interdependence further emphasises that international relations involve multiple channels of contact, a broad agenda extending beyond military security, and a reduced tendency to use force in situations where interdependence is deep (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

However, interdependence should not be treated as an automatic source of peace. The relationship between trade and conflict depends on the distribution of dependence, the substitutability of goods, the political meaning of economic ties, and the possibility that networks can be used coercively. Recent scholarship therefore distinguishes between the pacifying effects of interdependence and its vulnerability to asymmetry and weaponisation (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Mousseau & Mousseau, 2017).

Weaponised Interdependence

Farrell and Newman (2019) demonstrate that global economic networks are not necessarily symmetrical. States and firms controlling central nodes may obtain information, restrict access, or impose costs on actors located at more peripheral positions in a network (Farrell & Newman, 2019). This argument is particularly relevant to advanced technologies, financial infrastructure, digital platforms, and semiconductor production.

This perspective complicates the Economic Cage argument. Interdependence can discourage war because conflict would impose large mutual costs. At the same time, dependence can become a source of coercive power. A state that controls a critical node may attempt to use that node to influence another state without initiating conventional war. Consequently, the Economic Cage should not be understood as a simple harmony-producing mechanism. It is better understood as a constraint that makes some forms of conflict less attractive while encouraging competition through sanctions, export controls, investment restrictions, technological denial, and supply-chain restructuring.

Research Gap and Contribution

Existing scholarship has already established several components of the argument developed here. Commercial peace research examines the relationship between trade and war. Complex interdependence theory explains how cross-border connections alter state incentives. Weaponised interdependence research shows how network centrality can produce coercive power. Structural realism highlights the consequences of polarity and uncertainty. Research on global value chains demonstrates that modern production is distributed across multiple jurisdictions rather than contained within national borders.

The present article does not claim to be the first study to argue that economic interdependence may reduce the likelihood of war. Nor does it claim to introduce interdependence, network power, or commercial peace theory. Its more limited contribution is synthetic and comparative.

The article contributes in four ways. First, it connects the structure of the international system to the depth and non-substitutability of production-chain dependence. Second, it distinguishes contemporary multipolarity from pre-1914 multipolarity by comparing not merely the volume of trade but the technological specificity of production networks. Third, it treats informational visibility as a complementary mechanism that may affect warning, signalling, and crisis management. Fourth, it offers a framework for explaining how regional competition and economic coercion can coexist with a reduced likelihood of direct systemic war.

The term Economic Cage is therefore used as an analytical concept developed in this article. It is not presented as a wholly new general theory of international relations. It names the combined condition in which states are constrained by their dependence on specialised production networks whose disruption would impose substantial costs on multiple major actors.

METHODS

Research Design

This article uses a qualitative comparative historical analysis with a structured, focused comparison of four international-systemic periods:

1. Pre-1914 multipolarity, with attention to the conditions surrounding the July Crisis and the outbreak of the First World War.
2. Cold War bipolarity, 1947-1991, with attention to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the persistence of proxy conflict.
3. Post-Cold War unipolarity, 1991-2014, with attention to American military predominance, post-9/11 intervention, and strategic overextension.
4. Contemporary multipolarity in the 2020s, with attention to global value chains, semiconductor production, economic coercion, and informational visibility.

The cases are not treated as perfectly comparable experiments. They represent historically distinct systemic configurations. The purpose of comparison is to identify differences in the mechanisms that shape the expected costs and risks of major-power conflict.

Analytical Focus

The outcome of interest is the strategic attractiveness of direct conventional war among major powers. The article does not attempt to estimate a precise numerical probability of war. Instead, it examines whether particular structural conditions make direct conflict more costly, more difficult to initiate, or more likely to generate unacceptable domestic consequences.

Two explanatory mechanisms are examined:

1. Deep production-chain interdependence: the extent to which critical goods and technologies depend on specialised, geographically dispersed, and difficult-to-replace inputs.
2. Informational visibility: the extent to which military preparation and strategic behaviour can be observed through satellites, public data, digital communications, and open-source intelligence.

These mechanisms are examined alongside scope conditions, including nuclear deterrence, ideological commitment, territorial disputes, domestic political incentives, and the possibility of economic decoupling.

Case Selection and Evidence

The four periods were selected because they represent different combinations of polarity, economic integration, military technology, and informational conditions. The analysis uses secondary scholarship, institutional reports, economic data, historical studies, and publicly available material concerning semiconductor supply chains and satellite-based monitoring.

The method is interpretive rather than statistical. The article therefore does not claim to establish a universal law that interdependence prevents war. Its purpose is to develop a theoretically informed comparison and identify conditions under which economic and informational mechanisms may constrain direct great-power conflict.

RESULTS

Pre-1914 Multipolarity: Shallow Integration and Informational Opacity

The pre-1914 European system was multipolar, with several major powers competing for security, prestige, territory, and influence. The system possessed significant economic integration, but the character of that integration differed from contemporary production networks. During the nineteenth century, declining trade costs, improved transportation, and expanding long-distance commerce increased international economic integration (Jacks, 2024). However, contemporary production depends more heavily on specialised and difficult-to-replace technological inputs than many of the commodity and manufactured-good networks that characterised earlier international trade (OECD, 2023a, 2023b)

The political and informational environment also differed sharply from the present. The July Crisis involved alliance commitments, mobilisation decisions, incomplete coordination, and uncertainty about how other governments would respond (International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2024; Levy et al., 1991). This did not mean that states lacked information. Rather, information was less immediate, less widely distributed, and more difficult for publics and external actors to verify.

The July Crisis demonstrated how alliance commitments, mobilisation schedules, domestic pressures, and uncertainty about intentions could combine to produce escalation (International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2024; Levy et al., 1991). The outbreak of war was not caused by multipolarity alone. It resulted from the interaction of multiple mechanisms, including alliance politics, military planning, nationalism, imperial competition, and leaders’ assessments of risk.

The pre-1914 case therefore provides an important benchmark. It shows that international trade alone is insufficient to prevent major war. The relevant question is not simply whether states trade, but whether the economic structure creates severe and immediate mutual vulnerability, whether leaders recognise that vulnerability, and whether political institutions can convert economic costs into effective restraint.

Cold War Bipolarity: Nuclear Deterrence and Proxy Conflict

The Cold War produced a bipolar system centred on the United States and the Soviet Union. The concentration of military power in two principal rivals made the central strategic relationship comparatively clear. Both states possessed nuclear forces capable of inflicting catastrophic destruction, creating a powerful form of mutual deterrence (Jervis, 1989; Waltz, 1979).

The Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates both the dangers and the stabilising effects of bipolarity. The discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba brought the United States and the Soviet Union into a direct confrontation. At the same time, both governments understood that escalation could lead to nuclear catastrophe. The crisis encouraged the establishment of more reliable direct communication between Washington and Moscow. The U.S.–Soviet hotline was established after the crisis to facilitate rapid communication during future emergencies (Miller, 2021; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, 2022).

Bipolarity did not eliminate international violence. Instead, nuclear deterrence constrained direct war between the superpowers while competition continued through proxy conflicts and interventions in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa (Westad, 2005). The Korean War, the Vietnam War, conflicts in Africa, and other regional struggles demonstrated that systemic stability at the core could coexist with severe instability at the periphery.

The Cold War therefore reveals a distinction important for this article: a system may prevent direct great-power war without producing general peace. Deterrence can stabilise the core while displacing competition into regional arenas.

Post-Cold War Unipolarity: Primacy and Overextension

The collapse of the Soviet Union produced a period of concentrated American military and economic predominance, often described in international-relations scholarship as a period of unipolarity (Krauthammer, 1990; Wohlforth, 1999). The absence of a peer competitor reduced some forms of great-power rivalry, but it also weakened external constraints on the leading state’s use of force (Wohlforth, 1999).

The post-9/11 wars illustrate the costs associated with prolonged military intervention. Estimates from Brown University’s Costs of War project place the total budgetary costs and future obligations of the post-9/11 wars at approximately \$8 trillion, depending on the accounting period and categories included (Crawford, 2021). This figure includes war-related spending, homeland security expenditures, interest, and obligations for veterans’ care. It should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the cost of

unipolarity as such. It does, however, illustrate how military predominance can coexist with strategic and fiscal overextension.

The unipolar case differs from the pre-1914 case because the central problem was not the rapid multiplication of great-power alliances. Instead, it involved the strategic choices of a dominant power operating without a comparable peer competitor. The absence of an external counterweight did not make military action inevitable; it reduced some of the external constraints on large-scale intervention.

This period also demonstrates that military superiority does not automatically translate into political success. The ability to defeat a conventional opponent is not identical to the ability to produce stable political outcomes at acceptable economic and human costs.

Contemporary Multipolarity: Deep GVC Dependence

The contemporary system combines several major centres of power with highly integrated and specialised production networks. Semiconductor production illustrates the structure particularly clearly. The semiconductor value chain includes design, intellectual property, electronic-design automation, wafer fabrication, lithography, specialised equipment, materials, chemicals, assembly, testing, packaging, software, and logistics distributed across multiple jurisdictions (OECD, 2025 ; OECD, 2023b).

Taiwan plays a particularly important role in advanced semiconductor manufacturing, especially in foundry production and advanced logic-chip fabrication. Available estimates differ according to the definition of “advanced,” the process node considered, and whether the measure refers to foundry output, wafer capacity, or the most sophisticated logic chips (OECD, 2025 ; Semiconductor Industry Association & Boston Consulting Group, 2024). For this reason, the article avoids the broader claim that Taiwan produces “more than 90 percent of all advanced microprocessors.” More defensible formulations indicate that Taiwan is responsible for a very large share of advanced logic-chip production and occupies a central position in the global foundry system (Taiwan Representative Office 2024; MUFG Americas 2024).

ASML is the only commercial producer of extreme ultraviolet lithography systems used for high-volume production of the most advanced chips (ASML, 2023; OECD, 2025). This does not mean that ASML controls the entire semiconductor chain. Rather, it demonstrates how a specialised technological node can become strategically significant when it cannot be quickly replaced.

The semiconductor industry is therefore not a single national industry. It is a network that links U.S.-based design and intellectual-property capabilities, Dutch lithography equipment, Japanese materials and chemicals, Taiwanese foundry manufacturing, South Korean memory production, and other specialised suppliers (OECD, 2025; Semiconductor Industry Association & Boston Consulting Group, 2024). The precise distribution of dependence changes over time, and no single country possesses complete autonomy across every advanced semiconductor segment.

This structure generates a form of economic constraint. A major conflict in East Asia could interrupt production, shipping, insurance, finance, energy supplies, and access to technological inputs. Bloomberg

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Economics estimated that a major war over Taiwan could produce an approximately \$10 trillion shock to the global economy, equivalent to roughly 10 percent of global GDP in its 2024 scenario (Bloomberg Economics, 2024; MUFG Americas, 2024). These are modelled estimates rather than predictions, and their results depend on assumptions about the type, duration, and geographic scope of conflict.

The significance of these estimates is not that they prove war will not occur. Instead, they show the scale of the expected economic consequences. A government contemplating military action would have to consider not only battlefield outcomes but also the disruption of its own access to technologies, markets, financial systems, and industrial inputs.

This is the central logic of the Economic Cage: the more production depends on specialised and difficult-to-replace transnational networks, the more a major war risks damaging the economic foundations of the state that initiates it.

Contemporary Multipolarity: Informational Visibility

The second mechanism is the expansion of informational visibility. Commercial satellite imagery, automatic identification systems, social media, digital mapping, and open-source investigations allow governments, firms, researchers, journalists, and civil-society organisations to monitor some forms of military activity (Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022).

This development does not eliminate the fog of war. Important information remains classified, deceptive narratives remain possible, cyber operations can be difficult to attribute, and the interpretation of observed activity may remain contested. Open-source information can also generate confusion when large volumes of unverified material circulate simultaneously. (Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022).

Nevertheless, contemporary monitoring can make some major movements, deployments, infrastructure changes, and logistical preparations more visible than they were in 1914. This does not eliminate uncertainty, but it can improve warning and provide additional material for public verification and diplomatic signalling (Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). This can affect crisis management in three ways:

1. It can provide earlier warning of mobilisation or military preparation.
2. It can make certain forms of surprise more difficult.
3. It can provide publicly visible evidence that supports signalling, verification, and diplomatic coordination.

Informational visibility therefore functions as a potential stabiliser, but only under limited conditions. It may reduce uncertainty about observable capabilities and movements, while leaving uncertainty about intentions, tolerance for risk, domestic political pressures, and the meaning of ambiguous actions.

COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

The comparison produces four principal findings.

First, polarity alone does not determine systemic stability. Bipolarity constrained direct superpower war through nuclear deterrence, but it also supported intense proxy competition. Unipolarity reduced peer rivalry but enabled costly military interventions. Multipolarity can create uncertainty, yet its effects depend on the economic and informational environment in which it operates.

Second, the depth of economic interdependence matters more than the mere existence of trade. Pre-1914 commerce and contemporary production networks differ in their degree of technological specialisation and substitutability (Jacks, 2024; OECD, 2023a, 2023b). Contemporary GVCs can create significant bottlenecks and propagate disruptions across connected sectors, particularly in semiconductors (OECD, 2023a, 2023b; OECD, 2025).

Third, economic interdependence can perform contradictory functions. It may discourage direct war because conflict would be economically destructive. It may also generate coercive leverage, export controls, sanctions, and competition over network centrality. The same networks that constrain conventional war can intensify non-military strategic rivalry.

Fourth, informational visibility modifies but does not eliminate uncertainty. It can reduce the probability of certain forms of surprise, but it does not guarantee correct interpretation or rational decision-making. Information can support deterrence, but it can also accelerate crises when leaders interpret ambiguous evidence as confirmation of hostile intent.

Table 1 summarises the main systemic structures, stabilising mechanisms, conflict patterns, economic conditions, and informational environments identified across the four periods.

Period	Systemic structure	Main stabilising mechanism	Main conflict pattern	Economic condition	Informational condition
Pre-1914	Multipolarity	Balance-of-power diplomacy and alliance management	Great-power war and imperial competition	Extensive but comparatively substitutable trade	Slow communication, secrecy, limited public verification
1947–1991	Bipolarity	Nuclear deterrence and crisis communication	Core stability with proxy wars	Rival blocs with selective economic integration	High secrecy, but improving strategic surveillance

1991–2014	Unipolarity	Predominance of one leading power	Intervention, counterinsurgency, and strategic overextension	Highly globalised but increasingly contested	Growing digital and satellite observation
2020s	Multipolarity	Economic constraint, nuclear deterrence, institutions, and informational visibility	Regional rivalry, coercion, proxy competition, and limited confrontation	Deep specialised GVCs with critical bottlenecks	Commercial satellites, OSINT, digital monitoring and rapid information circulation

Table 1. *Comparative Characteristics of Four International-Systemic Periods*

DISCUSSION

Why Contemporary Multipolarity Differs from 1914

The comparison does not establish that contemporary multipolarity is inherently peaceful. It indicates that the structure of contemporary vulnerability differs from the structure of pre-1914 vulnerability. The pre-1914 system was economically connected, but many forms of trade involved goods that could be redirected or replaced over time. Contemporary production is often more dependent on specialised equipment, proprietary software, advanced materials, and geographically concentrated manufacturing capacity. A disruption at one critical node can affect sectors far beyond the immediate site of conflict, particularly when the affected input is difficult and costly to substitute (OECD, 2023a, 2023b). The difference is therefore not simply “more trade” versus “less trade.” It concerns the organisation of production, the time required to replace inputs, and the degree to which states can maintain industrial capacity without access to foreign technologies and markets. The informational environment also differs. In 1914, governments operated through slower communication systems, secret diplomacy, and limited public access to military information. In the 2020s, large military movements can often be observed through commercial satellites, digital traces, and publicly available data. This does not prevent miscalculation, but it changes the conditions under which miscalculation occurs.

Economic Constraint and Strategic Choice

The Economic Cage should not be interpreted as a mechanical barrier. States may accept economic losses when leaders believe that national survival, territorial control, regime legitimacy, or ideological objectives are at stake. Governments may also assume that a conflict will be short, that sanctions will be ineffective, or that economic dependence can be managed through emergency substitution.

The mechanism is therefore probabilistic rather than deterministic. Deep GVC dependence raises expected costs, but political leaders may discount those costs, distribute them unevenly across society, or treat them as preferable to the perceived costs of inaction. The framework also has an important temporal dimension. Interdependence may constrain conflict in the short term, while long-term decoupling may reduce future constraints (OECD, 2023a). Policies designed to increase resilience can simultaneously reduce vulnerability and weaken the economic barriers to military escalation.

The Security Dilemma of Transparency

Informational visibility can support stability, but it can also intensify the security dilemma. If one state observes another’s military preparation, it may respond defensively. The observed state may interpret those defensive measures as evidence of hostile intent and accelerate its own preparations.

More information does not always produce more trust. It can produce more rapid reactions. The stabilising effect of transparency therefore depends on communication channels, credible signalling, interpretive restraint, and the ability to distinguish preparation for defence from preparation for attack.

Scope Conditions and Limitations

The argument has several limitations.

First, the analysis does not measure the probability of war statistically. It offers a comparative theoretical explanation rather than a quantitative forecast.

Second, the Economic Cage may be weaker when economic interdependence is asymmetric. A state that controls a critical network node may impose costs on others while suffering fewer immediate consequences itself.

Third, technological and industrial decoupling may reduce mutual vulnerability over time. Strategic competition over semiconductors, critical minerals, energy, data, and logistics may lead states to build parallel systems.

Fourth, economic costs may be outweighed by ideological, territorial, or domestic political incentives. The framework should therefore not be applied as if leaders always maximise aggregate national welfare.

Fifth, the analysis concerns direct conventional war among major powers. It does not imply that regional wars, proxy conflicts, cyberattacks, sanctions, blockades, coercive diplomacy, or limited military incidents are unlikely.

Finally, informational visibility is not equivalent to accurate knowledge. OSINT can reveal movements and material evidence, but it cannot reliably reveal intentions. Deception, propaganda, poor interpretation, and domestic political bias remain important sources of escalation.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined whether contemporary multipolarity is likely to generate a systemic war among the major powers. The comparison of four periods suggests that polarity alone cannot explain international stability. Pre-1914 multipolarity was vulnerable to alliance dynamics, nationalism, military planning, and informational opacity. Cold War bipolarity constrained direct superpower war through nuclear deterrence but displaced competition into proxy conflicts. Post-Cold War unipolarity reduced peer rivalry while enabling costly military interventions and strategic overextension.

Contemporary multipolarity differs from these earlier systems because it combines several major centres of power with deeply specialised global value chains and expanded informational visibility. The Economic Cage captures the first mechanism: major states depend on transnational production networks whose disruption would impose serious costs on both aggressors and targets. Informational visibility captures the second: satellites, digital systems, and OSINT can make large-scale military preparations more observable and create additional opportunities for warning and crisis management.

Neither mechanism eliminates war. Economic interdependence can be weaponised, decoupling can reduce mutual vulnerability, and information can be misinterpreted. States may also prioritise territorial, ideological, or regime-security objectives over economic welfare. The most defensible conclusion is therefore limited: deep GVC interdependence and expanded informational visibility raise the expected costs of direct great-power war and reduce its strategic attractiveness under many conditions, while leaving substantial room for regional conflict, coercion, proxy competition, and escalation.

The international system of the 2020s should consequently be understood not as a self-regulating system that has overcome war, but as a system in which the costs of systemic war are unusually visible, economically interconnected, and difficult for major powers to contain. Its stability depends not only on military deterrence but also on the preservation of resilient economic networks, crisis communication, institutional restraint, and the careful management of technological interdependence.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yasin Zhalgasbaeva is a high school student at Astana Bilim-Innovation Lyceum for Gifted Girls. She takes a strong interest in international relations, political science, and economics, with a focus on global governance and public policy. She plans to pursue higher education in international relations and political science, aiming to conduct analytical research and contribute to international law and diplomacy.