



COMPETING VISIONS OF THE FUTURE INTERNATIONAL ORDER: REASSESSMENT OF MEARSHEIMER, FUKUYAMA, HUNTINGTON, BARNETT, AND ZAKARIA'S WORLDVIEW IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

*The end of the Cold War generated an unprecedented wave of theoretical reflection on the future trajectory of international politics. Among the most influential interpretations were Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Thomas P. Barnett's *The Pentagon's New Map – Peace and Security in the 21st Century*, Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, and John J. Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Although these scholars advanced distinct and, in some respects, competing visions of the post-Cold War international order, their arguments identified the capability of different forces in shaping global politics in the twenty-first century. This paper comparatively reassesses the five perspectives of these scholars against major geopolitical developments between 2000 and 2025, including the resurgence of great-power rivalry, China's rise, the diffusion of economic and political power beyond the West, the persistence of civilizational and identity-based conflicts, regional instability, state fragility, globalization, and the renewed salience of geopolitics. Rather than treating these theories as mutually exclusive predictions, the paper examines their points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity, and evaluates the extent to which subsequent developments have validated, challenged, or modified their original propositions. It argues that no single theoretical vision adequately explains the complexity of the contemporary international system. Instead, the emerging order reflects the simultaneous interaction of several dynamics anticipated by these scholars: ideological competition, civilizational identities, globalization and connectivity, state fragmentation, power diffusion, and great-power rivalry. The paper therefore proposes a multidimensional synthesis of these perspectives as a more comprehensive framework for understanding the transition from the post-Cold War order toward an increasingly contested, fragmented, and multipolar international system.*



Key Words: International Order; Post-Cold War Order; Great-Power Competition; Multipolarity; Civilizational Conflict; Globalization; Power Diffusion; International Relations Theory

Analysis of Five Competing Scholarly Visions of the World

Mearsheimer's World

In Mearsheimer's case, he saw the rise of China as a reality and predicted that it might once again lead to a bipolar world based on the balance of power (Horizons Interviews, 2026). He claims that power, as a core concept, guides the thinking of all great powers, and Russia, if one goes by John Mearsheimer's definition of a great power, is part of the three-great-powers club in the world today (Horizons Interviews, 2026). Russia, he considers, is doing today what all great powers have done in the past: calculating power, analyzing it for experimental needs, and utilizing it to dominate, drive, and exercise influence and control over international relations. "Great powers are determined largely based on their military capability," says Mearsheimer (Horizons Interviews, 2026). To qualify as a great power, a state must be able to put up a serious fight against the most powerful state and should have a reasonable prospect of turning the conflict into a war of attrition that leaves the dominant state seriously weakened (Mearsheimer & Harrison, 2026). In the nuclear age, a state cannot be a great power without a nuclear deterrent and its capacity to survive the first strike against an enemy (Mearsheimer & Harrison, 2026). In the nuclear age, without nuclear weapons, you cannot be a great power. So, Mearsheimer views the nine countries that possess nuclear weapons as nuclear powers, but not all of them as great powers. North Korea, Pakistan, Israel, the United Kingdom, and France do not fulfill the Mearsheimer conditions of being a great power. This leaves just the United States, Russia, and China to qualify and stake this claim. So, in the world seen from Prof. Mearsheimer's point of view, be it Gaza, Ukraine, South China Sea, Taiwan, North Korea, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kashmir, Haiti, Yemen, Ethiopia, or the Sahel, the fortunes of all the conflicts are determined primarily by the politics, decisions, and actions of these great powers.

Prof. Mearsheimer argues that great powers influence and control what goes on in the world. It is the competition between them and the intensity of that competition that conflicts either peak or end in many parts of the world (Snyder, 2002). A new balance of power is always formed when the most powerful state tries to alienate the other great powers from the international system, and Mearsheimer views the US alienation of Russia through the eastward expansion of NATO in the same mode (Lind, 2018). He also believes that the US has alienated China by continuously lecturing its leaders on how to rule itself (Ikenberry et al., 2022). Great-power alienation has a history, and the Cold War emerged from the ashes of the defeat of Germany and Japan, but not before the US tried to alienate these powers from the international system. Germany was humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles after World War I, and Japan by the imposition of an oil embargo by the US, because of which it ended up losing 94% of its oil supply (Blakemore, 2019). Witnessing the world through Prof. Mearsheimer's lens, Pearl Harbor and Hitler may have been the products of a policy of alienation by a great power that ultimately culminated in a new balance of power system. Between 1945 and 1990, in the bipolar world, politics was deeply influenced by the competition between the Soviet Union and the US. So, whether in Cuba, Angola, Korea, Vietnam, or Afghanistan, the



conflicts in these countries were the creation of Prof. Mearsheimer's propagated great-power competition between the two great powers of the time. The US enjoyed absolute power in the “unipolar moment,” as it had no other great power to deal with, but the subsequent rise of China and the resurgence of Russia happened and brought back balance in the world dominated by the US in the unipolar moment (Zakaria, 2019).

If revisionism is born in the womb of alienation, then both Russia and China are revisionist powers that doubt the fairness of the international system, with a belief that it favors its own creator, the US. For forty five years, two great powers contested and competed; today, there are three. The most powerful state has already brought battlefields to the doorsteps of these great powers: NATO's eastern encroachment and Ukraine in the case of Russia, and Taiwan's support by the US in the case of China (Ehsan, 2023). In the Cold War, the battles had an ideological tone, and thwarting the spread of communism was a policy that resulted in battles in far-flung regions of the world; the most powerful state is again utilizing an ideological overtone, but this time, in the name of the defense of freedom, individual liberties, commercial interests, control of energy resources, and the rule of international law (Ehsan, 2023).

The costs and risks of shifting the balance of power are great, and so the transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar world will also be filled with many risks and many costs. Many scholars of international relations predict that a multipolar system will be far more war-prone than the bipolar system was, because the greater the number of great powers in a system, the greater the potential for acquisition of power and resultant conflicts (Ashford & Cooper, 2023). Prof. Mearsheimer builds the future world around the great powers' power politics, and those who underappreciate the potential and dynamics of geopolitics and visualize power competition and power politics only in terms of geoeconomics must understand that what money is to economics, power is to international relations (Makridis, 2025). Desire for power by great powers is an enduring issue that sustains international relations more than anything else does (Latham, 2025).

To summarize, Prof. Mearsheimer's world is uncertain, in which states are unsure of other states' intentions. In such a world, great powers maximize their relative power and, where possible, achieve regional hegemony. In Prof. Mearsheimer's world, security competition, rivalry, and balancing will remain permanent features of international politics. In short, Mearsheimer sees the world as anarchic, competitive, uncertain, and driven primarily by the struggle for power and survival rather than cooperation or shared values. Amongst the five scholars, Mearsheimer's diagnosis regarding China seems more appealing and convincing. The historical record also supports Mearsheimer's diagnosis. Robert Gilpin argues that “hegemonic transitions, when a rising power begins to overtake the dominant one, have rarely been peaceful.” Mearsheimer also considers nationalism as a source of conflict in international politics, and Huntington sees religion as also a great motivating force in politics. Mearsheimer, being a realist, wants the West to balance against China, and the West can only do so by developing alliances and partnerships. To Mearsheimer, the liberal policy of “engagement” offers no solution to China's rising power and will only make it



worse (Betts, 2010). Mearsheimer considers that the US has a profound interest in seeing Chinese economic growth slow down; he further states that “the US has pursued a strategy to have the opposite effect.” Economic warfare that could work toward hobbling China would also provoke it, and is not a plausible option in any case. Mearsheimer considers that bipolar international systems are most stable, and so he finds no reason for alarm in the rise of China (Betts, 2010).

Fukuyama’s World View

Fukuyama’s worldview seems full of optimism as it views the promotion of democracy, capitalism, and liberalism, driven by wealth and technology, in a globalized environment that would lead to the creation of an order based on the homogenization of all human societies (Berman, 2011). Fukuyama believes that this transformation occurs when the twin principles of democracy, liberty, and equality are fully implemented and the spiritual quest of human dignity is fully achieved (Berman, 2011). It is widely believed that when Fukuyama said that history has ended, he did not mean the virtual end of history but a process that will lead to an end when its remaining loose ends are tied up (Gibson, 2022). He predicted that conflicts will persist in the developing world as it remains “stuck in history” (Gibson, 2022). Fukuyama linked the process of history to a strung-out wagon train, in which some wagons get temporarily stopped, damaged, or diverted but eventually arrive at the same destination (Betts, 2010).

Without any fundamental disagreements in how society should be organized—he gives no heed to President Xi’s different worldview—he imagines there will be nothing important left to fight about. Fukuyama also gives no heed to the fundamental realist theory that “history is not a progress towards enlightenment and peace but is a cycle of conflict” (Betts, 2010). Fukuyama considers the world to be healthy and people like Mearsheimer are “only proposing costly and dangerous cures to healthy patients” (Betts, 2010). Fukuyama’s thesis came on the heels of the end of the Cold War, and he called democracy the final form of government because, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, communism had faded as the last standing threat to capitalism. Unlike Fukuyama, Mearsheimer views the possibility of lasting peace and security in the world not through the spread of nice ideas but through a stable balance of power (Betts, 2010). Without peace, Fukuyama’s thesis that humanity has come to an end of its ideological evolution seems weak, and the more we live in a conflict-prone world, the less popular Fukuyama’s vision of the future world appears. Fukuyama had not considered Islam as a challenge to the West because he considered that it had little appeal outside areas that were already Islamic. In his opinion, Islam can win back lapsed adherents, but has no resonance for young people in Berlin, Tokyo, or Moscow (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 46).

Fukuyama worries about Nietzsche’s idea of the will to power, “that people will strive to be not just equal but superior,” but this is likely to reignite the impulses to violence that his thesis, the end of history, was supposed to put to rest. He admits that this spiritual dimension gives power to the least Davos-like force, nationalism. By the look of Fukuyama’s work, it seems he is talking more about the intermission of history than its actual end. On the West’s relationship with China, one can easily say that Fukuyama’s future world is one in which China should ideologically become part of the



West, and this is only possible if China democratizes. Fukuyama also states that Western civilization is content with its achievement in the fields of materialism and justice. Looking towards the future, in Fukuyama's world, the West, under such circumstances, will find it difficult to defend itself against other civilizations whose citizens are ready to forsake comfort and safety and who are not afraid to risk their lives for better prospects of life.

Huntington's World View

Huntington, like Fukuyama, believed in the impact of globalization, but unlike him, he saw globalization generating not consensus but conflict (Bazela, 2026). He also believed in Mearsheimer's concept of power and its role in creating balance in the world, but insisted that power is concentrated not in nation-states but in transnational cultural areas, which he described as eight civilizations (Huntington, 1993). His famous argument was that "the world was unifying economically and culturally but not socially" (Huntington, 1993). He believed in the dominance of the West but also predicted a relative Western decline as other civilizations assert themselves and catch up to the West. For Huntington, the biggest competition in the future would be between the West and the "rest" (Huntington, 1993). Clearly, this assumption is closer to President Xi's political thinking about how China wants to compete with the West by leading the rest of the world. Huntington did not agree with Fukuyama's concept of the wagon train in which some wagons get strung or stop, but all would eventually arrive at the destination. Huntington believed that there were more than one train and all of them were moving in different directions and on different routes (Fukuyama, 2011). He was essentially talking about different civilizations that were doing well on their own. The main thrust of Huntington's argument was that modernization and westernization were two different things, and no matter how other civilizations participated in Western consumer culture, it never meant that these cultures believed in Western values as well.

Huntington referred to Fukuyama's homogenization as "Davos culture"—the annual meeting of the elites in Switzerland. By this, he meant that a very limited part of the population, one percent of the world elite, about 50 million people, control the world's institutions and, in many cases, the governments of the independent states, but this group of elites could not drive the agenda of the middle classes and the masses of the other civilizations (Ong, 2022). Huntington cautioned that the celebrations on the progress of democracy and Fukuyama's end of history may be short-lived, as the spread of democracy does not necessarily mean the fostering of Western values. In fact, Huntington argued that such a culture of promotion of Western values only resulted in the empowerment of the native movements (Ong, 2022). He argued that, "Spreading Western values does not promote peace but provokes resistance: If Non-Western societies are once again to be shaped by Western culture, it will happen only as a result of the expansion, deployment, and impact of Western power" (Huntington, 1993). Imperialism, he believed, was the necessary logical consequence of universalism (Huntington, 1993). Huntington's prediction of the clash of civilizations does not do justice to his work. His work was actually built around preventing the clash of civilizations from becoming a war of civilizations (Betts, 2010). He proposed that a wiser alternative was to recognize that the security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturalism. Huntington's



recommended recipe for peace for the West was to reject universalism, respect non-Western cultures, and practice non-interference in the conflicts of non-Western civilizations, something almost the opposite of what the West believed and did, and no wonder there is a lack of peace and security in the world.

After 9/11, the only theorist of the five who seemed to make sense was Huntington. In the afterword to a later edition of his book, Huntington argued that Muslim countries outside the Arab world would be able to democratize and that violent Islamist doctrines are radical ideologies inspired by Western fascism and communism and do not reflect any core teachings of Islam (Aziz, 2025). As far as terrorism and its importance to both Fukuyama and Mearsheimer are concerned, it can be judged from the fact that the word terrorism did not even appear in the index of either of their books. Huntington, on the other hand, considered Islam not only as a great challenge but also a loose end in Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis. President Bush did not take Huntington's advice of not meddling in the affairs of other civilizations and undertook a disastrous invasion of Iraq. If a vision and forecast in the first decade of the twenty-first century mattered, it was Huntington's.

Huntington writes about Fukuyama that "he goes beyond the many who embrace globalization and Davos culture and worries that economic plenty and technological comforts are not enough to keep history ended, because 'man is not simply an economic animal'" (Betts, 2010). Huntington proposed that China be given its space, revered and respected, with no attempts to cut down its influence and growth. Huntington's prescription of restraint is something that America should reflect upon, and a combination of Huntington's policy prescription of restraint and Mearsheimer's "dragonized" future world based on a system of stable balance of power might be the best way for the West to take the relationship forward with China.

Thomas P. M. Barnett's World View

The fourth scholar and theorist whose work is reflective of how the international system might change is Thomas P. M. Barnett, the author of *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*. He claims that disconnectedness defines danger and allows bad actors to flourish, and suggests that eradicating disconnectedness is the defining security task of our age (Barnett, 2004). Barnett states that the enemy is neither religion (Islam) nor a place (Middle East), but a condition—disconnectedness (Barnett, 2004). He makes a valid observation when he writes that the future is not about dealing with the biggest threat in the environment but dealing with the environment of threats. He divides the world into the core and the gap. The core is the developed world, and the gap is the world still developing (Barnett, 2004). In his core and gap thesis, he states that the US military is clearly headed towards a perpetual war all over the gap. The core's good life attracts people from the gap who are fed up and frustrated when they compare their sorry existence to the good life in the core. This frustration and resentment lead to public anger, demonstrations, and coups. Sadly, the world today has contributed to the statelessness that most countries in the gap experience today. The British and the French colonized more than 95% of the African continent; Britain colonized 22 African states while the French colonized 20 (BBC, n.d.).



Previous generations read the history of evil empires; the current generation has not only read that history but also the history of “evil states” created by the colonizers. The definition of an evil state depends on which part of the world you reside in. If you reside in the core, the “axis of evil” is the definition, and leaders like Saddam, Bashar al-Assad, and Gaddafi are the evil leaders that must be eliminated (Barnett, 2004). But if you reside in the gap, the military dictators, the colonizer-imposed ruling regimes, and their leaders are considered evil by the people, and hence coups and chaos (Barnett, 2004). Barnett states that four flows keep the balancing act together across the globe: people, energy, investment, and security. Energy scarcity and high prices have shut down industries and are now shutting down basic life in people’s homes. He believes that the Core provides security in the Gap as long as the Gap serves its interests. A large percentage of France’s nuclear power plants ran on uranium extracted from deposits in Niger, and to ensure sustained supply, France maintained a military base there (Melly, 2024). The people wanted them out, and their ambassador was declared persona non grata only because Niger realized that they no longer wanted to remain colonized (Mazou & Aksar, 2023).

Barnett writes that after two great wars, the U.S. found in globalization the remedy for the world’s peaceful existence. Yet, it is the disproportionate benefits of globalization that are enjoyed more by the core and less by the periphery, which creates hatred and resentment in the gap countries. The West may be united, but the rest is up against it and wants the root problems to be addressed rather than only the symptoms. The U.S. may be the global leader, the world’s Leviathan, but the countries in the Gap do not see it performing the role of the “Gap’s Leviathan.” In short, Barnett’s worldview suggests that the gap is not the problem; the problem is the core. The core creates firewalls to prevent the flow of immigrants, drugs, illegal money, pandemics, etc., only to keep itself insulated from the gap countries. This is not the grand strategy of globalization but a grand strategy of solidifying a permanent divide in the world (Barnett, 2004).

Fareed Zakaria’s World View

In his book, *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria identified three important long-term shifts in the distribution of global power: (1) the rise of the West (15th to 19th centuries), a period during which a world order was created and dominated by Europe; (2) the rise of America (late 19th to 20th centuries), a period during which the US, after the two World Wars, became the central power in the international system; and (3) the rise of the rest (late 20th and 21st centuries), a period during which countries outside the West experienced unprecedented economic growth, and the rise relatively reduced Western global dominance (Zakaria, 2008).

The book *The Post-American World* by Fareed Zakaria explains the shifting global power dynamics in the twenty-first century. Zakaria argues that the world is transitioning from a US-dominated world towards a multipolar world. He suggests that the US will remain a great power but not a dominant power (Zakaria, 2011). He argues that the US will no longer remain the undisputed leader in world affairs; instead, the “rest” of the world—especially countries like China, India, and Brazil, rising economically and politically—will play a role in the creation of a multipolar world (Zakaria,



2008a). Zakaria specifically highlights China and India as the most significant emerging powers. He claims that these countries are becoming key players in shaping the global economic, political, and security environments. Zakaria emphasizes that the U.S.'s relative dominance is eroding and suggests that the U.S. is transitioning from a superpower to one among many great powers in a more balanced world order (Zakaria, 2008a). Zakaria notes that the U.S. is facing significant internal challenges and states that the U.S. has struggled with its foreign policy, particularly after the Iraq War, and that its credibility has been tarnished by fighting unnecessary wars (Zakaria, 2008a).

For Zakaria, the rise of globalization, the increasing interconnectedness of the world's economies, politics, and cultures, is one of the main drivers of the post-American world. Zakaria explains how globalization has allowed other nations to catch up with the U.S. and emphasizes that countries are not just competing with one another; they are also cooperating and relying on each other for trade, technology, security, and resources. Zakaria emphasizes the idea of soft power, the ability to influence others through culture, values, diplomacy, and other non-coercive means, and considers that soft power is becoming an increasingly important aspect of international relations. Zakaria also advocates the concept of smart power, which combines hard and soft power to create a more effective approach to global leadership (Zakaria, 2008b). Despite the relative decline of U.S. dominance, Zakaria argues that the U.S. still has a crucial role to play in the new global order and suggests that the U.S. needs to embrace multilateralism, build partnerships, and work collaboratively with other rising powers to address global challenges. Zakaria believes that the key challenge for the U.S. will be how to adjust to a world where it is not the uncontested leader and urges the U.S. to embrace the changing world order, avoid isolationism, and adapt its foreign policy strategies to a more multipolar and interconnected world (Zakaria, 2008b).

Findings

The Five Theorists' Predictions: Which Driving Forces Will Guide Global Politics in the Twenty-First Century?

The work of the five theorists is a guide, and by relying on their predictions, the driving forces of global politics can be highlighted. These theorists' predictions help not only policymakers but also the policy discourse in making sense of the events unfolding in the world around them and making their best calls. It is up to the policymakers and practitioners to decide how best they understand the driving forces of global politics of the twenty-first century as highlighted by these theorists. Policymakers need gateways for their minds, and the predictions of these scholars/theorists help anchor the vital decisions that the policymakers need to make to help shape a better world.

Fareed Zakaria

According to Fareed Zakaria, the defining forces of twenty-first-century global politics would be: The "rise of the rest"—the diffusion of economic, political, technological, and cultural power away from the United States and the Western world toward countries such as China, India, Russia, Brazil, and other emerging powers.



A world with multiple centers of influence rather than a purely American-dominated order. The US will not decline, but there will be relative diffusion of power as the central transformation. The US will remain the most powerful individual state, but the world will be defined and directed from many places and by many people.

Francis Fukuyama

According to Francis Fukuyama, the central force shaping twenty-first-century global politics will be:

Continued expansion of liberal democracy and market-oriented capitalism.

Liberal democracy will remain the most viable and legitimate form of government, and ideological competition will increasingly diminish.

Wars, nationalism, religious conflict, or authoritarian regimes will continue and present challenges to the global order.

Ideological convergence toward liberal democratic values, driven by modernization, economic development, and political participation, will continue.

Prof. Mearsheimer

According to John J. Mearsheimer, the dominant forces shaping twenty-first-century global politics will be:

Great-power competition, the struggle for relative power, and the security dilemma generated by an anarchic international system.

The rise of China, the continuing competition among major powers, balancing, regional hegemony, and the pursuit of security through military and economic capabilities will remain central features of world politics.

The post-Cold War expectation of enduring peace will remain misleading.

Geopolitical rivalry and the balance of power, rather than ideological convergence or globalization, will drive international politics.

S. P. Huntington

According to Samuel P. Huntington, the principal forces shaping twenty-first-century global politics will be:

Civilizational identities, cultural differences, religion, and conflicts between major civilizations.

The major sources of conflict will shift toward cultural and civilizational divisions.

Future conflicts will occur both along "fault lines" between civilizations and among states seeking influence within their own civilizations.

Culture and identity, not ideology or economic interdependence, will become central organizing forces of twenty-first-century international politics.

T. P. Barnett

According to Thomas P. Barnett in *The Pentagon's New Map*, the forces shaping twenty-first-century global politics will be:



Globalization, economic connectivity, technological integration, and the widening gap between countries that are integrated into the global economy and those that remain disconnected from it.

Gap States will continue experiencing instability, weak governance, and exclusion from globalization.

Future conflicts will increasingly arise from this connectivity gap.

Disconnection and instability will be the principal forces shaping the twenty-first-century international system.

Conclusion

Taken together, the five theorists—Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, Thomas P. Barnett, Fareed Zakaria, and John Mearsheimer—offer contrasting but complementary explanations of the forces likely to shape global politics in the twenty-first century. Fukuyama emphasizes liberal democracy and economic modernization as the long-term direction of political development; Huntington places civilizational identity and cultural differences at the center of future conflicts; Barnett highlights globalization, connectivity, and the widening gap between the “Functioning Core” and the “Non-Integrating Gap”; Fareed Zakaria speaks about the rise of the rest against the West and the world changing from a US-dominated to a multipolar world, while Mearsheimer stresses anarchy, survival, power competition, and great-power rivalry.

Collectively, their perspectives suggest that twenty-first-century international politics will be driven by the interaction of ideology and governance, civilizational identity, globalization and economic connectivity, and the enduring struggle for power and security among states. Rather than one force replacing all others, the century is likely to be shaped by their simultaneous and sometimes contradictory interaction.



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