

From the end of empire to China-centric unipolarity



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When Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt published *Empire* (2000), they envisioned a global order where sovereignty was diffuse and power no longer resided in the Westphalian nation-state. A decentred, networked form of rule was emerging, dissolving traditional hierarchies into a postmodern regime of control. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft and his collaborators framed postcoloniality as a condition in which the peripheries could “write back” to the centre, destabilising its authority. Yet, nearly a quarter century later, what has unfolded looks markedly different. Instead of a borderless, postnational empire or a chorus of postcolonial voices transforming the centre, we see the gradual decline of the US led order and the simultaneous rise of a rival architecture with China at its hub. The “decline of the West,” once the domain of Spenglerian pessimists, is visible in material realities today: the waning legitimacy of US military interventions, its internal crises of democracy, the fragmentation of Western alliances, and the accelerating global movement towards dedollarisation.

This trajectory raises a paradox: “empire” has not “written back” in the way Ashcroft anticipated. Rather than the peripheries speaking to and transforming the centre, the centre itself is shifting—from Washington to Beijing. Power, instead of dissolving, is relocating. History is not witnessing the evaporation of unipolarity but the conditions for its reconstitution in a China-centric form.

The waning of the dollar and the US order

The dollar has long been the linchpin of US hegemony. Since Bretton Woods in 1944, the greenback has underpinned global trade, reserves, and financial governance. Even after the Nixon Shock of 1971 severed the gold peg, the “petrodollar” system, which tied oil trade to dollar-denominated transactions, continued to underpin US global dominance. This monetary privilege allowed Washington to finance deficits cheaply, project military power globally, and wield sanctions as a devastating geopolitical weapon.

But cracks in this edifice are widening.

Dedollarisation is no longer a rhetorical aspiration of adversaries but a lived practice. The BRICS states are experimenting with local currency settlements. Russia and China conduct the bulk of their trade in rubles and yuan. Even US allies, wary of overreliance, diversify their reserves by accumulating euros, yen, and gold. Central banks in the Global South are actively reducing their exposure to dollar assets, accelerating a structural shift in global finance.

As the financial sinews of empire fray, Washington’s capacity to weaponise the dollar through sanctions diminishes. Its ability to dictate terms in institutions like the IMF and World Bank erodes, vastly amplified by President Donald Trump’s tariff war against the rest of the world. What once seemed unassailable now looks fragile, threatening the very foundations of US global leadership.

China’s alternative architecture

China has emerged as the principal cause and beneficiary of this unravelling. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, stretches across Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America, weaving more than 140 countries into a web of infrastructural and financial connectivity. Roads, railways, ports, and digital networks bear the imprint of Beijing’s capital.

Parallel financial institutions are multiplying. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank provide financing without the austerity strictures of the IMF. The yuan’s use in trade financing has grown, particularly in energy markets, with Shanghai’s oil futures market challenging dollar-based pricing. By promoting digital yuan pilots across BRI countries, Beijing is laying the groundwork for a currency regime less tethered to the dollar.

This is not merely China’s integration into the US-dominated order; it is the construction of an alternative system with Beijing at its centre. Where Washington sought to universalise liberal norms, many think that Beijing institutionalises infrastructural dependency, an architecture tailored to

its developmentalist ethos and strategic imperatives.

Decline of the West: Beyond economics

The decline of the West is not confined to financial indicators. Militarily, US and Nato power projection faltered in Afghanistan, where two decades of investment collapsed within weeks. In Europe, divisions over Ukraine—ranging from the degree of military support to the economic pain of sanctions—

challenging Western dominance in the discursive sphere. The ideological monopoly that once accompanied US unipolarity no longer holds.

The prevailing discourse frames our era as multipolar. States like India, Brazil, and Turkey assert growing regional influence, complicating any straightforward unipolar narrative. Yet, history suggests transitional multipolarity rarely persists. The interwar

Indo-Pacific. Economically, policies such as the CHIPS and Science Act seek to preserve US leadership in semiconductors, a critical strategic industry.

Yet, these measures feel defensive rather than visionary. Where the US once set the global agenda, it now appears reactive, scrambling to preserve a status quo that steadily erodes. Its alliances are strained; its dollar hegemony weakens; its liberal ideology confronts mounting scepticism. The image is less of confident leadership than rearguard action, signalling the limits of Washington’s capacity to maintain systemic control.

A striking feature of this transition is that the postcolonial “writing back” to empire, articulated by Bill Ashcroft and his collaborators, has not unfolded as anticipated. The challenge to the US led order has not come primarily from subaltern voices but from another state-centred project. The peripheries have not destabilised the centre by transforming the language of power. Instead, the centre itself is shifting—from Washington to Beijing.

This does not render the Global South irrelevant. Many states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are repositioning themselves, diversifying partnerships and hedging against overdependence on either pole. Yet, their agency operates within a broader gravitational movement of power relocation. The “writing back” that Ashcroft once identified has been subsumed within a larger recentring of global order, showing that historical power relocations now occur at the centre rather than through peripheries.

Towards a new unipolarity?

If the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer) is fading, what replaces it may not be a balanced bipolar order but a new unipolarity—this time with Beijing at the helm. Such a system would not replicate the liberal international order but embody a different logic: infrastructural dependency, sovereign hierarchies, state-managed capitalism, and a developmentalist ideology privileging stability over liberty. We are moving not to a postimperial vacuum but to the emergence of another empire. The language of multipolarity risks obscuring this trajectory, mistaking transitional turbulence for equilibrium. The tectonic shift is gaining momentum as India gradually tilts towards China, its formidable neighbour, driven by the perceived unreliability of its traditional ally, the US. The 21st century’s centre of gravity is quietly shifting from Washington to Beijing, signalling the rise of a China-centric order anchored in infrastructure, technology, and state-managed capitalism.



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PHOTO: FREEPIK

expose fraying cohesion.

Culturally and ideologically, Western liberalism faces diminishing appeal in the Global South. Leaders from Africa to Southeast Asia increasingly dismiss Western lectures on democracy and human rights as hypocritical. Interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan undermine the credibility of liberal norms as a universal model. By contrast, China’s authoritarian developmentalism, emphasising sovereignty, order, and economic growth, largely resonates with elites who prioritise regime survival over liberal reform.

The West’s ability to shape the dominant narratives is also eroding. Digital platforms have decentralised information flows, enabling alternative perspectives to proliferate. China, Russia, India and other actors promote counter-narratives

period of multipolarity gave way to bipolarity, and the Cold War’s bipolarity gave way to US unipolarity. Power tends towards consolidation.

Today’s fragmentation may coalesce into a dominant pole—centred not in Washington but in Beijing. China’s technological edge strengthens this pull. In AI, 5G infrastructure, renewable energy, and electric vehicles, Beijing is positioning itself at the global cutting edge. Its capacity to set standards in emerging technologies may replicate the role the US played postwar, where technological dominance translated into systemic influence.

The US response: Containment or rearguard action?

Washington is not passive. Initiatives like the QUAD (with Japan, India, and Australia) and AUKUS (with the UK and Australia) aim to counterbalance Chinese influence in the

An election that could return Ducsu to the students



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To be honest, I had never thought I would care about Dhaka University Central Students’ Union (Ducsu). I spent most of my time at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) of Dhaka University (DU) focusing on classes, assignments, internships, and networking. Ducsu, for us, was the iconic spot where you get breakfast for Tk 10, something that amuses IBA freshers. Campus politics always felt like a story I read about. And DU for most of my life, felt like a place where student politics existed in the background, a constant hum, but not something that shaped my daily reality.

This is because I had the luxury of being apolitical. At IBA, one’s academic performance, dedication, and ideas mattered far more than political affiliations. Politics, in the traditional DU sense, simply did not reach us, and this was a privilege that most of the other students did not have. They lived in a different reality, one that was shaped, constrained, and intimidated by the dominance of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). We read these horror stories online, heard people talk in hushed voices and genuinely felt bad for them, but speaking up didn’t seem like an option. However, now, I feel like I cannot look away. There is a sense of possibility in the air, a rare, almost tangible feeling that something is different.

My father, who enrolled in DU as part of the 1986-87 batch, had a different university experience. Back then, they could vote for whoever they wanted in the Ducsu election. He recalls cherishing that freedom. Over

the last 15 years, that freedom was far from a reality as the student wing of the former ruling party shaped a reality where every choice carried weight beyond personal preference. This year, that contrast makes this election feel all the more remarkable as it presents a rare window for students to truly unshackle their voices.

that dominance was frustrating and isolating. And we watched from the sidelines, wondering whether student leadership could ever represent students like us, who wanted a fair, academic, and inclusive environment, rather than a politically charged one. This time, for the first time in my life, it feels like Ducsu could genuinely belong to the students. Suddenly, panels I have never heard of before are stepping forward, with candidates who do not have any political legacy to lean on, who speak in language that makes sense to a student like me. There is little political jargon and more of a vision for students being heard, represented, and respected.

What really stands out is how much the conversation has changed

reforms. Candidates are engaging students with surveys and informal discussions, asking not just what we need but what we want, with a shift from performative politics to meaningful engagement. And it is not just the ideas, but the tone. There is a certain energy, curiosity, and respect. Students are debating and challenging without fear of reprisal. This offers an opportunity to reshape the culture of representation, accountability, and engagement.

So this time, if we turn up, engage, and vote, this election could bring back to the original idea of student politics, where Ducsu is not dominated by a single party, and where students from every faculty, background, and gender can participate meaningfully. It is also tempting to feel sceptical because student politics in Bangladesh has always been messy, brimming with partisanship, violence and apathy in equal parts. But this year, I see glimpses of something different. I see panels willing to listen, students daring to question, and a campus ready to imagine a better system. I see a Ducsu that might actually embody the ideals we have only ever discussed in theory.

This Ducsu election also matters because it tests a broader societal aspiration and the hope that institutions can be inclusive, accountable, and responsive to their constituents. If a university known for seething political tensions can foster a free, fair, and student-centred election, it becomes evidence that meaningful change is possible when people believe and work towards it.

Last week, when I went to DU for my internship registration, I noticed the conversations. Students are curious, cautious, and excited. There is no cynicism, at least not the kind that paralyzes action. So, yes, this year, our vote could matter, not just for the Ducsu, but also for the future of this university. It is time to turn up and make a difference.



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

For decades, DU has been dominated by the BCL. They were omnipresent with posters, slogans, campus events, and the silent pressure of a system where political alignment often dictated opportunities. For many students residing in the halls, who simply wanted to focus on academics,

on campus. In the past, even talking about Ducsu was dangerous because you had to know who was associated with whom, what that meant for you socially and academically, and how to engage without being caught in a web of political allegiances. This year, the conversation is about ideas and

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Artist Duchamp
- 7 Make finer
- 11 Crumbly Italian cheese
- 12 Not busy
- 13 Pinnacle
- 14 Writer Uris
- 15 Fixes copy
- 16 Sky sights
- 17 - good example
- 18 Thwart
- 19 Words of understanding
- 21 Throw in
- 22 “Shoop” trio
- 25 Cobbler’s tool
- 26 Rapper Rick
- 27 Monkey (with)
- 29 Play group
- 33 Plant anew
- 34 Run-down
- 35 Avenue liners
- 36 Music genre
- 37 Theater unit
- 38 Milestone birthday
- 39 Some bills
- 40 Rabble

DOWN

- 1 Crew members
- 2 Stage comment
- 3 Hit the ball out of the park
- 4 Marsh plant
- 5 They may clash
- 6 Cut off
- 7 Like riverbeds
- 8 Brainstorming diagram
- 9 “Club Can’t Handle Me” rapper
- 10 Showed fear
- 16 Flight makeup
- 18 Madrid mister
- 20 Scatter
- 22 “No Flex Zone” rapper
- 23 Beggar
- 24 Gets away
- 25 Not active
- 28 Fence supports
- 30 Friend of d’Artagnan
- 31 Gem
- 32 Sorts
- 34 Latvia’s capital
- 36 Deli meat

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LETUP	OPRAH
LAWNS	REUSE
USA	ICE EYE
DOS	LAD TON
ENAMOR	CONS
GUNSHOT	
PROM	EITHER
LEO	BAR EMU
AID	ETA GIN
INDIA	BLAND
NEARS	LAMER
TRYST	ENEMY

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