



# **The Rise of China: The Emergence of a Bipolar Superpower and the Implication for the Future of International Law**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author AHK designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author EA managed the analyses of the study and the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the continuing rise and influence of China in the international system, the world is gradually transforming from a unipolar world to a bipolar world. A critical analysis of recent events happening in the world suggests a decline in the power of the USA while China, on the other hand, has over the years embarked on numerous measures to strengthen its military and economic might in the international system.

This article contributes to existing knowledge and literature by giving a comprehensive view of events that suggests the decline in the power of the USA, as well as measures that China has over the years embarked on to increase its influence in the international system such as “the One belt One road” initiative.

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The methodology adopted for the study is the qualitative approach of which the works of scholars that focus on the rise of China was analyzed and reviewed. Materials used include information from the internet, journal articles and policy documents.

The article gives a picture of the possible implications that the emergence of a bipolar world due to the rise of China will have on the practice and application of international law and concludes by suggesting that with the current global challenges of the world such as terrorism, the massive inflow of refugees, the need for a general consensus on policies to protect the ecology etc. bipolarity is the best way to deal with such challenges. Thus, if the USA and China are to collaborate and cooperate effectively with one another, the challenges of the world could be efficiently dealt with. It is thus recommended that the two countries bury their ideological difference and think of ways by which they could make international law stronger and effective to deal with the challenges that the world is confronted with.

*Keywords: Usable power; unipolar world; implication on international law; international system; the emergence of China; the decline of USA; world superpower, bipolar world.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The United States of America (USA) has been the world superpower since the end of the Cold War, however, in recent times, one can argue that the USA is losing its influence and power as the only superpower in the world. China, on the other hand, has over the years implemented measures and policies that have gone a long way to relatively increase its power and influence in the international system.

Some scholars have argued that a critical analysis of the current world order indicates that the world is gradually transforming from a unipolar world to a bipolar world with USA occupying one side and the People's Republic of China (PRC) also occupying the other side [1-3]. This event might take a very long time to happen, but there is a higher possibility of it happening in the future looking at the current trend of activities between China and the USA in the international system [4-5].

The disparity between China and the USA in terms of world superpower continues to narrow day in and day out. As of the year 2011, the GDP of China was expected to be 45% of that of the USA and in the event that the GDP of China continues to grow at 8.5% per year while the GDP of the USA, on the other hand, grows at less than 3.8% in a year, then it can be estimated that the GDP disparity between the two countries will be leveled in a decade [6].

### **1.1 Comparative Analysis of the USA and the Chinese Economy**

Economically, China is undoubtedly an economic giant in the international world. In December 1978, China adopted the open door policy which

was announced by Deng Xiaoping, and this eventually led to lots of businessmen and investors moving to invest in China's economy. Consequently, China is one of the most growing or perhaps the fastest growing economy in the world [7]. Most of the products that are consumed around the world are produced in Chinese factories and as a country that has got a huge population; it has thus become a consumer as well as a producer.

The USA has the world's greatest and perhaps the most sophisticated military in the world. However, in recent years, the Chinese government continues to invest in its military strength with the aim of equipping the military to probably match the standard of the USA. The Chinese military over the past 20 years has made significant progress in equipping itself with training methods and sophisticated weapons. With the introduction of new technologies and an extreme increase in the military budget by the Chinese government, China's aircraft, tanks, warships and missile capabilities are gradually becoming comparable to those of the USA [8]. If this phenomenon continues to follow this trend for a while, it will not be surprising that the military power of China will be equated to that of the USA in a short time.

For over a century now and according to figures from the World Bank in 2017, the USA has been ranked as the world's biggest economy as it accounts for over 24% of the World's Gross Domestic Product as of the year 2016 [9]. However, in recent times, things have changed and both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have rated China as the World's largest economy based on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) [9]. PPP refers to a measure that is used to adjust a country's

GDPs based on the differences in prices and this by implication means that due to the fact that money stretches further in China than in the USA, the GDP of China is adjusted upwards hence aiding China to attain the status of the current world's largest economy (See Fig. 1).

It will thus not be long before the economy of China surpasses that of the USA in other measures as well and in fact, the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), predicts that by the year 2029, the Chinese economy will be superior to that of the USA [10]. CEBR, states that the slow GDP of China and the fact that the currency of China is weak will not enable China to overtake the USA economy by 2015 as forecast by many analysts, however, with recent developments in China and global happenings around the world, CEBR can confidently envisage that by the year 2019 or 2029, the Chinese economy will entirely surpass that of the USA.

The growth of the Chinese economy is not surprising because it has a population of about 1.4 billion, which is about four times higher compared to that of the USA. In recent times, the Chinese economy has experienced some setbacks, but that notwithstanding, data from the World Bank indicates that the Chinese economy is still growing at a higher rate of about three times compared to that of the USA, thus around 7% over the last couple of years, compared to less than 2.5% [11].

With regards to export, both the economy of the USA and that of China to a large extent are on an even steady condition, however, the USA imports more than it exports resulting into trade deficit whereas China on the other hand exports more than it imports resulting into a trade surplus. It must, however, be stated if China intends to entirely close the gap between her and the USA, it has a lot of things to do. The flow of foreign direct investment in China is comparatively very low and its high-tech exports are about four times less compared to that of the USA [12].

The gap that exists between China and the USA to a large extent is not that wide and it is just a matter of time for China to completely close this gap looking at current development and measures adopted

by China with regards to education, investment in energy and global trading.

China is currently investing about 4% of its GDP into the training of its people and the educational system in China is arguably the largest in the world as it has more university students than the European Union and the USA combined [13]. According to a report produced by the Confederation of British Industry titled "Bridges to the future: The role of universities in the UK-China relationship", universities in the United Kingdom were advised to develop partnerships with China and share experience in terms of skills, knowledge, innovation as well as training of people. About ninety thousand (90,000) students from China are currently studying in different British universities and this accounts for about one-fifth of international students studying in the United Kingdom.

As of the year 2016, a report from the United Nation indicated that China is currently the biggest investor with regards to renewable energy globally as it spends more than the USA and Europe combined [14]. According to the report, the strongest and most consistent upward increase in dollar commitments as far as renewable energy is concerned comes from China due to the fact that as of the year 2004, China invested just \$ 3 billion, then multiplied this by 13-fold in the year 2010 and finally by another two and a half times by the year 2015, to a record \$102.9 billion.

## **1.2 Literature Review on the Rise of China**

The rise of China as a global power is a phenomenon that has been analyzed by several scholars. Even though this phenomenon might take a long time before it actually manifest into reality, there is a greater possibility of the world changing from a unipolar world with the USA as the only superpower into a bipolar world where China will hold one end of the pole in global affairs whereas the USA also holds the other side of the pole. A review of scholarly work on the rise of China and the subsequent development of the world into bipolarity is as follows:

Joelien (2008) in her article which is titled "Non-alignment in the current world order: The impact of the rise of China." argues that the gradual rise of China as a global power is one of the things that is likely to influence and change the global order after the Cold War.

# A tale of two economies

The United States has had the world's biggest economy for 140 years and accounts for roughly 22.44 per cent of the gross world product. It remains top in nominal GDP but, in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), the International Monetary Fund now ranks China as the world's largest economy. This is because PPP enables you to compare how much you can buy for your money in different countries. As money goes further in China than in the US, the figure for China is adjusted upwards

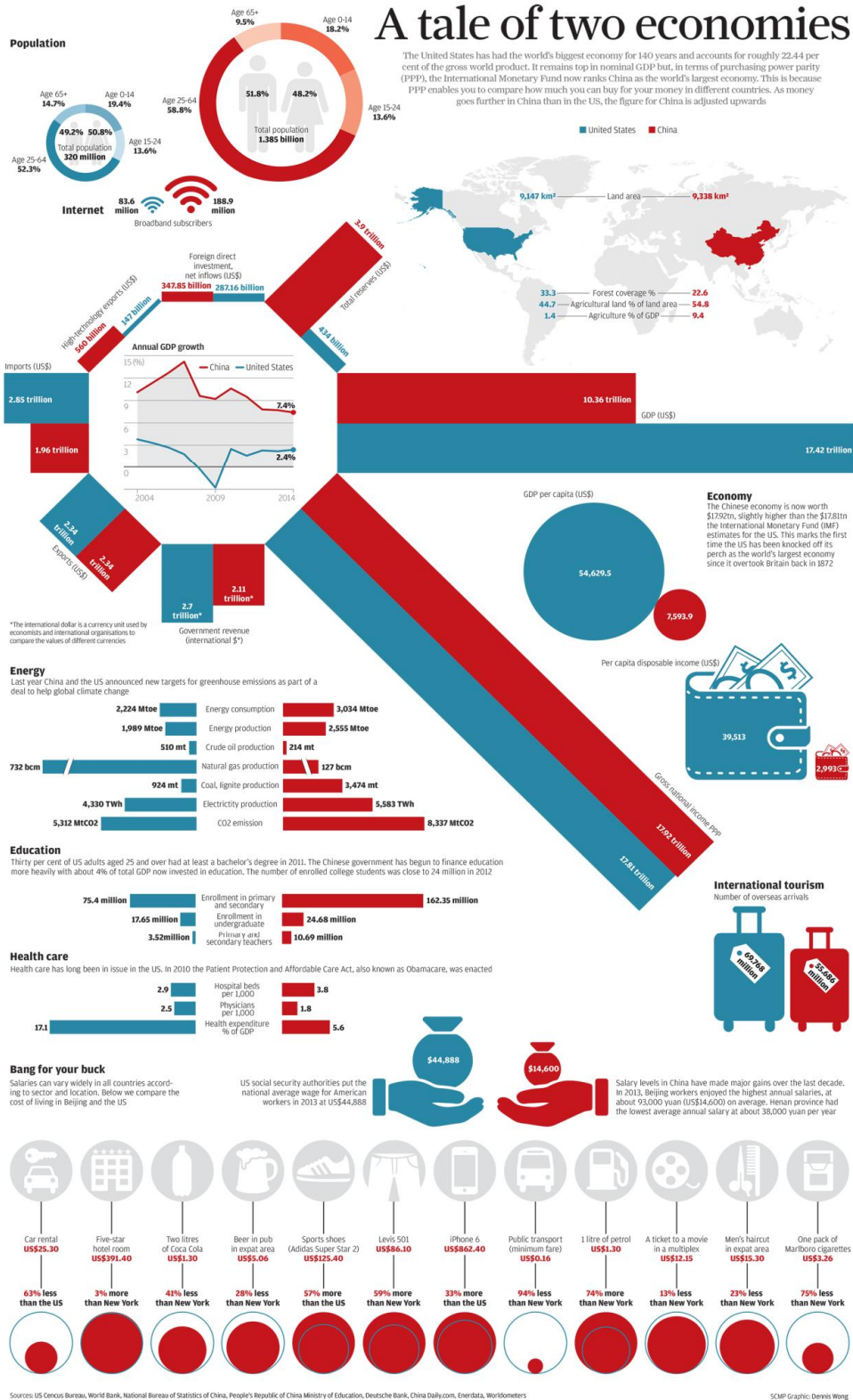


Fig. 1. Comparison between the USA and the Chinese economy

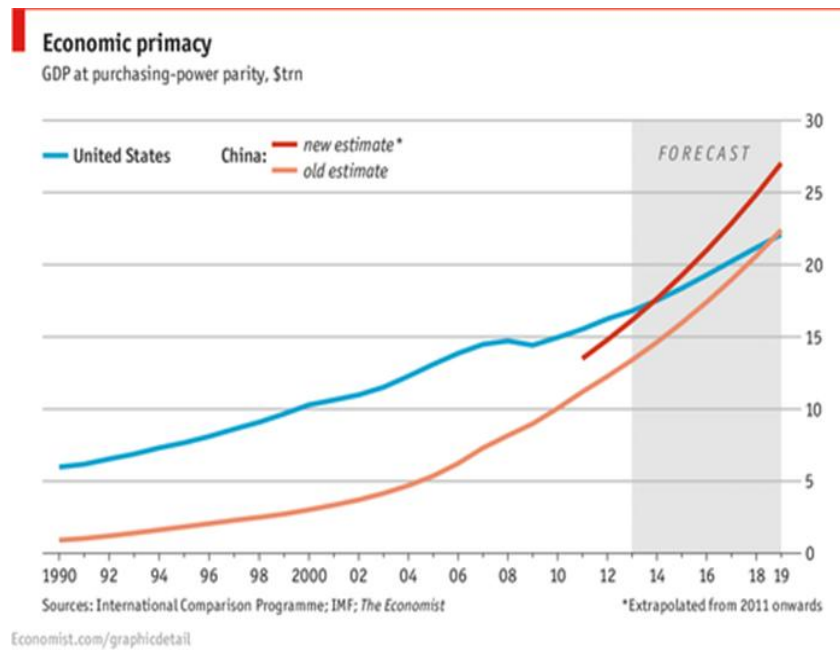


Fig. 2. Prediction of economic growth between the USA and China by 2019

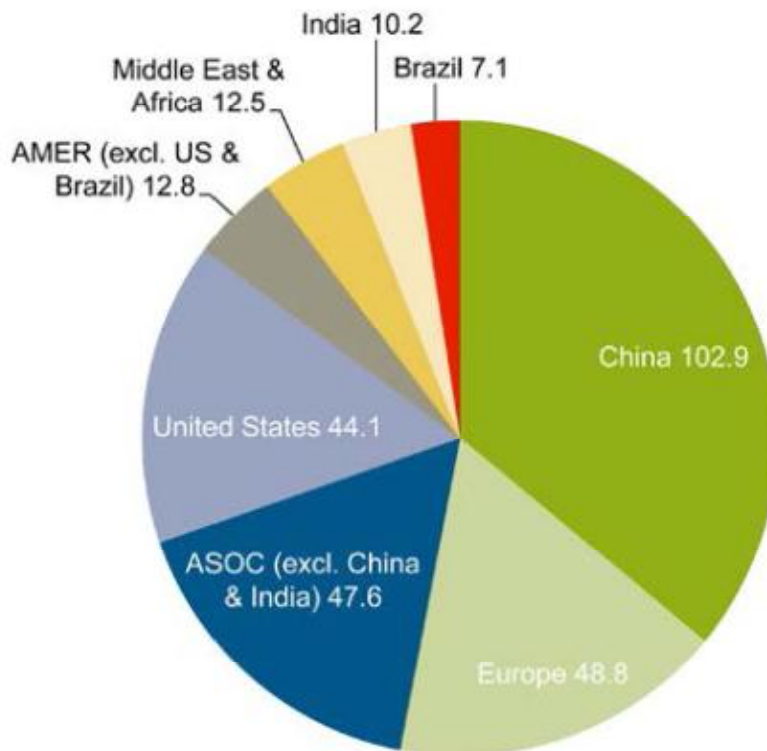


Fig. 3. Global new investment in renewable energy by region, 2015, \$ Bn  
New investment volume adjusts for re-invested equity. Total values include estimates for undisclosed deals.  
Source: UNEP, Bloomberg New Energy Finance

She adds that a critical analysis of current events happening in the world proves that there is some sought of competition between the USA and China for power and resources in the global arena and one can thus infer that bipolarity is returning even though not as in the case of the Cold War. China is steadily rising as a global power and championing the cause of self-determination, peace, and equality in world affairs as well as the changing of the world from a unipolar world with the USA as the hegemon to a bipolar or possibly a multipolar world. The rise of China and the possible evolution of the world into a bipolar world is something that Nonalignment movements can exploit to their advantage. The Beijing Consensus provides an alternative to the Washington Consensus and it does this by coming up with new terms that can aid developing countries to better integrate into the global economy in a way that reflects their ideas and developmental process [15].

According to Jeffrey (2008), the rise of China both in economic and political might as far as the global order is concerned has the possibility of changing the phase of globalization, where the influence of China will not only be seen in Asia alone but will extend to other countries as well. He postulates a theory where the rise of China will lead to 'Global-Asian Era'(GAE) where the world will witness China's global power in trade, politics, business, geographical expansion as well as all other important aspects of international relations. This era will present both opportunities as well as some likely disadvantages in terms of trade, business, social and political developments in developing countries and the world at large [16].

In the words of Oded (2006), China in the next two or three decades will overtake the USA as the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing power. When this happens, China will succeed in putting an end to the over 150 years of the USA reign as the world's hegemon and also this event will help China to reclaim the primacy it first obtained a millennium earlier when it isolated itself from Western Europe to become the biggest economy on the planet. The footprint of China will be felt in all parts of the world and China will eventually take the lead in global trading, international business transactions among others. He acknowledges the fact that China will have to embark on several policies and institute sustainable measures within the next two decades in order to make this dream a reality [17].

Ding Sheng (2010) analyzes the rising power of China from a different perspective by looking at how China is using its soft power to rise in global politics. Most analyses of the rising power of China tend to focus on the rise of China by examining how China is using its hard power to entrench its position in the international system; thus the ability of China to use economic inducement or military threats to make herself powerful in the international system. Ding Sheng, on the other hand, looks at how China is using her ideas and values (Soft power) to make more allies and in the process try to shape the world through attraction and agenda setting. He adds that China in the process of undergoing its modernization phase has not only embraced the idea of soft power but has also implemented a new global strategy that will offer China the opportunity to create more allies in the international system which will in the long term increase its power in the international system. By using its soft power China has succeeded in generating an international platform for Beijing to share its opinions and ideas on some important international issues which has gone a long way to increase the respect and image of China globally [18].

## **2. THE DECLINE OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Relative power is very important in international relations and international law for that matter. Relative power simply refers to the power that one country or entity possesses as compared to another country or entity, what share of international trade does a country possess, which country has the best form of military and so on [19]. There is no doubt that the USA has a huge amount of assets: It has the best form of military in the world, great structure economically because it owns the dollar, it has vast allies, English language and so on. However, if one focuses entirely on relative power, one can miss something important which also goes a long way to determine how influential and powerful a country is in the international system and this is what is referred to as usable power.

Usable power is the ability to translate a country's assets into real influence and power internationally and this is what the USA is suffering from in recent times [20]. The inability of the USA to translate its numerous assets into usable power portrays the USA as a broke country politically, culturally and socially and perhaps economically. The USA is divided

among itself politically, culturally and socially than it used to be. American politics do not really work like it used to be during and after the Cold War. Economically, though the country has a large economy, it does not seem to have a strong and vibrant economy like it used to and according to recent research, the economy of the USA is broken and insecure to the extent that the country cannot continue to run affairs like it used to [21].

Accordingly, a critical analysis of trends of events in the world, whether in Europe, Asia or the Middle East suggest that the USA is gradually losing its influence and power as the hegemon of the world which dictates how things should be done in the international system [22]. For instance, Russia refuses to abridge its solidarity and help that it offers to armed separatist in Ukraine. In Asia, China continues to claim the land, operates in the South China Sea and refuses to abandon its base building endeavors at the place. Saudi Arabia has also refused to support and give approval to the US-brokered nuclear deal with Iran and finally, despite the numerous efforts and might of the USA military the Islamic State movement (ISIS) has refused to surrender [23].

### **3. THE RISE OF CHINA**

China has over the years embarked on numerous measures to increase its influence in the international system and with the recent introduction of China's "One belt One road" initiative, the economic power and influence of China are likely to rise and rival that of the USA [24]. The One belt One road is probably the greatest vision of China at all times. It covers the old Silk Road economic initiative of China, which simply refers to a network of trade routes used for hundreds of years to move goods like silk and other commodities to different parts of the world.

On the One belt One road initiative, China intends to spend over a trillion dollars to build new networks, trade routes and connections between Europe, Asia and Africa with the aim of developing supply routes over land and water, which will in turn put China in a position to control trade in these areas and consequently increase its influence in the international system. China is already building a coal power plant in Pakistan, making a huge investment in foreign oil companies and building a six million dollar railway that will connect eight countries [25].

The influence of China in Singapore has also risen drastically over the few years. China intends to spend close to one-third of its one belt one road investments in Singapore and in July 2017, China succeeded in bidding and winning \$11.6 billion deal with a Singapore warehouse and Global Logistics Property (GLP) [26]. GLP is the biggest Asia warehouse operator and has about \$41 billion portfolios of assets spread across China, Brazil, Japan and the USA [27]. The acquisition of this firm is of great importance as it will reinforce the notion that ASEAN has become a place where a large acquisition is possible, a characteristic that was initially associated with advanced economies.

Also, China continues to invest in its military strength over the past years and in 2017 the Chinese government made an announcement of increasing its military budget up to 7% with the aim of equipping the military to protect the peace and security in the region [28]. The increase of the military budget by the Chinese government in the year 2017 marks the second time that China has consecutively increased its military budget with the purpose of enhancing its military strength and power. Some Chinese observers and scholars argue that the actual spending by the Chinese government on its military is probably more than the 7% increase that was announced by the Chinese government [29].

With regards to education, culture, and language, the Chinese government has instituted a number of scholarship schemes to attract students and scholars from all over the world to study and learn the Chinese language and Chinese culture. Notable among these Scholarships is the Confucius Institute Scholarship and the Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC). The Chinese government has widened the scope of these scholarships over the years to attract academics from the USA, Europe, Asia, Africa and other parts of the world which many scholars argue that it is a good initiative to help spread the Chinese culture and encourage the study of the Chinese language. Again, the Chinese government has made conscious efforts to establish Chinese language institutes and departments of Chinese language studies in some notable universities in Africa and other parts of the world with the aim and idea of encouraging the study of Chinese language.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China has embarked on several policies that have helped boost its economy,

improve growth in per capita GDP and consequently enhanced its influence in global politics. With the introduction of the Law on Chinese Foreign Equity Joint Ventures which opened the economy of the country to foreign investors, the Chinese regional economies have experienced significant improvement and thereby gradually easing pricing restrictions in order to enable companies to retain profits and set up their own wage structures which consequently boost the country's GDP from an annual average of 6% between 1953-1978 to 9.4% between 1978-2012 [30].

The pace of urbanization since then also increased drastically as workers from the countryside were drawn into the big cities to engage in higher-paying jobs. The opening of the Chinese market to foreign investors paved the way for China to become a global exporter. And for the first time in over 40 years, the Shanghai Stock Exchange was opened in December 1990 and eventually leading to China's accession to the World Trade Organization.

In order for China to continue to rise and become more influential in global affairs, there are still quite a lot of things that it still needs to do. China needs to invest more in innovation so as to enable it to move from an economy that is mainly driven by manufacturing to a much robust economy that is based on innovation as well as domestic consumption and services. China also needs to spread wealth among all its citizens so as to change her global outlook and reduce the wide gap disparity that exists between the poor and the rich [31].

Again, the Chinese leadership should also embark on substantive measures to develop cleaner sources of energy in order to address the issue of pollution in China as well as Chinese companies that are working overseas as this will go a long way to change the global image of China with regards to environmental pollution. China is "perceived" as a country that is not environmentally friendly due to the fact that the manufacturing industries that it possess pollutes the environment and even in some African countries that perception exist as Chinese firms and companies are accused of destroying water bodies and other mineral resources and as a result of these accusations or perception, some countries are not comfortable to invite China in their territories for business and trade which in the long run can cause harm to the country's growth and global expansion.

There is thus the need to address the issue of pollution, especially urban pollution, both at home and abroad so as to erase that perception and probably offer China a better global image with regards to trade and the protection of the environment.

#### **4. THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW IN A BIPOLAR WORLD**

International law at its initial stages of development was referred to as the laws of nations and thus was simply defined as a body of rules and principles that governed the relations among civilized states in their dealings with one another. This definition of international law is very narrow and viewed as the traditional definition of international law [32].

Obviously, there are a lot of gaps in such a definition of international law as it is difficult to determine which state is civilized and which state is not and more importantly, the scope of international law has widened to govern the relations not only among states but other entities as well.

With the growth of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) most probably after the World War II (WWII) as well as business transactions, agreements and contract among persons, the scope, and definition of international law has widened to cover the activities and operations of NGOs and even persons as well. The modern definition of international law is thus defined as a body of rules and principles that governs the relations among States, International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), NGOs as well as individual persons in the relations among each other [33]

The possible emergence of a bipolar world, thus the rise of China could have a great change and influence in practice and application of international law:

Firstly, the rise of China and the consequent evolution of the world into bipolarity might lead to an emphasis on regionalism with regards to the application and practice of international law. Thus the possible rise of China could lead to a break up on the global conception of what constitute the core components of international law towards competing sub-systems where regional organizations will assume a more important role as far as developing and enacting international law is concerned. This is likely to



create a situation where China will be the hegemon in Asia, some parts of Africa and probably some parts of Europe, while the USA, on the other hand, will also be the hegemon in the West, some parts of Europe and Africa as well. The phenomenon, however, could have a negative effect on the practice and application of international law as it might lead to a situation where regional interest will be much paramount than the interest of the general good. Regional blocs will thus pursue policies and treaties that will serve the interest of their region without giving much concern to enacting treaties that will better serve the interest of all countries all over the world.

Also the make-up, dealings, actions and legal instruments of international organizations like the United Nations (UN) has the possibility of undergoing some important changes: The UN as an international organization relies on donations from member states to run its daily activities and the USA is the largest contributor to the UN and this according to some scholars, enables the USA to exert a great amount of influence on the actions of the UN. According to some scholars, the actions of the UN are dictated by the USA which therefore implies that the UN is an entity that exists just to safeguard the interest of the USA and as such it decides to enforce international laws and regulations that are in agreement with the ideas and perceptions of the USA [34].

This phenomenon could change with the rise of China and the emergence of a bipolar world. The ideals and beliefs of the USA and China are different from each other. For example, China believes in communism and the USA, on the other hand, believes in capitalism and hence what the two countries believe should constitute the core components of international law differ from one another. In other words, if China is able to contribute and donate to the UN as much as the USA does, it will mark the end of the era where the UN has to follow the whims and caprice of the USA but will rather have to take into consideration the beliefs and ideals of China as well before embarking on any actions.

Closely related to the above-stated point is the growing influence, importance and recognition of Communism as an alternative to Liberal democracy as a system of government in the international system. China as a country has thrived and achieved rapid economic and technological advancement by practicing

communism over the years. By the end of the cold war and the consequent emergence of the USA as the world's superpower, democracy to a large extent has been internationally recognized as the best form of government that has the potential of fostering economic growth and development. However, this notion has been disproved with China as a typical example of a communist country that has advanced economically and technologically despite the size of its population. The significant achievement of China in terms of development and consequently the emergence of a bipolar world will thus engineer the debate about liberal democracy as the system of government that should be adopted by developing countries in their quest or process of development or communism. Critics of democracy argue that democracy retards development due to delay in the decision-making process and with the rise of China, developing countries around the world will begin to give a consideration to communism as a system of government and probably draw lessons from China's experience [35].

Again the rise of China and the emergence of a bipolar world will lead to an increase in the balance of power and the perception of global justice with a fair principle of what constitutes sovereignty of a state as well as strict and maximum regard to international laws that protect the sovereignty of states. The USA has been criticized by academics and scholars for not respecting the international laws governing the rights and principle of the sovereignty of other states [36]. A typical case was in the year 2003 when the USA attacked and invaded Iraq. Before the invasion, the USA went to the Security Council of the UN to seek for a resolution, however, it was denied this resolution, but this did not stop the USA from carrying on with the attack on Iraq. The USA argues that its national interest was threatened and that serve as the basis for the Iraq attack, but other scholars view that act as a violation of international law [37]. The point, therefore, is that with the transformation of the world into a bipolar world, there will be some counterbalance check on the power of the USA however this could sharpen and intensify the North and South divide in the application and practice of international law where voting pattern, especially with regards voting among the five permanent members of the security council, might be shaped by ideological difference and this could prevent the UN from intervening on time especially when lives of innocent citizens are threatened [38].

## **5. CONCLUSION**

One can infer from the above that China is gradually rising as a global power in politics and in the international arena as a whole through the use of its soft power and it is on a way of becoming the world's leading economy which in actual facts it has partially achieved that in terms of PPP. However, China has a lot to do in order to surpass the USA highly diversified and tertiary economy. There is thus the need for China to institute policies and measure that will move the country from a resource-intensive manufacturing hub to a much better consumer-driven and modern economy.

Nevertheless, the rise of China as a global power is highly possible and a comprehensive analysis of events happening around the world and in the international system is a clear indication that the world is transforming from a unipolar world where the USA is the only superpower to a bipolar world where China will emerge as another superpower that will hold one end of the pole with the USA also holding the other end of the pole and running affairs in the world. For example, the introduction of the one belt one road initiative by the Chinese government will go a long way to help China in creating more allies in Asia, Europe, and Africa, which in the long run will increase the global influence of China as far as international trade and investment are concerned. The transformation of the world into bipolarity might probably take a long time to happen, but in the event that it happens, it will also have some effects on the practice and application of international law. The rise of China and consequently the emergence of a bipolar world will create some sort of counterbalance check on the limits and powers of the USA in determining the policy directions and legal frameworks that govern the international system and international law for that matter and this will also lead to a situation where emphasis will be placed much on regional interest than the interest of all countries over the world which is what international law in a broad sense seeks to do.

With the current challenges of the world such as terrorism, the massive outflows of refugees, the need to protect the ecology and so on, a bipolar world will be the best and a much more effective way of dealing with these challenges, however, if care is not taken, the evolution of the world into a bipolar system could do more harm than good. For instance, it could intensify the difference in

ideology between the global developed North Countries and global developing South countries which will, in turn, influence the voting patterns, especially among the five permanent members of the Security Council of the UN and this, in the long run, will hinder the effective performance of the UN Security Council.

It is therefore recommended that the necessary measures should be instituted by the UN to enable the USA and China bury their ideological differences and desist from the perceived competition that exists between the two countries but rather cooperate with each other in making international law more effective, strong and robust in dealing with the continuous challenges of the world.

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## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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