

## **Sino-Russian Challenges to American Hegemony: Are We Moving Towards a Multipolar World Order?**

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*Abstract:* The current state of international relations and the global order is characterised by growing conflicts and rivalries between the United States of America, the declining hegemon, and the rising non-Western powers, first and foremost, China and Russia. Russia's "special military operation" to "demilitarise" and "denazify" Ukraine has galvanised and united Western allies against the attack on the international "rules-based" order. Dominated by the US, the West seeks partners and client states to support its actions against Moscow. On the other hand, Washington, D.C., aims to contain Beijing, nudging European and other partners to limit Chinese expansion, both political and technological. The countries of the so-called Global South seek their own interests and do not uncritically follow American positions. Practically all the states of Africa, Asia, and Eurasia have not allied with the West in their struggle against Russia. The war over the future of the planetary order, the conflict between the unipolar and multipolar forces, has been going on for some time, and unless the US and its allies win, the world is heading towards polycentrism and multipolarity.

*Keywords:* war, world order, hegemony, multipolarity, Russia, China, US, Ukraine.

### **Introduction**

The current state of international relations and the global order is characterised by growing conflicts and rivalries between the United States of America (US), the declining hegemon, and the rising non-Western powers, first and foremost, China and Russia. In February 2022, Russian President

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Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” to “demilitarise” and “denazify” Ukraine. Russia’s invasion has unified the Western world. Among their elites, there is a fear that Moscow, as well as China, Iran, and other non-democratic regimes, vitally endanger the liberal democratic world and the “rules-based order”. Rallied around the US leadership, they are mobilised in support of Ukraine. Some analysts fear the worst. For example, the prominent French intellectual Emmanuel Todd argues that the Ukraine proxy war is “existential” for both Russia and the US “imperial system”, and that it represents the start of World War III. As the Russia expert Fiona Hill commented, “Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have been fighting this War for a long time, and we have failed to recognise it” (Glasser 2022). I argue that the latest conflict in Ukraine is just a very clear and public manifestation of the struggle where Washington, D.C., strives to remain the only or the main hegemonic power in the world, while Russia, China, and other regional players seek a more balanced state of affairs.

One could also speak of the possibility of the emergence of polycentric governance in the world. As a general definition, “polycentric” governing occurs when “many centres” address a given policy concern. While the diffuse “decision points can be scattered across multiple scales (local, national, regional, and global) and various sectors (public, private, and hybrid), the participating organisations in a polycentric arrangement often have overlapping mandates, ambiguous hierarchies of authority, and no ultimate arbiter. Continual creation and reconstruction of institutions and relationships among them also tend to make polycentric governing processes quite fluid” (Koinova et al. 2008). Polycentrism persisted even during the Cold War as Third World countries sought to shape global norms surrounding national independence and non-alignment. Today, another scenario is possible: a “polycentric order” with multiple centres of authority where the US is the leading power but not the hegemonic one. The war over the future of the planetary order, the conflict between the unipolar and multipolar forces, has been going on for some time, and unless the US and its allies win, the world is heading towards polycentrism and multipolarity.

## **From the End of the Cold War and the End of History to Global Conflict**

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was followed by the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The post-1991 world was dominated by the West, with the US at the top and being highly unipolar. At that time, there was not a single country or alliance left in the world that would offer a global alternative to the democratic political system and capitalist mode of production. Despite the fact that the US and Western powers gave Russia written assurance in 1990 against Northern Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) expansion, former communist countries in Europe were quickly integrated into NATO (Wiegrefe 2022, Goldman 2023, National Security Archive 2017, Shiffrinson 2016) and later into the European Union (EU). In academia, the final triumph of the liberal idea and the end of history were debated. In 1994, the Uruguay Round of trade liberalisation was concluded. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) became the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995. After tough negotiations, China joined the WTO in November 2001. Thereafter, it quickly integrated into the capitalist economy, actively trading with the US, the EU, and the rest of the world. Globalisation was the new economic order, and the US dollar continued to be the currency of choice. Developing countries aimed to progress trading in the international marketplace. Ideologically, since the early 1990s, globalisation has been linked with the triumph of political liberalism and has been seen as a mechanism for disseminating liberal norms and values beyond the “historical West” to the rest of the world.

Optimism about the prospects of peace and cooperation in the world was the dominant mood around the globe. Meanwhile, the US pursued a grand strategy of maintaining its global hegemony by engaging in regime change, toppling down regimes, and nation-building, using military force around the world with international partners and alliances, from NATO in Kosovo in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001 to the “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq in 2003, and the United Nations (UN) resolution approved forces in Libya in 2011. The US dominated the world and Europe, even though leading European intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas sought autonomy for the EU in relations with Washington, D.C. Despite successes, there were many crises that the US and the West mishandled. The rejection of the proposed Treaty for Establishing a

Constitution for Europe in 2005 was followed by a crisis in the Eurozone, the rise of sovereigntist and populist political forces, Brexit, a migration crisis, the victory of Donald Trump, and the emergence of illiberal positions among leaders of several, mainly Eastern European states. Western powers failed to find a convincing answer to the challenges of the global financial meltdown of 2008–2009 and the “Arab Spring” of 2011–2012 (Mearsheimer 2019). The fight against radical Islamism has not fully eradicated this threat. In Syria, the West could not topple Assad’s regime after Russia came to his aid. President Joe Biden decided to hastily withdraw American troops from Afghanistan at the end of the summer of 2021.

In recent years, Russia and China have become more influential and confrontational in international politics. While Moscow’s proposals for a new Security Treaty for Europe, a joint Russia-NATO missile defence system, and offers to establish formal relations between NATO and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation were rebuffed, NATO gradually expanded east. In 2014, following the toppling of President Viktor Yanukovich and the establishment of an anti-Russian government, Russia acted decisively by annexing Crimea and helping Donetsk rebels fight Ukraine, ultimately forcing Kiev to accept the so-called Minsk Peace Agreements. For Moscow, this was a necessary reaction following the Euro-Maidan Revolution and statements about Ukrainian plans not to extend the base lease for the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, to join NATO, and to install policies to limit Russian cultural and linguistic rights. Kiev did not change course, as in February 2019, Ukraine’s constitution was amended to make NATO membership an obligatory governmental goal. In March 2021, Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected President on a pro-peace platform in 2019, adopted the Crimean Platform, a programme to secure the return of Crimea to Ukraine by any means necessary, including unspecified military measures.

At the end of 2021, Russia demanded a radical overhaul of Europe’s security system that had emerged over the past twenty years, based on the central role of the US and NATO in the system. After the US unilaterally withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 and the Antiballistic Missile Treaty in 2022, Moscow did not want NATO to expand in Ukraine. Placing antiballistic launch systems in Romania and Poland as part of the US project to create a global missile defence system

was already a serious issue for Russia, as these launchers could also accommodate and fire offensive nuclear weapons at Russia, such as nuclear-tipped Tomahawk cruise missiles (Abellow 2022, 16). Putin and other Russian officials addressed the danger of a lack of response time if Ukraine was incorporated into NATO and the Alliance stationed nuclear-capable missiles there and asked for concessions from the West. As tensions between Moscow and Washington, D.C., rose in the late fall and winter of 2021-2022, Russia amassed a significant number of troops on the borders with Ukraine. On December 17, 2021, Moscow submitted two drafts to European security treaties, one addressed to the US and the other to NATO, demanding no further NATO enlargement, no deployment of weaponry or military forces on Russia's borders, and NATO's return to the force posture of May 1997. Neither Washington nor its European allies could give Russia the security guarantees it wanted, rejecting Moscow's proposals in January 2022 and reiterating that NATO's eastward expansion was nonnegotiable as sovereign states had the "right to choose their security arrangements" (Stoltenberg 2022).

The US promised to continue dialogue if Russia de-escalated its forces on Ukraine's border. On the other hand, the Ukrainian Army had a large force preparing to reconquer territories lost to the Donbass rebels in 2014. According to Russian claims, "half of Ukraine's regular Army was deployed there by the end of 2021" (Roberts 2022, 6). On March 24, 2021, Zelensky issued a decree for the recapture of Crimea, while in October 2021, the Ukrainian Army conducted air operations in Donbass using drones, including at least one strike against a fuel depot in Donetsk (Episkopos 2021). As tensions rose with the military buildup on both sides, diplomacy was focused on finding solutions based on the so-called Minsk Agreements. Thus, on February 7, 2022, during his visit to Moscow, Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed to Vladimir Putin his commitment to the Minsk Agreements, a commitment he would repeat after his meeting with Volodymyr Zelensky the next day. However, on February 11, 2022, in Berlin, at a meeting of political advisors of the leaders of the "Normandy format", the Ukrainians refused to apply the Minsk Agreements. Instead, according to various reports, including those of OSCE observers, the Ukrainian Army intensified its shelling of Donbass starting on February 16, 2022. Moreover, in his speech to the Munich Security Conference on February 19, 2022, Zelensky threatened the Ukrainian re-acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Mass evacuations and general mobilisation began in the Donbass region following aggravations along the “line of contact,” a front line that had remained static since 2014. Although Biden warned that Putin was planning to try to fabricate a pretext for invasion, including by making false claims that Ukrainian forces had attacked civilians in the Donbas region (Risen 2022), according to various sources, the large, significantly increased bombardment of Russian separatists’ positions in Donetsk in February 2022 provoked Moscow’s recognition of the independence of the breakaway regions of Donbass and, subsequently, an invasion. Thus, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) maps show a significant rise in artillery strikes in the independent republics of Donetsk and Luhansk since February 16, 2022 (OSCE 2022). While the Western media remained silent, explosions documented by the OSCE increased from 76 on February 15 to 316 on February 16, 654 on February 17, and 2,028 on February 20 (Gala 2022). As David C. Hendrickson pointed out, the great majority of the shelling originated from the Ukrainian side of the ceasefire line (2022). It is plausible to say that Putin reacted to this escalation. On February 21, 2022, Russia recognised the independence of the two Donbass Republics and signed friendship and assistance treaties with them. On February 23, 2022, the two Republics asked for military assistance from Russia, and two days later, Vladimir Putin invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter, which provides for mutual military assistance in the framework of a defensive alliance. Credible US intelligence sources indicate that Putin only made a final decision shortly before the invasion began, and the haphazard and uncoordinated nature of the early stages of the campaign corroborates this claim (Risen 2022). Certainly, Russia could have begun its aggression even without this escalation, but “after more than 14,000 casualties in fighting between Ukrainian nationalists and pro-Russian separatists in Donbas before the February 24th invasion, it is hard to argue that Russia’s concerns were groundless” (Goldman 2023).

In any case, Russia’s attack on Ukraine is a threat to the Western-based international order. Moscow’s aggression has mobilised the West. In essence, the US and its allies see the war in Ukraine as an existential conflict between democracies and autocracies. At the 2023 Munich Security Conference, US Vice President Kamala Harris said that the war had “far-reaching global ramifications”, while German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stressed that anything less than a complete Russian defeat and withdrawal would

mean “the end of the international order and the end of international law” (Walt 2023). While American and European attention is now mostly focused on Russia, China is also considered a strategic risk. This has been a fact for quite some time already. President Trump has begun, and Biden has continued to impose sanctions on China. Once Washington, D.C., started the struggle with Beijing, Brussels followed. Despite negotiating since 2012 and an agreement in principle by the European Commission at the end of 2020 to conclude a trade pact, the European Parliament decided to freeze the ratification of the comprehensive investment deal with China and now considers Beijing a strategic enemy. Indeed, despite all the drama and monumental international consequences of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is China, not Russia, that is still considered by US politicians as the main strategic challenge and threat to the national interests of the United States and the West as a whole. In his National Security Strategy, Biden outlined his view of global competition with China and the American desire to “work in lockstep with our allies and partners and with all those who share our interests” (Strategy 2022). Predictions of an armed conflict have been made. In an interview with *The Financial Times*, James Bierman, the highest-ranking United States Marine Corps General in Japan, declared that the US is “setting a counter-China theatre” in the Asia-Pacific region (Hille 2023). US Air Force General Mike Minihan sent a memo to the officers he commands that predicts the US will be at war with China in two years (Kube 2023). Washington, D.C., says that Beijing wants to be ready to invade the self-governing island of Taiwan by 2027, and the US is the island’s chief ally and supplier of weapons (Copp 2023).

### **China and Russia on the Rise challenging the American Order**

For more than a century, an extreme concentration of economic power allowed the West, despite representing a small minority of the world’s population, to initiate, legitimise, and successfully advocate policy in the economic or security realm (Stuenkel 2016). Yet, nowadays, the American-led international order is not the only game in town. The West is slowly losing the capacity to set the agenda on a global scale. According to US CIA Director William Burns (2019, 7): “Great power rivalry is back: China is systematically modernizing its military and is poised to overtake the US as the world’s biggest economy, slowly extending its reach in Asia and across

the Eurasian supercontinent; Russia is providing graphic evidence that declining powers can be at least as disruptive as rising ones, increasingly convinced that the pathway to revival of its great power status runs through the erosion of an American-led order...Meanwhile, a quarter century of convergence towards a Western model is giving way to a new form of globalisation, featuring a new diversity of actors and the fragmentation of global power, capital, and concepts of governance."

China, Russia, and other emerging powers "do not accept the dual structure of the liberal international order in which the United States enforces the rules but is not bound by them" (Diessen 2021, 209). Russia is against the Western-backed rules-based order, which introduces divisions between liberal democracies and "authoritarian powers", introducing the ethical categories of "good" and "evil" into international politics, making it very ideologized. For Moscow, the promotion of the "selective combination of rules, unilaterally employed, is with the aim of circumventing multilateral, collective decision-making, and international legal instruments and processes based on the UN Charter as a core of the post-war order" (Ibid., 16). Western states challenge the principle of "indivisibility of security". Efforts by liberal states to "expand the zone of liberal peace encroach on state sovereignty and the right of every nation to determine its own course of development" (Krickovic and Sakwa 2022, 9). For Russia, NATO enlargement eschews restraint and instead pursues "preponderance, upsetting the balance of power and violating the foundational principle of the "indivisibility of security" (Putin 2022a). China and Russia take issue with what they see as US "heavy-handed democracy promotion" (or "collective unilateralism") and proclaim sovereignty to be a "hard" (or fundamental) concept. Sergei Karaganov argued for the US, Russia, and China to be the "twenty-first-century concert of nations", the leading triumvirate that could be supported to include other "real" and "sovereign actors" (2017). In opposition to the American approach, Russia cultivates pragmatic relations with different countries, regions, and organisations, insisting on the principles of peaceful coexistence, independence, autonomy, and non-interference. Russian leaders consistently defend the right of each state "to choose those models of development that correspond to their national, cultural, and confessional identities" (Lavrov 2018).



Shortly before the start of the full-scale Russian attack of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin and Xi signed a statement proclaiming that there were “no limits to Sino-Russian cooperation”. In February 2023, after meeting Beijing’s top diplomat, Wang Yi, in Moscow, Putin said that Russia and China are reaching new levels of cooperation, adding that he awaits a visit from Chinese President Xi Jinping. Wang told Putin that the relationship between China and Russia would “not succumb to pressure from third parties” and pledged to deepen strategic cooperation with Moscow (Sorgi 2023). Indeed, both Moscow and Beijing favour changing the world order. From the Russian perspective, the existing system of international relations and security is unfair and discriminating against the rival emerging powers, and, therefore, it has been endeavouring to strengthen its security, protect its sovereignty, and multiply its military potential through cooperation with other partners, first and foremost within the military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Zemanek 2022, 7). The West’s support for the 2014 coup in Ukraine “ended the remaining illusions in Russia about a gradual integration with the West to construct a Greater Europe” (Diessen 2021b, 19). Instead, Moscow seeks regional economic cooperation through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU) trade bloc. Russia aims for independence from financial institutions dominated by the West and a transition to settlements in national currencies or the creation of regional exchanges for trading those goods, where Russia will remain an important player in Asian markets. Following the Ukrainian invasion and Western sanctions, Moscow seeks the gradual formation of a new infrastructure for trade and economic cooperation between Russia and its Asian and Eurasian neighbours.

As the international system shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity for the countries of the Global South, China and Russia present economic and political alternatives to the dominant American model. Moreover, realising the “difficulty of single-handedly taking on the United States and its allies, the Chinese and Russian governments are increasingly finding common ground in their world views” (Suri, 2022, 237). Indeed, with the rise of China and Russia, countries around the world have alternative suppliers of development assistance, military security, and public goods—in effect, countries now have “exit options” from US hegemony (Ikenberry 2020). Following the introduction of a new set of EU sanctions in 2022, Moscow

has delinked from the EU, seeking better cooperation with Eurasia. Already in the making since 2014, the push for the concept of Greater Eurasia got full support from Moscow. The Greater Eurasia concept aims to “decouple from the West’s geoeconomic instruments of power and develop global governance based on a balance of power where Russia develops strategic industries, transportation corridors, and financial instruments beyond the control of the US” (Diessen 2021, 213). Thus, for example, Russia, together with Iran and India, is speeding up efforts to complete a new transport corridor that would largely cut Europe, its sanctions, and any other threats out of the picture. The International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) is a land-and sea-based 7,200-km-long network comprising rail, road, and water routes that are aimed at reducing costs and travel time for freight transport in a bid to boost trade between Russia, Iran, Central Asia, and India. In December, a major new Siberian gas field (Kovykta) was launched to help drive a planned surge in supply to China through the Power of Siberia pipeline carrying Russian gas to China. With recoverable reserves of 1.8 trillion cubic metres, the field is the largest in eastern Russia (Reuters 2022). Russia also plans to construct another major pipeline, the Power of Siberia 2, via Mongolia, with a view to selling additional gas to China. The new Eurasian pipeline infrastructure will enable Russia to supply both the East and the West from the same oil and gas fields. If relations improve in the future, clients from Europe willing to buy Russian energy cheaper than American or other alternatives will be competing with Asian buyers.

The Chinese and Russian geoeconomic decoupling from the US is “resulting in the construction of a new autonomous Eurasian supercontinent uniting Europe and Asia by reorganising strategic industries, transportation corridors, and financial instruments” (Diessen 2021b, 20). Beijing and Tehran established their comprehensive strategic partnership when Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping visited Iran in 2016. In 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year partnership agreement whereby China will provide investments and economic and security services worth \$400 billion over 25 years in return for a steady supply of oil from Iran to the Chinese economy. Other provisions included the creation of a special mechanism to aid banking transactions between the two countries in yuan; intelligence cooperation and developing information infrastructure for a 5G telecommunication network; working to make Iran the centre point of the

Silk Road's commercial route in the Middle East instead of passing through the Arabian Peninsula; and military, defence, and security cooperation, including training, research, and interaction on strategic issues (Rasanah 2023, 7). Most recently, in February 2023, China and Iran agreed to deepen their partnership, increasing coordination under multilateral platforms such as the UN, the SCO, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Iran is to become one of the first new members of BRICS+ and is about to conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Beijing is also taking leadership of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), focusing on infrastructure development, especially from China's western provinces to the Pakistani deep-sea ports of Gwadar and Karachi.

China is reimagining the world as a single, complex network of supply chains and trade arteries. Fueled by commodities from around the world, the country is becoming the keystone of the global economy and the principal engine of globalisation. As observers like Robert Kuttner point out, the country has attained the status of a "global economic superpower" (2018, 207). This also shows the bifurcation of the world into two parts, wherein China is trying to create a new cost-effective alternative and challenge the established order. The alternative order is already in the making; it includes, among others, institutions such as the BRICS, a coalition of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (as an alternative to the G7), the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (to complement the World Bank), the Universal Credit Rating Group (to complement Moody's and S&P), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, BRICS countries' the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), China Union Pay (to complement Mastercard and Visa), CIPS (to complement SWIFT), and many other initiatives. Beijing wants to operate in a more favourable strategic environment in multiple domains. Across emerging economies, Chinese-led globalisation has already begun displacing America's "rules-based order". Combined with Beijing's systematic push to expand its influence in multilateral rule-setting institutions and, in some cases, to create new ones, these roads seem to lead towards a regional or perhaps global ecosystem that would disadvantage the United States.

Throughout the world, China is amassing levers of influence. In Africa, Beijing is an important contributor to infrastructure construction and trade

for many nations. China competes with the US for influence on the continent. Following the US-Africa Summit organised by Biden in Washington in December 2022, in January 2023, the new Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang went on a tour to Africa, visiting five diverse countries – Ethiopia, Gabon, Benin, Angola, and Egypt – and the headquarters of both the African Union and the Arab League. Qin signed documents in many fields, including debt cancellation, reassuring African partners that China-Africa economic relations would be revitalised. Qin supported Africa in playing an active role in international cooperation, stating that China would support the continental countries in increasing the representation of Africa in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and other international organisations (RFI 2023). In March 2023, China facilitated talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which resulted in an agreement between the two regional powers to re-establish diplomatic relations and reopen their embassies within two months. Riyadh and Tehran agreed to activate a security cooperation agreement signed in 2001, respect state sovereignty, and not interfere in each other's internal affairs. Wang Yi, China's most senior diplomat, commented that Beijing would continue to play a constructive role in handling hotspot issues and demonstrate responsibility as a major nation (Al Jazeera 2023).

Beijing even promoted a “peace plan position paper” for ending the Ukrainian conflict (China's Position 2023). Suggesting that “dialogue and negotiation are the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis”, China's paper centres around the following 12 aspects: respecting the sovereignty of all countries, abandoning the Cold War mentality, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks, resolving the humanitarian crisis, protecting civilians and prisoners of war, keeping nuclear power plants safe, reducing strategic risks, facilitating grain exports, stopping unilateral sanctions, keeping industrial and supply chains stable, and promoting post-conflict reconstruction. On the one hand, the document openly condemns the use of nuclear weapons, calls for a military de-escalation, and claims that China will continue to play a constructive role in this regard. Yet, on the other hand, in raising opposition to “Cold War mentality”, the paper categorically suggests: “The security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs... The legitimate security interests and concerns of all countries must be taken seriously and addressed properly. [...] All parties should oppose the pursuit of one's own security at the cost of others' security, prevent bloc confrontation,

and work together for peace and stability on the Eurasian Continent". The document confirms that China stands with Russia in the ideological confrontation between Moscow and the West. Thus, the paper notes that "[r]elevant countries (the US and its allies) should stop abusing unilateral sanctions and 'long-arm jurisdiction' against other countries". At the same time, the rhetorical formulation that "all countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equal members of the international community" underscores China's attempts at positioning itself as the leader and main voice of the Global South against hegemonic powers (Bruni and Carrozza 2023). While Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, called the position paper "an important contribution", Russia reacted positively to Beijing's efforts, and Ukrainian President Zelensky offered a muted response, saying Kyiv needed to "work with China" on approaches to put an end to the year-old war. The US and its Western partners snubbed the proposals while warning against Beijing's increasing closer ties to Moscow.

Under the Beijing-led BRI, over 150 countries and organisations that make up roughly 70 percent of the global population and over 50 percent of global GDP participate, with Latin America added as a "natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Most of the members of the BRI are countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Central and East Asia, and Central and Southeastern Europe. Under this framework, China is to invest about \$1 trillion in loans and other funds in developing critical infrastructure, including ports, airports, highways, railways, pipelines, and power plants, making it the world's largest official creditor (Wei 2022). The size of the investments and infrastructure envisioned will be enormous, with some estimating it to be seven times bigger than the US's Marshall Plan to rebuild post-World War II Europe (Hillman 2020). Envisioned as a "global infrastructure drive to promote greater economic linkages, the BRI seeks to position China at the centre of key economic supply chains" (Suri 2022, 233). Within the BRI, China focuses on making free trade agreements (FTAs) with other nations and building special economic zones (SEZs). Overall, the BRI has the potential to meet the long-standing needs of developing countries and spur global economic growth. The BRI is designed to advance an array of Chinese economic, political, and geopolitical interests while filling a vital need in many countries for reliable sources of power and better infrastructure. The BRI and the Digital Silk Road (DSR) projects aim to

integrate financial markets and connect nation-states with a string of next-generation digital infrastructure and satellite coverage.

The normative side of China's digitalization vision does not differ from Beijing's emphasis in international law on the concept of sovereignty; hence, in the digital world, there is a focus on what it calls "cyber sovereignty," strong data localization requirements, and censorship. China's preferred norms of "internet sovereignty" and prioritising the collective "right to development" over individual human rights are promoted at the UN Group of Governmental Experts, the World Internet Conference, and the South-South Human Rights Forum. Indeed, Beijing is quite active in international forums to promote this model of internet governance as a globally accepted norm. Chinese internet experts cooperate with their counterparts in Africa, Russia, and the Middle East on how to shape up internet controls and crack down on illegal activities and dissent online. On the one hand, on the global stage, China has been unequivocal on the importance of multilateralism and national sovereignty. Yet, on the other hand, China exhibits a flexible and functional approach to international law where it seeks to advance interpretations of international law and the development of new international norms that reflect China's values and advance its interests, neither of which are necessarily fixed. While in certain aspects of international law China looks for exceptions, thus ignoring UNCLOS (the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas) in the South China Sea, for example, in other, Chinese-initiated fora, such as the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organisation, the China-conceived Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the newly created Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, it appears to largely reproduce the norms and practices of existing international institutions.

During the annual Boao Forum on April 21, 2022, Xi introduced a Global Security Initiative (GSI) to "uphold the principle of indivisible security, build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the building of national security on the basis of insecurity in other countries". In February 2023, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang officially released the GSI Concept Paper, fully elaborating ideas and principles, clarifying cooperation mechanisms, and underscoring China's responsibilities and firm determination to safeguard world peace by listing 20 major cooperation

directions. The GSI affirms the central role of the UN in addressing conflict by promoting “harmonisation and positive relationships” between great powers, including opposition to “hegemonic actions”. Furthermore, it encourages dialogue to “cool hotspots” and “release the pressure from crises”, while addressing the challenges of traditional and non-traditional security threats and supporting capacity building for global security governance (GSI Concept Paper). The GSI emphasises the role of the UN as the principal forum for resolving global security issues and promotes a number of China-initiated regional peace and security initiatives, including the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, the Beijing Xiangshan Forum, the Global Data Security Initiative, and its regional iterations in Central Asia and Latin America. In order to realise this vision, China will hold high-level GSI-related events and invite various parties to discuss security matters.

In September 2022, during his address to the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi presented China’s Global Development Initiative (GDI) as a pathway to accelerate implementation of the 2030 agenda. The GDI marks a significant departure in China’s development narrative because it presents a normative framework for China’s engagements. China asserts that the 2030 agenda is off track, with the GDI laying out and advocating its vision with six accompanying principles (a people-centred approach, development as a priority, benefits for all, innovation-driven development, harmony with nature, and action-oriented approaches), eight priorities (poverty reduction, food security, COVID-19 and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, the digital economy, and connectivity), governance arrangements, and actions. The launch of the GDI does not suggest China is replacing or diminishing the BRI. The BRI and GDI are best seen as parallel tracks. While the BRI is economic growth-oriented, the GDI is development-oriented. The BRI delivers hardware and economic corridors, while the GDI focuses on software, livelihoods, knowledge transfer, and capacity building (Mulakala 2022). The BRI is market-oriented, where enterprises play a key role. By contrast, the GDI is public-oriented, delivering grants and development assistance. While the BRI’s pathways are mostly bilateral and regional, involving MOUs with partner countries, the GDI promotes diverse partnerships with multilaterals, NGOs, and the private sector. China’s National Development and Reform Commission is the main coordinating agency behind the BRI, whereas the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the China International Development Cooperation Agency drive the GDI. China's August 2022 announcement of debt relief to 17 countries may indicate a willingness to engage in greater debt diplomacy. The recent debt relief agreement reached between China and Zambia was also a positive sign.

Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and the GSI are a geopolitical rebirth of the world into a global form. China, Russia, and their allies clash with attempts by Western actors who oppose the idea of multipolar global architecture and are pushing for reforms at the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and many other global institutions that are perceived to have become structured in a manner sympathetic to the US and its allies rather than emerging economies. Beijing believes that an equitable international economic order must be preserved by all focusing on principles such as "an equitable division of labour, encouragement of competition, anti-monopoly, protection of property rights and IPRs, promoting entrepreneurship and the free flow of production factors, fair distribution, a strong social safety net, and ensuring macroeconomic stability" (Devonshire-Ellis 2022). The opponents of US hegemony insist on the creation of an alternative model and a multipolar world.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian attack of Ukraine is just a very clear and public manifestation of the struggle where the US, supported by its junior Western partners, strives to remain the only, or the main, hegemonic power in the world, while Moscow, Beijing, and other regional players seek a more balanced state of affairs. Although discussions over the justness of the international system and the potential for the development of a polycentric world have intensified since last February, the conflict between the unipolar and multipolar forces has been going on for some time. Russia, China, and other actors aim to end the supremacy of the Western world based on five pillars: institutional-financial, military, technological innovation, and cultural-ideological. On the other hand, the US and its allies have been trying for some time to hamper Moscow's and Beijing's initiatives, diplomacy, and economic and technological development. The US and Europe are defenders



of the so-called “rules-based liberal world order”, and the two others are seen as contesting it.

Much of the world is wary of taking sides. Practically all the states of Africa, Asia, and Eurasia have ended up in that Global Majority, the totality of countries that make up 85 percent of the world’s population that have not allied with the West in its struggle against Russia. Fewer than 40 of the 193 UN member states have imposed sanctions on Russia, while fewer than 30 have pledged military assistance for Ukraine. “Non-alignment” offers governments avenues to boost their autonomy in foreign and energy policy. One can argue that following the Russian attack of Ukraine, the world has been divided into the Western liberal world and the conservative forces. In the first group, we find the US, the EU, the UK, and their allies. Russia, Iran, Central Asia, China, Africa, and the Arab Middle East, with various political institutions and ideologies from Islamism to secular communism and state capitalism, are united in their rejection of western modernity and its associated political and social alternatives. Countries of South America, Asia-Pacific, or Southeastern Europe, including Turkey, do not have strict affiliation with either of the blocks, balancing their interests. The world is not driven by values but by states pursuing their interests.

At the moment, it is difficult to imagine a decisive victory for either of the two camps. What would the consequences of the end of the US-led postwar order be for the future of world politics? Europe and the United States would need to adapt to the new realities of global politics, which will combine liberal functions with other features. The future of the world will be more consistent with diversity and pluralism in its norms, means of communication, and leadership. Different value systems will coexist in the world, diverging on issues such as understanding gender, sexuality, individualism vs. communitarianism, drugs, gun control, the death sentence, and abortion, not to mention larger ideological constructs like the balance or the role of the state and the various religious teaching[s]. A victory for the US-led West in Ukraine could mean the democratisation of Russia and further pressure on other non-democratic countries to follow that path. The defeat of Moscow could also lead to the rise of more nationalistic leaders in Russia and further antagonism; it could also lead to nuclear Armageddon. In any case, the times are very exciting, and the world is on the cusp of serious changes.

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