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Power Transition, Cold War II and the Ukraine War

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Abstract: The onset of multipolarity is accompanied by a number of cross-cutting trends. First, the consolidation of elements of modified bipolarity in the form of the Sino-American great power dyad. Second, the emergence of a range of ‘legacy’ great powers, including Germany, France, the UK and Japan, with Russia struggling to retain its status as a great power while fearing relegation to legacy status. Third, the revival of cold war entails the restoration of bloc politics, although in this case in an acutely asymmetrical form. The nascent political institutionalization of the political East is based on a very different institutional and normative basis than the more consolidated political West. Overall, the centre of gravity of international politics is shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific basin, reflecting a fundamental change in the global correlation of forces. The Ukraine war has accelerated the end of the era of the dominance of the political West.

Key Words: Multipolarity; power shift; cold war; sanctions; Charter international system; correlation of forces.

Strategic competition is the defining feature of international politics in the twenty-first century. Long-term trends are shifting the global centre of power from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Europe to Asia, and from the US to China. Rather than a Cold War, theorists suggest that we are witnessing a ‘power transition’, considered ‘among the most destabilizing events in international politics’.¹ The unipolarity that marked the inter-Cold War period is giving way to a more multipolar configuration of international politics.² Cold War II is both a cause and a consequence. However, this is tempered by the pre-eminence of two great powers, the US and China, whose dominance restores elements of bipolarity.

According to Kenneth Waltz, a pole is created in a larger system when a state accumulates a disproportionate share of resources and capabilities accompanied by ‘the size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military strength, political stability and competence’.³ The Soviet Union in comparison with the US (and even with modern China) was thus always an ‘incomplete superpower’.⁴ Today Russia is also ‘incomplete’, yet it remains a great power, ensuring that international politics remains multipolar. It does so in the context of a renewed Cold War that in Ukraine has become a direct test of wills between the political West and Russia. While Cold War I focused on Europe, with global ramifications, the second is global by its very essence. It is far more entrenched and reflects not a contingent power shift, but the culmination of a historical epoch. China will undoubtedly prove to be a far more formidable and enduring protagonist than the Soviet Union ever was. This great power competition is more deeply rooted in historical trajectories, political

¹ Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (eds), *China’s Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008): 1.

² Aldo Ferrari and Eleonara Tafuro Ambrosetti (eds), *Multipolarity after Ukraine: Old Wine in New Bottles?* (Milan, Ledizioni Ledi Publishing/ISPI, 2023).

³ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World”, *Daedalus* 93, no 3 (1964): 881-909, and his *Theory of International Politics* (New York, Random House 1979): 131 and *passim*.

⁴ Paul Dibb, *The Soviet Union: The Incomplete Superpower* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1986).

cultures and status concerns than the original US-Soviet one ever was.⁵ This new conflict will be more structured, multifaceted, dynamic, intense, and enduring.

1. Cold War II and Multilateralism

Just as the Second World War differed from the first, so the Second Cold War differs from the earlier one. In both cases, the second conflict was provoked by unresolved contradictions in the ending of the first.⁶ The failure at the Paris Peace Conference to create a durable peace meant that the Versailles Treaty of June 1919 inaugurated a period beset by crisis and the bitterness of an outcast Germany. The ensuing ‘twenty years’ crisis’, analysed by E. H. Carr, described the tension between idealism and pragmatism.⁷ This dynamic was very much at work in the twenty-five-year Cold Peace from 1945 to 2014, which culminated in Cold War II. Different ideologies, actors and regions are involved in this new conflict, but the fundamental quality of ‘cold war’ is reproduced. In Cold War II the struggle is no longer between socialism and capitalism, and not even between democracy and autocracy, but between models of world order and paths to modernity. In World War II Japan played a much larger role than in the first, whereas today China has become the leading actor in the renewed confrontation. As in World War II, there are two main regional arenas for conflict, Europe and Asia, as well as a number of global proxy conflicts. Whereas in Cold War I the conflict in Europe was static but in the rest of the world dynamic, the opposite is the case today. Cold war has come home to roost in Europe.

The concept of a Second Cold War identifies the differences as well as the similarities with the earlier conflict. A few months before the Ukraine war, the Russian scholar Sergei Karaganov argued that ‘We must admit the obvious: a new cold war is unfolding, and Russia should think of how to win it’. Russia had to avoid making the mistakes of the USSR, and devise a long-term vision of future development, a partnership with China, and greater flexibility in response to possible geopolitical changes (such as China’s defeat of the US, or vice versa).⁸ The invasion of Ukraine could thus be considered a gigantic Soviet-style mistake, diminishing the chances of Russia emerging as a long-term winner. Russia was more globally integrated than the USSR ever was, although the state remained an important regulator in its ‘sovereign globalisation’.⁹

Despite attempts to enhance resilience through import substitution, building up foreign currency and bullion reserves, and creating parallel instruments of financial management, Russia remained vulnerable to trade and financial sanctions. After 2014 the Atlantic powers imposed stringent constraints, which in 2022 turned into full-scale economic warfare. These sanctions have had damaging blowback effects on the rest of the global economy, exacerbating

⁵ Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Emperor’s New Road: China and the Project of the Century* (Fair Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2020).

⁶ Analysed by Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How we Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, forthcoming 2024), from which this article draws.

⁷ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, Reissued with a New Introduction and additional material by Michael Cox (London, Palgrave, 2001 [1939]).

⁸ Sergei Karaganov, “Shans, kotoryi nel’zya upustit’”, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 25 June 2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/06/25/karaganov-rossii-nado-dumat-kak-pobedit-v-holodnoj-vojne.html> (accessed 10 March 2023).

⁹ Nigel Gould-Davies, *Russia’s Sovereign Globalisation: Rise, Fall and Future* (London, Chatham House, Russia and Eurasian Programme, January 2016), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/01/russias-sovereign-globalization-rise-fall-and-future> (accessed 10 March 2023).

post-pandemic supply chain issues, leading to galloping energy price rises, food shortages and inflation.

The world today is populated with a larger cohort of substantive powers than during Cold War I, giving substance to the Russian argument that the world is becoming multipolar. A total of 131 states voted for the 2 March 2022 General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with only 5 voting against and 35 abstaining. The resolution called for the full withdrawal of Russian forces and a reversal of its decision to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk. China and India, however, abstained and avoided openly condemning Russia.¹⁰ In the 7 April General Assembly vote on membership of the UN Human Rights Council, 93 voted in favour of suspending Russia, 24 voted against, while 58 abstained. Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria and Vietnam were among those who voted against, while those abstaining included India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Singapore, Indonesia and Cambodia.¹¹ The pattern was repeated in later votes, with the majority of states in the Global South refusing to engage in a conflict that they considered a matter for the Global North.

Thirty-nine states joined the sanctions against Russia while most of the rest remained non-aligned, limiting themselves to condemning the war and the violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a sovereign state. Numerous African countries (1.2 billion people), India (1.4 billion) and China (1.4 billion) did not join the punitive measures imposed by the political West. In the immediate aftermath, China moved beyond its normally cautious formulation, and for the first time associated itself with Russia's condemnation of NATO enlargement. The irony of the situation was not lost on Beijing. Just weeks before the war, the Joint Statement of 4 February 2022 affirmed the principles of non-interference and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and condemned hegemonism, and now Moscow egregiously trampled on these principles.¹² The two countries portrayed themselves as peace-loving and the US was aggressive and hegemonic, but now Russia was engaged in militarism and aggression. The challenge was two-fold: to the normative foundations of anti-hegemonism; and on a more practical level on how to respond to war in Europe, especially since China enjoyed good relations with Ukraine.

Beijing called for peace and diplomacy but made clear that the alignment with Russia would remain.¹³ The war deepened China's mistrust of the West at a time when a number of provocative high-level visits by senior American politicians aggravated tensions over Taiwan. Beijing's stance evolved from cautious impartiality to the denunciation of the sanctions as 'financial terrorism' and 'economic weaponisation'. The weaponization of the dollar and trade relations were tools that would be deployed against China. In a famous tweet on 19 March 2022, the broadcaster Liu Xin stated that the US position amounted to the request: 'Can you help me fight your friend so that I can concentrate on fighting you later'. Blinken's warning in June 2022 that Washington would 'shape the strategic environment around Beijing' confirmed

¹⁰ UN News, "General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian Offensive in Ukraine", 2 March 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152> (accessed 10 March 2023).

¹¹ UN News, "UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council", 7 April 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782> (accessed 10 March 2023).

¹² "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development", *Kremlin.ru*, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> (accessed 10 March 2023).

¹³ Alexander Lukin, "Why China Won't Break with Russia over Ukraine", *The National Interest*, 28 March 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-china-won%E2%80%99t-break-russia-over-ukraine-201495> (accessed 10 March 2023).

such fears.¹⁴ Nevertheless, even though the Joint Statement spoke of ‘no limits’, the war demonstrated that there were constraints. Chinese companies were unwilling to risk sanctions by working with Russia, and hence limited the sale of aircraft parts and other technologies, while Sinopec suspended major investments in the Russian gas market.¹⁵ Russia lost some of its value as a strategic partner, but Beijing’s ‘credibility’ (to use the term favoured by Washington) would also be on the line if it distanced itself from Moscow.¹⁶ China also had geopolitical concerns about the stability of its northern neighbour and the security of its 4,133 km border with Russia. The incorporation of Russia into the Atlantic power system would be a strategic nightmare for Beijing.

Russia and China are aligned not so much to oppose the US, however, as to defend the UN-based Charter international system and to support of their preferred model of world order, sovereign internationalism. Since so much of liberal internationalism is associated with the Charter system, resistance does not take the form of explicit revisionism, but rather anti-hegemonism of the sort espoused by the Non-Aligned Movement. The Declaration of the Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations in 1955 affirmed the fundamental Charter principle of sovereign internationalism. Resisting the Cold War binary, the movement coalesced in Belgrade in 1961. In conditions of renewed cold war, the Non-Aligned Movement is experiencing a renaissance, although so far in rather more inchoate form than earlier.

Anti-hegemonism draws on this tradition to condemn the expansive claims of post-1989 liberal hegemony, above all its assertion that the Western ‘rules-based system’ is synonymous with order itself. This global substitution is replicated at the regional level through the assertion of a post-Cold War ‘global Atlanticism’. An ‘informal concert (NATO and friends)’ usurped ‘the role of the formally accepted concert, namely the UN Security Council’.¹⁷ This ‘concert’ was global in its ambitions, with forays into Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere, accompanied by the ‘NATOisation’ of East Asian security, but the focus in the first instance was on Russia. Although the dynamic of Russian resistance was very different from the Soviet Union’s stated revolutionary ambitions, the threat to world order was formulated in classic Cold War terms.

This conceptual confusion in the aims and purposes of Russian resistance has been amplified by former Soviet bloc countries, who perceived threats to their security in historical and identity terms. The post-2014 Ukrainian authorities and their allies dismissed Russia’s security concerns and instead focused on the civilisational and normative aspect of the struggle, condemning what they considered to be a neo-imperialist attempt to restore lost lands. Structured dialogue almost disappeared as the allies closed ranks to prevent Russia from driving a ‘wedge’ between them. The resulting stasis created a hermetic closure that prevented ideas about how to salvage the disintegrating European security order from gaining traction. This only exacerbated the security dilemma. NATO mobilised against a threat that its own hedging had brought into existence, thus justifying the original expansionary hedging. The circularity of the logic was impeccable, but it did not impress – let alone convince – much of the Global South.¹⁸ As far as they were concerned, the political West had blundered into a

¹⁴ Vincent Ni, “China’s Evolving Stance on the War in Ukraine Reflects a Deepening Distrust of the West”, *Guardian*, 7 June 2022: 21.

¹⁵ Nathaniel Sher, “Why Isn’t China Going all Out to Help Russia in Ukraine?”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 4 April 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/04/why-isnt-china-going-all-out-to-help-russia-in-ukraine/> (accessed 10 March 2023).

¹⁶ Lukin, “Why China Won’t Break with Russia over Ukraine”.

¹⁷ Ian Clark, *The Post-Cold War Order: The Spoils of Peace* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001): 51.

¹⁸ Liz Sly, “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine sparks global divide,” *The Washington Post*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/22/global-south-russia-war-divided/>.

conflict of its own making. From this perspective, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not unprovoked, although not thereby justified.

2. Cold War II

As the Cold Peace gave way to renewed confrontation, the protagonists themselves increasingly used the term. In an interview in April 2020 former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev warned that American threats turned competition into confrontation and a renewal of cold war.¹⁹ China was initially more reticent, believing the concept to be irremediably Eurocentric and historically short-sighted. In terms of ideological rivalry, China was 'anxious not to frame relations with the West as a new cold war', fearing that Soviet-style ideological expansionism could trigger a backlash.²⁰ Chinese scholars also opposed use of the term: first, because it misrepresented the current state of international politics; and second (although this was only intimated), because it reduced China to the status of the USSR, and even worse, it equated mighty China with struggling Russia. China refused to adopt what it considered a stale and anachronistic category that failed to capture the enormity of China's re-entry into world politics. Wang Jisi, the head of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, stressed the unprecedented character of the conflict. He insisted that the US and China were 'embroiled in a contest that might prove more enduring, more wide-ranging, and more intense than any other international competition in modern history, including the Cold War'.²¹ Such conflicts are as old as history, but the US and China are 'entering their own new Cold War', now increasingly recognised as such by both sides.²² As far as John Mearsheimer is concerned, the US committed a strategic blunder of the first order in facilitating China's rise for the half century from the 1970s. Now the two are locked 'in what can only be called a new Cold War – an intense security competition that touches on every dimension of their relationship'.²³

The narrative of Cold War II does indeed restore Russia to centrality in international affairs, giving perhaps rather too much credence to Moscow's claimed power and status in world politics. It also privileges European matters, and commensurately once again reduces the Global South to a peripheral area in which the struggles of the Atlantic powers are conducted. However, once it became clear to the Beijing leadership that the 'pivot to Asia' launched by President Barack Obama and later reinforced by trade and investment restrictions represented an enduring policy of long-term containment, the term became relevant for the Asian theatre as well. Chinese commentators reluctantly but necessarily embraced the concept.

This reveals an important characteristic of Cold War II. In the earlier conflict there was a stable confrontation between the two superpowers, although up to the mid-1950s France and Great Britain also retained pretensions to great power status. The Geneva meeting of July 1955, convened to find ways to enhance global security, was the last four-power summit. Thereafter, the US and the USSR met alone, while France and the UK joined Germany and Japan as 'legacy' great powers.

¹⁹ Dmitrii Medvedev, "Nevyuchennye uroki istorii", *RIA Novosti*, 23 April 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210423/diplomatiya-1729522868.html> (accessed 10 March 2023).

²⁰ Yan Xuetong, "Becoming Strong", 42.

²¹ Wang Jisi, "The Plot Against China? How China Sees the New Washington Consensus", *Foreign Affairs* 100, no 4 (July-Aug. 2021): 48.

²² As argued by Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History", *Foreign Affairs* 100, no 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2021): 10-20.

²³ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry", *Foreign Affairs* 100, no 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2021): 48-58, at p. 48.

A similar process has been at work in Cold War II. The European legacy powers sought to regulate the conflict in Ukraine from 2014, above all in the ‘Normandy format’ which brought together France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia to oversee the implementation of the Minsk-2 Accords of February 2015. By 2021, however, it was clear that this format had exhausted its potential and the focus shifted to bilateral talks between Washington and Moscow. This was accompanied by a strengthening triangular dynamic, with Beijing an enduring factor even when not directly involved. China ineluctably entered the ranks of the great powers. China moreover, unlike the USSR, is unlikely to pack up and go away, and will remain a complex protagonist. Globally it ranks third in terms of territory, first in population and second in nominal GDP. Despite having a troubled relationship with some regions (notably Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang), the country is unlikely to fragment in the manner of the Soviet Union. Taiwan is in a special category, since Beijing views it as no more than an estranged province lost when the defeated Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-shek retreated there in 1949. Beijing is committed to its reunification with the mainland.

The logic of the Cold War entailed domestic controls and repression. In the case of the USSR this proved fatal. Here again, a major difference between the USSR and China is that the former failed to adapt to the challenges of complex modernisation. The Khrushchev reforms in the 1950s removed the worst aspects of Stalinism, but failed to escape the ‘Leninist trap’ in which mechanical stability is imposed by self-reproducing political elites through bureaucratic means. This reduces the scope for organic stability achieved through the political management of societal contradictions and the relatively free play of competitive market forces. Technocratic political management allows long-term plans to be devised and fulfilled, but without elements of political pluralism this drifts into dogmatic authoritarianism. The Soviet Union was caught in a deepening Leninist trap in the Brezhnev years (1964-82), leading to the stagnation of the late 1970s. Mikhail Gorbachev tried to break out of this trap through his distinctive formulation of *reform communism* in the late 1980s, but under Putin the Leninist trap has been reproduced in the form of a Regime-state.²⁴ Gorbachev found an evolutionary path out, but the cost was high. His successors are intent on not repeating his mistakes, but thereby they also fail to reap his gains. China by contrast began its market reforms in 1978, under Deng Xiaoping, and thus created the novel political order of *communism of reform*, with the Party-state at the head of a market-type economy. Under Xi, however, the Leninist trap has once again tightened.

The instability and disintegration generated by reform communism still acts as a salutary warning to the Chinese leadership. The restoration of an authoritarian Russia has helped cement their relationship. At the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the July 2001 Friendship Treaty, the two sides argued that the relationship was ‘without limits’ and stronger than an alliance, propositions severely tested by the Ukraine war.

Both Russia and China are wary of establishing a bloc system of allies. As Richard Little notes, ‘A military alliance between China and Russia would not enhance their level of security or shift the balance of power in their favour’.²⁵ However, given the intensity of Western support for Ukraine, strategic planners in Beijing are increasingly concerned that Russia’s defeat would expose China to more a forceful assertion of power by the political West. They may therefore decide that enhanced support, including not only materiel but also some sort of defence guarantees, would be appropriate. Given China’s sheer economic power and authority, this would mean the full-scale return of a Cold War I-style bipolarity, although in diluted form. Most countries resent being forced to choose between Beijing and Washington,

²⁴ See Richard Sakwa, *The Putin Paradox* (London and New York, I. B. Tauris, 2020).

²⁵ Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007): 285.

yet none can escape the consequences of this confrontation. A Russia debilitated by sanctions may well be forced to cede leadership to Beijing. A weakened Russia may be a less useful ally, but China will surely seek to ensure that its border to the north remains in the hands of an ally. The strategic imperatives driving alignments will remain.

3. The Crisis of Liberal Hegemony

Cold War is back. Despite deeply entwined economies and increasingly connected societies, Europe in 1914 drifted into an almost unimaginable war.²⁶ In the interwar period, neither Nazi Germany nor imperial Japan were ready to abide by the rules of the international system of the time, and the rise of two revisionist powers once again led to war.²⁷ Today all sides claim allegiance to the rules of the international system created in 1945, but these competing claims to legitimacy have themselves become a ground for contestation. Cold War II has become a genuinely global cold war, with fronts in Asia, the Arctic, Africa, and the high seas, alongside a jagged ‘iron curtain’ in Europe.

The US remains overwhelmingly the predominant global power, and this is unlikely to change soon.²⁸ However, we are also witnessing an acceleration of the long-term relative decline of American power and of the ideational dominance of the political West. This is often described in terms of a crisis of ‘global order’, whereas in fact it is a crisis of its liberal sub-order. Patrick Porter notes that the language of ‘crisis’ is part of the defensive response to challenges to liberal hegemony. The language of crisis is used to invalidate critique of that order. Calls for ‘the reclamation of the old order’ thus represent an appeal ‘for the perpetuation of American primacy’.²⁹

In this tragic compromise between power and norms, diplomacy and effective statecraft have been sacrificed on the altar of expediency. The political West has proved itself less than adept at deploying both raw power and liberal values, leading to confusing trade-offs and ineffective policies. Stephen Walt describes the post-Cold War period as ‘filled with visible failures and devoid of major accomplishments’.³⁰ Primacy has allowed the US to ‘shape the world’, but it also gave rise to a paradox: ‘US primacy made an ambitious grand strategy possible, but it also made it less necessary’ [emphasis in original].³¹ The strategy of ‘liberal hegemony’ sought to spread ‘traditional liberal ideals of individual freedom, democratic governance, and a market-based economy’. Hegemony defined the US as the ‘indispensable nation’, ‘uniquely qualified to spread these political principles to other countries and to bring other states into a web of alliances and institutions designed and led by the United States’. However, says Walt, the outcome was a ‘dismal failure’ because the ‘strategy of liberal hegemony is fundamentally flawed’:

²⁶ For the earlier occasion, see Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London, Profile Books, 2014). The ‘unimaginable’ character of the conflict was outlined by Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (San Francisco, CA, Bottom of the Hill Publishing, [1910] 2012).

²⁷ For a classic study, see A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, Penguin, [1961] 1991).

²⁸ Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back from the World* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018)..

²⁹ Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020): 17.

³⁰ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019): 7.

³¹ Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 13.

Instead of building an ever-expanding zone of peace united by a shared commitment to liberal ideals, America's pursuit of liberal hegemony poisoned relations with Russia, led to costly quagmires in Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other countries, squandered trillions of dollars and thousands of lives, and encouraged both state and non-state actors to resist US efforts or to exploit them for their own benefit.³²

The lack of pragmatic balance in international politics was reproduced in domestic affairs. The emergence of social movements dissatisfied with neoliberal orthodoxy was reflected in the ballot box, including the Brexit vote of 26 June 2016. Often dismissed as populist challenges, Ernesto Laclau is right to note (drawing in particular on Latin American experience) that in conditions of political closure, populism becomes the vernacular in which innovative ideas can be articulated to challenge the failings of the ruling system.³³ Globalisation will continue, but now within a more heterogeneous international society. The question then becomes: how will the US and its allies respond?

The former US ambassador to the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick, urged the US to become a more 'normal' power at the end of the Cold War. She urged a greater focus on domestic concerns because 'a good society is defined not by its foreign policy but its internal qualities ... by the relations among its citizens, the kind of character nurtured, and the quality of life lived'.³⁴ Her argument prefigured some of Donald J. Trump's concerns, including his condemnation of the American 'deep state', but his revisionist instincts were stymied. Nevertheless, calls for 'restraint' in US foreign policy are voiced with increasing urgency.³⁵

The recalibration of US power became all the more urgent following the Trumpian disruption and the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not clear what a 'normal' US would look like, but it would include less emphasis on military power, greater multilateralism in the framework of the Charter international system, and a greater willingness to share responsibility not only with allies but also with potential adversaries. This is a cooperative version of sovereign internationalism. It does not mean abandoning a leadership role, as is appropriate for the world's leading power, but it would include dropping the messianic ambition to change the world in its image, less demonisation of opponents, and a greater commitment to forge coalitions of the willing (and even the unwilling) in order to deliver global public goods.

Should this occur the tension between US leadership and the autonomy of the international system would not disappear. Even within the liberal order the US was not always the leader, and the Trump disruption revealed that the US could become an outcast to the liberal international order that it created. The world saw a glimpse of a 'rogue America' whose power was exercised without responsibility. Elements of this scenario remain. The US was hesitant to embrace developments in human rights norms, with patchy membership in some UN human rights institutions accompanied by the repeated violation of the norms represented by those institutions. The George W. Bush administration refused to become a member of the UN Human Rights Council, one of the three foundational UN bodies (alongside the Security Council and General Assembly). The US is not a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights. The 'war on terror', meanwhile, devolved into

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, Verso, 2007).

³⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Normal Country in a Normal Time", *The National Interest*, Fall 1990. For her overall perspective see *Making War to Keep Peace* (New York, Regan Books, 2007).

³⁵ See, for example, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2014) and Michael O'Hanlon, *The Art of War in an Age of Peace: US Grand Strategy and Resolute Restraint* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2021).

‘extraordinary rendition’ and the use of ‘black sites’ in Eastern Europe, where ‘enhanced interrogation’ techniques were applied against suspects. While Washington’s relationship with the UNHRC has been patchy, it has been consistently hostile to the International Criminal Court (ICC).³⁶ It is one of only seven states that, in July 1998, voted against the Rome Statute setting up the Court. The US understandably fears politically motivated prosecutions, but so does the rest of the world.

In the Trump years the idea of democratic internationalism was marginalised, and longstanding reservations about the cosmopolitanism inherent in the international human rights regime came to the fore. Cosmopolitanism assumes equality and the absence of the perennial exceptions that make a mockery of human rights principles. Democratic internationalism is susceptible to the lure of double standards and the selective application of norms – in which allies are treated indulgently while adversaries are subjected to the full weight of recriminations and sanctions. Exceptionalism, however, is fundamental to America’s self-identity, hence its resistance to external constraints on its sovereignty and subordination to universal norms.³⁷ The US has positioned itself above the very cosmopolitanism that it considers its mission to advance elsewhere.

4. The Coming Power Shift

China and Russia challenge the pre-eminence of the political West, but is peaceful change possible? Examining the power dynamics at the beginning and end of the Cold War, Joshua Shiffrinson argues that dominant and rising powers can calibrate their relationship in a way that avoids war.³⁸ Power transition theories stress heightened security competition, but agree that international institutions can moderate the intensity of competition ‘by constraining the use of force, influencing threat perception, and promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts of interests’.³⁹ In other words, international politics does not occur in the pure vacuum of anarchy (as suggested by offensive realists) but is shaped and constrained by the international system – although no one suggests that multilateralism entirely trumps national power. Even then, any putative ‘power transition’ is far from linear and is affected by regional interactions and by the multiple dimensions of power. Even if China overtakes the US in the brute size of its GDP, it is unlikely to replace the US as an order-making leader or to enjoy what Joseph Nye calls its reserves of ‘soft power’. Others are more doubtful.

The apparent decline in the West’s capacity to sustain the liberal order globally is encapsulated by the notion of ‘Westlessness’. The idea was advanced soon after Trump’s election at the Munich Security Conference in 2017, where the main report described a ‘Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order’ world. This was also the theme of the Munich meeting of world leaders in 2020. From this perspective, the power shift is caused by there being not enough ‘West’ in the world, and by the West itself becoming less Western as its values are eroded by populist sentiments. Critics argue that the decline of the hegemonic West is no bad thing since its 500-year dominance was an era of colonialism, militarism, and war, while its defenders stress the openness and freedoms with which it was ultimately associated.

³⁶ “US threatens to arrest ICC judges if they pursue Americans for Afghan war crimes”, *Agence France Presse*, 10 September 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180910-usa-trump-threatens-arrest-icc-judges-american-soldiers-afghan-war-crimes>.

³⁷ Patrick Lawrence, “The state of exception”, *The Scrum*, 22 March 2023, <https://thescrum.substack.com/p/the-state-of-exception>.

³⁸ Joshua Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2018).

³⁹ Ross and Zhu (eds), *China’s Ascent*, 5.

The Cold War I term ‘superpower’ has been resurrected to describe the undoubted pre-eminence of the two leading countries. The scholar Yan Xuetong notes that the ‘present bipolarization is mainly attributable to the narrowed disparity in comprehensive capability between China and the United States’.⁴⁰ He denies that the revived bipolar configuration equates to a Cold War, although in practice it necessarily generates traditional Cold War patterns. On most indices of power, above all economic and military, the two have emerged as clear leaders. The US remains the pre-eminent military power, but the two are much closer economically, with the US leading in nominal terms, while China since 2014 has been ahead on comparative purchasing power measures. Bipolar systems of this kind are considered more stable and hence more peaceful than multipolar systems, ostensibly increasing ‘predictability and transparency in balancing’. Deterred by overwhelming US military power, it is assumed that balancing and competition will take place primarily in the economic sphere.⁴¹ This assumption proved mistaken. China’s military power and sophistication are growing fast, and its economic power is being translated into global political ambitions.⁴²

America’s undoubted pre-eminence during the Cold Peace nurtured the expansive ambitions of liberal hegemony. This undermined the autonomy of the international system and of alternative systems of governance. Russia never accepted what it considered the usurpation of the prerogatives of the UN-based Charter international system, but lacked order-enforcing capacity until China emerged as a powerful ally. Today only three power constellations retain effective rule-making capacities: the US, China and the EU, each with asymmetric repertoires of power. Russia’s place in this firmament remains uncertain and hinges on the outcome of its war with Ukraine. India is emerging as a major power but is hesitant to assert itself. Overall, there is no straightforward power transition but a series of complex global power shifts, including the rise of non-liberal order-making capacity. The latter does not necessarily entail full-scale revisionism but the conservative and status quo defence of the Charter international system. Neo-revisionist states emphasise the sovereign internationalism at the heart of the Charter system, but neglect the associated human rights agenda. The struggle over the interpretation of norms once again feeds Cold War hostilities.

The relative decline of the political West is extremely uneven and affects its various components differently. If the focus is on brute military power, then those who dismiss ‘declinist’ interpretations of America’s status are undoubtedly right.⁴³ The top line US military budget in 2021 was \$716 billion, more than the next dozen countries combined. To this could be added \$50 billion devoted to the CIA and Special Forces. In 2021 the Russian defence budget was \$65 billion and China’s \$183 billion, but in purchasing terms their spending power was much higher. Still, the Pentagon has for years argued that there is a ‘readiness crisis’ requiring a steady upward trajectory for the US defence budget.

How wisely this money has been spent is another matter. The F-35 was conceived as a fighter-bomber but it lacks agility in the air, and as of 2021 it still had 871 software and hardware deficiencies. This did not prevent the US from purchasing 93 that year at a cost of \$9.1 billion. In 2021 \$7.5 billion was devoted to the MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the US Navy received nine warships, including another Virginia-class submarine, and \$29 billion was earmarked for strategic nuclear forces. The US had 2.5 million personnel under

⁴⁰ Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of the Great Powers* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019): 82, 87.

⁴¹ Clifford Kupchan, “The New Bipolarity: Reason for Cautious Optimism”, *Valdai Discussion Club*, 21 October 2020, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-new-bipolarity-reason-for-cautious-optimism/> (accessed 10 March 2023).

⁴² As famously predicted by Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London, Verso, 2009).

⁴³ Joseph S. Nye, *Is the American Century Over?* (Cambridge, Polity, 2015).

arms, 1.5 million on active duty, and one million more in the Reserve and the National Guard. Meanwhile, China had 2.8 million active-duty troops, although 800,000 of them make up the Wu Jing domestic security force. Russia's army numbered 2.9 million, with 900,000 active duty and two million reservists, as well as the 340,000-strong Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya).

The US also has some 800 installations (not all of them are bases) in 70 countries with some 170,000 active-duty service personnel stationed overseas. Russia has 21 bases, mostly in former Soviet states such as Armenia, Belarus and Tajikistan, and air and naval bases in Syria where it was directly involved in the conflict. The largest Russian military formation outside the country is the 201st Military Base and Federal Guards Service in Tajikistan, which became important following the US withdrawal in August 2021 from neighbouring Afghanistan.

Russian plans to establish a seaport technical facility in Port Sudan encountered stiff American resistance. China has four overseas facilities – Djibouti and Tajikistan, and signals installations in Myanmar and Argentina. As a symbol of its power, the US has seven numbered operational aircraft battle fleets, five based in the US and one apiece in Japan and Italy. The 11 aircraft carriers are nuclear-powered and carry more planes than most national air forces. China has only two aircraft carriers, mostly deployed in coastal waters, but is adding a European-sized navy annually. Russia has just one oil-powered aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, which is mostly confined to its base in Murmansk for extensive repairs and refits. Its guided missile cruiser *Moskva*, the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, was sunk by Ukraine on 14 April 2022 using two R360 Neptune anti-ship missiles. The Global Firepower (GFP) annual defence review for 2021 ranked the US number one, with Russia in second place, followed by China, India, Japan and South Korea. The first European country (France) is ranked seventh followed by the UK and Brazil, with Pakistan making up the last of the top ten.⁴⁴ Russia's position may well decline in future reviews, given its relatively mediocre performance in the Ukraine war and heavy battlefield losses.

5. Correlation of Forces: Ineluctable or Reversible?

Is the correlation of forces ineluctably tilting away from the political West? The notion is a Soviet term for the changing balance in global power, measured not only in military terms but also in the attractiveness of the respective social model. Based on a Marxist materialist and ideological logic, the Soviet Union believed that the tide of history had inexorably turned in its favour during the 1970s, only to find itself beached less than two decades later, when the current flowed sharply the other way.

Recent shifts in international politics reflect deeper changes in the global balance of power. There is a slow but sure structural shift of economic power from the Atlantic to the Pacific basin. Over half the world's population is concentrated in the latter, and Asia already accounts for 38 per cent of global GDP and a third of world trade. In the 1970s the G7 countries represented 80 per cent of global GDP. By 2020 this had fallen to less than 40 per cent.⁴⁵ In particular, China's return as one of the world's top economic powers cannot but change the structure of global power. In 2014 China overtook US GDP in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, and forecasts suggest that it will match the US at par by 2028. If India resumes its pre-pandemic trajectory, it will assume third place in comparative terms in the early 2020s.

China is now the only potential peer competitor to American hegemony, and for that reason many predict a collision with the United States. The US will do everything in its power

⁴⁴ "2021 Military Strength Ranking", <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp> (accessed 10 March 2023).

⁴⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics>, 7 April 2021 (accessed 10 March 2023).

to contain China's rise, while China will push back against the US in the South China Sea and elsewhere.⁴⁶ This scenario is predicated on the continued relative decline in US economic power. In 1945 the US comprised at least 40 per cent of global GDP, whereas today it has less than 20 per cent. Persistent US federal budget deficits, exceeding \$1 trillion per year since 2010, and a gargantuan national debt of \$31 trillion are contrasted with the enormous surpluses generated by the economies of East Asia. This is compounded by governance deficits in the US, compared with the efficacy of some East Asian states, as demonstrated in their respective responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. China's zero-Covid policy, however, proved unsustainable, precipitating widespread protests in late 2022, followed by a sharp reversal accompanied by mass infections and deaths. The chaotic manner in which Beijing abandoned its zero-Covid policy shook public confidence in the leadership of the Communist Party of China.

So, while a major shift in global power is undoubtedly taking place, it is not a linear power transition of the sort described in the international relations literature by Robert Gilpin, Paul Kennedy and William Wohlforth. They posit a close connection between models of international order and the rise and fall of great powers.⁴⁷ For these hegemonic realists, order is created by powerful states, and when a state declines so does the order that it cultivated. For Gilpin, war was the traditional mechanism used to resolve 'the disequilibrium between the structure of the international system and the redistribution of power'.⁴⁸ But this is not always the case—the US smoothly took over the role of global leader from Great Britain in the 1940s.

Rather than an outright transition from one system to another, an adjustment is underway in the top rank of global powers. The issue is whether status quo powers have the will to make reasonable accommodations to it; and whether challenger states can shape their demands in a way that can facilitate peaceful change.

This adjustment is taking place in the context of the continuing tension between the two facets of US power: hegemony over an international system that it did so much to create; and primacy at the head of a liberal international order. The former can be managed by consensual leadership and moral example (facilitated by the US putting its own house in order); while the latter means maintaining NATO and creating ad hoc coalitions such as the putative Alliance for Democracy.

The survival of Atlantic bloc politics well into the twenty-first century has been one of the more surprising features of contemporary international politics. Forged in the crucible of Cold War I, the retention of the US alliance system in Europe reproduced the original conflict in the form of Cold War II. Although specific features differ, the Euro-Atlantic security system acts as a political force multiplier for the US and absolves European powers of responsibility for their own security. In 2017 only four NATO states met the two per cent of GDP requirement for military spending, though in 2022 that number rose to seven.⁴⁹

This system has constrained moves towards 'strategic autonomy' for European institutions as a whole, while preventing European legacy powers from acting independently – hence their 'legacy' status. One of the biggest questions of our century, therefore, is whether

⁴⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition (New York, W. W. Norton, [2014] 2001). The new final chapter describes the inevitable conflict: 360-411.

⁴⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 and 2000* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1988); William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", *International Security* 24, No. 1 (1999): 5-41.

⁴⁸ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 197.

⁴⁹ Tyler Durden, "Only 7 Out Of 30 NATO Members Hit 2% GDP Defense Spending Target In 2022", *ZeroHedge*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.zerohedge.com/geopolitical/only-7-out-30-nato-members-hit-2-gdp-defense-spending-target-2022> (accessed 24 March 2023).

the Cold War-style Euro-Atlantic community will dissolve. For its supporters, the Russo-Ukrainian war has reinforced NATO's continued relevance, accentuated by plans for a 'global NATO' extending its remit to cover the Asia-Pacific region. For critics, its underlying rationale needs to be questioned, as part of a debate over responsibility for generating the security dilemma that led to war in Europe.