

When Unipolarity Dies: The Russo-Ukrainian War, the End of the Neoliberal Order and Asian Security in the 2020s

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for a period of US-centered unipolarity in global affairs. This period has ended; it will not return. Moreover, the delicate neoliberal world order crafted by the United States and its allies is collapsing, unable to endure the stress of the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath. The rise of China does not, however, mean that the world is returning to a long period of bipolarity -- reminiscent of the US-Soviet Cold War. Rather, the United States and China simply happen to be far greater than any of their potential competitors at present—the globe is in a condition of “incomplete multi-polarity.” The multipolar system is maturing rapidly, however, and it is to be expected that an increasing number of great and medium powers will pursue their interests unilaterally and assertively. This period of deepening multi-polarity is dangerous. It may plausibly culminate in a Third World War. This analysis examines immediate and longer-term dangers accompanying the new multi-polarity, with particular emphasis on how the security of East and South Asia is inextricably linked.

Keywords: US, China, Transition, Incomplete Multi-Polarity, Security, Global Dominance.

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Introduction

The decline and fall of the Soviet Union led to an era unlike any in human history, at least in one key aspect. For millennia, polities had grappled for power, yet true global dominance was a prize denied even to Alexander the Great. The demise of the Soviet Union, however, allowed the United States, for a brief time, to become the most powerful state in human history. Washington had no peer or near-peer competitor to contest its position as an indisputable global hegemon or quasi-hegemon with an unrivaled military and financial power.

American strategic assets—combined with a fair bit of good fortune, such as the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev, rather than a more hawkish and obstinate figure, oversaw the Soviet Union’s disintegration—allowing for a relatively smooth transition from a bipolar to a unipolar world. That happy set of circumstances were coincidental. Even very small differences in the personalities and behaviour of key European, American, and especially Soviet policymakers might have resulted in radically different outcomes.¹ Good fortune, nevertheless, fed hubristic beliefs in the inevitable triumph of democracy and good governance — which, in turn, made it easier for the US leadership to ignore the obvious decay in their country’s foreign policy.

The United States remains a superpower and, overall, the most influential individual state, but it cannot claim global hegemony. The Post-Cold War neoliberal global order has disintegrated, and there is no quasi-hegemon. This was demonstrated in the months following the COVID-19 outbreak; when faced with an extraordinary “stress test,” the neoliberal world order that Washington had crafted simply collapsed on itself. Major countries around the world acted ruthlessly in their own national interests, with little concern over US reaction. (Many Americans blame this absence of deference almost entirely on the leadership of the then US President

¹ On Gorbachev’s political decision making in the years leading up to the USSR’s dissolution: Vladislav M. Zubok, “*Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*”, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

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Donald Trump. The latter's flaws are legion but are not entirely responsible for the decline of the American foreign policy e.g., the Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and *de facto* ruler Muhammed Bin Salman recently spurned President Biden's attempt to woo the desert kingdom for their oil).² The unipolar world is dead, regardless of whether that reality is acknowledged by Washington or not. The longer the US government denies this reality, the more likely it will make a calamitous miscalculation in its dealings with other great powers.

Today's multi-polarity is deeply unstable, although it is possible to imagine that given sound statecraft and time, a reasonably stable and peaceful global order will emerge. In the interim period, the global security environment is deeply disordered, with rising and declining powers jockeying for positions in a multipolar world. Unless and until a coherent multipolar order solidifies, the general level of risk in the international environment will remain high. The decade of the 2020s will be full of hazards, not least in Asia.

Uni-polarity Fades Away

The unipolar world was predestined to be short-lived, and even as a supposedly robust neoliberal order was coming into being, many of its key flaws were evident. The United States of the 1990s and early 2000s was confident, but entirely lacking in strategic nuance, treating sanctions, air bombardment, and similar measures as substitutes for a meaningful grand strategy. Concurrently, numerous major liberal states, including Japan and most European countries, mainly devoted themselves to their own economic interests, with trade and similar matters generally taking precedence over longer-term concerns about how they might ensure the sustainability of the neoliberal system.

² Clifford Krauss, "Ostracized by the West, Russia Finds a Partner in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, September 14, 2022, accessed September 26, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/business/energy-environment/russia-saudi-oil-putin-mbs.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

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In the decades between the Soviet collapse and COVID-19, maintenance of the neoliberal system essentially was seen as an American problem—an understandable, however regrettable, response to Washington’s disproportionate global power. The United States would bear most of the military costs of maintaining the neoliberal system, but in exchange, it was supposed to craft an order that would reorient human history. Washington failed in this endeavour because no single power can permanently dominate global politics. The illusion of near omnipotence was devastating to US foreign policy judgment.

As time passed, American efforts to manage the global system became increasingly difficult. Washington lost the desire, if not the ability, to understand that both friends and foes had legitimate national interests requiring some degree of accommodation. Allies often were treated high-handedly and expected to assist US endeavours, but undesired friendly advice was waved away as Washington stumbled from one misadventure to the other. Some of the relatively modest imbroglios of the 1990s, such as bungled US interventions in Somalia and Haiti, probably did little permanent harm to Washington’s global standing but were subtly telling: global policing is a difficult business.³ More significantly, US interventions in the Balkans and NATO expansion efforts deeply alienated Moscow, thoroughly poisoning a promising, but an inherently fragile relationship. Worse yet, in the 21st century Washington undertook two ruinous Asian land wars. Having failed to learn the hard lessons of Vietnam, Washington again engaged in military-dominated nation-building efforts geographically distant from areas of core strategic interest to the United States, and it paid a ruinous price for its foolhardiness.

Given changes in the global energy market resulting from advances in drilling and related technologies, by 2003, even Iraq was relatively marginal to US interests. Saddam Hussein’s regime had been contained,

³ The myriad challenges faced by that the United States as it attempted to impose a global order were explored contemporaneously in Colin S. Gray, *The Sherriff: America’s Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

and the world was not heavily reliant on the flow of Iraqi oil, the export of which had been minimized by a severe sanctions regime. Strategically speaking, the preceding occupation of Afghanistan was an even more questionable endeavour. Aside from the fact that Osama Bin Laden and many of his associates were operating there, Afghanistan was of negligible strategic significance to the United States. This did not stop the United States from squandering trillions of dollars over two decades, fighting to create a stable, US-allied government—and then abandoning the effort and simply walking away.⁴ Together, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars exhausted the United States, draining life out of the unipolar order and encouraging China to press forward in seeking to displace the United States as the preeminent global power.

Wandering into Confrontation

Contrary to the fears of many Russian policymakers, and the hopes of many Ukrainians in general, the United States government gave relatively little thought to Ukraine in the years following the Soviet split.⁵ The US policy-makers tended to focus on big, often fuzzy, goals for everything ranging from economic reforms to democratization, to military modernization, pursued by a distracted and globally overcommitted Western Hemisphere superpower. Many Ukrainian officials, on the other hand, clearly had a greater interest in channeling foreign aid to their offshore accounts than in fundamentally transforming their country. This

⁴ For a short reflection on the early years of US failure in Afghanistan, see C. Dale Walton, “The Futile Decade: The US Failure in Afghanistan and Its Lessons,” *Military Strategy Magazine* (formerly *Infinity Journal*) vol. 2, issue 1, October 2012, accessed September 13, 2022, at <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/the-futile-decade-the-us-failure-in-afghanistan-and-its-lessons/>.

⁵ Since its publication in the latter 1990s, many observers have claimed that US intentions regarding Ukraine were revealed in Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 2016; originally published 1997). Brzezinski, a Polish-American who served as the national security adviser in the Carter Administration, certainly had a keen appreciation of Ukraine’s importance to Russia, and he was a prestigious figure in the US foreign policy community. However, the notion that his book provides the blueprint for a secret US foreign policy, hidden in plain sight, is fanciful.

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apparent impasse continued for years; intriguingly, though. Kyiv, nonetheless, managed to improve its capacity for armed self-defense to a degree that eventually shocked its American and European friends as well as its Russian foes.

Washington's limited attention and commitment of resources to Ukraine before 2022 was the characteristic of its diplomacy in East-Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. US policymakers tended to act without sensitivity to Russia's security concerns,⁶ even reasonable ones such as the fear of NATO further expanding its already large border with Russia. Washington was not, however, engaged in a carefully considered campaign to comprehensively enfeeble a rival great power. Its behaviour could be best described as a form of strategic malpractice; regardless of what they might claim. Top US leaders displayed little interest in understanding Russia's perspective and did not carefully and continuously calibrate their policy in response to it. Moscow was treated as a nuisance that could be ignored, publicly belittled,⁷ or sanctioned, as the United States thought fit. Russian observers were convinced that the US government had both unlimited malice and great competence in crafting long-term stratagems to crush its foes, but also saw a combination of arrogance and intellectual laziness as a more plausible explanation for American behaviour in the years leading up to 2022.

The Russian elite was increasingly certain that the United States was uninterested in any real dialogue—a striking contrast to the Cold War when Washington repeatedly proved a willingness to make serious compromises on nuclear arms control and other critical matters. Even long before 2022, the notion that dialogue is pointless, if not dangerous, encouraged a conviction within Russia that it must be ready and able to

⁶ George Beebe, "The Russia Trap: How Our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral Into Nuclear Catastrophe", (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2019).

⁷ Madeline Conway, "Obama Dismisses Russia as a 'Weaker Country,'" *Politico*, December 16, 2016, accessed September 26, 2022, at <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/obama-russia-weaker-country-232759>.

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fight a prolonged war for survival.⁸ In short, it appears that many Russian thinkers assumed that the Americans and their European allies were so ardently Russo-phobic that, regardless of circumstances, they will never abandon their efforts to undermine and harm Moscow.

Despite years of obvious signposts warning of an eventual major crisis, the United States and most other Western governments did not re-engineer their foreign policy towards Russia. Aside from gimmicks such as the Obama administration's "Russia reset" policy, the slow march towards disaster simply continued. By the time Russia undertook its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, most Western commentators, including high-level government officials, were flummoxed by the undertaking. Having never seriously considered Moscow's perspective, they were unable to provide analysis more sophisticated than clichés about Russian paranoia and (admittedly well-deserved) criticism of President Putin's moral character.

It would be a great relief if American (and broader Western) misreading of Russia's security concerns and intentions was a unique case of cultural obtuseness inapplicable to other great power relationships. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The slow disintegration of uni-polarity did not bring forth a renaissance in diplomacy and a prudent recrafting of the world order. Instead, conditions are increasingly conducive to a disastrous misunderstanding and tragedy. Countries are rising and declining at a dizzying pace, while technology, particularly social media, has politically mobilized hundreds of millions throughout the planet, many of them eager to respond with violence to perceived insults and outrages against their country. Such an extraordinarily combustible combination of factors threatens tragedy on a horrifying scale.

⁸ Andrew Monaghan, *Preparing for War? Moscow Facing an Arc of Crisis*, Letort Papers series (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College/Strategic Studies Institute, December 2016), accessed September 26, 2022, at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1024160.pdf>.

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A Distant War and a Developing Crisis in South Asia

Perhaps the greatest virtue of uni-polarity was the degree to which it sternly discouraged conflict amongst most states. There was a great deal of brutal violence during the late 20th and early 21st century, but it was mostly concentrated within failed and semi-failed states. Indeed, much of the global strategic discussion during this period focused on finding solutions to the “failed state problem” and preventing a cascade of state failures.⁹

State failure remains a major security threat, indeed. Given food and energy shortages and price spikes related to the war in Ukraine, it may be an especially acute one in the coming months. At the time of writing, there is every indication that, at minimum, late 2022 and 2023 will be a harshly difficult period for hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest people. This, in turn, has potentially massive implications for peace and security—a prolonged period of extreme food and energy prices could be a catalyst for violent disorder, even revolution, in many countries.¹⁰

Russia’s bungled attempt to undertake a quick, low-cost military operation, presumably to impose regime change in Kyiv and alter borders, effectively ensured an international food crisis. Prolonged warfare and related sanctions regimes, as well as natural disasters such as severe flooding in Pakistan and drought in China and the United States, are placing intense pressure on the global food supply. The ultimate severity of this food crisis presently cannot be known – certainly. However, there is an acute short-term threat of massive disorder and tragedy.

⁹ For a particularly influential Clinton Administration-era analysis focused on failed and semi-failed states see Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic* (February 1994), accessed September 13, 2022, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>.

¹⁰ An extremely impressive analysis of how economic inequality and temporary crisis can result in violent political change is offered in Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

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The unfolding world food and energy emergency will not be resolved quickly. At the minimum, food prices will likely remain elevated for well more than a year, and the crisis may extend to several years. That is a deeply worrying prospect; prolonged food crises encourage socio-political disorder, creating a spiral of worsening conditions and an environment ripe for both domestic and international violence.

Even before the invasion of February 2022, the world had endured well over two years of fear and disruptions related to COVID-19. Moreover, the pandemic was the first major multilayered global crisis during which a substantial proportion of humanity owned smartphones, allowing citizens to constantly reinforce their anxiety via facts, rumours, and updated reminders of their helplessness in the face of forces (both natural and institutional) outside their control. Furthermore, societies divided sharply over issues such as lockdowns and masking, resulting in deep, and perhaps lasting, cleavages within polities. How this psychologically traumatic mass experience might impact the future behaviour of states is uncertain. Nonetheless, a long period of social repair and relative political stability is obviously needed throughout the world but is nowhere in sight.

It is not possible to predict precisely how the current food and energy crisis will develop in the coming months. The crisis is a terrifyingly enormous example of what the late Donald Rumsfeld characterized as a “known unknown.” It is not difficult to imagine nightmarish developments in South Asia: large-scale famine conditions, inter-communal violence, and even interstate warfare. None of these outcomes should be taken as preordained, however; individuals, certainly including the leaders of states, make choices that impact how history unfolds. Prudent governance and a bit of good fortune could prevent near-term disasters. Successful navigation of the current crisis would not, however, alter the deeper geopolitical factors, virtually ensuring that the remainder of the 2020s is a decade of intense rivalries amongst numerous great and medium powers throughout Asia.

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The Long Game: Multi-polarity in Asia

Like two potent acids, COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian War have eroded great power cooperation rapidly and profoundly. The United States had poor relationships with both Russia and China even before COVID-19, and those connections have now degenerated further—in the Russo-American case, so dramatically that the powers are poised on the edge of direct violence against each other. At the same time, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has proven to be increasingly bold in pressuring and threatening Taiwan.

Beijing is intentionally opaque about its future intentions concerning Taiwan, but many warn that a PRC assault on Taiwan could happen unexpectedly.¹¹ It is not difficult to see how a PRC-Taiwan conflict could immediately draw in the United States,¹² and, quite possibly, other states. In short, an attempt to invade Taiwan would be a plausible catalyst for a Third World War. The United States is at the center of the most extravagant web of international relationships in existence, and many of its longstanding allies—including substantial powers such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea—are deeply suspicious of Beijing.¹³ Moreover, the United States is deepening its relationship with India, whose border with China is disputed—and the site of repeated lethal skirmishes in recent years. Existing US relationships should not, however, be expected to provide reliable guidance as to how individual states would act in an

¹¹ Oriana Skylar Mastro, “The Taiwan Temptation,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 100, no. 4, July/August 2021, accessed September 27, 2022, at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation>.

¹² This is especially true in light of Pres. Biden’s repeated indications that the United States would fight to defend Taiwan in the event of an invasion. However, the US stance on Taiwan still retains a degree of ambiguity. See David E. Sanger, “Biden Said the U.S. Would Protect Taiwan. But It’s Not that Clear Cut,” *New York Times* online ed., October 22, 2021, accessed October 3, 2022, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/us/politics/biden-taiwan-defense-china.html>.

¹³ On the US alliance network in Asia, particularly as it concerns nuclear matters, see Stephan Frühling and Andrew O’Neil, eds., *Alliance, Nuclear Weapons and Escalation: Managing Deterrence in the 21st Century* (Acton, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2021)

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actual standoff, as unique circumstances give each crisis its own form and logic. Thus, the shape of a future confrontation—its origin, character, and apparent trajectory—would surely influence the actions of powers in Asia and beyond.

It is difficult to gauge what risks Beijing would knowingly accept in exchange for an opportunity to solve its “Taiwan Question.” This is by design; in general, states tend to be secretive and place a high value on their freedom of action in foreign policy, but the Chinese Communist Party has an especially pronounced preference for discretion and strategic autonomy. No great power today is better than China at hiding its planning and intentions. Skillful masking of intent, however, could backfire catastrophically: if observers cannot be confident of Beijing’s ultimate objectives, they might plausibly assume that it has deeply revisionist goals and a willingness to engage in any violent confrontations necessary to achieve them. Thus, even if China planned only to conquer Taiwan and intended to immediately pivot toward repairing relations with other powers, the latter could not trust that its objectives were truly and permanently restricted to PRC-Taiwan unification.

Even if China’s neighbours felt reasonably confident that its immediate goals were limited, the conquest of a democracy with a population of over twenty million and one of the world’s two dozen largest economies would be a bitter precedent, especially for democratic states such as Japan and South Korea. Moreover, it would not be unreasonable for these neighbours to fear that a successful conquest of Taiwan would whet Beijing’s appetite for military adventures in the more distant future. (After all, generally, states tend to continue patterns of behaviour that they believe were profitable in the past). Conversely, if the United States did not leap to defend Taiwan, its inaction might critically undermine other countries’ trust in its security guarantees. Faith in Washington’s assurances has been surely and deeply eroded by US failures in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and -- more distantly in time but still relevant, especially in Asia -- Vietnam.

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As the threat to Taiwan has appeared to grow more intense, the island's *de facto* independence has become an increasing focus of international attention. In the medium-term future, it is likely that numerous countries which have, insofar as possible, avoided involvement in PRC-Taiwan affairs will feel compelled by events to definitively "pick a side." This has significant implications for the politics of both South and Southeast Asia, as countries slowly line up into two opposing blocs, a circumstance that sounds reminiscent of the Cold War but would be more akin structurally to the European security environment in the years leading up to the First World War.

The First World War brought about a degraded multi-polarity, with a shell of a world order built largely on hopes and expectations—most critically, that frantically building international institutions and negotiating arms control treaties would ensure long-term peace. This obviously failed, and the Second World War demolished the rotten multipolar structure; by the time the conflict ended, only two states remained capable of exercising a superpower role. The British and French Empires remained impressive enough on paper to secure permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seats for London and Paris, but these doomed enterprises already were coming unglued as the global conflict was ongoing. The fifth permanent UNSC member, China, had been utterly ravaged by civil war and occupation; American-sponsored diplomatic efforts ensured US ally Chiang Kai-Shek's Republic of China a seat which, ironically, eventually ended up in the hands of the PRC.

Today, the major cities of the world's great and medium powers are not smoking ruins—quite the opposite, most are far more populous and prosperous than at any time before the recent past. Various giants and near-giants—including Brazil, Indonesia, and Japan, amongst others—currently wield only a fraction of the international influence of which they are theoretically capable. Additionally, there is a rich ecosystem of medium powers, some of which are amongst the world's most affluent and technologically advanced states. The world of the 2020 is troubled though, it remains unlike that of the mid-1940s. The United States does

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not enjoy unassailable global economic dominance, and Chinese army is not standing in the ruins of enemy cities. Washington and Beijing are the two greatest countries globally. It is even accurate to describe them as superpowers, as they possess greater military and economic power than any other major countries. Their predominance is not, however, certain even to last for the rest of this decade.

Thanks to its previous decades of momentum, the United States should continue to be economically and militarily powerful, but its domestic politics have undermined America's ability to act effectively in its interests. In the absence of significant recalibration of US politics and a healing of internal divisions within the United States, Washington's readiness to treat international affairs as mere extensions of its domestic culture war will grow. Issues that traditionally were seen as peripheral to national security, such as debates over LBGT+ rights and abortion, exert an increasingly significant influence over US foreign policy, and this trend has accelerated in recent years. The internationalization of domestic struggle is potentially dangerous not just for Americans, but for the global security environment in general. The world's most militarily powerful state is engaged in a powerful cycle of an internal culture war, and its foreign policy has been and will be shaped by that struggle in unpredictable ways.

Beijing is on even more uncertain ground. China's progress in recent decades resulted from uniquely favourable conditions which are irreversibly decaying. The Chinese citizenry is aging rapidly, and the economic tailwind provided by a disproportionately young population is reversing direction. More immediately, China will have to cope with, amongst other troubles: the deflation of the greatest property bubble in human history; economic damage inflicted by strict COVID-19 lockdowns; the flight of foreign capital in response to China's human rights record and other concerns; and massive environmental damage and shortages of fresh water. Facing such challenges, China may be tempted to act recklessly in foreign affairs, in the hope of securing geostrategic gains before conditions become even more insalubrious—an instinct not

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dissimilar to the mix of arrogance and fear that drove Europe to war in the early twentieth century.

The role that South Asia will play in the struggle between the United States and China is as yet uncertain, though it is clear that it will be a major one. The decisions that New Delhi and Islamabad make will be especially critical. India is clearly reluctant to compromise its strategic autonomy by forming a close alliance relationship with the United States, but the logic of its strategic position nonetheless may draw it into one. Both countries are members of the Quad Security Dialogue, an initially amorphous security entity that increasingly has the characteristics of a nascent alliance. Given India's acrimonious relationship with China, including periodic border clashes, it is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which New Delhi might decisively shift towards Washington. It would do so as a great power with a wide variety of assets, including substantial naval capabilities, and what will soon be the world's largest population. India, in short, faces enormous challenges but also has massive negotiating leverage when dealing with American, Japanese, and other partners. Indeed, India's refusal to cooperate with many of the West's sanctions on Russian energy supplies demonstrates its ability to take actions that anger Western partners in some areas even while it cooperates closely in others.

Islamabad also brings many strategic assets to the table, including nuclear arms, but the end of the US war in Afghanistan, Pakistan's domestic political turbulence, and similar factors have conspired to undermine its leverage in key respects. Like India, and many other countries, it is presently focused on immediate issues. Over the longer term, however, it is likely that Pakistan will move closer to China. Islamabad's relationship with the United States has been troubled for decades, and, absent some extraordinary change in global conditions, it is unlikely that it will return to a healthy condition. Yet Pakistan understandably feels that it requires a partner with sufficient "weight" to counterbalance India, and China is the only state available that could fill this role. The Russo-Ukrainian War

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likely, albeit indirectly, will accelerate the deepening of the Sino-Pakistani *de facto* alliance.

As with the Indo-American relationship, however, the depth of future cooperation is uncertain. Thus far, China essentially has been unwilling to provide meaningful security guarantees to friendly states. Beijing has (likely wisely) been reluctant to build out an alliance network comparable to that of the United States, which would limit its freedom of action and possibly obligate it to fight in unchosen conflicts. As China's confrontation with the United States and its allies develops, it probably will come to regard this stance as untenable. China that moved toward formalizing alliances would likely find numerous willing partners.

There has been a considerable degree of speculation regarding the future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, it is unlikely that this forum will serve as the basis for a formal alliance, at least if it retains its current membership. The SCO includes India, for example. There has been a useful diplomatic instrument for China, but it is probable that any "NATO-similar" alliance would be a new entity with its own legal personality.

If the Eastern Eurasian "megaregion" continues its trend towards the consolidation of two mutually antagonistic blocs, it will become, like Europe in the 1910s as a powder keg surrounded by open flames. Multipolarity is a reality, yet a global alliance structure consisting of two blocs is not inevitable. It is, in fact, the geopolitical path of least resistance. It is perfectly understandable for states to be concerned for their security, and the current "incomplete multi-polarity," a world that isn't bipolar but in which two powers are considerably more powerful than any of their contemporaries, invites the creation of a dangerous security architecture, which, in turn, could result in horrific disaster.

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Conclusion: The Knife's Edge

In retrospect, the three decades preceding the COVID pandemic were wasted. Western governments had at least a theoretical opportunity to effect positive change on a global scale. The plausibility of nuclear annihilation might have been reduced radically, although complete elimination of these devices (“global zero”) was not a plausible outcome. Global environmental issues could have been grappled far more effectively. Serious discussions of the costs and tradeoffs of various courses of action would have been more productive instead of mere unrolling of an endless parade of essentially symbolic efforts, such as toothless climate agreements. A global community that had serious discussions about a future of ever-safer and more-affordable nuclear power technologies, mining of the minerals critical to any “green revolution,” the health of oceans and soil, and similar matters thirty years ago, humanity might have enjoyed a much less tragic twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, the leaders of the Post-Cold War world of 1991-2020 failed to craft a radically better future. Instead, they cobbled together a cheapjack neoliberal order, supposedly durable but actually optimized for short-term political and economic convenience, which is falling apart. There is no readily available and desirable replacement, and it is not realistically repairable, though prudent as-needed temporary “fixes” may prevent it from collapsing catastrophically. The twilight of a world order, however flawed and incomplete, brings forth many evils—political disorder presents endless opportunities for breakdown within states and violence amongst them.¹⁴

In the 1930s and 1940s, aggressively revisionist great powers plausibly presented the greatest threat to the survival of democracy globally. The world, fortunately, does not face such a stark threat today. Indeed, even

¹⁴ C. Dale Walton, “The Geopolitics of Ideology: Intellectual Tumult and the Slow Demise of a World Order,” *The Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses* vol. 5, no. 2 (Winter 2019), pp. 78-100, accessed September 29, 2022, at: <https://thesvi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/JSSA-Vol-V-No.-2-87-109.pdf>.

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has backfired spectacularly—a fact that hopefully will give other would-be aggressors a pause. To simply apply a mid-twentieth century framework to the problems of the mid-twenty-first century would be dangerously inappropriate. The technological, social, and economic environment is simply too different to allow for precise parallels.

The past does, however, offer clear warnings about the dangers of extreme solutions to difficult problems. In capitals throughout the world, there will be a continuing temptation to (supposedly) protect national security via a continuous ratcheting-up of military capabilities and rhetoric. Under conditions in which billions of people have access to constant information and misinformation, and thus potentially are politically mobilized by irresponsible or belligerent leaders that would be extraordinarily dangerous. At the same time, though, interstate military aggression must not again become an accepted fact of international life—and it is perfectly natural for states to band together in alliances. There is a need for circumspection, empathy, and caution—qualities which have been in short supply in recent years. Unless major states again learn how to cultivate them, the 2020s could prove to be a very grim decade, indeed. When major powers hold knives at each other's throats, miscalculations are easy to make but sometimes impossible to correct. ■