



Introduction

The Myth of Bipolarity: How to Understand Strategic Competition in a Globalized World

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Abstract: The aim of this *Connections* issue is to explore the various aspects and implications of strategic competition in a globalized world. International politics will not be shaped solely by the two superpowers, the United States and China, struggling for dominance in different world regions. Several other states and groups of states will also influence the outcome of this competition. Considering a more complex constellation of actors opens up new perspectives on the political and economic challenges ahead and facilitates the exploration of approaches to bridge gaps with non-aligned countries.

The issue begins by examining the most important actors in international politics and then concentrates on the different world regions relevant to strategic competition. Finally, it explores cross-cutting trends and topics that will significantly influence the global outcome of this competition. As a result, it offers key takeaways: The Political West would be wise to recognize the perceptions and needs of nonaligned countries in the context of strategic competition. In this regard, China and Russia are perceived as adversaries of the West. Their narratives resonate strongly in many countries in the Global South. The Political West must regain the initiative and actively promote its competitive advantage. India holds critical importance in this context. Supporting the development of an additional pole in South Asia and fostering the rules-based liberal world order could help contain bilateral conflicts and reduce tensions at both global and regional levels.

Keywords: strategic competition, great powers, rivalry, international system, world order, Cold war, globalization, great power competition.

Introduction

The world is entering a new age of strategic competition between major powers. Anti-Western and nondemocratic actors challenge the rules-based liberal world order that emerged after 1990. While it is clear that the international system is undergoing a fundamental transformation, the ultimate direction of this change remains uncertain. Many observers, particularly in North America, China, and Europe, perceive this emerging order primarily as a bipolar rivalry between China and the United States.¹ Sino-American antagonism is undoubtedly a key driver of the ongoing structural changes. However, this view is contested in Russia and other parts of the world. Many observers from countries in the Global South, as well as some from the Political West,² reject the assessment that the international system is moving towards bipolarity. They instead argue that a multipolar order is emerging.³ The issue at hand goes beyond a mere debate over terminology. In fact, the critical question is whether the two superpowers will ultimately be decisive in determining the outcome of this strategic competition or whether other states and groups of states will also play a significant role in shaping its course.

Against this background, this issue of *Connections* adopts a broad view of the evolving international system. Three sections will provide:

1. an analysis of five key players – the United States, China, Russia, India, and the European Union (EU)
2. an exploration of selected regions that play a significant role in this context
3. an examination of overarching topics likely to shape the future evolution of strategic competition.

As a result, this issue not only focuses on the major powers and their actions in key areas of competition but also explores the internal dynamics of various regions, integrating the perspectives and interests of regional actors. Finally, it addresses cross-cutting trends and topics that will significantly influence the outcome of strategic competition on a global scale.

¹ Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 333–356, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.

² Political West and Political East as well as Global North and Global South are terms to describe a grouping of countries with regard to political and socio-economic aspects. The term Political West is not limited to culturally like-minded “occidental” nations but refers to politically aligned countries including the member states of NATO and EU, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

³ A themed journey through parts of this debate is provided for example in “Is There Really a Cold War 2.0? Inside the Debate on How to Think about the U.S.-China Rivalry,” *Flash Points, Foreign Policy*, June 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/11/new-cold-war-2-us-china-russia-geopolitics/>.

Before examining some of the leading players, it is important to clarify the evolving structures and context of *strategic competition*. Although strategic competition has become a defining feature of the changing global landscape, the term and its underlying concepts remain complex and contested in academic and policy debates. Unlike great power competition, strategic competition involves more than just peer competitors. It also includes strategically important regional powers and transnational actors. This form of competition blurs the line between peace and war, unfolding across a spectrum that ranges from cooperation to competition and, at times, to conflicts of varying intensities. It employs national power, including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools. Additionally, transnational threats and challenges—such as terrorism, organized crime, and the weaponization of migration—may be exploited in this contest. When engaging in the gray zone of competition, states often respond across multiple domains, such as countering military actions with economic sanctions.⁴

The focus in this regard is typically on what has historically been defined as great powers,⁵ whose influence is considerably superior to that of medium-sized regional powers. The question of how many great powers dominate the international system is crucial, as the answer appears to significantly influence the assessment of other states' room for maneuver.⁶ In a fully developed bipolar order, for example, most states would have little choice but to align with one of the two superpowers. While this great-power-centered approach is meaningful, it overlooks the perceptions and actions of other states and groups of states. Though not major powers themselves, these states remain important because their allegiance may be a key prize in the competition. As such, they could even be said to hold the balance of power, as Parag Khanna has argued.⁷

Irrespective of the numerical distribution of forces between great and medium-sized powers, regional players may possess considerable room for maneuver in distinct world regions crucial to the outcome of strategic competition. Including these actors and their ability to navigate within the international system could provide a deeper understanding of its evolution and the extent to which

⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, and Yvonne K. Crane, "Understanding a New Era of Strategic Competition," Research Report RR-A290-4 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, November 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A290-4>; Christopher Paul et al., "The Role of Information in U.S. Concepts for Strategic Competition," Research Report RR-A1256-1 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), 8-12, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A1256-1>.

⁵ The term great power refers to a state that cannot be ignored on the world stage and without whose cooperation no global problem can be solved.

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Thomas F. Lynch III, "Major Findings on Contemporary Great Power Competition," in *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition*, ed. Thomas F. Lynch III (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, November 2020), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404283/major-findings-on-contemporary-great-power-competition/>.

⁷ Parag Khanna, *The Second World: How Emerging Powers Are Redefining Global Competition in the Twenty-first Century* (New York, NY: Random House, 2009).

great powers can dominate it. This is one of the primary objectives of this *Connections* issue.

The Dangerous Narrative of a New Cold War

Notable Western observers are discussing the possibility of a new Cold War that would once again divide the world into East and West. Remarkably, this perspective is shared not only by many political analysts⁸ but also by economic historians such as Niall Ferguson,⁹ who believe the world is reverting to a bipolar system in which nonaligned states will essentially play a role similar to the one they held until 1989. Proponents of this view point to the parallels between today's global situation and that during the Cold War – in both cases, democratic states confront authoritarian regimes. However, this distinction between states based on their political system does not provide much insight into the structure of the international system, either then or now. During the Cold War, for example, India was a democracy but did not align with the Western camp.¹⁰

After World War II, the United States could not intervene in world affairs without considering the position of the Soviet Union and vice versa. The bipolar structure of the international system constrained the scope for action of all other states. They were within the sphere of influence of the United States or the Soviet Union.¹¹ Even the so-called nonaligned countries tended to align closely with either the Western or Eastern bloc. Regional powers in conflict, such as Pakistan and India, often sought the support of the superpowers. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of India, which, despite its leadership role in the “non-aligned movement,” developed close relations with the Soviet Union, particularly in the defense sector.¹² Consequently, during that period, it was nearly impossible to remain strategically unaligned; the bipolar world order left little room for escaping the overarching conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.

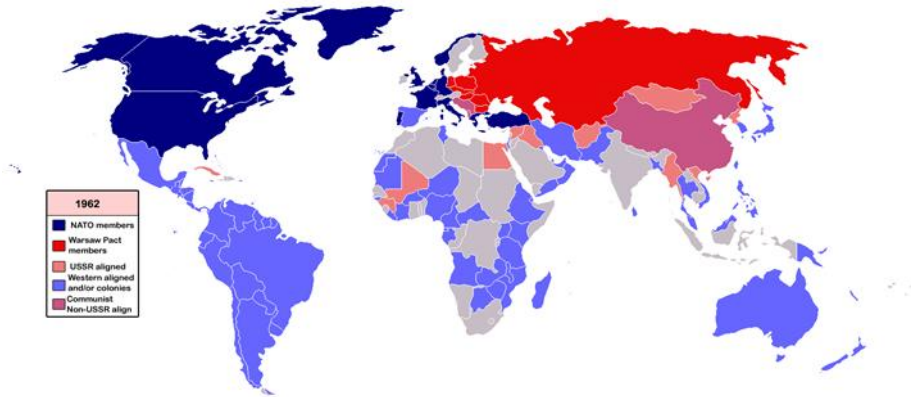
⁸ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power’s Staying Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (2023), www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth; Elbridge Colby, “The Return of Strategic Competition: How to Execute and Sustain the National Security Strategy,” in “The Future of Conservative Internationalism,” collection of essays delivered in Beaver Creek, Colorado, in July 2019, Reagan Institute Strategy Group, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/publications/the-return-of-strategic-competition-how-to-execute-and-sustain-the-national-security-strategy/>.

⁹ Niall Ferguson, “America, China, Russia, and the Avalanche of History,” *Bloomberg*, May 20, 2022, www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-05-20/niall-ferguson-america-china-russia-and-the-avalanche-of-history.

¹⁰ Amit Ranjan, “India’s Foreign Policy: Shift, Adjustment and Continuity,” *The Round Table* 111, no. 3 (2022): 381-384, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2082737>.

¹¹ See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 20-25.

¹² Vojtech Mastny, “The Soviet Union’s Partnership with India,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 50-90, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00006.



Map 1. Cold War World Map, 1962.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cold_War_World_Map_1962.png

In contrast to the Cold War, states today do not necessarily align themselves with one of two leading global nation-state powers. While China is often perceived as the strongest challenger to the West, it lacks a large alliance system similar to that of the Soviet Union. The frequently mentioned Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), for example, does not function as a robust alliance. Although it deals with issues of international security cooperation, the SCO operates well below the level of a mutual defense commitment and lacks a military command structure.¹³ On the other hand, the United States remains the leading power in the transatlantic alliance. However, the Indo-Pacific region—the main theater of U.S.-China rivalry—lies outside NATO’s treaty area. Instead, Washington maintains bilateral security relations with several countries in Asia, such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.¹⁴ Currently, many states, even in the highly contested regions of South and Southeast Asia,

¹³ Amjad Abbas Khan, “Security Environment in South Asia: The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,” in *China and South Asia: Changing Regional Dynamics, Development and Power Play*, ed. Rajiv Ranjan and Guo Changgang (London: Routledge India, 2021), 97-107.

¹⁴ Andrew M. Campbell, “Contending with a Rising China: A Comparative Study of Middle-Power Strategies in the Indo-Pacific,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2023): 49-74. https://media.defense.gov/2023/feb/02/2003154179/-1/-1/1/_jipa_january-february%202023.pdf; Thomas Wilkins, “Middle Power Hedging in the Era of Security/Economic Disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the ‘Special Strategic Partnership’,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 23, no. 1 (January 2023): 93-127, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab023>.

see no need to align themselves with either China or the United States – a trend unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.¹⁵

Another important difference concerns threat perceptions. During the Cold War, the situation was relatively straightforward for the democratic states of Western Europe: the Soviet Union was clearly the most significant military threat, and the United States also focused predominantly on countering the Soviet threat. This shared threat perception was the most important bond uniting the transatlantic community.¹⁶ Today, the picture is far more complex. For the United States, China represents the biggest threat, whereas, from a European perspective, Russia has once again become the primary threat to regional security following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷ Therefore, today's geopolitical situation is very different from the constellation during the Cold War.

The same is true regarding the distribution of economic power today compared to the Cold War era. Western-oriented states dominated the global economy after World War II. Even in the 1980s, they still accounted for nearly three-quarters of global gross domestic product (GDP). However, their share has decreased to around 50 percent today (Table 1). Notably, not only the adversaries of the Political West have increased their share of global GDP – the same is true for the countries in the Global South. The economic weight of the nonaligned states is much greater today than it was during the Cold War, which contradicts the notion of a development toward a fully-fledged bipolar system.

Table 1. Share of Global GDP, at constant 2015 US Dollars.

Global GDP Share	1985	2022
Political West	73 %	51 %
Political East	9 %	20 %
Global South	18 %	29 %

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/basic>.

¹⁵ Kishore Mahbubani, "Asia's Third Way: How ASEAN Survives—and Thrives—Amid Great-Power Competition," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 2 (March/April 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/southeast-asia/asias-third-way-asean-amid-great-power-competition>.

¹⁶ Common values have also been an important binding force for the majority of Western nations. However, NATO has not always been an alliance of democratic states. Dictatorial governed states, e.g. Greece from 1967 to 1974 and Türkiye after the military coups of 1960 and 1980, retained NATO membership.

¹⁷ Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, "Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 7, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/>.

As a result, while the bilateral rivalry between China and the United States is important, it is not the defining feature of the emerging international order. Medium-sized powers and groups of states in different regions of the world now have more leverage than they did during the Cold War.¹⁸

Misperceptions of the Evolving International Order Are Driving Bad Policies

In studying the evolving international order, the distribution of military capabilities and economic potential serve as a starting point for further analysis. Regional constellations and dynamics must also be considered, particularly with regard to the differing abilities of global and regional actors to exercise or project power in specific areas of strategic interest. During the Cold War, for instance, it was inconsequential that the Eastern Bloc's leading nation was economically far inferior to its global rival and lacked the maritime power to challenge the United States on the world's oceans. The geopolitical importance of the Soviet Union stemmed from its land power and ability to dominate a geostrategic pivot area – Halford Mackinder's Euro-Asian heartland.¹⁹

The world's leading economic regions were, nevertheless, North America and Western Europe, with Japan joining later. Due to their geostrategic and geo-economic relevance for both superpowers, Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, East Asia became central arenas in their struggle for supremacy. In 1943, Nicholas Spykman identified these two regions as the main theaters of a potential future conflict, arguing that the balance of power in Eurasia directly affected U.S. security. Although Spykman died the same year, he became one of the masterminds behind U.S. Cold War strategies from 1947 onward.²⁰ These strategies emphasized control over the West European and East Asian "green water" littorals and "brown water" riverines as key to securing the North American coastlines.²¹ Establishing a permanent military presence in countries such as Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea was a logical by-product of this shift in U.S. security policy.

Since the end of the Cold War, the rise of China and other non-Western states has significantly altered the global distribution of power. As a result, East Asia

¹⁸ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş et al., "Strategic Interdependence: Europe's New Approach in a World of Middle Powers," Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/strategic-interdependence-europes-new-approach-in-a-world-of-middle-powers/>.

¹⁹ Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot to History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421-437, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>.

²⁰ The logic of containment firstly articulated by George F. Kennan in 1947 reflected reasoning from Spykman's writings. Antero Holmila, "Re-thinking Nicholas J. Spykman: From Historical Sociology to Balance of Power," *The International History Review* 42, no. 5 (2019): 951-966, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1655469>.

²¹ Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), 49-55.

and the now-united Europe have switched ranks as the world's geostrategic and geo-economic key regions. Additionally, South Asia and Southeast Asia are positioning themselves to become the fourth powerhouse of the global economy.²² These are significant shifts, but some crucial elements of international politics remain essentially unchanged. Although Russia's military and economic influence has diminished, the country will retain its geostrategic position at the heart of Eurasia and its ability to exercise or project power into surrounding regions. This will be particularly relevant for strategic competition. In this context, both Asia and Europe will continue to play key roles as theaters for future conflicts or power contests. Therefore, the United States would be ill-advised to depart from a long-standing and proven principle of its security policy by focusing its engagement on only one theater.

Strategic Competition Involves More Actors Than China and the United States

The Sino-American rivalry is undeniably a dominant feature driving strategic competition. However, other states and groups of states will also influence the outcome of this global contest. Five articles in this issue, therefore, focus on what are arguably the most important actors in this context. Alongside China and the United States, these include the European Union, India, and Russia. The article by May-Britt Stumbaum and Sharon De Cet, "China's 'Natural Return' to the Center – Beijing's Perspective on Strategic Competition, Drivers, and Alternative Models for World Order," highlights the perspective of the Chinese state and party leadership on strategic competition. Unsurprisingly, the bilateral struggle for global supremacy is central to Beijing's considerations. China's growing role and influence are viewed as a return to the natural state of affairs. Drawing on ancient concepts and driven by historically shaped preferences for control and dominance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presents the idea of a "community of shared future for mankind" as an alternative to the Western-shaped, rules-based order. The CCP envisions a hierarchical, China-centric world order, with Beijing at its core, engaging with subordinate states for the "benefit of all."

The emphasis on the bipolar features of the emerging international order is shared by both Beijing and Washington, reflecting the U.S.- and China-centric perspectives in both capitals. Nonetheless, the key concepts underlying the notion of strategic competition have primarily been developed in the United States. Matt Neumeyer's article "Strategic Competition and U.S. National Strategies" highlights how this has helped reframe American strategic thought, particularly in national security and military strategies, and how these documents define the

²² OECD, *Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2024: Developing amid Disaster Risks* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1787/3bbe7dfe-en>; V. Anantha Nageswaran and Gurvinder Kaur, "Don't Bet Against India: New Delhi's Brewing Economic Comeback," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 1 (January-February 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/dont-bet-against-india>

threats to American primacy and the rules-based international order. However, the term “strategic competition” is not universally understood within the U.S. government, leading to different perspectives on how to proceed. Additionally, it does not adequately address how competitors approach international competition, creating a risk of miscalculation and increasing the chance of conflict. Accordingly, while strategic competition serves as a necessary framework to guide American strategy and strategic calculus, it remains a somewhat vague concept.

Many observers in Washington and Beijing attribute to Russia the role of a secondary regional power in the context of strategic competition. However, Graeme Herd emphasizes in his article “The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and All That: How Russia Understands Strategic Confrontation” that the Kremlin continues to play a central role in the ideological conflict between the democratic West and its challengers. He illustrates this with the use of the term “Anglo-Saxon” in Russian propaganda. Its meanings are open-ended, dynamic, and evolving, and its applications tend to be context-sensitive. The term symbolizes a “collective West” allegedly intent on destabilizing Russia. The supposed threat posed by “Anglo-Saxons” is used to justify political choices, legitimize internal order, characterize Russia’s alternative geopolitical identity, and project a vision of its preferred global order. The article identifies three core ways in which the official discourse deploys the “Anglo-Saxon” concept:

- 1) “Anglo-Saxon Atlanticists” and the “collective West”;
- 2) the “Anglo-Saxon Reich” – encompassing the “fascist Anglo-Saxons elite” and “Ordinary Nazis”; and,
- 3) “Anglo-Saxons” as the “Fifth Column” and “Foreign Agents.”²³

The Kremlin’s anti-Western propaganda resonates not only in states of the Global South but also within certain segments of Western societies. Consequently, Russia will continue to maintain an influential role on the international stage in this field.

The European Union is perhaps the most poorly understood actor in international politics due to its elusive character – more than a community of states but less than a nation-state. Katrin Bastian elaborates on the prevailing view of strategic competition in Brussels in her article “The European Union and Strategic Competition.” The European Union perceives the world as multipolar, with countries of the Global South expanding their political and economic influence alongside the rivalry between the United States and China. Cooperation, compromise, and multilateral engagement are central to the EU’s mode of operation. The European Union and its member states favor this approach in shaping international relations. However, in a security environment characterized by strategic competition, the European Union, as the world’s largest trading bloc, must assert its

²³ Graeme Herd, “The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and All That: How Russia Understands Strategic Confrontation,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 23, no. 2 (2024): 44-69, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.2.04>.

role. “Strategic interdependence” appears to be the EU’s response to navigating the complexities of a changing world.²⁴

Despite some differences in worldview, the European Union and India share the belief that a multipolar world order is emerging. In “India’s Stake and Role in the U.S.-China Strategic Competition,” Vinay Kaura examines India’s position and role within the context of strategic competition. The analysis of India’s strategic vision—particularly the changing dynamics of its bilateral ties with the United States, China, and Russia—reveals that New Delhi’s foreign policy toward Washington is increasingly shaped by developments in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as well as by the evolving dynamics of the U.S. relationships with key Asian powers. India has assumed a prominent role in Washington’s efforts to uphold a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. The existence of some shared values has been leveraged by both parties to deepen engagement, which has also been driven by pragmatic considerations. At the same time, maintaining close relations with Russia remains a strategic necessity for India. However, New Delhi has shown a noticeable shift in its approach toward the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, reflecting India’s changing perception of China – from a partner to a security threat.

Regional Dynamics Influence the Outcome of Strategic Competition

Four articles in this issue of *Connections* delve into the internal dynamics of different regions that have the potential to significantly influence the outcome of strategic competition at a global level. The so-called Indo-Pacific is frequently perceived as the most critical region in this regard. Its numerous ethnic, territorial, and maritime disputes not only threaten to destabilize individual states and the region but also pose risks to the international system. The rivalry between China and the United States adds another layer of complexity to these regional dynamics. Zenel Garcia explores the role of the Indo-Pacific in the broader framework of strategic competition, analyzing the perceptions and interests of key actors in the region. She argues that these actors are exercising their agency in ways that constrain or co-opt the Chinese-U.S. rivalry to advance their own interests. By revealing the region’s intricate realities, her conclusions challenge the emerging Cold War 2.0 discourse, which envisions Washington and Beijing forming two coherent blocs competing for influence.

Strategic competition is also unfolding in other regions of the world. The Black Sea region (BSR) has become prominent in global geopolitics, geo-economics, and strategic considerations. In their article, “Navigating the Trilemma of (In)security: Strategic Competition in the Black Sea Region,” Victoria Vdovychenko, Natalia Albu, and Nika Chitadze introduce the concept of strategic trilemmas in the BSR, involving the active participation of Türkiye, Ukraine, and

²⁴ Katrin Bastian, “The European Union and Strategic Competition,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 23, no. 2 (2024): 70-89, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.2.11>.

pro-Western littoral states (Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia) on one side, and Russia on the other. The region's dynamic and complex geopolitical landscape presents a series of trilemmas for the major actors involved. While Russia's influence remains a concern, the potential for reducing its dominance and increasing cooperation between Western countries and the BSR states offers bilateral and multilateral collaboration opportunities in this critical geopolitical theater.

The High North has gained increased importance due to climate change, the emergence of new shipping routes, and expanded opportunities for the exploitation of natural resources. Rachael Gosnell's article "A Divided Arctic: Is an Ice Curtain Emerging?" examines the factors enabling expanded cooperation among like-minded Western Arctic nations and between Russia and China. Climate change is a critical driver of regional activity, with warming trends affecting the region's economic development, infrastructure, and military activity. With Western sanctions restricting technological and economic cooperation with Russia, China is well-positioned to fill the gap. However, the emergence of an "ice curtain" separating the Western like-minded Arctic nations from a Russian-Chinese Arctic partnership is not a foregone conclusion. First, while European Arctic capitals have recognized the threat posed by Russia, they differ from Washington in their approach to China. Second, it remains uncertain whether Russia will choose to give the keys to its Arctic kingdom to China or pursue a political settlement in Ukraine.

In contrast, Africa is often perceived as a peripheral arena in the strategic competition between the great powers. This view is challenged by Elikem Fiamavle, Aida Marie Stéphanie Naoule, and Martin Schuster in their article "Unfolding Geopolitical Events Suggest a New Order in Strategic Competition – Perspectives from West Africa." They argue that the prospects of a multipolar international order have influenced how African countries interact with the rest of the world. African states have entered an era of choice. Narratives that once portrayed Africa as the "Dark Continent" are shifting to depict it as a "rising continent" engaging with an increasing number of non-Western actors, mostly emerging economies, including China, the Gulf States, India, and Türkiye. Several African governments have increasingly embraced economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Russia. Russia's renewed interest in Africa is driven by its pursuit of global power status. Africa's abundant strategic resources and promising growth prospects grant its leaders significant influence in modern geopolitics. Therefore, the authors argue that Africa's importance in strategic competition should not be underestimated. Africa's relationship with the Political West has been complex, with both positive and negative impacts on the continent. Frustration among Africans toward Western powers stems from the belief that promises of democracy leading to development and economic growth are illusory. Generating trust and credibility will require greater transparency from the United States and Europe regarding their interests, minimizing policy incoherencies, and narrowing the prevailing disparities between Western offerings and African needs.

Hybrid Threats Pose a Particular Challenge to the West

Africa, in particular, demonstrates that the Political West is being challenged in ways that extend far beyond the realms of politics and the military. Propaganda and disinformation, for example, are powerful hybrid weapons employed by opponents of the West in strategic competition. These tactics resonate strongly, especially in regions where Western promises of progress and prosperity remain unfulfilled, amplifying anti-Western narratives. In her article “Hybrid Threats and Strategic Competition,” Heather Gregg argues that the ability of state and non-state actors to directly influence populations through a range of quick and non-attributable activities marks a departure from previous iterations of strategic competition. These hybrid threats pose a direct challenge to state sovereignty and represent a key distinguishing feature of strategic competition today. Her article highlights the importance of building resilience within populations to counter such hybrid threats.

Strategic competition with China and Russia is also a contest for the support of countries in other parts of the world. Falk Tettweiler’s article “Strategic Competition and the Battle of Narratives: A Sociopsychological Perspective” elaborates on the often-underestimated role of strategic narratives. Summarizing the key points of the strategic narratives of China, Russia, and the United States, he discusses the implications that a competitive mindset might have on humanity’s ability to address critical global security challenges. Overemphasizing the concept of strategic competition could exacerbate the dilemma of competing while simultaneously needing to cooperate. Leaders who have embraced this competitive mindset must find a careful balance here. Unfortunately, the Russian leadership’s fear- and threat-driven perception of reality leaves little room for concession or compromise. Against this background, the Russian leadership currently represents the greatest obstacle and threat to collaborative solutions to global challenges.

Finally, Ralf Roloff’s article examines cross-cutting economic trends that will significantly influence the outcome of strategic competition at the global level. Increasing tensions due to strategic competition, geopolitical shifts, and external shocks—including the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, and Russia’s war against Ukraine since February 2022—have placed the global economy under significant stress. International trade, foreign direct investment, and global value chains have been redirected, diversified, and de-risked. Rather than leading to deglobalization, this has resulted in a “fragmentegrated” global economy that is simultaneously fragmented and integrated at regional and global levels. The world economy is not decoupled but remains deeply interconnected. However, the “fragmentegrated” global economy is exposed to an increasing weaponization of economic interdependence, which instrumentalizes all sectors of the multilateral system.

In summary, the focus of the strategic competition debate on China versus the United States and bipolarity versus multipolarity is not well-suited to fully capture the diverse political, military, and economic developments at the global

and regional levels. The international system has become increasingly fluid, complex, and fragmented. In this “era of choice,” nonaligned countries are in a position to negotiate with various interested powers and ultimately choose the best option from different worlds on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, the emerging new landscape also provides regional powers traditionally aligned with the Political West, such as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, with greater opportunities for maneuvering and achieving strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

Strategic competition extends beyond a confrontation between two superpowers and their respective allies. It is also a contest for the support of nonaligned countries that do not belong to either the Political West or the group of challengers such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. While the Western focus on the challenge posed by China may seem plausible, it limits a broader and deeper understanding of other important trends and dynamics shaping strategic competition across different regions of the world. Acknowledging the reality of a more complex global constellation opens up new perspectives on the political and economic challenges ahead and facilitates the exploration of Western approaches to bridging gaps with nonaligned countries. Therefore, the Political West would be wise to recognize the perceptions and needs of this “target audience.”²⁵

In this context, both China and Russia are opponents of the West. Russia’s narrative is a toxic mix of radical geopolitics and anti-Western resentment. Surprisingly, this narrative is quite popular in the Global South, even though the Kremlin is clearly attempting to divide the world into zones of influence controlled by a few great powers. On the other hand, China’s narrative is firmly based on the principles of state sovereignty and the rejection of “external interference” – except, apparently, in the case of Ukraine. Like the Russian narrative, it resonates with many countries in the Global South. However, beyond that, China seems to offer something more: a viable economic alternative to the West.²⁶

Against this background, the Political West needs to regain the initiative and actively promote its competitive advantage. It should recognize that any approach engaging nonaligned countries through values-based diplomacy will be more credible and sustainable than the purely transactional alternatives offered by its opponents.²⁷ India is of critical importance in this context. It perceives itself

²⁵ Katrin Bastian et al., “Perspectives on Strategic Competition,” George C. Marshall Center Policy Brief No. 1, November 2024, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/perspectives-strategic-competition>.

²⁶ Elizabeth Economy, “China’s Alternative Order: And What America Should Learn from It,” *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 3 (May/June 2024), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-alternative-order-xi-jinping-elizabeth-economy>.

²⁷ Graeme P. Herd, Falk Tettweiler, Katrin Bastian, and Frank Hagemann, “‘Normative Strategic Competition in an Era of Choice,’ Symposium Aide Memoire, Federal Ministry

in a leadership role and as a “bridge between North and South,” committed to maintaining and further developing a rules-based liberal world order. The United States has emphasized this role in its Joint Regional Strategy for South Asia, and the European Union has taken steps to strengthen ties with India. Providing greater support to India could also benefit the region and improve the perception of the West in the Global South. Encouraging the development of an additional pole in South Asia and thereby fostering the rules-based liberal world order through close cooperation between the United States, Europe, India, Japan, and other interested countries could help contain bilateral conflicts and reduce tensions at the global and regional levels.²⁸

The “unipolar moment” that has defined the international system since the collapse of the Soviet Union has come to an end. The United States, in particular, needs to adapt its policies to this new reality. However, European states and the European Union must also consider how to position themselves in this context and decide what policies to pursue. This is not about turning away from the United States; rather, Europeans must ask themselves what role they should play in strategic competition alongside their Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific partners.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent official views of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium’s editors.

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²⁸ Bastian et al., “Perspectives on Strategic Competition.”

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