Research Paper

US and the Americas Programme

March 2025

Competing visions of international order

Responses to US power in a fracturing world

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Preface

An earlier version of this research paper was prepared for the US National Intelligence Council as part of a project entitled 'Competing Visions for International Order'. The project looked at how national leaders and foreign policy elites in a carefully selected group of states across Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America viewed the United States and its international role. Our research took a special interest in how these elite perceptions of the US have affected the ambitions and strategies of some of the most important allies and partners of the US, but also of several of its adversaries.

Over the course of several months, our authors held a series of individual meetings, and convened for a research workshop at Chatham House to consider the future international order, and how each of these states seeks to establish its own position in this order. In our authors' workshop, contributors asked whether states were content with the status quo, or whether they sought to adapt, disrupt or even undermine the existing international order. The brief was also to consider the presence (or absence) of a consensus around their state's vision of international order, the implications of US–China rivalry, and, especially, the changing US international role and the significance of the 2024 US elections.

The prospect of a possible second Donald Trump presidency was surprisingly muted in much of the original analysis. Several authors identified a long-term trend in the US towards a more assertive international position. Trump's subsequent election victory in November 2024 and the initial two months of his second term in 2025 have been received very differently in different regions of the world. For Europe, foreign policy elites have been transfixed by the US's abandonment of its commitments to sovereignty, multilateralism and the defence of Ukraine. The chapters in this paper, although conceived and first written in 2024, have been developed and updated to take into account the return of President Trump to the White House.

The paper has deliberately aimed to be selective rather than comprehensive. The states we have studied are actively seeking to manage the challenge presented by a changing US position. Some are more ambitious and seek to adapt or revise the international order, while others are intent on undermining it. The selection of states also reflects the necessary constraints of time and resource and our effort to balance this paper with multiple other initiatives at Chatham House that have addressed, for example, the international ambitions of the UK, or the role of Africa on the global stage. The discussions that have continued since the initial drafts were circulated, together with the comments of several excellent peer reviewers, have helped the authors further develop their chapters. Our aim is to present a carefully considered look at the medium- and longer-term factors that are shaping states' visions of international order.

01
The fracturing of the US-led liberal international order

After decades of strong support but growing ambivalence, the United States is turning against the liberal international order that it once forged. Where does this changed stance leave the rest of the world?

Leslie Vinjamuri

The liberal international order is more fractured now than at any point since the end of the Cold War. The challenge to this order comes from within the leading democracies, and also from adversaries of the West. It reflects in part a structural shift in the international distribution of power.[1]

Illiberal leaders have escalated their attacks on the values and norms that are the bedrock of liberal internationalism. Collective solutions are needed to address the very real problems of war, economic inequality, stagnating growth, climate change, pandemic prevention and developing-country debt. But many leaders have instead weaponized legitimate grievances and spread disinformation in a bid to mobilize voters around an anti-elite, anti-immigrant and anti-liberal-establishment platform. The backlash against the liberal international order has also included a broader group of critics who argue, albeit in less inflammatory tone, that multilateral and regional agreements have overreached, encroaching on state sovereignty around vital issues of trade, human rights and international justice.

Competition and rivalry between the world's two most powerful states, the United States and China, provide the backdrop against which these divisive politics have been unfolding. And now, more than three years of a deadly and destructive war – between Russia and Ukraine – have revealed the weakness of the international

1 Niblett, R. and Vinjamuri, L. (2021), 'The Liberal Order Begins at Home: How Democratic Revival Can Reboot the International System', *Foreign Affairs*, 30 March 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/liberal-order-begins-home.

order in the face of the outright violation of state sovereignty. In Ukraine, but also in Gaza and Sudan, international humanitarian law has proved ineffectual as mass atrocities have mounted.

In all of this, nationalism is proving to be a more enduring, motivating and powerful force than globalism. The US was once the primary architect of the liberal international order. That order was defined by three principles shared among its members: a commitment to democracy and the rule of law; a commitment to open trade; and a commitment to institutionalized multilateralism as the main form of cooperation. Today, the US seeks to adapt, disrupt and, in some cases, reject outright the most essential tenets of the very system it helped to forge from the ashes of the Second World War. The 2024 election of Donald Trump has returned to the White House a leader whose rhetorical disregard for the sovereignty of other states is on full display, along with his disdain for multilateralism. President Trump has energized a narrative of grievance in the US Republican Party and among its supporters, one that positions the US as a victim of unfair treatment by allies and adversaries alike. At first gradually, but now abruptly, the US commitment to the liberal international order is eroding.

Today, the US seeks to adapt, disrupt and, in some cases, reject outright the most essential tenets of the very system it helped to forge from the ashes of the Second World War.

The sources of this changed US posture are complex. The challenge the US faces from an increasingly prosperous and assertive China has been met by a new consensus in the US that China's integration into the liberal international order has yielded uneven returns, that this integration has benefited China more than the US, and that China has failed to play by the rules. The 2022 US National Security Strategy stated that the People's Republic of China was the 'only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it'.[2]

Emerging and middle powers, too, have complicated the outlook. They have expanded their influence intra-regionally, creating opportunity but also uncertainty. Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and South Africa are chief among these ambitious players. Some have extended their influence *beyond* their respective regions, working to shape international norms and reform international institutions. The attempt by these states to maintain their autonomy, in part by leveraging bilateral relationships with the US, China and Russia, is creating a world of multiple alignments. While this has created options and also opportunity for many states, it has also led to greater unpredictability.

In a world shaped by geopolitical competition, rapid technological change and emerging-power ambition, the US nonetheless remains dominant. It accounts for

2 The White House (2022), *National Security Strategy: October 2022*, 12 October 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf.

26 per cent of global GDP,[3] still spends over $800 billion a year on defence,[4] and holds a structural advantage in the major multilateral institutions. The US dollar continues to be the world's reserve currency, conferring on the US an exorbitant privilege in the global financial system and an unparalleled power to sanction other states. In the most competitive technological domain, artificial intelligence (AI), the US continues to have the edge even as China makes rapid advances. All this has given the US a strong ability to shape the international order to its own advantage, but also to the advantage of its partners and allies.

US steps back from the liberal international order it forged

For more than seven decades, the US was pivotal to the development and maintenance of the liberal international order. After the Cold War, the US supported the expansion of NATO and the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as multiple institutional initiatives that included new members and extended to new areas of economic engagement, human rights and humanitarianism. The US was a proponent, if an ambivalent one, of deepening the liberal international order to include greater enforcement mechanisms, even though it fiercely guarded its own sovereignty. The US's role as a guarantor of the liberal international order was always accompanied by its self-understanding that the US was an exceptional power and that multilateral institutions needed to reflect this.

Today, this ambivalence has transformed into outright rejection of the very order the US created and underwrote. The US has begun to substitute nationalism for globalism, replace multilateralism with unilateralism, and abandon essential components of its soft power. President Trump's threats to annex Canada, Greenland and the Panama Canal have undermined global confidence in the US as a guarantor of sovereignty. His attacks on the US's European allies and move to exclude them from peace talks with Russia over the future of Ukraine have undermined the transatlantic partnership, a partnership that has anchored the liberal international order for more than seven decades. Interventions in Europe's domestic politics by Vice-President J. D. Vance and Elon Musk have also cast doubt on the US role as a proponent of sovereignty and liberal democracy. The announcement that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the World Health Organization were early indicators of the US rejection of multilateralism. Within days of taking office, President Trump undercut US soft power, freezing all foreign assistance for 90 days, and effectively shuttering the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

But the seeds of US ambivalence towards the liberal international order were sown long before even the first election in 2016 of President Trump. Two factors played an outsized role in weakening the bipartisan consensus in the US that for decades

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3 World Bank Group (2025), 'GDP (current US$) – United States, World', https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2023&locations=US-1W&most_recent_value_desc=false&start=2000&view=chart&year=2000 (accessed 10 Feb. 2025).
4 Garamone, J. and Todd Lopez, C. (2024), 'DOD's 2025 Budget Request Provides 4.5% Raise for Service Members', U.S. Department of Defense, 11 March 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3703751/dods-2025-budget-request-provides-45-raise-for-service-members.

had anchored the American commitment to the post-war liberal international order. One was the growing perception among US foreign policy elites, but also among the American public, that the US was overextended and that its military interventions – and especially its subsequent troop presences in Afghanistan and Iraq – were costly 'wars of choice' that were not justified by a clear US national interest.

A second factor was the view – which developed gradually at first, then later exploded – that the expansion of free trade and international finance was hurting US interests, and that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed in 1992, had led to the loss of large numbers of manufacturing jobs in the US.[5] This view first emerged among progressive Democrats critical of the absence of labour rights in NAFTA's provisions, before gaining wider currency and ultimately being used by President Trump to mobilize his base around the 'America first' platform seen today.

The liberal international order was not only about boosting peace and security and expanding free trade globally; it was also built on the premise that such an order would make the world safe for democracy.[6] Accommodations were made that allowed states that were recovering from war and were late industrializers to protect local industry while it caught up. But by the 1990s, as free trade deepened and expanded, and as neoliberal ideas further infused the dominant international institutions, policies designed to provide social and economic protection came under increased pressure. Economic inequalities widened in many countries, but especially in the US, and opened the door to attacks by populist leaders willing to exploit anti-elite sentiment, exacerbate social division, and undermine the trust in institutions that had been critical to the success of democracy.

China's economic rise and its admission to the WTO in 2001 fed further suspicion of international trade agreements. China's WTO membership later helped to give rise to a new consensus in the US that China was benefiting from the liberal international order at the expense of the US, and that China had failed to become a responsible stakeholder in that order. From its entry into the WTO until 2023, China's GDP increased from $1.3 trillion to $18 trillion in nominal terms.[7] Within eight years of joining the WTO, China also became the world's largest goods exporter.[8]

The 2008 global financial crisis was a turning point. The collapse of international trade and its impacts on the US transformed the nascent but contained US political conversation about globalization into a political about-face that questioned some of the most central elements of the liberal international order.[9]

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5 Scott, R. E. (2011), 'Trade deficit with Mexico has resulted in 682,900 U.S. jobs lost or displaced', Economic Policy Institute, 12 October 2011, https://www.epi.org/publication/trade-deficit-mexico-resulted-682900-jobs.
6 Ikenberry, G. J. (2020), *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
7 World Bank Group (2025), 'GDP (current US$) – China', https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2023&locations=CN&most_recent_value_desc=false&start=2001&view=chart&year=2000 (accessed 10 Feb. 2025).
8 Sapir, A. and Mavroidis, P. C. (2021), 'China and the WTO, an uneasy relationship', 29 April 2021, Centre for Economic Policy Research, https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/china-and-wto-uneasy-relationship.
9 Levchenko, A. A., Lewis, L. T. and Tesar, L. (2009), *The Collapse of International Trade During the 2008-2009 Crisis: In Search of the Smoking Gun*, 30 December 2009, https://www.imf.org/external/np/res/seminars/2010/paris/pdf/tesar.pdf.

The politics unleashed by the financial crisis created new momentum around the anti-trade agenda. US leaders on both sides of the political aisle increasingly pushed back against trade and investment liberalization. One example was the collapse of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral free-trade agreement among 12 Pacific Rim states, signed in February 2016. President Barack Obama had negotiated US membership of the TPP. Yet both Hillary Clinton, who ran as the Democratic candidate to be Obama's successor, and Trump then opposed US participation in it. In 2017, on his first day in office, Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the US from the TPP.

The politics unleashed by the financial crisis created new momentum around the anti-trade agenda. US leaders on both sides of the political aisle increasingly pushed back against trade and investment liberalization.

The perception that China was unduly benefiting from its participation in the WTO had another spillover effect: it hampered efforts to reform the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the two Bretton Woods institutions. The US rejected calls to reapportion voting shares at the IMF to reflect China's new international economic status. (Voting shares have not changed since 2010.) The US aversion to being unduly constrained also spurred it to block reforms to the appellate body at the WTO, effectively scuppering the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism.

But it was an unforeseen global crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – that presented the greatest test for the liberal international order and revealed that order's weakness. The US response was a parochial one. Political attention turned inwards, the government adopted strict border controls, and public debate became mired in a domestic battle about the virus and its significance. Once it had produced a vaccine, the US carefully guarded its supplies while China in turn used its own vaccine to curry geopolitical favour. Competition between the US and China in other domains escalated. Wary of China's growing assertiveness, the US restricted technology-sharing with China and pressured Europe to do the same. And the pandemic-induced shock to supply chains spurred efforts to 'near-shore' and 'friend-shore' manufacturing. President Joe Biden's investments in climate action, as seen in the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, also prioritized manufacturing and job creation inside the US, creating new frictions with Europe. This protectionist turn in the US helped to cement the view in many countries that the US was chipping away at the building blocks of the liberal international order.

Allies and adversaries alike see the US as an unreliable actor

Since Trump's first election to the presidency in 2016, polarization between the Republican and Democratic parties has intensified, making it harder to agree spending priorities and pass legislation. This has fed the perception that Washington has become politically dysfunctional.

The Biden administration had lulled Europeans into a belief that the first Trump administration was an exception to the rule of sound US leadership. Even after the chaotic allied withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden allayed Europe's worst fears by delivering a strong, multilateral and anticipatory response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. But later US decisions to veto multiple UN Security Council resolutions condemning Israel for atrocities in its war in Gaza unleashed an avalanche of criticism of Washington for having double standards. Charges of hypocrisy against the US rose to new levels following the 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas and the US support of Israel in its war with Hamas in Gaza.

Trump's return to office in 2025 has created a sense of urgency around the need to settle the war between Russia and Ukraine. This has come during a period when many countries are struggling with slow economic growth, complex challenges around migration, and the growing influence of far right political parties. His disruptive tactics domestically and internationally are creating heightened uncertainty among the US's closest allies and partners. The threat to use tariffs to coerce policy change first in Colombia, Mexico and Canada, and later globally, Trump's unconventional and shocking claims on the Panama Canal, Greenland and Gaza, his administration's rhetorical attacks on Canada and Europe, and his recent labelling of Ukraine's president as a 'dictator' have all contributed to a new consensus that the US may be a necessary ally but not a reliable one.

Against this backdrop, states have worked to safeguard their geopolitical room for manoeuvre. Values are also contested and many states prefer a more tailored international order, one that delegates concerns for human rights and democracy to sovereign states. Brazil has asserted its independence and maintained its role as a leader and shaper of the liberal international order. India has clung fiercely to a strategy of non-alignment, deepening its partnership with the US while maintaining close ties to Russia. Europe is growing increasingly wary of its dependency on the US. France and now also Germany are committed to increasing their strategic autonomy.

Yet there is little sign that the quest for such autonomy has been accompanied by a realistic alternative to the US or China as a provider of global public goods. China's Belt and Road Initiative has had mixed success. The global demand for climate finance has so far gone unmet. Developing-country debt has mounted, and growth has stagnated globally. Public health challenges and technological transformation are both global problems in need of global solutions.

For now, the US under Trump's leadership appears actively opposed to rising to these challenges. This has created an opportunity for China to fill the leadership gap, and to bend international norms and rules to its interests. If achieved, the spread and consolidation of Chinese-led norms and cooperation mechanisms would mark a sharp break with the values that have infused the post-Cold War liberal international order.

About this paper: surveying a world of competing visions and diverse agendas

Geopolitical competition, US unilateralism and populist grievances with the liberal international order all contribute to the picture of upheaval described above. These forces are prompting a complex and diverse range of responses by states. This research paper attempts to capture these responses, and to understand where they amount to an alternative vision of international order.

The chapters that follow assess the future of the liberal international order from the perspectives of 11 different states: China, Russia, Iran, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Turkey, Germany, France and Japan. Some of these are US adversaries, others are partners or allies of the US. Each state has been selected because it has strategic or economic significance for the liberal international order. Each also has some ability to shape that order or to influence regional aspects of it.

We asked the authors to consider each state's vision for international order. The chapters reflect on how foreign policy elites understand their state's relative power and status, and whether these visions are a reaction to the US and its global exercise of power or to changes in the global distribution of power and increased competition between the US and China. We also asked authors to comment on whether foreign policy elites in their state had a shared vision of international order, or if this was the subject of internal contestation.

Country-by-country synopses

China, Russia and Iran are all adversaries of the US. Each presents a considerable challenge to the international or regional order. **China**'s ambition has been to work to adapt the international order to its own advantage, elevating the norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention, writes *M. Taylor Fravel*. China's vision of international order is more negative than positive, with an aim of reducing the influence of the US. Beijing rejects Washington's imposition of values on the rest of the world. China also perceives the US to have become more hostile towards it in recent years. The United Nations is at the centre of Beijing's multilateral engagement strategy, but China also uses an array of military and economic tools to achieve influence.

Russia, too, wants to undermine the US-led order and usher in a post-Western, multipolar order. Russia sees itself as a regional leader and a great power. *Alexander Cooley* writes that Russia seeks both control over the post-Soviet states and the maintenance of a special zone of privilege. Russia is assertive and revisionist,

and sees its war on Ukraine as an opportunity to transform the international order. Moscow believes that the US is a power in decline, and sees the international system as unstable and at a moment of change.

Vali Nasr emphasizes that **Iran**'s foreign policy mantra is one of 'resistance'. Iran, too, sees the liberal international order as an instrument of US hegemony. While there has been a convergence of interest among China, Russia and Iran on the desirability of displacing US global influence, many of their wider interests diverge. The erosion of US leadership and the liberal international order has created strategic space for Iran's revisionism. Tehran aims to defy Washington's efforts at containment and to weaken the role of the US in the Middle East. The Iranian leadership also believes that the US will never accept Iran's great power status in the region.

US allies no longer share a common perception of the path forward for the liberal international order. **Germany** is fully committed to the principles of this order and has made important adjustments (decoupling itself from Russian energy supplies and increasing defence spending), but for now it is ill equipped to lead or defend the order, writes *Constanze Stelzenmüller*. **France** sees itself as an international leader, using the European Union as a bulwark against US hegemony and China's economic coercion, according to *Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer* and *Martin Quencez*. It also seeks to cement its autonomy by building partnerships in the Global South. *Jennifer Lind* argues that **Japan** is uncomfortable with parts of the liberal international order. Japan would welcome a more pragmatic US approach to international order-building, one that is less values-based.

Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia seek strategic autonomy. **Turkey** has adopted an opportunistic and defensive approach to the liberal international order, write *Senem Aydın Düzgit* and *Ayşe Zarakol*. For Turkish leaders, strategic autonomy is central to the state's security and to regime survival. Turkey wants to be part of the West and to remain a member of its core institutions, but with weakened ties and with the flexibility to engage with China, Iran and Russia as desired. **Saudi Arabia** has adopted a pragmatic approach to its role in the liberal international order, as *Sanam Vakil* explains. As an emerging power and leader of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia has benefited in some ways from the liberal international order even as the kingdom's internal politics and regional ambitions often diverge from the principles associated with that order. US–China rivalry, though, is a key concern for Saudi Arabia, driving the kingdom to diversify its partnerships with other states.

India's version of strategic autonomy is defined by non-alignment. India sees itself as non-Western but not anti-Western, writes *Chietigj Bajpaee*. It is reformist regarding the liberal international order. India endorses or at least accepts parts of this order, but has avoided an embrace of the human rights agenda that became more central after the end of the Cold War. Economic dependence on China and military dependence on Russia condition this position. Over time, India's relationship with the US has grown stronger, rooted in reference to values shared by the world's largest democracy and the world's oldest one.

Ralf Emmers writes that **Indonesia**'s leaders pursue non-alignment and strategic autonomy, which is made possible by the country facing a low level of threat. In recent years, Jakarta has also tried to create a regional institutional architecture that aims to include all the major and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific.

Brazil's strategic vision is conditioned by the fact that it sees itself as a co-architect of the existing international order, according to *Oliver Stuenkel*. It is an active proponent of multilateralism and adherence to international law. That Brazil anticipates and also welcomes multipolarity reflects its perception of Washington as the greatest threat to global stability. Like India, Brazil wants to reform multilateral institutions, not least so that it can gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. But unlike India, Brazil generally sees China's rise as a good thing, especially for the economic benefits it gains from this.

Outlook

Today the US appears increasingly alone. Its partners and allies are uncertain of future US commitment to the liberal international order, and wary of Trump's unilateralism. Adversaries of the US regard America as a country in decline – and they see this as an advantage. They seek to undermine Western unity and either to adapt or, more often, further fracture the liberal international order. Emerging and middle powers may feel the US-led West is out of touch with the rest of the world, but they still prefer to work within the order and leverage it to their advantage. Rather than launching an international challenge to the status quo, they have usually worked at the regional level to shape institutions and norms.

The chapters in this paper confirm that the US-led liberal international order has many critics. But the ideas presented in this collection also show that no other state has managed to replace or reimagine the international order, and that many have not even tried. Only China has made an effort to rise to the challenge of replacing the US as a leading provider of global public goods. In most other cases, relative inaction by states reflects domestic constraints rather than a lack of ambition. In addition, the chapters reveal that many states, for all their reservations, still have an abiding belief in the benefits of the liberal international order – or at least elements of it. If there is a consensus among the states covered here, it is that the future of that order is deeply uncertain.

02
China: Balancing the US, increasing global influence

China is actively seeking to balance US power and maximize its own international influence, through deep diplomatic engagement and global initiatives framed to exploit growing disquiet at the US-led world order.

M. Taylor Fravel

Over the near to medium term, China's vision for the future of international order is one in which the material power of the United States and the role of the liberal ideas it has championed are diminished relative to their position today. China's vision, as held by China's top leaders, contains three core elements. First, China articulates a Westphalian vision of order based on the primacy of states and on principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention. In China's vision, a state's international influence should be commensurate with its capabilities – the logic of which confers special prerogatives on great powers with the greatest capabilities, such as China today. This vision bolsters China's internal regime security and legitimates its own efforts to increase its international influence and occupy a leading position in the international system as it rises in power. Second, the main purpose of China's vision of order since the end of the Cold War has been to reduce the influence of the US in an era in which liberal ideas along with US power have been ascendant. This enables Beijing both to decrease the ability of the US to harm or constrain China and to maximize its own freedom of manoeuvre and influence internationally. Third, China has pursued this vision of order much more actively and vigorously in the past decade, as its national capabilities have grown substantially and as its rivalry with the US has intensified.

One caveat is necessary. In today's China, it is hard to identify open and stark differences among foreign policy elites, especially disagreements that might bear directly on the statements and positions of top leaders such as Xi Jinping, China's president and general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Although one might be able to find signs of dissatisfaction with certain policies, it is hard to do so regarding foundational questions of foreign policy and grand strategy. Therefore, the analysis in this chapter assumes a consensus among Chinese foreign policy elites on China's vision of international order.

China's vision of international order

In early 2021, Xi described the US as 'the biggest threat' to China's development and security.[10] Chinese concerns about US power are long-standing. In the contemporary period, these began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and were expressed in the concept of pursuing a 'new international order' that reflected Beijing's apprehensions about increased US power in the world. China viewed the material power of the US (including its network of military alliances) and its normative power (anchored in liberal norms and values) as threatening, although access to the US economy and global markets remained critical. As the dominant and unrivalled state in the international system in the post-Cold War era, the US was the only nation that could pose a long-term threat to China's development and security. Thus, at its core, Beijing's approach to international order has been about reducing its vulnerability to US power and increasing its own freedom of manoeuvre. Put differently, China's approach to international order can be viewed as an attempt to balance US power and minimize US constraints on Beijing's ability to exert influence and shape its external environment. It does this by emphasizing Westphalian ideas of sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention and the formal equality of states, in contrast to liberal principles of openness, free markets, rules-based approaches and universal values.[11]

At its core, Beijing's approach to international order has been about reducing its vulnerability to US power and increasing its own freedom of manoeuvre.

These beliefs about international order were present in efforts under CPC General Secretary Jiang Zemin to develop 'a new security concept' for the post-Cold War world.[12] The basic idea was that countries should 'rise above one-sided security and seek common security through mutually beneficial cooperation'.[13] One notable example of China's efforts to promote this new security concept was the 1997 *Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order*, issued with Russia when Jiang held a summit with President Boris Yeltsin.[14] The declaration anticipated that growing 'multipolarization',[15] created by the rise of the developing world, would weaken the position and influence of the US, and would

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10 Buckley, C. (2021), '"The East Is Rising": Xi Maps Out China's Post-Covid Ascent', *New York Times*, 3 March 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/03/world/asia/xi-china-congress.html.
11 On Westphalian and liberal approaches to order, see Ikenberry, G. (2014), 'The logic of order: Westphalia, liberalism, and the evolution of international order in the modern era', in Ikenberry, G. (ed.) (2014), *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For an application to contemporary Chinese foreign policy, see Murphy, D. (2022), *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
12 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2002), 'China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept', 6 August 2002, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/gjs_665170/gjzzyhy_665174/2612_665212/2614_65216/202406/t20240606_11404682.html.
13 Ibid.
14 People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation (1997), 'Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order', 23 April 1997, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/234074?ln=en&v=pdf.
15 Ibid.

enable the establishment of a new order. As laid out in the declaration, the core elements of the new order were unambiguously Westphalian in nature: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, peaceful coexistence, the right of states to choose their own development paths based on their circumstances, non-discrimination, the equality of states and non-intervention, and the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue. In this new order, military 'blocs' (meaning US alliances) were viewed as a threat to security and a source of regional tensions. This vision also emphasized the need to strengthen the United Nations, which was described as 'the most universal and authoritative organization of sovereign States' that would play an 'important role in the establishment and maintenance of the new international order'.[16]

A vision of international order based on Westphalian principles advances China's interests in two ways. First, the core norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention bolstered the regime security of the CPC after the end of the Cold War, when liberal ideas and US power were ascendant, by rejecting pressure for domestic political reform or regime change. Second, a Westphalian approach to order privileges the interests of great powers and the management of their interactions, thus providing a framework to legitimize greater influence by China as it accumulates more capabilities, regardless of its political system.

Xi's concept of a 'community of common destiny for mankind' – now officially translated as a 'community of shared future' – has replaced Jiang's 'new international order'.[17] However, many of the core principles remain: sovereign equality, the 'democratization' of international relations, common security, peaceful resolution of disputes and the centrality of the UN. In other words, Xi's concept reflects the Westphalian principles that China has promoted since the end of the Cold War, as it seeks to balance US power and to legitimize its own interests, position and influence.

At the same time, Xi's community of common destiny projects greater ambitions for China than Jiang's new international order did. It has been formally written into the CPC's charter (章程) and the constitution (宪法) of the People's Republic of China. It also reflects Xi's aspirations for China 'to actively participate in leading reform of the global governance system'[18] and 'to become a leading state in comprehensive national strength and international influence' by 2050.[19] Between 2021 and 2023, China announced three new global initiatives – the global development, security and civilizational initiatives – to serve as the 'strategic guidance' to advance the achievement of the community of common destiny. Although the concept reflects a general sense of continuity with China's vision of international

16 Ibid.
17 State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2023), 'A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions', 26 September 2023, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202309/26/content_WS6512703dc6d0868f4e8dfc37.html.
18 Xinhua (2018), '习近平：努力开创中国特色大国外交新局面' [Xi Jinping: Strive to create a new situation in major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics], 23 June 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-06/23/c_1123025806.htm.
19 Xinhua (2017), '习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告' [Xi Jinping's Report at the 19th National Party Congress of the Chinese Community Party], 18 October 2017.

order, it also displays a much greater desire to leverage and exercise China's new capabilities to proactively advance the realization of this order, and to occupy a leading position within it.

The most expansive interpretation of China's end goal is that it reflects a desire to create a Sino-centric global order, in which China replaces the US as the dominant state and reshapes the entire order according to its preferences.

Analysts diverge over what might be the end state of the community of common destiny or China's ultimate goal within this vision of order. The most expansive interpretation of China's end goal is that it reflects a desire to create a Sino-centric global order, in which China replaces the US as the dominant state and reshapes the entire order according to its preferences.[20] Less expansive interpretations see ideas such as the community of common destiny as envisioning a partial hegemony in which China becomes the dominant state in some parts of the world, most likely in the developing world, essentially creating a bifurcated or bipolar order.[21] Other analysts highlight the ambiguity in Chinese writings on the community of common destiny to suggest that the end state remains ambiguous, most likely by design, to maintain flexibility in the specific policies China pursues and to avoid alienating other states. And even if ambiguous, it remains useful for how China positions itself with respect to the US amid an increasingly competitive relationship.[22] Divergent interpretations of China's end goal also make it more challenging to assess China's progress towards achieving its vision. Regardless, in the near to medium term, China will remain focused on balancing US power, especially in those areas that Beijing sees as most threatening to its interests.

China's perceptions of US power

As suggested above, China's perceptions of US power are negative – and have grown more so as the relationship has become more competitive over the last decade and has been framed increasingly by the US in ideological terms of democracy versus autocracy.

According to Fu Ying, a retired senior Chinese diplomat, China views the 'world order' as having three components: 'first, American or Western values; second, the US-led military alignment; third, the UN and its institutions'.[23] China opposes Western states imposing their values on other states, including itself, and opposes

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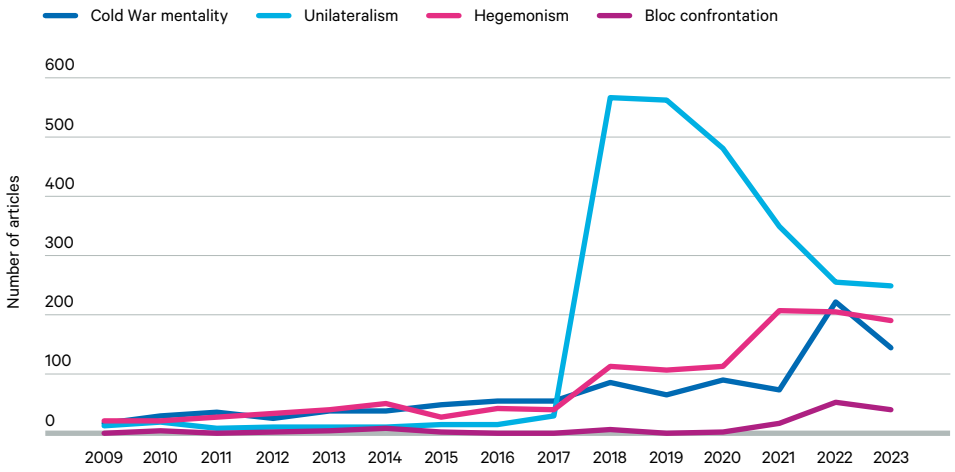
20 For example, see Tsang, S. and Cheung, O. (2024), *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
21 For example, see Rolland, N. (2020), *China's Vision for a New World Order*, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research; and Doshi, R. (2021), *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace the United States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
22 For example, see Zeng, J. (2020), *Slogan Politics: Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts*, Oxford: Palgrave.
23 Fu, Y. (2016), 'China and the Future of International Order', Lecture, 6 July 2016, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

the US's alliances as harmful tools of US power, but it supports the UN and its subordinate organizations. For Fu, 'China is part of the international order', meaning only the UN system.

Figure 1. Occurrence of keywords indicating Chinese perceptions of US hostility in the *People's Daily*



Source: Fravel, M. (2024), 'China's Global Security Initiative at Two: A Journey, Not a Destination', *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 80.

Offering an authoritative Chinese perspective, Fu's characterization of international order also highlights the ways in which China's vision of order has reflected concerns about US power and ideas. In the 1990s, Jiang's call for a new international order and new security concept contained what are now quite familiar terms that capture Beijing's concern about the role and influence of the US in the world, such as hegemony, power politics, a Cold War mentality and bloc politics. More recently, Chinese commentary on the community of common destiny and the three global initiatives are grounded in a clear counter-US framing that reflects similar concerns. As shown in Figure 1, Chinese perceptions of US hostility – as seen in the use of select keywords in articles in the *People's Daily*, the newspaper of the CPC's Central Committee – have increased significantly since 2018. In February 2023, for example, the day before China released a concept paper on the new Global Security Initiative, the Xinhua news agency released a lengthy report, entitled 'US Hegemony and Its Perils'. It outlined US threats to global peace and stability that China's initiative would address, thereby directly linking China's vision of order with its concerns about the US. The September 2023 white paper on the community of common destiny was also framed directly in terms of growing global dissatisfaction with the existing international order and clear criticism of the US role in the world. The only possible way to interpret the white paper is as a desire to establish an alternative vision to a US-led order and justify China's efforts to increase its international influence.

The counter-US framing in the community of common destiny and the related global initiatives serves several purposes. One is to delegitimize the US as a global leader to justify China's own proposed vision, thereby weakening the ideational basis of the existing order by sowing doubts about Washington's reliability

as a partner. Delegitimization of the leading international role of the US is a key element of China's approach to the rivalry between the two countries. Another purpose of the counter-US framing is to deflect growing US pressure and criticism of China as a threat to the international order by offering an alternative narrative about their rivalry. That narrative blames the US for the deterioration in ties and its global consequences, and portrays Washington – not Beijing – as the greatest threat to international order.

Pursuing the vision through deep diplomatic engagement

In pursuit of its vision of international order, Beijing uses all tools of statecraft and it has accumulated significant capabilities across them to do so, especially in the last decade.

Within the Asia-Pacific region, China uses all these tools – military, economic, diplomatic and information-related. Further afield, it relies most heavily on the last three. The economic tools extend far beyond the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), though the BRI is a prominent example, and include extensive trade, investment and financial ties with other states. The information tools include public diplomacy and persistent efforts to insert China's preferred diplomatic slogans and language linked to its vision of order into diplomatic documents such as joint statements, as well as into UN resolutions and programmes.

China's deep diplomatic engagement with the world enables it to pursue its vision of order through a latticework of international relationships. The first part of this engagement consists of bilateral relationships, given the intensive nature of China's diplomatic activity and the robust presence of its diplomats in all states except those that recognize Taiwan and therefore do not maintain diplomatic ties with Beijing. Although more than a diplomatic endeavour, the BRI is an important example of China's active bilateralism, in which it seeks to use infrastructure funding and direct investment to boost ties and increase its influence in the developing world.

As part of its approach to bilateral relationships, China has avoided pursuing military alliances or signing mutual defence pacts to promote its vision of order. In fact, it has not signed a mutual defence pact since doing so with North Korea in 1961. However, 'partnerships' with other states – defined variously as strategic, comprehensive strategic and all-weather strategic – play a significant role, especially with countries such as Pakistan and Russia with which China has close and extensive ties in all domains. These partnerships are variants of Beijing's bilateralism and are tools to deepen ties with states that it prioritizes to promote its interests. As part of its 'comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination'[24] with Russia, for example, China has provided significant diplomatic and economic support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and for Russian defence industries.

24 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), 'President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin Jointly Meet the Press', 16 May 2024, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202405/t20240517_11306326.htm.

The second part of China's deep diplomatic engagement consists of its membership in regional and minilateral organizations. It participates in an increasing number of these, some of which, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it helped to establish. In Asia, China belongs to and seeks a leading role in regional organizations and cooperation mechanisms that include the Lancang-Mekong Initiative and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. Beyond the Asia-Pacific, it is a founding member of the BRICS group of regional powers (now the 'BRICS plus')[25] and it seeks to exercise leadership within it too.

Institutionalized interactions with regional organizations of which it is not a member and with regions beyond its own form the third part of China's deep diplomatic engagement. These interactions could be described as 'bi-multilateralism' or '*n*+1' platforms, as they formalize engagement with regional organizations as well as with their members. This can take several forms, such as direct and formal interactions with regional organizations, such as China's dialogue with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (the ASEAN '10+1'). Beijing has similar institutionalized engagement with the European Union and the African Union. Another form of such interactions consists of dialogue mechanisms with other regions in the world, such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, the China–Latin America and Caribbean States Forum, and the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum.

If no organization or mechanism exists for a group of states with which it wants to engage, China will create one.

If no organization or mechanism exists for a group of states with which it wants to engage, China will create one. One recent example is the China–Central Asian Summit (C+C5); earlier ones include the 17+1 grouping between Central and Eastern European states and China (now reduced to 14+1 following the withdrawal of three states). In the 2010s, China tried but failed to create similar groupings with European states, including with France, Germany and the UK; with the Mediterranean states; and with the Nordic states.

What is notable about China's institutionalized engagement with, or participation in, different regional and minilateral organizations and mechanisms is that they are all forums in which the US is not a member or participant. This allows Beijing to shape their agendas in ways that maximize its interests and to pursue its priorities without direct US pushback.

With the exception of the 'BRICS plus', China's diplomatic engagement tends not to use transregional mechanisms (that is, across multiple regions), but it often pursues sub-regional ones. For example, Beijing has dialogue mechanisms with Arab League members through the China–Arab Summit and with some members

25 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members) and South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, as well as Indonesia, which joined in 2025.

of the Arab League in a dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council. China has pursued engagement with the EU but, as noted above, has also pursued smaller groupings with select European states. In Central Asia, China engages regional states through the SCO as well as the more recent C+C5.

The last part of China's deep diplomatic engagement is with international organizations that any sovereign state can join. The most important is the UN because of the principle of sovereign equality embedded in its charter, which places China on an equal footing with the US and allows it to rally support from many of the countries and regions with which it pursues the deep diplomatic engagement described above, especially in the developing world. China holds a critical position in the UN as a permanent member of the Security Council and uses the UN to advocate what it calls 'true multilateralism',[26] which it contrasts with the US use of military alliances. It also uses its role to weaken the emphasis on liberal values and human rights in the UN and to strengthen the principle of absolute sovereignty.

China's approach to rivalry with the US

China's approach to this rivalry emphasizes balancing US power and diminishing Washington's ability to check Beijing's growing influence and its pursuit of its vision of order. The ways in which Beijing seeks to balance US power are multifaceted and comprehensive.

A primary objective for China is to further enhance its hard power through continued military modernization, so that the People's Liberation Army can fight and win what it calls 'informatized local wars' and become a 'world-class' military by 2050.[27] These modernization efforts emphasize a potential conflict over Taiwan, but they are also shifting the balance of military power in the Asia-Pacific. China seeks to enhance its military presence in other parts of the world too by increasing cooperation with other militaries through joint exercises and training and, more gradually, by establishing overseas bases.

Next, a key aim is to strengthen its economic self-reliance and indigenous innovation to reduce China's vulnerability to external shocks and targeted sanctions. China also emphasizes the development of self-reliance in the frontier technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution that are seen as critical to increasing its national wealth and thus its influence in the coming decades – such technologies are also central to enhancing Chinese military capabilities. Part of this effort includes securing China's supply chains for critical technologies, such as advanced semiconductors, and enhancing indigenous innovation in areas such as biotechnology, quantum computing and artificial intelligence.

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26 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), 'Wang Yi: We Firmly Choose Multilateralism over Unilateralism', 9 January 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332627.html.
27 Fravel, M. (2020), 'China's "World-Class" Military Ambitions: Origins and Implications', *The Washington Quarterly*, 42(4), pp. 85–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1735850.

Relatedly, Beijing seeks to increase other states' economic dependence on China by deepening trade, investment and financial relations. Doing so raises the costs for countries to challenge Chinese interests and can increase policy alignment between China and these states.

Diplomatically, China will continue its efforts to delegitimize the US as a provider of global public goods and source of stability in the international system. The 'governance deficits'[28] that Beijing seeks to address through the community of common destiny and the three global initiatives are framed to tap dissatisfaction with the current order, and with Washington, in many parts of the world – and at least superficially to position China as a source of possible remedies. Delegitimization also includes efforts to discredit and divide US alliances, thereby weakening the US international position.

China will also further deepen ties with Russia. This is intended to enable China to concentrate its strategic resources against the US without needing to focus on securing its own northern border.

China will also further deepen ties with Russia. This is intended to enable China to concentrate its strategic resources against the US without needing to focus on securing its own northern border. Although Beijing and Moscow have quite different views of international order, Russia's confrontation with the US diverts some US strategic attention from China, giving the latter more breathing space while also making available certain advanced military technologies and relatively cheaper commodities such as oil and natural gas. As stated explicitly for the first time in their May 2024 joint statement, China and Russia declared their intent to cooperate in many areas to weaken US power.[29]

China seeks as much as possible to divide Europe, or parts of Europe, to prevent it from pursuing closer ties with the US or US-favoured policies that target China. Beijing frequently calls for Europe to exercise its 'strategic autonomy',[30] which is another way of asking it to reduce its alignment with the US and its support for US policies such as technology restrictions against China. However, Beijing's deepening ties with Moscow and support for Russia's economy and defence industrial base during the invasion of Ukraine have harmed China's image in the region and undercut its ability to divide Europe.

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28 Xi, J. (2021), 'Pulling Together Through Adversity and Toward a Shared Future for All', PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 April 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11341525.html.
29 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), 'President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin Jointly Meet the Press'.
30 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), 'Remarks by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Informal Meeting with the EU Political and Security Committee', 6 June 2024, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202406/t20240607_11406180.htm.

Elsewhere around the world, China will deepen and improve ties in all domains with Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. These regions are the main targets of the three global initiatives, and they were previously the regions where the BRI was most widely embraced and implemented.

Finally, among international institutions, China seeks to underscore the centrality of the UN and, within it, an absolute notion of sovereignty to counter more liberal conceptions of partial sovereignty.

Although China is unlikely to fundamentally alter this basic approach to its rivalry with the US, how China may respond to the policies of the second Trump administration bears consideration. On the one hand, immediately after Trump's election in November 2024, Beijing indicated a desire to maintain stability in its ties with Washington, underscoring four 'red lines' that the US should not cross.[31] On the other hand, China is prepared to respond vigorously – and much more proactively than during the first Trump administration – to what it views as challenges from the US. To prepare for increased tariffs and other potential economic sanctions, China has developed a suite of policy tools such as export controls to impose costs on US firms and has endeavoured to boost growth at home and deepen economic ties with third countries.[32] More generally, China is poised to exploit tensions that might arise between the US and other countries in response to Trump's economic and diplomatic policies, giving China an opportunity to weaken US alliances, divide Europe and further boost China's standing in the developing world. These tensions may also make it even easier for China to highlight the appeal of Xi's community of common destiny by offering it as a remedy for the instability and disorder which 'America first' policies may cause in the international community.[33]

Conclusion

China's vision of international order in the near to medium term reflects continued pursuit of Westphalian principles under the banner of the community of common destiny for mankind. Its pursuit of this vision has intensified in the past decade under Xi Jinping and is now intertwined with the US–China rivalry, as the country seeks to balance US power and maximize its international influence in an increasingly competitive context. Global implementation of this vision relies on all instruments of statecraft, but especially on deepening diplomatic engagement with the rest of the world.

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31 The four red lines are 'the Taiwan question, democracy and human rights, China's path and system, and China's development right'. See PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), 'President Xi Jinping Meets with U.S. President Joe Biden in Lima', 17 November 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202411/t20241117_11527672.html.
32 Medeiros, M. (2025), 'Xi has a plan for retaliating against Trump's gamesmanship', *Financial Times*, 4 January 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/ca79e423-7c0f-4883-a295-6fe1c73a2819.
33 Matthews, W. (2024), 'Trump's "America First" foreign policy will accelerate China's push for global leadership', Chatham House Expert Comment, 14 November 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/11/trumps-america-first-foreign-policy-will-accelerate-chinas-push-global-leadership.

03
Russia stakes global ambitions on regional dominance

Russia is using regional hegemony to secure its great power status, recasting the Ukraine war as a global conflict against the US-led international order. But whether Russia would thrive in a post-Western world is far from clear.

Alexander Cooley

For more than two decades, Russia has viewed itself as a regional leader and a great power in an emerging multipolar world. It has assumed an increasingly assertive and aggressive revisionist stance towards the US-led liberal international order, with its elites framing the war in Ukraine as central to Moscow's campaign to transform that order and to usher in a post-Western world. These regional and global ambitions are inextricably linked in Russian foreign policymakers' minds: if Russia does not project enduring influence in its neighbourhood, its global aspirations cannot be realized. Accordingly, the local or regional war in Ukraine – beyond questions of territory, Russian identity and regional security – has been recast by Moscow as a global conflict about the very essence of international order and as an attempt to oppose US-led Western hegemony.

Russia's vision of its place and role in the international order rests on three main pillars. First, Russia seeks to maintain leadership and control over the post-Soviet states, which it regards as forming its sphere of influence or 'special zone of privilege'.[34] It has exerted influence through a mix of coercion, creation of regional organizations under Russian leadership, support for breakaway territories to pressure the governments of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and the maintenance of a strong network of security and economic ties across the region. Countering Western influence and engagement in these countries is also a strategic priority by extension.

34 The term 'special zone of privilege' was coined by Russia's president, Dmitri Medvedev, in August 2008 following the country's war with Georgia. Kramer, A. (2008), 'Russia Claims its Sphere of Influence in the World', *New York Times*, 31 August 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/01/world/europe/01russia.html.

Second, Russia aims to secure its global standing as a great power in a post-Western, multipolar world. Its regional hegemony provides the basis for its global great power status, while its elites view the waning of US hegemony and global leadership as a necessary step in institutionalizing a new order.[35] Relatedly, on regional issues like Afghanistan and the Hamas–Israel war, or on global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, Russian officials reflexively point to Western policies, values and interventions as the drivers of regional instability and international non-cooperation.

Moscow regards its campaign to sow divisions in the West as the natural extension of its aim to promote a post-Western world order, and sees these efforts as the geopolitical equivalent to Western campaigns to promote democracy and liberal values abroad.

Third, Russia seeks to undermine Western political unity and foreign policy consensus. It works to erode support in the West for transatlantic institutions, allies and political communities, backing political elites and parties that oppose NATO and the European Union. Moscow also seeks to exacerbate political polarization and separatist movements in Western countries through disinformation operations. It regards its campaign to sow divisions in the West as the natural extension of its aim to promote a post-Western world order, and sees these efforts as the geopolitical equivalent to Western campaigns to promote democracy and liberal values abroad.

The impact of the war in Ukraine

Moscow opportunistically uses international crises and conflicts to promote its revisionist agenda. The war in Ukraine has turbocharged efforts across all three pillars of Russia's international ordering strategy.

Moldova has been a strong supporter of Ukraine but other post-Soviet states have been divided, remained silent or maintained public neutrality when it comes to the war. Georgia, for example, has refused to follow the West in imposing economic sanctions on Russia. In Central Asia, public opinion on who is to blame for the war ranges from being relatively evenly split (in Kazakhstan) to strongly backing the Russian position and blaming the West, Ukraine and NATO (in Kyrgyzstan).[36] Central Asian elites are concerned about a resurgent Russia's broader territorial ambitions and disregard for sovereign borders. However, such wariness does not translate into openly aligning with the West against Russia but instead into increasing engagement with as many foreign policy partners as possible (such as China, Japan, South Korea and the Gulf states).

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35 Mankoff, J. (2009), *Russia Foreign Policy: the return of great power politics*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
36 See the Central Asia Barometer survey from September 2022, https://eurasianet.org/surveying-kazakh-and-kyrgyz-attitudes-on-russias-war.

At the same time, rather than causing these countries to extricate themselves from their ties with Russia, the war in Ukraine has fostered new network connections and opportunities for population mobility across the region. Central Asian labour migrants continue to go to Russia in record numbers, while two waves of Russian emigrants, or *relokanty* (mostly displaced IT workers and conscription evaders), have boosted the Russian presence in capital cities across Central Asia and the South Caucasus.[37] Most importantly, sanctions evasion is booming, driven by regional business and political elites who actively collaborate with Russian firms and customs officials to maintain the operation of re-export chains and routes.

Russia's attempt to gain global support for its war has had limited success, especially in the first months when it framed the 'special military operation' as being necessary to 'de-nazify' Ukraine.[38] Later, Russia pivoted to frame the conflict as a full-fledged proxy war against Ukraine's Western supporters over the future of the international order. Moscow's diplomatic efforts in the Global South have sought to generate solidarity with itself against US hegemony, interventionism and imperialism. Opinion polls beginning in 2023 have suggested that international support for Ukraine is diminishing, even among countries that initially voted at the UN to support its sovereignty.[39] Most notably, in April 2023, Brazil's president Luis Ignácio Lula da Silva not only refused to send military assistance to Ukraine but also stated that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was equally culpable for the war.[40]

Moreover, as the war has gone on, Russia has pragmatically bolstered its war effort with the support of several Middle Eastern or Asian countries. Since the autumn of 2022, Iran has supplied Russia with more than 8,000 Iran-developed drones, many used for long-range attacks into Ukraine, and has reportedly transferred the technology for their production to within Russia.[41] Despite its official stance of neutrality, China continues to supply Russia covertly with dual-use goods and complete weapons systems. Perhaps most dramatically, after signing a mutual defence treaty, North Korea has sent more than 10,000 troops to fight on Russia's behalf, beginning in the Ukrainian-occupied region of Kursk.[42] As Western Europe has supported Ukraine, Russia has been increasingly backed by non-European allies and partners in a conflict taking place within the European theatre.

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37 Sahadeo, J. (2024), 'Russian "Relokanty" in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Cooperation and Tensions between States and Societies', International Centre for Migration Policy Development, February 2024, https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/60894/file/PB_Sahadeo_EN_final.pdf.
38 See US Department of State, Global Engagement Center (2023), *Disinformation Roulette: The Kremlin's Year of Lies to Justify an Unjustifiable War*, 23 February 2023, https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/disinformation-roulette-the-kremlins-year-of-lies-to-justify-an-unjustifiable-war.
39 See Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), 'Russia's pockets of support are growing in the developing world', 7 March 2023, https://www.eiu.com/n/russias-pockets-of-support-are-growing-in-the-developing-world; and Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. (2023), 'United West, Divided from the Rest: Global Public Opinion One Year into the War on Ukraine', European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2023, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/United-West-divided-from-the-rest_Leonard-Garton-Ash-Krastev.pdf.
40 Paraguassu, L. and Boadle, A. (2023), 'Brazil's Lula draws Russian praise, U.S. scorn for Ukraine views', Reuters, 17 April 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-thanks-brazil-efforts-resolve-ukraine-war-2023-04-17.
41 Reuters (2024), 'Ukraine says Russia Launched 8,060 Iran-Developed Drones during the War', 13 September 2024.
42 Barnes, J. E., Schmidt, E. and Schwirtz, M. (2024), '50,000 Russian and North Korean Troops Mass Ahead of Attack, U.S. Says', *New York Times*, 10 November 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/10/us/politics/russia-north-korea-troops-ukraine.html.

After an initial, intense period of stigmatization in the West that saw even Russia-friendly politicians quickly distance themselves from its actions, Moscow has cultivated a network of commentators and policymakers to pressure Kyiv into entering peace talks and to reduce Western support to Ukraine. In the run-up to the 2024 US presidential election, Russia continued to support a network of right-wing commentators, founded a number of authentic-looking local digital media outlets, and then, on election day on 5 November, it appeared to make a number of bomb threats to polling locations across several swing states. Moscow's hopes appeared to have paid off: Following Donald Trump's inauguration, the US president initiated direct bilateral negotiations with Moscow on the terms of a ceasefire that appeared favourable to the Kremlin, while threatening Ukraine with the cut-off from US assistance and intelligence-sharing.

Finally, Russia's intelligence and security services are increasingly determined to infiltrate and to repress the activities of Russians who fled to the West when the war began.[43]

Russian perceptions of US power

For some time, Russia's elites have openly asserted that the US is in decline as a global hegemon and that, consequently, the international system is unstable and undergoing a profound transformation. Many of them also say the war in Ukraine is the result of this instability and changing international dynamics. Still, most Russian elites, who had become accustomed to framing the West as fragmented, were taken by surprise by the degree of its initial unity, including over coordinated sanctions, the expansion of NATO membership to Finland and Sweden, and the supply of weaponry to Ukraine, as well as by the withdrawal of the Western private sector from Russia.

For some time, Russia's elites have openly asserted that the US is in decline as a global hegemon and that, consequently, the international system is unstable and undergoing a profound transformation.

Russia's elites routinely level a host of criticisms at US foreign policy, but three are especially resonant.

The first criticism is that the US liberal democracy agenda has long been a cover for forcing disruptive regime changes around the world. Russian analysts point to the Colour Revolutions that ousted post-Soviet rulers in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) in favour of more Western-oriented opposition figures following street protests triggered by flawed elections. They regarded those events as geopolitical moves, rather than the product of domestic discontent. They believed

43 Soldatov, A. and Borogan, I. (2023), 'In From the Cold: the Struggle for Russia's Exiles', Center for European Policy Analysis, 12 December 2023, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/in-from-the-cold-the-struggle-for-russias-exiles.

that these protests were the direct result of the actions of the US or of US-backed external actors, such as democracy non-governmental organizations and regional donors. This narrative was reinforced during the Arab Spring in 2011, when the US similarly appeared to encourage the toppling of rulers across the Middle East, including long-time allies such as Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Russia's elites commonly equate democracy promotion with regime change and point out that the result of US interventions is instability and chaos, citing Libya as a prime example.

The second charge is that the US's alleged support for a rules-based order is acutely hypocritical, especially with US officials invoking the importance of rules, norms and international law only when convenient. In his address after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and in his speech that marked the annexation of four occupied provinces of eastern Ukraine in 2022, President Vladimir Putin made multiple references to Western hypocrisy and double standards (and even 'triple standards'). From this perspective, the outbreak of the Hamas–Israel war has not only turned the global spotlight away from Ukraine; it has also allowed Russian policymakers to underscore how the US in its Middle East policy routinely ignores UN declarations, international law and global public opinion.

A third critique is that of US-led economic imperialism and Washington's coercive and geopolitical use of dollar diplomacy. Russia's elites have been critical of the purpose and justification of US and Western sanctions on their country since 2014, and the more robust ones imposed since 2022 have spurred Moscow to take practical and diplomatic steps to alleviate their impact. Russian academics and analysts have a robust research programme on the evolution, purpose and forms of US and Western sanctions.[44]

Foreign policy instruments

In Western policymaking circles, Russia tends to be viewed as a declining or regional power, with neither the capabilities nor the global influence of China, the main strategic competitor of the US.[45] This ignores the disruptions that Russia has caused for the international system and Western interests, as well as the evolution of its toolkit to effect change in several aspects of the international order.

Military force

The most important element of Russia's toolkit is the use of force to achieve its political and strategic aims. Even before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia had forcibly intervened in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 by annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in the east of the country. Further afield, Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015 to support the teetering regime of President Bashar

44 See, for example, Timofeev, I., Arapova, E. and Nikitina, Y. (2024), 'The Illusion of 'Smart' Sanctions: The Russian Case,' *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22(2) (April–June 2024): 156–78, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/156-178.pdf.
45 On 25 March 2014, in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, US President Barack Obama proclaimed that 'Russia is a regional power threatening its neighbors – not out of strength, but out of weakness'. Wilson, S. (2014), 'Obama dismisses Russia as "regional power" acting out of weakness', *Washington Post*, 25 March 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html.

al-Assad was initially successful, supporting the regime until its collapse in December 2024. Moscow has consistently promoted its global reputation as a guardian of political stability, especially among authoritarian regimes.

The first months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 revealed significant weaknesses in its large kinetic operations, as the Ukrainian military repelled Russian advances, destroyed symbolic Russian targets in the Black Sea and regained some territory, most notably Kherson. However, since 2023, Russia's military has proven more effective, including in halting the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and it has since achieved incremental gains as Ukraine's munitions supplies have dwindled. The severe loss of troops has not changed elite thinking about the cost of the war or moved public opinion to oppose it.

Regional and non-Western organizations

Upon becoming president in 1999, Putin made re-engaging with the post-Soviet states a priority. For this purpose, Russia launched regional organizations to institutionalize its control over its neighbours, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Customs Union, which in 2014 became the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). These organizations mimicked some of the institutional features of NATO and the EU, respectively, but Western policymakers mostly dismissed them as ineffective or politically not worthy of engagement.[46]

Since the start of the war in 2022, the relevance of these regional bodies has been mixed. The CSTO's legitimacy has been threatened by Russia's refusal to defend or intervene on behalf of its fellow member Armenia, which was ousted from Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan's forces in September 2023. As a result, public opinion in Armenia has shifted against Russia and Moscow's security guarantees have lost credibility. Just a few weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, however, Russia had achieved its greatest success when CSTO peacekeepers entered Kazakhstan at the request of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who was facing street protests, to defend symbolic targets and affirm Russia's support for him.

By contrast, the frequently criticized EAEU has provided the legal architecture for much of Russia's sanctions evasion and thriving re-export trade, allowing Russian businesses to reflag abroad, enabling the re-export of repurposed and dual-use goods (many from China) via Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and facilitating Russian firms and citizens in opening foreign bank accounts.

Russia's elites are strong backers of its membership in non-Western groups and organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS group[47] and of the expansion of these, which they view as building the fabric of a global governance that is not controlled by the West. Russia views these organizations as forums to criticize the West and to promote counter-ordering agendas in different regions.

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46 Nikitina, Y. (2012), 'The Collective Security Treaty Organization through the Looking Glass', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 59(3), pp. 41–52. Also see Flikke, G. (2009), 'Balancing Acts: Russian–Chinese Relations and Developments in the SCO and the CSTO', Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.
47 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members), South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, and Indonesia (2025).

International law

Russia's membership in regional organizations also bolsters its broader claims to be a champion and guardian of international law. Moscow values and defends its permanent seat in the UN Security Council, but its interpretations of the applicability of international law have evolved as a function of its dissatisfaction with the liberal international order.[48]

The West's unilateral recognition of Kosovo as an independent state in 2008 and the US argument that this would not set a precedent were particularly criticized in Russia, where this was viewed as a prime example of Washington only following international law when it is geopolitically convenient. The Kosovo decision also provided Moscow with a precedent to justify its recognition of the independence of Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that same year.[49]

In 2015, the Constitutional Court of Russia ruled that it retained the authority to override rulings of the European Court on Human Rights (which Russia had previously regarded as binding) if it determined that the rulings were incompatible with the constitution.[50] The local referendums preceding Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and in the four occupied eastern Ukrainian provinces in 2022 were obviously shams, but they were indicative of Moscow's desire to justify its territorial grabs through some type of international legal process.

Counter-norms

Russia puts forth a constant critique of liberal democracy and the Western promotion of liberal causes. In 2019, Putin argued that liberal ideas are 'obsolete' and that 'traditional values are more stable and more important for millions of people than this liberal idea, which, in my opinion, is really ceasing to exist'.[51] Russia has consistently pushed 'traditional values' as a global counter-norm to liberalism, emphasizing the traditional family and promoting the role of state religion and, more recently, a pro-life agenda. Tellingly, in his 2022 annexation speech, amid his ranting about US imperialism, Putin also railed against the evils of gender-reassignment surgery.[52] Championing traditional values has made Russia politically appealing to some right-wing and conservative movements in Europe and the US, including through new transnational networks formed by groups like the World Congress of Families. Russia's elites have also promoted the norm of civilizational diversity that China puts forward and sought to emphasize the importance of sovereignty and security.[53]

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48 Mälksoo, L. (2015), *Russian approaches to international law*, Oxford University Press.
49 Fabry, M. (2012), 'The contemporary practice of state recognition: Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and their aftermath', *Nationalities Papers*, 40(5), pp. 661–76.
50 Mälksoo, L. (2021), 'International law and the 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution', *American Journal of International Law*, 115(1), p. 88.
51 Barber, L. and Foy, H. (2019), 'Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete'', *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36.
52 Putin, V. (2022), 'Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia', The Kremlin, 30 September 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465.
53 Bettiza, G., Bolton, D. and Lewis, D (2023), 'Civilizationism and the Ideological Contestation of the Liberal International Order', *International Studies Review*, 25(2), pp. 1–28; and Cooley, A. (2015), 'Countering Democratic Norms', *Journal of Democracy*, 26(3), pp. 49–63.

Information warfare

Russia uses its information warfare capability to promote disinformation at multiple levels (local, national, regional and global) through a complex ecosystem that includes state media, content-sharing agreements, social media and the strategic use of fake media outlets. From targeting regimes and factions in African countries to promoting anti-Western vaccine messages across Latin America, to spreading disinformation about the 2024 US presidential election,[54] Russia has developed an effective network designed to highlight the failures of the liberal international order and to promote political polarization in the West. Its information efforts are less focused on promoting positive views of Russia, although this is often used in the West as a standard for judging their efficacy, which mistakenly equates information warfare with 'soft power'.

Providing public goods

Russia has repeatedly attempted to act as an alternative provider of public goods, but this is one area of international ordering where it has proven ineffective. For example, during the financial crisis of 2008–09, it unsuccessfully attempted to leverage emergency financial assistance to other countries to extract foreign policy concessions, including trying to get Belarus to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia also offered Kyrgyzstan an emergency loan with the demand that it close the Manas airbase, which the US used to stage troops in and out of Afghanistan. However, although President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced the base's closure, he later renewed the lease for a higher annual rental payment. Around that time, Russia similarly failed in its attempts to negotiate military access in exchange for emergency financing in such countries as Cyprus, Iceland and Vietnam.

Russia has repeatedly attempted to act as an alternative provider of public goods, but this is one area of international ordering where it has proven ineffective.

Simply put, Russia's resources for providing assistance to other countries are not at the level of those of China or even of Saudi Arabia. Moscow has accepted that it is no longer competing in Eurasia with Chinese public-goods initiatives like the Belt and Road, and it now includes Chinese infrastructure integration projects in its concept of a Greater Eurasia.[55]

A more recent example of Russia's limited success with regard to public goods was its efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic to leverage its Sputnik V vaccine.[56]

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54 Myers, S. (2024), 'Spate of Mock News Sites With Russian Ties Pop Up in U.S.', *New York Times*, 7 March 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/07/business/media/russia-us-news-sites.html.
55 Lewis, D. (2018), 'Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia'', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(10), pp. 1612–37.
56 On vaccine diplomacy as competitive public-goods provision, see Suzuki, M. and Yang, S. (2023), 'Political economy of vaccine diplomacy: explaining varying strategies of China, India, and Russia's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy', *Review of International Political Economy*, 30(3), pp. 865–90.

After announcing with great public fanfare that Russian scientists had developed the world's first vaccine against the virus, Moscow mostly failed to deliver on contracted commitments to purchasing countries, becoming mired in regulatory difficulties and corruption procurement scandals, which made Sputnik V a more marginal player in vaccine geopolitics than its Western and Chinese counterparts.[57]

The liberal international order

Russia has a shaky record as a revisionist power leading global efforts to dismantle the US-led liberal international order. However, the assumptions of liberal internationalism about Russia have also been debunked. Most notably, the long-held assumption in certain Western countries that economic interdependence in areas like energy, information technology and consumer goods would change Russia's interests or temper its revanchism has proven to be incorrect.

In the case of the Ukraine war, Russia's opportunistic global messaging that it is the vanguard of anti-Western imperialism, while rightly derided by Ukraine and its supporters, resonates in other countries. This complicates Western debates about supporting Ukraine with local, regional and global considerations that seem far removed from the actual triggering causes of the war.

Even if Western support for Ukraine diminishes and the country is somehow forced into a settlement on Russian terms, it is not at all clear that such a settlement or a resulting post-Western world would be one in which Russia would thrive or retain the same international prominence that it enjoys now as the leader of an anti-US revisionist bloc. The historian Stephen Kotkin has argued that the least likely of all the possible scenarios for Russia's future is the one predicted by its foreign policy elites, namely that the country will remain a great power with a regional sphere of influence in a multipolar world.[58] It is more likely, Kotkin argues, that Russia assumes a global rogue status more akin to that of North Korea or becomes China's vassal.

Navigating China–US rivalry

Discussions about Russia's vision for international order rightly zero in on its relationship with China. Putin and President Xi Jinping have portrayed China–Russia relations as growing ever closer and as a 'partnership without limits'. Three key points stand out in this regard.

First, the war in Ukraine, despite (or perhaps because of) Russia's military difficulties, has brought the two countries closer. Although China remains officially neutral, it holds a pro-Russia type of neutrality that includes agreeing with Moscow's position about the causes of the conflict and about NATO expansion, denouncing Western economic sanctions and the weaponization of the dollar, and opposing

57 See Stronski, P. (2021), 'What Went Wrong with Russia's Sputnik V Rollout?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 November 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/11/what-went-wrong-with-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-rollout?lang=en.
58 Kotkin, S. (2024), 'The Five Futures of Russia', *Foreign Affairs*, 103(2) May/June 2024, pp. 64–83.

liberalism and democracy. There are also some interaction effects. For example, in May 2022, in reaction to individual sanctions by the West against Russian oligarchs, China barred its high-level officials and their family members from owning overseas bank accounts.[59] Researchers have found that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created a demonstration effect that may increase public support in China for using military force against Taiwan.[60]

Second, differences exist between China and Russia on certain matters, but these are not yet sufficient to change the overall emphasis on their strategic partnership. Beijing has proven to be a tough negotiator on important bilateral gas projects (such as the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline), and Moscow's pivot to the East cannot make up for its loss of Western markets and investments. China has also warned Russia about the danger of using a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine. But, overall, there is little official public disagreement between them. Beijing also appears to acknowledge that the US would be focusing entirely on China if it were not for the war in Ukraine.

Russia may not fully trust China but it will continue to cooperate and expand ties with its neighbour in its bid to oppose the US-led order, as well as to forge closer economic and security relations with countries that the US considers as rogues and rivals, such as Cuba, Iran and North Korea.

Third, the partnership between China and Russia follows a pattern seen for some time across Eurasia. The relationship may be asymmetrical in favour of China, but this does not prevent mutual accommodation, if only because the two share a common cause in opposing the US-led liberal international order. For example, they coordinated to deny the US basing rights in Central Asia during its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and they engaged with Afghanistan and its neighbours to advance their respective regional agendas. Russia may not fully trust China but it will continue to cooperate and expand ties with its neighbour in its bid to oppose the US-led order, as well as to forge closer economic and security relations with countries that the US considers as rogues and rivals, such as Cuba, Iran and North Korea.

Another wrinkle in the geopolitics of the Beijing–Moscow axis is the second Trump administration. A number of Trump officials have emphasized that it is China, not Russia, that constitutes the main threat and strategic competitor to the US. Accordingly, settling the conflict in Ukraine and forcing European countries to assume greater responsibility for their security are viewed as critical for refocusing

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59 Wong, C. (2022), 'China Insists Party Elites Shed Overseas Assets, Eyeing Western Sanctions on Russia', *Wall Street Journal*, 19 May 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-insists-party-elites-shed-overseas-assets-eyeing-western-sanctions-on-russia-11652956787.
60 Aksoy, D., Enamorado, T. and Yang, T. (2024), 'Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Chinese Public Support for War', *International Organization*, pp. 1–20.

US resources and attention on China in the Pacific. Politically, polling indicates that most members of the US Republican base do not regard Russia, despite its invasion of Ukraine, as the main threat to the US, and it appears unlikely that Kyiv will again see the types of aid packages that the Biden administration assembled.[61]

Moreover, even if a US strategic reorientation towards Asia takes place, it is unclear whether Moscow will make any type of meaningful concessions to Ukraine and its Western backers to settle the conflict, such as allowing Kyiv Western-backed security guarantees. Three years after commencing the limited 'special military operation', the war has cost Russia hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives. However, Moscow's increasing networking and pragmatic cooperation with global partners and the prospect of eroding Western unity have emboldened its revisionist aspirations and agenda despite – or even because of – these sunk costs.

61 Copeland, J. (2024), 'Wide partisan divisions remain in Americans' view of the war in Ukraine', Pew Research Center, 25 November 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/25/wide-partisan-divisions-remain-in-americans-views-of-the-war-in-ukraine.

04
Resistance: the mantra behind Iran's worldview

After decades of both defying and attempting to coexist with the West, Iran's rulers detect structural shifts in the liberal international order which they believe will reward their anti-US strategic outlook.

Vali Nasr

Iran is today a revisionist power that sees the liberal international order as inimical to its national interest. Iran proclaims its desire to revise that order, and in practice bypasses it where possible. This makes for an uneasy coexistence with the liberal international order, wherein Iran seeks advantage within that order opportunistically, but challenges it and looks to circumvent it. There is revolutionary ideology behind Iran's attitude, but the country's experiences with the liberal international order since the revolution in 1979 have reinforced its suspicions of the world order.

Iran's foreign policy posture and its outlook on state, society and the economy reflect not only its ideological predispositions, but also how it views experiences such as the 1979 revolution, the 1980s war with Iraq and the collapse of the nuclear deal in 2018. Another factor is the difficulty for Iran of balancing its fundamental antagonism towards the world order with the imperative of working within it and contending with the West.

Criticisms of Iran's strategic outlook and conduct abound in both academia and public debates. There are obvious arguments against the assumptions of Iran's foreign policy and questions regarding whether its goals are achievable. The aim in this essay is not to reiterate those criticisms or judge the wisdom of Iran's foreign policy thinking and behaviour. Rather, the chapter will seek to capture the country's strategic outlook, how it sees its national interest, and how it then seeks to balance strategic proclivities with pragmatic choices in dealing with the international order. That balance is shifting as the nature of the world order undergoes profound change.

Revisionism informed and boosted by global events

Iran's posture is not irrational genuflection by an authoritarian theocracy to outside pressure. It instead reflects a national security doctrine that is anchored in a particular view of national interest, one that has roots in Iran's history. Iran's current foreign policy outlook can be most readily traced back to the revolution of 1979 and the Islamic Republic's founding Islamic ideology.[62] Equally important, Iran's understanding of the world order and its effects on Iranian interests has been forged by the Islamic Republic's experiences since 1979. The most salient of these experiences have been its eight-year war with Iraq;[63] the US-led containment of Iran since 1979; 9/11 and the War on Terror; US invasions of Iran's neighbours to its east and west, namely Afghanistan and Iraq; Iran's experience of a nuclear deal with the West and the ever-tightening noose of sanctions around its economy[64] – and going forward, the lessons inherent in the recent regional conflagration following Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel and the West's response to it, culminating ultimately in the decimation of Hezbollah in Lebanon and fall of the Assad regime in Syria. These experiences have enveloped one another to shape Iran's conception of its national security, and of how to protect itself within the current world order. As Ayşe Zarakol has argued, anxiety cinches the psychology of states, and that will in turn shape their conceptions of insecurity and status, and their approach to the world.[65]

In this context, global developments that have challenged or changed the established international order have been of particular interest to Iran's foreign policy elite. For a period, the world order that Iran confronted appeared stable. Yet, the past decade has witnessed an acceleration of fundamental changes to the world order with direct implications for Iran's strategic outlook. Iran's rulers have noted the palpable decline in the salience and coherence of the current world order – a theme that peppers the speeches of the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and of the political and military elite. They have noted an end to US unipolar dominance over the global order; the receding footprint of globalization as the dominant international economic framework; the alienation of China and Russia from the liberal international order; and the rise of the BRICS.[66]

Iran's rulers see validation of their own long-held worldviews, and even despite setbacks in the region, they detect long-run advantage and opportunity in structural shifts in the world order. Khamenei has gone as far as to claim credit for Iran's role in altering the balance of power in the world order. Since 2018 Iran has increased its economic and strategic tilt towards China and Russia, seeking strategic depth in the

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62 Farhi, F. and Lotfian, S. (2012), 'Iran's Post-Revolution Foreign Policy Puzzle', in Nau, H. R. and Ollapally, D. M. (eds) (2012), *World of Aspiring Power: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan and Russia*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 114–40.
63 Samuel, A. T. (2022), *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Tabatabai A. M. and Samuel, A. T. (2017), 'What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us About the Future of Iran Nuclear Deal', *International Security*, 41(1), pp. 152–85.
64 Nasr, V. (2018), 'Iran Among the Ruins', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018, pp. 108–18.
65 Zarakol, A. (2011), *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
66 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members), South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, and Indonesia (2025). On the Supreme Leader's speeches, see Ayatollah Khamenei's interview in *Entekhab.ir*, https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/amp/news/731364.

de facto emergence of a contiguous Eurasian 'axis of resistance' to the US.[67] Russia is now committed to opening a north–south trade corridor running via Iran and on to the Arab monarchies on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf – which once were impermeable to relations with Iran.[68]

Iran's rulers see validation of their own long-held worldviews, and even despite setbacks in the region, they detect long-run advantage and opportunity in structural shifts in the world order.

There is strategic convergence between Iran, China and Russia. Khamenei recently opined that both China and Russia tried to realize their national aims by embracing the US-led world order only to discover what Iran has maintained all along: that the liberal international order is not an even playing field for all; rather, that it is an instrument of US hegemony, and that the path of other challengers to great power status will be blocked by the US. Having seen Iran's perspective and now finding themselves in the crosshairs of the US, those great powers are moving in Iran's direction (as much as Iran is moving in theirs).

The crisis facing the liberal international order is therefore giving rise to a strategic space at the global level that is aligned with and boosts Iran's revisionism. That space will only grow as US conflict with China and Russia becomes more embedded in US foreign policy; it will to an increasing extent also shape the dynamics of the global order. For the first time since the start of the Iranian nuclear crisis in 2003, at the meeting of the Board of Governors of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency in June 2024, China and Russia broke with the US and Europe to join Iran in rejecting a motion to censure Tehran, embracing the notion that the UN agency was serving as an instrument of American foreign policy.[69] However, in practice the promise of this strategic space has not lived up to the expectations that Iran's most ardent advocates of a 'look east' policy have of it. China and Russia have provided Iran with strategic depth, but neither has provided the much-needed military support nor an economic outlet that could effectively buoy up Iran's economy. So Iranians debate the extent to which the country should continue to rely on China and Russia, but this has not obviated their abiding suspicion of the liberal international order.

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67 B. As`adi va Monavvari, S. A. (2021), 'Barresi Ravabet-e Iran va Rusiyeh dar Qarn Jadid: Etehhad-e Stratejik ya Hamgarai-ye Manafe' [Examination of Iran-Russia Relations in the New Century: Strategic Alliance or Convergence of Interests], *Rahyaftha-ye Siyasi va Beinolmellali*, 12(4), pp. 181–210.
68 de Waal, T. (2024), 'Putin's Hidden Game in the South Caucasus', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 June 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/azerbaijan/putins-hidden-game-south-caucasus.
69 Iran Watch (2024), 'Joint Statement on Behalf of the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation Under the Agenda Item 6 of the Session of the IAEA Board of Governors', 6 June 2024, https://www.iranwatch.org/library/governments/iran/ministry-foreign-affairs/joint-statement-behalf-peoples-republic-china-islamic-republic-iran-russian-federation-under-agenda.

How resistance defines the ruling elite view of world order

It is commonly assumed in the West that Iran's defiance of the US and the West is ideological – reflecting the anti-Western tilt of Islamism – and is a facet of the Islamic Republic's theocratic nature. Although this explanation has validity in that the language of the state is Islamic, and ideology accounted for the Islamic Republic's virulent anti-Americanism early on, the value of this perspective has waned over the decades.[70]

The mantra of Iran's foreign policy today is 'resistance'. This is an idea that draws on Islamism's antagonism to the West but has been increasingly defined in strategic and national security terms. It is now less an ideological posture and more a national security doctrine for Iran. Even at the ideological level it does not reflect the religious stamp of the revolution as much as it does the Third Worldist view of its leadership. According to Iran's Supreme Leader, who is the Islamic Republic's chief strategist, resistance is a modern-day version of the anti-imperialism that was in vogue among the New Left in the 1960s and the 1970s. At its core, Iran views the US as a rapacious imperialist hegemon bent on world domination.[71]

Iran seeks to resist US imperialism, but its own aim is development and great power status, which are outlined in a grand vision for the state and the economy in national documents. Iran is adamant that development cannot be achieved in a state of 'dependence' on the US and acceptance of its hegemony. Echoing the decades-old 'dependency theory' in political science, Iran's view is that development in a system designed to ensure the supremacy of the West and the subservience of the rest means perpetual underdevelopment. The path to veritable development must start by rejecting imperialism and the world order that supports it. The US, Iran's Supreme Leader has argued, is blocking Iran's path to development.[72] That is the root cause of the conflict with the US, and why Iran must resist in order to develop in accordance with its own plans.[73]

There are few religious harangues and much nationalistic defiance in how Iran defines its resistance. In nationalist terms, resistance is cast as a continuation of Iran's struggle for independence, heir to the nationalist movement of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in the 1950s to secure Iran's right to its national resources. Mossadegh's nationalization of Iran's oil industry was undone by what Iran's rulers believe was an American- and British-engineered military coup. Regardless of its accuracy, this is the operative historical memory that underpins the Islamic Republic's worldview. Their latter-day resistance, argue the doyens of the republic, is succeeding where Mossadegh failed. In this they make clear that resistance to the US has roots in contemporary Iranian history, and in Iran's struggle for national independence.

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70 Motahhari, A. (2020), 'We and America', *Etemad*, 4815, 14 December 2020, http://www.etemadnewspaper.ir/fa/main/detail/160126/ما-و-امریکا.
71 Mirqaderi, S. F. and Kiyani, H. (2012), 'The Basis of Resistance Literature in the Quran', *Faslnameh-e Adabiyat-e Dini*, 1(1), 1391/March–April 2012, p. 70.
72 *Khamenei.ir* (2009), 'Comments During a Meeting with Pilgrims and Neighbors of the Shrine of Harat-e Ali ibn Musa Al-Reza', 21 March 2009, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=6082.
73 Smyth, G. (2016), 'Deciphering the Iranian Leader's Call for Resistance Economy', *Guardian*, 19 April 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/apr/19/iran-resistance-economy-tehranbureau.

Why Iran is at odds with the liberal international order

This surly view reflects a deep distrust of the West that has been reinforced by the Islamic Republic's experiences since 1979. All revolutions challenge standing international orders, and Iran's revolution was no exception. One of its defining events was the defiance of international law when American diplomats were held hostage in the US Embassy in Tehran for 444 days. However, as revolutionary zeal gave way to bureaucratic behaviour during its first decade, and the Islamic Republic increasingly approximated the Weberian legal-rational state, opposition to the international order moved beyond mere ideological posturing. That opposition then reflected more and more the lessons of Iran's harrowing eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s. During that war Iran's rulers concluded that the liberal international order provided no protection to Iran, nor did it serve the country's interests. To the contrary, at every turn its rules were deployed to ensure Iraq's advantage and block Iran's path to victory. Even the UN was biased and protected Iraq.[74] The world body did not acknowledge or condemn Iraq's invasion and occupation of Iranian territory. Economic sanctions then prevented Iran from buying arms while European countries armed Iraq.[75] The US provided Iraq with battlefield intelligence to dull Iranian offensives. When Iraq used chemical weapons against Iranian troops, first in 1982 and then threatened to do so against Iranian cities, Western powers and the UN remained silent.[76]

Iran concluded that it failed to defeat Iraq because the US and Europe supported Iraq militarily, US regional allies bankrolled Iraq, and international organizations failed to condemn Iraq. Those conclusions led Iran to view the liberal international order as a tool of the West and a cudgel to be used against Iran – it was an adversarial order, one which Iran had to live with but defy if it were to realize its national aims.

More recently, Iran has viewed the liberal international order as deeply biased towards Israel in the Gaza war.

This dark view of the world order has persisted and has even gained greater currency in Iran since the 1980s. President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the imposition of severe sanctions on Iran confirmed the belief in Tehran that international agreements hold no value and provide no protection; they serve merely as instruments of convenience for the US to further its own interests. The argument that Iran should not give up hard national assets like a nuclear programme for the promise

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74 Mostaghimi, B. and Taromsari, M. (1997), 'Double Standard: The Security Council and the Two Wars', in Rajaee, F. (ed.) (1997), *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, pp. 62–70.
75 Shiralinia, J. (2014), *Tarikh-e Jang-e Iran va Araq* [*History of the Iran–Iraq War*], Tehran: Sayan, pp. 220–21 and 227; Ostadi Moqaddam, M. H. (2021), *Ashna-ie ba Defa`-e Moqaddas* [*Understanding Sacred Defense*], Tehran: Khadem al-Reza, p. 130.
76 Coll, S. (2024), *The Achilles Trap: Saddam Hussein, the C.I.A., and the Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq*, New York: Penguin Press, pp. 107–16.

of a deal in accordance with rules of the international normative order has grown louder in Tehran since 2018.

More recently, Iran has viewed the liberal international order as deeply biased towards Israel in the Gaza war. However, this time Iran sees a larger swath of the Global South arrayed against selective application of international norms. Iran sees vindication in this.[77] Tehran argued that it decided to retaliate against Israel with a barrage of drones and missiles in April 2024 only because the UN failed to condemn an Israeli attack on Iran's consulate in Damascus. That justification is indicative of Iran's mindset towards the liberal international order and its institutions, and why Iran sees the weakening of that order as a strategic gain.

Iran and the end of globalization

Before Russia invaded Ukraine, Iran was the most sanctioned country in the world, and it certainly continues to be among the countries that have been under sanctions for the longest and subject to the most severe economic pressure.[78] The goal of economic sanctions against Iran has been to deny it access to global trade and financial networks – the pillars of globalization. As a result, Iran has developed its economy by circumventing sanctions and deliberately violating the rules governing global trade and financial transactions.

Yet various international developments have boosted hopes in Tehran that economic possibilities outside the Western-led world order will expand – and that a growing number of countries will share Iran's worldview and trade with it. Factors spurring those hopes have included the recent populist revolt in the West against globalization, as evident with Trump's presidency in the US, Brexit and the electoral successes of populist parties in Europe; the proliferation of economic sanctions across the world alienating more and more countries from the West, allowing Iran to make common cause with them; and the implications of the US economy decoupling from China.

The imposition of economic sanctions on Russia and China has expanded the share of the global economy that is now subject to US economic pressure that is exerted using the mechanisms of the liberal international order. Strategic common ground now exists between Iran and the expanding list of countries impacted by US sanctions, and this presents the possibility of circumventing sanctions more effectively. Iran's economic strategy of working around sanctions and finding space to grow despite them has developed allies around the world and has gained greater resilience to oppose the US-dominated international economic order. Iran now sees the emergence of a continent-wide Eurasian zone encompassing itself, Russia and China which is large enough to counter US economic pressure and to pose as the base for an alternate global economic order.[79]

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77 Bajoghli, N. and Nasr, V. (2024), 'How the War in Gaza Revived the Axis of Resistance', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 January 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-war-gaza-revived-axis-resistance.
78 Bajoghli, N., Nasr, V., Salehi-Isfahani, D. and Vaez, A. (2024), *How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
79 See Bourse & Bazaar (2022), 'China-Iran Trade Report', October 2022, https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/china-iran-trade-reports/october-2020?rq=China; and Bourse & Bazaar (2021), 'China's deficit with Iran widens', March 2021, https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/china-iran-trade-reports/march-2021?rq=China.

Over the past four decades and especially since the imposition of 'maximum pressure' sanctions, Iran has been forced to restructure its economy. Reduced oil revenue has compelled greater reliance on taxation as well as direct control of the manufacturing and services sectors. This process has expanded the state's reach into the economy and society – and particularly has expanded the deep state security apparatus. The process has unfolded in tandem with greater reliance on black market trade and financial networks. These channels circumvent regular global economic networks. As such, the viability of Iran's economy is now dependent not on the dominance and health of the global economic order, but on a growing number of economies grappling with the impact of US sanctions, the availability of loopholes in its networks, and the willingness of a growing number of states and actors to violate its rules.[80]

The retrenchment of globalization and the factors behind it have given Iran the belief that its so-called resistance economy will be viable and will find room to grow. The overuse of sanctions by the US will degrade their effectiveness as an international economic regime.[81]

Although Iran sees a convergence of interests with China and Russia, the three countries do not always see eye to eye. Iran came close to signing a strategic partnership with China, but Tehran found the financial terms onerous, whereas Beijing saw limits to how much it could invest in Iran given the scope of economic sanctions on the Iranian economy. Both China and Russia have sought to balance their ties with Tehran with their economic interests in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Both have supported the demand of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that Iran settle its dispute over three islands that Iran appropriated from the UAE in the 1970s as Iranian territory. That support has irked Tehran, but such discord does not override the large convergence among the three. Importantly, Iran has been persuaded by both Beijing and Moscow to improve ties with its Arab neighbours – and conversely Beijing and Moscow have shown Tehran that they can override the standing US policy of containment of Iran to persuade GCC states to normalize ties with Tehran. Iran has seen the greater roles played by China and Russia in the Persian Gulf as a sign of declining US influence there and a source of potential benefits.

Although the promise that China and Russia will compensate for Iran's exclusion from the world economy holds much allure, so far the reality falls short of expectations.

The tightening of US sanctions has effectively ended Iran's trade with the West. Chinese manufacturing and supply chains have replaced European suppliers, and Iranian trade routes increasingly run north to Russia, east to China, and

80 Bajoghli, Nasr, Salehi-Isfahani and Vaez (2024), *How Sanctions Work*, pp. 51–52.
81 Demarais, A. (2022), 'The End of the Age of Sanctions?', *Foreign Affairs*, 27 December 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/end-age-sanctions.

to neighbours around Iran.[82] In 2023, the Iranian government estimated that in five years the revenue earned from its trade with Russia (also under Western sanctions) would exceed Iran's revenue from oil sales. It is not just state revenue that has become increasingly divorced from economic interactions with the West. The Iranian private sector, which was previously rooted in trade with the West, now also has vested interests in Iran's ties with China, Russia and regional trade. This economic reality has reinforced Iran's 'look east' strategic posture.

Although the promise that China and Russia will compensate for Iran's exclusion from the world economy holds much allure, so far the reality falls short of expectations. The same is true of the hope Iran has placed in a more rapid and fruitful shift towards a multipolar world system. The realization of this has stoked the debate over how far Iran should tilt to the east and become dependent on Russia and China, and whether it is instead prudent to maintain at least a semblance of coexistence with the liberal international order. The election of a reformist to the presidency in 2024, and the return of diplomats who oversaw the 2015 international nuclear deal, suggests that Iran recognizes that it must find some accommodation within the existing world order and balance its 'look east' stance with coexisting with the West.

The end of the unipolar moment

The Islamic Republic has come of age contending with US containment. Since the 1990s Iran's most serious security threats have been from the US. In refusing to bend to US will, or to change course and abandon its resistance, Iran has anchored its national interest in defying US containment, and in weakening the US position in the Middle East. Iranian rulers have said that Iran can only achieve its national goals by defying US policies and forcing America to abandon the Middle East.

The Iran nuclear deal was a single occasion when Iran signed a major international agreement. Although not a treaty, it was nevertheless given the status of an international agreement by the UN – which Iran was led to believe would protect the deal. By unilaterally withdrawing from that deal, and then preventing other signatories from abiding by it, the US convinced Iran that there was no value in international agreements or protection under the liberal international order. In the best tradition of realpolitik, Iran is now open to transactional deals with the US, but no longer takes seriously the liberal international order, the UN, or agreements under the purview of international organizations.

Iran's rulers believe that the US will never accept the Iranian revolution or be reconciled to its great power status in the region. The US will block Iran's path at every turn, but more worryingly for Tehran, Washington seeks to weaken Iran and topple its regime. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 alarmed Tehran and led to the consensus among Iran's rulers that the Islamic Republic would be safe only if the American project in Iraq were defeated and the US pushed out of the region. Iran's rulers were convinced then that the US would shift the war in Iraq into

82 Tirone, J. and Motevalli, G. (2022), 'Russia and Iran Are Building a Trade Route That Defies Sanctions', *Businessweek*, 21 December 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-russia-iran-trade-corridor/#xj4y7vzkg?leadSource=uverify%20wall.

Iran. Concern over US intentions fuelled the drive by Tehran to bog the US down in a quagmire in Iraq, and to acquire advanced nuclear capability. Iran's nuclear posturing and its regional strategy of asymmetric warfare against the US and regional allies both have their roots in the post-9/11 policies pursued by the US in the Middle East. US failures in Afghanistan and Iraq have redoubled Tehran's efforts. The Supreme Leader has bragged that Iran should be credited with forcing the US to shrink its regional footprint, and even with its decline as a global power.

Iran's rulers perceived their handling of the US in Iraq to be a success in terms of deterrence and protection of their country's security against the US. As a result, the idea of 'Forward Defence' – that is, protecting Iran's interests through asymmetric means inside the Arab world – became rooted in Iran's security doctrine.[83] Between 2003 and 2024, Iran aggressively pursued building a regional axis (to encompass Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen) to exert regional influence and further reduce US presence in the Middle East. The strategy exacted a great cost: tens of billions of dollars of investment in allied militias, which happened as the Iranian economy was retrenching and social misery inside Iran was rising. The Forward Defence strategy suffered a major setback in 2024, with Israel battering Iran's allies in its regional axis, Hamas and Hezbollah, and with the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December. Forward Defence did not survive the test of direct confrontation with Israel. The fate of the strategy is now being debated in Iran, and as recent exchanges of drones and missiles between Iran and Israel have shown, Tehran is increasingly reliant on those tools to manage its regional security goals.

It is too early to determine the direction that Iran's regional policy will take, and if Iran's rulers are ready to change their outlook on the world order. All evidence suggests that it is unlikely that Iran will easily revise its posture towards the liberal international order. Iran will respond to tactical defeats with tactical adjustments, but a strategic shift is not imminent. Setbacks in Lebanon and Syria have not disabused Iran of its belief that the larger trends in the Middle East and the world are moving – and will continue to move – in its desired direction, and that the wars in Gaza and Lebanon that began in 2023 have accelerated the decline of the liberal international order.[84] Iran's calculation is that the pressure it is enduring will not last, and as with a J-curve, the nadir point will be followed by a sharp ascent.[85] Iran will have to survive in the short run to reap the benefits it expects in the long run.

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83 Nasr (2018), 'Iran Among the Ruins', pp. 108–18; and Barzegar, K. (2009), 'Iran's Foreign Policy from the Viewpoint of Offensive and Defensive Realism', *Ravabet-e Khareji*, 1(1), April 2009, p. 123.
84 See Khamenei's interview in *Entekhab.ir* (undated), https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/amp/news/731364.
85 See Khamenei's speech before IRGC commanders: *Khamanei.ir* (2023), 'In Order to reach the Peak', 19 August 2023, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/video-content?id=53604; and *Khamanei.ir* (2023), 'Reaching the Peak is the Start of Farther Horizons', 31 August 2023, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-dialog?id=53729.

05
India: A non-Western, not anti-Western, worldview

India seeks greater recognition on the world stage and changes to the international order, but not through disruption – instead it sees itself as a bridge between the West and the Global South.

Chietigj Bajpaee

Like other emerging economies, India seeks a more equitable distribution of power in an emerging multipolar international system. It is often labelled a middle power, but India sees itself as a rising power and also as an aspiring major power.[86] This view is reflected in the ambition to become a developed country (*Viksit Bharat* – 'Developed India') by 2047,[87] and has prompted a push for greater status and recognition on the world stage.[88] India wants to have a seat in key rule-making global institutions, including a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. In parallel, it has also been an architect of new regional and global initiatives. In some cases, such as the I2U2 grouping (of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States) and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, these complement the role of the US in the international system. In other situations, such as the BRICS[89] group encouraging the de-dollarization of trade, they seek to challenge the US-led global order.

86 Sridharan, E. (2017), 'Where is India headed? Possible future directions in Indian foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 93(1), pp. 51–68.
87 Bharatiya Janata Party (2024), *Modi ki Guarantee 2024: Phir Ek Baar Modi Sarkar* [*Modi's Guarantee 2024: Once Again, Modi government*], BJP Election Manifesto.
88 Paul, T. V. (2024), *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Studies from Nehru to Modi*, New York: Oxford University Press.
89 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members), South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, and Indonesia (2025).

However, unlike other powers such as China, Iran and Russia, India seeks to promote a non-Western, but not an anti-Western, worldview. Reflecting this, when External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was asked about India's position on relations with the West and Russia/China following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he responded: '[W]e are a democracy; we are a market economy; we are a pluralistic society; we have positions on international law and I think that should give a fair part of the answer.'[90]

India is a reformist rather than a revisionist power in that it seeks changes to the international system but not through disruptive means. In doing so, it also sees itself as a bridge between the West and the Global South – prompting some to refer to the country as a 'southwestern power'.[91] New Delhi has thus referred to itself as a *Vishvamitra* ('friend to the world'). This became evident during India's G20 presidency in 2023 with the admission of the African Union to the grouping, which came amid the country's efforts to project itself as a voice of the Global South.[92]

Underpinning India's worldviews are three 'grand strategic prescriptions' that have defined how the country's foreign policy has evolved: Nehruvianism, neoliberalism and hyper-realism.

Underpinning India's worldviews are three 'grand strategic prescriptions' that have defined how the country's foreign policy has evolved: Nehruvianism, characterized by non-alignment and solidarity with the developing world (or Global South); neoliberalism, with an emphasis on economic interactions and mutual gain; and hyper-realism, which emphasizes the importance of the military and the balance of power.[93]

The three streams operate simultaneously, as illustrated in the foreign policy of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that assumed power in 2014.[94] The Modi government's proclivity for strategic autonomy (an updated version of non-alignment) through engagement with all poles of influence in the international system indicates the continuation of elements of Nehruvianism. The push to attract foreign investment to facilitate India's development demonstrates the stream of neoliberalism. Finally, emphasis on internal balancing (by strengthening the

90 Barman, S. R. (2022), 'Europe has to grow out of mindset that its problems are world's problems: Jaishankar', *Indian Express*, 4 June 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/europe-has-to-grow-out-of-mindset-that-its-problems-are-worlds-problems-jaishankar-7951895.
91 Press Trust of India (2019), 'India would be a southwestern power, says Jaishankar', *The Hindu*, 3 October 2019, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-would-be-a-southwestern-power-says-jaishankar/article61978697.ece.
92 Bajpaee, C. (2023), 'Why India's G20 triumph means much more than the tangible results', *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 2023, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3234935/why-indias-g20-triumph-means-much-more-tangible-results.
93 Bajpai, K. (2002), 'Indian Strategic Culture' in Chambers, M. (ed.) (2002), *South Asia in 2020: Future Strategic Balances and Alliances*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, pp. 245–302.
94 Bajpaee, C. (2022), '"Strategic Culture" as the source of strategic elite world-views', in Bajpaee, C. (2022), *China in India's Post-Cold War Engagement with Southeast Asia*, New York: Routledge, pp. 63–66.

capabilities of the military) and external balancing (through working with states with a history of difficult relations with China, including Japan, the US and Vietnam) shows the persistence of hyper-realism.[95]

At the same time, the Modi government has sought to reframe the core principles that drive India's foreign policy. A resolution adopted in 2015 by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) noted that the key pillars of foreign policy had changed to *Pancharmrit* (referring to five cornerstones of foreign policy), which replaced *Panchsheel* (or the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, expressed in the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement).[96] So far these changes have been largely symbolic. They include referring to India as *Bharat*; references to *Akhand Bharat* (Greater India), which alludes to a so-called Indian sphere of influence; the use of terminology to promote the country's civilizational identity, such as India as a *Vishvaguru* ('world teacher') and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ('world as one family'); and attempts to project soft power through India's cultural attributes such as yoga and Ayurveda.[97]

However, there is often more rhetoric than substance to claims that Modi's rise to power marks a unique strain of India's strategic culture, as many of the principles of the BJP's *Hindutva* worldview can be subsumed under the three 'grand strategic prescriptions'.[98] The BJP has been more active in using civilizational identity as a tool of foreign policy, but it is not the only political party to do so. For example, India's 'Buddhist diplomacy' can be traced to several non-BJP governments, from India playing host to the International Buddhist Conference in 1952 to efforts to revive the ancient Nalanda University in 2010.[99]

Therefore, despite claims of a distinct 'Modi doctrine', there is more continuity in India's foreign policy.[100] The real source of change has come from the stronger mandate of the Modi government, which has fuelled a bolder foreign policy, coupled with a more favourable international system in which India is seen as a potential beneficiary of a more acute rivalry between China and the US. The external geopolitical environment marked by more pronounced US–China strategic competition is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. However, the domestic political environment is showing signs of change: the 2024 elections saw the BJP return on a weakened mandate, and Indian politics appears to be reverting to the norm of coalition governments that preceded Modi's rise to power in 2014.[101]

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95 Bajpai expanded his 'grand strategic prescriptions' by supplementing the three 'schools' of Nehruvianism, neoliberalism and hyper-realism with three minor schools: Marxism, *Hindutva* and Gandhianism. However, except for *Hindutva*, these play a marginal role in India's foreign policy. See Bajpai, K. (2014), 'Indian Grand Strategy: Six Schools of Thought', in Bajpai, K., Basit, S. and Krishnappa, V. (eds) (2014), *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases*, New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 128–50.
96 The *Pancharmrit* framework refers to dignity (*samman*), dialogue (*samvad*), shared prosperity (*samriddhi*), regional and global security (*suraksha*), and civilizational linkages (*sanskriti evam sabhyata*). *The Telegraph* (2015), 'Panchsheel gives way to Panchamrit', 4 April 2015, https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/panchsheel-gives-way-to-panchamrit/cid/1510952.
97 Mazumdar, A. (2018), 'India's soft power diplomacy under the Modi administration: Buddhism, Diaspora and Yoga', *Asian Affairs*, 49(3), pp. 475–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487696; and Sahasrabuddhe, V. (2022), 'Vishwa Guru India: The why and the how', *The New Indian Express*, 21 June 2022, https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2022/Jun/21/vishwa-guru-india-the-why-and-the-how-2468181.html.
98 Gupta, S. et al. (2019), 'Indian Foreign Policy under Modi: A New Brand or Just Repackaging?', *International Studies Perspectives*, p. 8.
99 Kishwar, S. (2018), 'The rising role of Buddhism in India's soft power strategy', *ORF Issue Brief*, 23 February 2018, New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation.
100 Basrur, R. (2017), 'Modi's foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged', *International Affairs*, 93(1), pp. 7–26.
101 Bajpaee, C. (2024), 'India and the world may finally have reached 'peak Modi'', *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2024, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/06/04/narendra-modi-india-bharatiya-janata-election.

India's perceptions of US power

Closer relations with the West (and the US in particular) have been a key component of Indian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Economic imperatives have been a key driver of the Indo-US rapprochement. Oil-price shocks triggered by the first Gulf War prompted a foreign-exchange crisis for India in 1991. As a result, New Delhi received an emergency bailout from the IMF and accelerated its economic liberalization reforms. The loss of preferential access to markets following the Soviet Union's collapse also led India to reorient its external relations, which included rapprochement with the US.[102]

Closer relations with the West (and the US in particular) have been a key component of Indian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Economic imperatives have been a key driver of the Indo-US rapprochement.

In an address to the US Congress in 2016, Modi proclaimed that India and the US had 'overcome the hesitations of history' in deepening their relationship.[103] He was alluding to the fact that the relationship was strained for much of India's post-independence history and particularly during the Cold War. This has been largely overcome, with strengthened cooperation in strategically important areas, including defence, technology and energy. This cooperation has been facilitated by India becoming increasingly enmeshed in a growing web of bilateral initiatives with the US (for example, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, which has been renamed the TRUST – Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology – Initiative under the Trump administration) and in multilateral ones with countries with similar perceived values (for example, the Mineral Security Partnership and the Artemis Accords).

There has also been a values-based dimension to the India–US relationship. Unlike the United States' relations with countries such as Vietnam or Saudi Arabia, which are more transactional and rooted in shared interests, there is a perception in the US that its relationship with India is rooted in shared values (in addition to shared interests). This perception has supported India's efforts to partner with the US and other democratic states in minilateral initiatives (such as the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the US), with the aim of upholding the rules-based international order.

Despite the highly polarized political environment in the US, India was among the countries least concerned by the outcome of the presidential election in November 2024, as Indian elites believe that the long-term trajectory of the

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102 Gupta, S. P. (1995), 'India's Increasing Eastern Orientation in Trade and Investment: Context and Challenges', in Gordon, S. and Henningham, S. (eds) (1995), *India Looks East: An Emerging Power and its Asia-Pacific Neighbours*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, pp. 73, 210–11.
103 *The Hindu* (2016), 'Text of the Prime Minister's address to the Joint Session of US Congress', 8 June 2016, https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/Text-of-the-Prime-Minister-Narendra-Modis-address-to-the-Joint-Session-of-U.S.-Congress/article60595537.ece.

India–US relationship will not change. To be sure, there are likely to be areas of specific friction in the India–US relationship under the second Trump administration – most notably in the areas of trade and immigration.[104] Donald Trump's inclination to see foreign policy in transactional terms may also weaken the narrative of a shared ideological affinity between the world's oldest democracy and the world's largest democracy. However, the US image of India as a bulwark against the rise of China remains unchanged and is a strong driver of a deeper bilateral relationship.

There is also a high degree of consensus across the political spectrum in India regarding a deepening of the relationship with the US. Those who do oppose closer engagement with the US and the West are largely fringe elements, such as the country's communist parties. However, a much more prominent contingent of the foreign policy elite, while supporting a deepening relationship, also endorses India's commitment to maintaining strategic autonomy.[105] This position is rooted in India's tradition of non-alignment dating back to the tenure of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The stance has made India reluctant to take sides in great power conflicts in the belief that the country should be an independent pole of influence rather than a swing state in the international system.[106]

As such, limits on the degree of India–US alignment may strain this relationship, especially given the challenge of maintaining strategic autonomy in a climate of growing geopolitical polarization and bifurcation. As relations continue to deteriorate between the US and other countries in the West on the one hand, and between the US, China and Iran on the other, India may yet be forced to choose sides. At present, it is likely that India will become increasingly estranged in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which promote an overtly anti-Western agenda. Forums that straddle this divide will be where India faces increasingly difficult choices; for instance, India is the second-largest shareholder in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and an Indian national was the first president of the BRICS New Development Bank. India is also among the leading recipients of loans from both institutions.

Therefore, while India will position itself closely to the US, this will remain well short of an alliance. This is not least because of India's strategic realities – such as economic dependence on China and military dependence on Russia – but also because its ideological affinities are embedded in the commitment to maintain strategic autonomy in foreign policy. These pressure points will be exacerbated under the second Trump administration. A more insular US that is less interested in global leadership will create more space for other countries, including India, to step up. This will help India to fulfil its long-standing ambition to play a leadership role in an emerging multipolar global order. At the same time, a more erratic US foreign policy under Trump will complicate India's relations with the US (as it will for other partners, allies and adversaries of Washington).

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104 Bajpaee, C. (2024), 'New Delhi's Optimism Over Trump 2.0 Belies Underlying Fault Lines in India-US Relations', *The Diplomat*, 16 November 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/11/new-delhis-optimism-over-trump-2-0-belies-underlying-fault-lines-in-india-us-relations.
105 Khilnani, S. et al. (2012), *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century*, New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research.
106 Menon, S. (2014), 'Jawaharlal Nehru and world order', 35th Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture, London, 25 November 2014, https://www.cambridgetrust.org/assets/documents/Special_Lecture_2014.pdf.

India and the liberal international order

India is a supporter of the rules-based international order, but it maintains a more ambiguous position on the *liberal* international order.[107] While it supports the principles of state sovereignty, international law, the peaceful resolution of international disputes and an open international economy, it also seeks to scale back emphasis in such areas as human rights, liberalism and interventionism.[108] This becomes evident when looking at India's position on several legal principles and issues of global governance – including freedom of navigation, climate change, the right to development and the responsibility to protect – where the country often appears to be more in sync with China than the US. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has acknowledged this: 'For all their issues with each other, India or China have at the back of their mind a feeling that they are also contesting an established Western order.'[109]

Moreover, while it supports the rules-based international order, what role India seeks to play in upholding that order is unclear. It has supported efforts in the provision of global public goods in selected areas, such as contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, naval deployments in the Indian Ocean to protect commercial shipping from piracy attacks, and digital public infrastructure. However, India is also often regarded as non-committal or ambivalent in other areas.[110] This is apparent in its limited role in mediation efforts in global conflicts from Ukraine to Gaza, where its actions are largely dictated by self-interest. In this context, India's conception of the rules-based international order is not universal but selective, based on pragmatic considerations and the limitations of its ambitions and capabilities.[111]

On the liberal international order, India's limited affinity with the West is evident in the global democracy debate. The country has not been averse to leveraging its credentials as the world's most populous democracy as part of its bid for leadership in key international institutions. Embedded within this tendency to promote its democratic credentials is the belief that India is well placed to offer lessons to other countries in the Global South by challenging an alleged trade-off between development and democracy.[112] India has also sought to employ its democratic credentials to undermine China's competing ambition to lead the Global South.[113]

Democracy has also emerged as an important pillar of India's engagement with the US. Their shared democratic credentials have also undergirded the claim that India and the US are 'natural allies'.[114] This narrative has been sustained across

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107 Mishra, A. (2023), 'The World Delhi wants: official Indian conceptions of international order, c. 1998-2023', *International Affairs*, 99(4), pp. 1401–19.
108 Ibid., p. 1415.
109 Jaishankar, S. (2020), *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, Noida: HarperCollins, pp. 137–38.
110 Sidhu, W. P. S., Mehta, P. B. and Jones, B. (2014), 'A hesitant rule shaper?', in Sidhu, W. P. S., Mehta, P. B. and Jones, B. (eds) (2014), *Shaping the emerging world: India and the multilateral order*, New Delhi: Foundation Books, pp. 3–21.
111 Mishra (2023), 'The World Delhi wants', p. 1418.
112 Mallavarapu, S. (2010), 'Democracy promotion circa 2010: an Indian Perspective', *Contemporary Politics*, 16(1), pp. 49–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569771003602895.
113 *Berkeley Economic Review* (2018), 'India and China: Two Very Different Paths to Development', 30 April 2018, https://econreview.studentorg.berkeley.edu/india-and-china-two-very-different-paths-to-development.
114 Vajpayee, S. A. B. (2000), 'Address by Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India', Asia Society, New York, 7 September 2000, https://asiasociety.org/address-shri-atal-bihari-vajpayee.

administrations in Washington. For instance, the 2022 US National Security Strategy stated:

> As India is the world's largest democracy and a Major Defense Partner, the United States and India will work together, bilaterally, and multilaterally, to support our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.[115]

Deepening Indo-US relations have made India a stronger advocate of democracy. Speaking in 2005, India's then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, noted: 'Liberal democracy is the natural order of political organisation in today's world. All alternative systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration.'[116] The same year India and the US were founding members of the Global Democracy Initiative and the UN Democracy Fund.

India's democracy agenda has continued under the Modi government, which has referred to the country as the 'Mother of Democracy' and a 'pole star' (*dhruv tara*) among democracies.[117] Under Modi the democracy narrative has shifted amid a greater emphasis on governance through the 'democratization of technology' and digital inclusion via digital public infrastructure.[118]

However, regarding claims of common ground between the West and India on the democracy debate, a gap remains between rhetoric and reality. New Delhi rarely promotes democracy as part of its foreign policy. Its emphasis is rather on upholding the principle of state sovereignty and maintaining relations with all countries, whether democracies or non-democracies. New Delhi's model of democracy promotion tends to focus on supporting democratic processes rather than principles; for instance, by providing training in constitution drafting and election management.[119] In this context, India's democracy promotion activities will usually be confined to providing top-down technical assistance rather than bottom-up support for civil society. India is also apprehensive about including democratic transition as a criterion of its development aid, unlike the West.

New Delhi will generally only promote democracy where this matches other geopolitical objectives.

As a result, India's foreign policy is often not aligned with that of Western democracies. While India is not unique among them in prioritizing pragmatism over principle, on non-democratic and weak democratic regimes it is often more aligned with China. New Delhi will generally only promote democracy where this matches other geopolitical objectives. This means that New Delhi will not push for democratic change where an authoritarian regime does not have a hostile approach towards

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115 The White House (2022), *National Security Strategy*, 2022, p. 38, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.
116 Quoted in Cartwright, J. (2009), 'India's Regional and International Support for Democracy: Rhetoric or Reality?', *Asian Survey*, 49(3), p. 404, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.3.403.
117 Ministry of Culture, Government of India (2023), 'Bharat: Mother of Democracy', https://indiaculture.gov.in/bharat-mother-democracy; *The Telegraph* (2015), 'Panchsheel gives way to Panchamrit'.
118 Krishnan, S. (2023), 'Keynote Address: India's Digital Age', Speech, Geopolitics of Technology, Carnegie India, 4–6 December 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2k_0O43i6o&list=PLeXQMWQXRkJXXnHrzYlBhUvO1_vPjCYKz&index=21.
119 Bajpaee, C. (2024), *How India's democracy shapes its global role and relations with the West*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136000.

India (for example, Iran or Russia) or where a country is seen to be supporting India's national security concerns (for example, Myanmar or Bangladesh under the previous Sheikh Hasina government).

Another problematic issue arises from India's pursuit of a bolder foreign policy. To be sure, this has generated positive outcomes as India seeks recognition as a responsible global power. For example, during its G20 presidency, New Delhi offered so-called Indian solutions to global problems such as climate change, digital public infrastructure and global health.[120] However, should India seek to be exempted from global rules and norms because of the country's self-perceived exceptional status, this will become a source of concern. Evidence of such behaviour can be seen in allegations of Indian complicity in recent assassination plots in several countries, including the US.[121] New Delhi's push to adopt a bolder foreign policy could become more problematic under the second Trump presidency as Indian foreign policy elites will challenge any criticism on the grounds of hypocrisy, noting that Washington is increasingly abandoning the order it helped to establish.

Indian positioning on the China–US rivalry

One of the pillars of the India–US relationship is the perception of India as a balancer against the rise of China. As New Delhi's and Washington's relations with Beijing have deteriorated, this narrative has strengthened. Moreover, as India and the US have deepened their relations, they have also developed a more collaborative approach on issues of regional security and global governance, where they have voiced common concerns about Chinese behaviour.[122]

India has long had a difficult relationship with China. This is rooted in their territorial dispute along their land border and competing visions of regional order: New Delhi favours a multipolar regional order while Beijing has a Sino-centric conception for one. This explains India's long-standing aversion to China-led regional and global initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative. Tensions were exacerbated by a border flare-up in 2020, and have since set the tone of relations.[123] In October 2024, the situation seemed to de-escalate following the conclusion of a border agreement. Despite this, however, India is no longer willing to shelve the border dispute while deepening cooperation in other areas, which had been the practice since the late 1980s. China's 'all-weather' relationship with Pakistan and engagement with other countries in South Asia have also been sources of tension in the relationship.

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120 Bajpaee, C. (2023), 'Why India's G20 triumph means much more than tangible results', *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 2023, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3234935/why-indias-g20-triumph-means-much-more-tangible-results.
121 Bajpaee, C. (2023), 'Why India's souring relations with Canada could have wider implications for the west', *Guardian*, 20 September 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/20/india-souring-relations-canada-assassination-foreign-policy.
122 The White House (2015), 'US–India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia–Pacific and the Indian Ocean', 25 January 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-jointstrategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region.
123 Bajpaee, C. (2021), 'New Normal in Sino-Indian ties', *War on the Rocks*, 21 April 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/china-and-india-de-escalation-signals-new-normal-rather-than-a-return-to-the-status-quo.

Following the deterioration of its relationship with China, India has become less apprehensive about participating in US-led regional and global initiatives that previously it would have seen as offending Beijing. From an economic standpoint, Indian elites see their country as a beneficiary of the effort to de-risk or diversify supply chains away from China. On the security front, collaboration with the US is more ambiguous given there is a lack of clarity over the role India would play in a potential China–US conflict over Taiwan, for example.[124] This has not prevented greater defence cooperation between New Delhi and Washington, with the US becoming India's leading partner for joint military exercises and an increasingly important supplier of defence equipment. India has also become more willing to call out China's acts of assertiveness, from the South China Sea to the Taiwan Strait.

Yet, ambiguities remain in the India–US relationship when it comes to China. India's commitment to strategic autonomy makes New Delhi reluctant to be part of any US-led initiative that resembles a military alliance.[125] Moreover, the limited overtures by both the US and India to China trigger sporadic concerns about strategic abandonment in New Delhi and Washington alike. New Delhi fears a return to a G2-type great power condominium between the US and China, while Washington fears the adoption of the 'Asia for Asians' concept that has been proposed by Beijing.[126] This shows that there remains a gap in how India and the US perceive each other, stemming from India's position of strategic autonomy and solidarity with the Global South on the one hand, and the US prioritization of its alliance relations and the liberal international order on the other, although the US commitment to upholding these priorities is being eroded under the second Trump administration.

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124 Tellis, A. (2023), 'America's Bad Bet on India', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi; and Tarapore, A. (2024), *Detering an attack on Taiwan: Policy options for India and other non-belligerent states*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute: Special Report, https://www.arzantarapore.com/_files/ugd/4733de_58a21660b6c84dccba29fa511655f165.pdf.
125 Bajpaee, C. (2024), 'Has India defanged the Quad?', Lowy Institute: *The Interpreter*, 21 June 2024, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/has-india-defanged-quad.
126 Bajpaee, C. (2017), 'The birth of a multipolar Asia?', Lowy Institute: *The Interpreter*, 22 May 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/birth-multipolar-asia.

06
Brazil sees opportunity in a multipolar order

Multipolarity may suit Brazil's preference for strategic flexibility and its claim to a greater global role – but the country faces difficult choices ahead when navigating great power competition.

Oliver Della Costa Stuenkel

Brazil's strategic outlook is profoundly shaped by the confluence of the country's size – it is the world's fifth-largest country by area and boasts the seventh-largest population – and sense of vulnerability, the latter symbolized by its relatively limited military power, its proximity to the United States and its difficulties in controlling its 16,800 km-long borders, the world's third-longest. This combination of factors explains both Brazil's ambition to play a global role and its deep-seated concern about sovereignty and foreign interference – themes which have shaped Brazil's worldview and foreign policy strategy since independence.

This vast territory and population, along with Brazil's dominant position in South America and a profound awareness of its unique cultural identity – which encompasses Western, African and Indigenous influences, as well as large diasporas from the Middle East and Japan – all contribute to the belief among foreign policy elites that Brazil has a distinctive role to play on the international stage. This belief, often overlooked by foreign observers, is a shared trait between Brazil and the other BRICS[127] founding members, who see themselves as natural contenders for a leading role in global affairs.

Brazil has tended to see international law, rules and norms, and multilateral institutions, as the best means to protect its interests. Its diplomatic corps has long prided itself on its capacity to 'punch above its weight' at multilateral forums such as the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization (WTO). This tradition

127 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members) and South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, as well as Indonesia, which joined in 2025.

goes back to the early 20th century, when Brazil advocated for treaty-based multilateralism at the Second Hague Conference in 1907, standing against the imperial ambitions of European powers. As Marcos Tourinho writes, at the time major powers of the day aimed to create a system resembling the classic European model, with differentiated privileges based on military might. Conversely, a coalition of Latin American countries, spearheaded by Ruy Barbosa, a Brazilian politician and writer, argued that international governance must be grounded in the principle of sovereign equality among all states.[128] One may dismiss the relevance of such traditions, given that countries' foreign policy strategies are often based on aspirations, leading states to couch their goals in a language based on idealism and altruism. Yet this historical background remains crucial to comprehending how Brazil perceives itself on the global stage.

Brazil's diplomatic corps has long prided itself on its capacity to 'punch above its weight' at multilateral forums such as the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization.

This long history of actively defending rules and norms explains why Brazil feels authorship and co-ownership of today's multilateral system.[129] It does not regard the current order as a US or European invention but as the product of complex and multidirectional negotiations between Western and non-Western countries. Brazil was a founding member of the United Nations and was present at its inception in San Francisco in 1945. The fact that the country came relatively close to being granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (US president Franklin D. Roosevelt had lobbied on Brazil's behalf, but the Soviet Union was opposed) is regularly invoked to show that Brazil's claim to greater responsibility is far from recent.[130] This explains why Brazil's foreign policy elites tend to believe that the rise of non-Western powers does not inherently weaken multilateral structures but reflects their evolution in response to shifting global dynamics. They thus fundamentally disagree with many Western scholars who associate the emergence of multipolarity and the West's declining influence with growing instability – and who tend to agree with the neorealist scholar Kenneth Waltz, who argued that multipolarity is unstable.[131]

128 Tourinho, M. (2015), 'Beyond Expansion: Political Contestation in the Global International Society (1815-1960)', PhD dissertation, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies of Geneva.
129 Roy, D. (2022), 'Brazil's Global Ambitions', Council on Foreign Relations, 19 September 2022, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/brazils-global-ambitions.
130 Garcia, E. V. and Coelho, N. B. R. (2018), 'A Seat at the Top? A Historical Appraisal of Brazil's Case for the UN Security Council', *Sage Open*, 8(3), https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018801098.
131 Waltz, K. (1979), *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw Hill. See also, for example, Ashford, E. and Cooper, E. (2023), 'Assumption Testing: Multipolarity is more dangerous than bipolarity for the United States', Stimson Policy Paper, 2 October 2023, https://www.stimson.org/2023/assumption-testing-multipolarity-is-more-dangerous-than-bipolarity-for-the-united-states.

Western interlocutors often seem surprised to hear that Brazilian elites view the shift to multipolarity as both unavoidable and beneficial.[132] While this might seem counterintuitive – given that a multipolar world is likely to be more turbulent, unpredictable and potentially dangerous for a militarily weak country such as Brazil – Brasília still views it as an opportunity and believes that multipolarity offers greater strategic autonomy and the ability to navigate between competing powers. Brazil's historical goal of constraining US influence is central to this perspective, which has long been a source of concern, particularly regarding US interference in Latin American countries' domestic affairs.

This apprehension *vis-à-vis* the US is not entirely unfounded. Some fears – such as conspiracy theories about foreign plans to seize control of the Amazon – are exaggerated. But they stem from a genuine distrust rooted in history, symbolized by the continued relevance of the Monroe Doctrine.[133] Recent threats by US president Donald Trump against Panama, as well as the prospect of US military intervention in neighbouring Venezuela in 2019, during Trump's first presidency, for instance, caused concern within Brazil's military establishment. It also explains why the then Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, despite being firmly pro-Trump, was unwilling to support the US president's strategy of refusing to rule out the use of force to unseat Nicolás Maduro as Venezuela's president. After all, such an action would have set a troubling precedent for the region.

The 2013 revelations of US National Security Agency espionage on Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff, also complicated the bilateral relationship. This scandal abruptly ended a carefully nurtured rapprochement between Brazil and the US under Rousseff and Barack Obama, who refused to issue a public apology. For Brazilian policymakers, these episodes exemplify the dangers of a unipolar world dominated by a single power that cannot be held accountable, strengthening their preference for a multipolar order that promises more balance and reduced dominance by any one state.

This historical context explains why Brazil's policymaking elites responded to the Soviet Union's collapse with hesitation and unease rather than relief and celebration, as was common across the West.[134] Yet Brazil's cautious reaction in the early 1990s had little to do with nostalgia for the Soviet Union or any advantages gained from bipolarity. Instead, its leaders were focused on maintaining strategic autonomy and limiting the reach of US influence in Latin America – a region where Brazil aspired to lead but where Washington had long played a far more relevant role than Brasília.

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132 Chivvis, C. and Geaghan-Breiner, B. (2023), *Brazil in the Emerging World Order*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 December 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/12/brazil-in-the-emerging-world-order?lang=en.
133 The Monroe Doctrine in 1823 asserted US authority over meddling European powers in Latin America. Often it has been used as a pretext for US military or diplomatic interventions in the Western Hemisphere and was largely seen as a form of US imperialism, especially during the 20th century. See Stuenkel, O. (2024), 'Trump Has His Own Monroe Doctrine', *Foreign Policy*, 17 October 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/17/trump-election-latin-america-monroe-doctrine-china-huawei-venezuela-far-right.
134 Stuenkel, O. (2021), 'V Bridge Builder, Humanitarian Donor, Reformer of Global Order: Brazilian Narratives of Soft Power Before Bolsonaro', in Baykurt, B. and de Grazia, V. (eds) (2021), *Soft-Power Internationalism: Competing for Cultural Influence in the 21st-Century Global Order*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 129–52, https://doi.org/10.7312/bayk19544-007.

A sceptical approach to globalization and democracy promotion

Brazil has never fully embraced the Western-centric global liberal narrative, whether inspired by Kantian ideals of democratic peace or Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. While the cultural influence of the West remains deeply ingrained – particularly that of the US and, to a lesser extent, Europe, as critical cultural reference points for Brazilian society – alternative perspectives have consistently shaped Brazil's worldview. For instance, concerns that globalization could undermine national sovereignty and economic independence have long been present in Brazil's debates and have shaped policy, even during the heyday of globalization in the 1990s, when other nations, such as Mexico, embraced economic liberalization. Similarly, the notion that the state should retain a significant role in regulating the economy continues to enjoy ample support. Numerous attempts in the past to industrialize Brazil through state-led policies produced mixed results at best, yet there is no sign that Brazilian governments will abandon them – quite the contrary in fact.

Concerns that globalization could undermine national sovereignty and economic independence have long been present in Brazil's debates and have shaped policy.

These factors contributed to Brazil's relatively cautious approach to economic liberalization in the 1990s and explain why, until this day, politicians who defend it are often accused of being '*entreguistas*' (which loosely translates as 'sellouts'), a pejorative label used to describe policymakers perceived as being overly submissive or willing to 'surrender' national resources, sovereignty or interests to the US.

Unlike countries such as Argentina and Chile, where many policymakers (often trained in US universities) at times enthusiastically implemented Washington Consensus reforms, Brazil was far more reluctant and concerned about the harmful effects of globalization on its domestic industries. This made Brazil's experience with market reforms less disruptive and politically contentious than that of its regional neighbours, but it also contributed to less economic dynamism and to protectionism, which generally benefited national economic elites, facilitating crony capitalism.[135]

Consequently, the political elite in Brazil never fully embraced the optimistic Western belief in the irreversible transformation of the global order and the spread of liberal democracy following the Cold War. In Brazil, that belief was largely limited to pockets of the business and academic elites with little influence. The Bolsonaro government defended liberalizing the economy to some extent. Yet growing protectionism around

135 Spektor, M. (2016), '1. Brazil: Shadows of the Past and Contested Ambitions', in Hitchcock, W. I., Leffler, M. P. and Legro, J. W. (eds) (2016), *Shaper Nations: Strategies for a Changing World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 17–35, https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674969254-002.

the world and the growing risk of a renewed trade war between the US and China limit Brazil's capacity to sign large trade deals, even though the two most recent administrations (of Bolsonaro and that of the current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) have made an effort to sign more trade agreements. The ratification of the Mercosur–EU trade deal, which would be unprecedented in size for both sides, remains uncertain and still faces significant resistance in Europe.

In the same way, despite its strong democratic tradition, Brazil remained sceptical of democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority, mainly because it was seen to stand in inevitable tension with national sovereignty.[136] Unlike Western powers, Brazil has historically avoided embedding its foreign policy within a liberal ideological framework. It neither sought to promote its democratic model globally nor did it develop a 'civilizing mission' rooted in a belief in its own superiority, akin to the approaches pursued by other states. US-led initiatives such as the Summit for Democracy under Joe Biden (and similar ones by Bill Clinton in the 1990s) have often been met with indifference or even resistance in Brasília, reflecting Brazil's wariness of initiatives that prioritize ideological alignment over pragmatic cooperation.

Brazil's outlook, however, is far from pessimistic. While it did not share the West's enthusiasm during the so-called 'end of history', after the end of the Cold War, it does not embrace the West's current disillusionment or despair. Brazil views these shifts pragmatically as the global order transitions towards multipolarity, recognizing opportunities in a world where Western dominance is less pronounced. At the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024, for example, Brazil sought to take a leading role in the fight against poverty and inequality. Given its role as a critical exporter of numerous agricultural commodities, the Brazilian government argues that it can contribute.[137]

Brazil's perceptions of US power

In Brazilian policy circles, the US is recognized as a key player in maintaining international order but paradoxically is also perceived as the greatest threat to global stability. It often surprises Western observers that Brazilian officials, regardless of political orientation, often identify the US – rather than China, Iran or North Korea – as the primary destabilizing force in global affairs.

This perspective explains why countries like Cuba and Venezuela, despite their weak economies, poor human rights records and large-scale emigration, are still able to garner significant support in Brazil and other parts of Latin America for standing up to US hegemony. Brazilian diplomats often question the credibility of global rules and norms when the US proclaims itself the indispensable nation, free to disregard the rules when that suits its interests. Such scepticism helps to explain why Western anxieties about issues like 'Chinese sharp power' resonate less in Brazil and why US warnings about the subject often sound disingenuous

136 Stuenkel, O. (2013), 'Rising Powers and the Future of Democracy Promotion: The Case of Brazil and India', *Third World Quarterly*, 34(2), pp. 339–55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42002126.
137 Stuenkel, O. (2024), 'G20 Summit 2024: How the World is Reacting to Trump', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 21 November 2024.

or paternalistic to Brazilians.[138] After all, for much of the 20th century, what Latin Americans experienced from the US felt anything but benign. At the same time, China adroitly uses a discourse of South–South solidarity and emphasizes 'win-win' relationships and respect for sovereignty (which, of course, is facilitated by the significant geographic distance between China and Latin America). In addition, given the profound asymmetry in Brazil's relationship with Washington, maintaining strong ties with other powers, such as China and Russia, remains a strategic priority.[139]

Foreign policy: a difficult balancing act

For decades, Brazil's primary foreign policy objective has been to safeguard its sovereignty and strategic autonomy to advance its socio-economic development. To achieve this, the prevailing foreign policy approach emphasizes avoiding fixed alliances in favour of adaptable partnerships. By maintaining strategic flexibility, Brazil seeks to maximize its bargaining power with major powers like the US and China by preserving various options. This approach – variously described as non-alignment, multi-alignment, strategic equidistance or strategic neutrality – stands out as one of the rare points of agreement across Brazil's political spectrum, uniting both the left and the right.

For decades, Brazil's primary foreign policy objective has been to safeguard its sovereignty and strategic autonomy to advance its socio-economic development.

Whenever Brazilian presidents have leaned too heavily into either anti-America or anti-China rhetoric, Congress has intervened to promote a more balanced approach, safeguarding the interests of the country's economic elites. This dynamic was evident during Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–22) when his first foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo – a vocal supporter of Trump and a proponent of conspiracy theories – was removed after Congress grew concerned that his harsh criticism of China could jeopardize relations with Brazil's largest trading partner since 2009. Similarly, Brazil's economic and political elites and its military have consistently prioritized maintaining strong ties with the US, which remains the single-largest source of foreign direct investment in Brazil. For example, when Bolsonaro and his allies considered orchestrating a coup after his 2022 electoral defeat, significant parts of the military ultimately rejected the idea, largely because they feared it would severely damage relations with Washington.[140] This scenario suggests that Brazil, regardless of who wins the presidential elections in 2026, will seek to preserve its current strategy of maintaining ties to all major players despite growing tensions among them.

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138 Walker, C. (2018), 'What is Sharp Power?', *Journal of Democracy*, July 2018, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power.
139 Stuenkel, O. (2023), 'Republican Threats on Mexico Could Carry a Huge Cost', *Americas Quarterly*, 28 September 2023.
140 Stuenkel, O. (2024), 'How U.S. Pressure Helped Save Brazil's Democracy', *Foreign Policy*, 20 February 2024.

Brazil's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine clearly illustrates its broader foreign policy approach. This stance likely would have remained unchanged even if Bolsonaro, a right-winger, had secured re-election in 2022. Like most other developing nations, Brazil condemned Russia's aggression and backed several United Nations General Assembly resolutions, including one early in the war that called for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine.[141] However, Brazil refrained from endorsing Western sanctions against Russia, aligning instead with the position of numerous developing countries that viewed such measures as disproportionately harmful to economies still recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.[142] Lula has also been careful not to antagonize the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. He has made numerous comments about the war that can be described as pro-Russian and in 2024 presented, along with China, a 'peace plan' that the Kremlin regarded as friendly, and that was rejected by Ukraine.[143]

Some Western analysts interpret Brazil's neutral stance on the war in Ukraine as either weakening the liberal international order or exposing its fragility. From Brasília's perspective, however, Western insistence on the moral imperative to denounce Russia's invasion is often seen as hypocritical. Brazilian officials frequently highlight examples of Western double standards, such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, its support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, which shifted from protecting civilians in Benghazi to a broader regime-change operation. While the West has been vocal about Russia's violation of international law in Ukraine, many in Brazil note the West's reluctance to condemn Israel's prolonged occupation of Palestinian territories and its insufficient efforts to prevent mass civilian casualties in Gaza. In the same way, the US decision not to become part of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and to threaten its judges with sanctions is seen across the Global South as a sign that Washington is only willing to defend international law when doing so is aligned with its national interest. Seen from Brasília, this selective application of international norms underscores the West's tendency to prioritize geopolitical interests over universal principles. This issue is often aggravated by what is perceived in the Global South as the West's hectoring rhetoric.

This critique of Western policies, of course, does not exempt Brazil's foreign policy from scrutiny, and the West is certainly not alone in applying rules and norms selectively. Lula's rhetoric on the Ukraine war has faced domestic criticism for appearing overly sympathetic to Russia. Some argue that his position may be shaped by pragmatic calculations, long-standing anti-American sentiment, and tacit admiration for Russia's defiance of US hegemony. Lula's remarks suggesting that the US bears responsibility for the continuation of the war and that Ukraine should consider territorial concessions have drawn a particular backlash both at home and abroad, with critics warning that such a stance could undermine Brazil's credibility

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141 European External Action Service (2022), 'UN General Assembly demands Russian Federation withdraw all military forces from the territory of Ukraine', 2 May 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/un-general-assembly-demands-russian-federation-withdraw-all-military-forces-territory-ukraine_en.
142 Kundnani, H. (2023) 'The War in Ukraine, Democracy, and the Global South: We Have a Problem', Commentary, International Centre for Defence and Security, 23 May 2023, https://icds.ee/en/the-war-in-ukraine-democracy-and-the-global-south-we-have-a-problem.
143 Lewis, S. (2024), 'China and Brazil press on with Ukraine peace plan despite Zelenskiy's ire', Reuters, 27 September 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/china-brazil-press-with-ukraine-peace-plan-despite-zelenskiys-ire-2024-09-27.

when it seeks international support to uphold the rules-based order. In the same way, Lula's criticism of the ICC's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Russia's president – and his initial comments that he would assure Putin could come to the G20 Summit in Brazil without fearing arrest – undermine the image that Brazilian diplomats have long sought to project. This often-uncomfortable balancing act reflects broader tensions in Brazil's foreign policy, where its desire for strategic autonomy sometimes conflicts with the expectations of a principled stance in global affairs based on the public narrative of Brazil as a staunch defender of international law.

Brazil and the liberal international order

Brazil frequently argues for the reform of the global order, contending that institutions such as the UN Security Council no longer reflect contemporary power dynamics, which thereby undermines their legitimacy and, ultimately, global stability. It also challenges entrenched practices like the unwritten rule that a European must lead the International Monetary Fund while the US controls the appointment of the World Bank president. The country's participation in the BRICS grouping stems significantly from dissatisfaction among its foreign policy elites with the limited progress of institutional reform efforts during the 2000s.

Brazil frequently argues for the reform of the global order, contending that institutions such as the UN Security Council no longer reflect contemporary power dynamics.

However, Brazil does not seek to overturn the global system. Unlike revisionist powers such as Iran, Venezuela, Nicaragua, North Korea or Russia, it is neither fundamentally anti-Western nor anti-American. Critics may point out that while Brazil frames its quest for reform as a noble pursuit, it is ultimately interested in joining a small number of countries with institutionalized privileges (e.g., as a permanent member of the UN Security Council) rather than genuinely seeking to make global order fully democratic.

Still, Brazil has worked with India to moderate BRICS summit declarations, ensuring the final version of the texts avoids overtly anti-Western tones. Brasília's stance has often countered Russia's policy preferences, frequently leading to tensions between Brasília and Moscow at intra-BRICS meetings. This dynamic has been visible since 2014, when Russia invaded the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. For example, while Putin often describes BRICS as a counterweight to the G7, Lula likes to point out that BRICS is 'against no one'.[144] Despite opposing BRICS expansion, Brazil and India

144 Bhatt, A. V. (2024), 'The BRICS countries' inability to define its identity limits action', Peterson Institute for International Economics, 7 November 2024, https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2024/brics-countries-inability-define-its-identity-limits-action.

failed to prevent the inclusion of new members like Iran in 2024, which is set to alter the group's dynamics in the future. This reflects Brazil's more nuanced approach: it criticizes the current order but does not advocate overthrowing it.

Brazil's critique of the liberal international order is not rooted in opposition to its values but to the selective and, according to Brazilian policymakers, hegemonic ways they have frequently been implemented. Government officials frequently point to structural inequities, such as the in-built privileges for Western powers and the inconsistent enforcement of norms. From Brazil's perspective, the liberal order is often neither liberal nor orderly but is shaped by explicit and implicit hierarchies. For example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 without UN Security Council authorization, NATO's reinterpretation of Resolution 1973 to justify regime change in Libya in 2011, and the use of the SWIFT financial system as a tool to isolate Russia exemplify how rules have been, according to many Brazilian observers, distorted for hegemonic purposes.

Brazilian policymakers generally do not fault the liberal rules and norms themselves but rather the actors who manipulate or disregard them. In this regard, there are significant differences between Brazil and countries such as Russia and Iran. The unifying thread among BRICS countries is thus not a criticism of the principles that underpin global rules and norms but a shared desire to counterbalance the US. Naturally, BRICS members also diverge on numerous issues. For example, while Brazil largely seeks to constrain Washington's ability to act unilaterally – without the 'permission slip' of global consensus – China aims to secure privileges similar to those the US enjoys.

This rhetoric seems to reflect Brazil's aspiration for a rules-based order that is genuinely equitable and universally upheld, reflecting its broader push for systemic reform rather than radical upheaval. Yet, of course, Brazil cannot hide the fact that it too may often defend rules and norms inconsistently – for example, when Lula suggested he would welcome Putin in Brazil, despite the active ICC arrest warrant against the Russian president. In the same way, Lula's rhetoric on Russia's invasion of Ukraine essentially embraces the Kremlin's narrative, for example, when he accused the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, of not being willing to negotiate a peace agreement.

China–US rivalry: opportunity and risk for Brazil

For two reasons, Brazilian foreign policy elites perceive China's rise as largely positive. From an economic point of view, that ascent has brought substantial benefits, with China becoming Brazil's biggest trading partner in 2009. Secondly, China's emergence as a global power contributes to the development of a multipolar world, enhancing Brazil's leverage and flexibility when dealing with Washington. While this shift may result in a more volatile and conflict-prone international system compared to US-led unipolarity, Brazilian policymakers see the opportunities it creates as outweighing the downsides. Brazil's preferred multi-aligned strategy may become more challenging and costly with the emergence

of a 'digital iron curtain' in the context of the intensifying 'tech war' between the US and China, which may create two mutually exclusive and incompatible spheres of technological influence.[145]

Non-alignment remains a cornerstone of Brazil's foreign policy, and there is little domestic debate over its merits, given that all alternatives seem unnecessary and excessively disruptive from an economic point of view. This strategy is reinforced by the uncertainty surrounding the trajectory of the US–China rivalry. Despite certain parallels between Brazil and the US – both are large, vibrant democracies grappling with socio-economic inequality and polarization – Brasília does not regard cultural and political similarities as a decisive factor in crafting its foreign policy strategy. With US domestic politics becoming increasingly unstable and with bipartisan consensus on foreign policy waning, fence-sitting is seen as the preferential strategy by both the left and right in Brazil, especially after Trump's election victory in November 2024.

However, the growing tensions of a new cold war present significant challenges to Brazil's neutral stance. Washington's pressure on Brasília and other Latin American governments to curtail the use of 5G technology from China's Huawei has largely backfired, being perceived as unwelcome interference. Yet, as economic decoupling between China and the US spreads – encompassing areas like biotechnology and electric vehicles – the costs of non-alignment may rise. Both Beijing and Washington are expected to intensify efforts to compel countries like Brazil to take sides on critical economic and geopolitical issues.

This dynamic is causing unease among Brazilian policymakers, particularly as many expect the second Trump administration to adopt a more aggressive stance towards curbing Chinese influence in Latin America. Remarks in the memoirs of Trump's former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, have amplified these concerns, particularly Trump's claim that Venezuela is 'really part of the United States' and his insistence on exploring military options for the country.[146] Such rhetoric underscores the challenges that Brazil could face in navigating great power competition.

The US–China rivalry thus represents both an opportunity and a risk for Brazil. China's rise seems to have strengthened Brazil's strategic autonomy. However, the increasing polarization of the global order may limit its room for manoeuvre, forcing difficult choices in the years ahead – especially if the US increases pressure on countries to move away from China.

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145 Stuenkel O. (2021), 'Latin American Governments Are Caught in the Middle of the U.S.-China Tech War', *Foreign Policy*, 26 February 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/26/latin-america-united-states-china-5g-technology-war.
146 Bolton, J. (2020), *The Room Where it Happened: A White House Memoir*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

07
Saudi Arabia's goals rest on managing multipolarity

Saudi Arabia faces a challenging juggling act – pursuing a bold domestic reform agenda, trying to balance US-backed security with China-led economic ties, and seeking to maximize its multi-aligned regional influence.

Sanam Vakil

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, like many US partners in the Middle East, has been adapting to perceived shifts and a gradual fracturing of the Western-led international order. These shifts have affected Riyadh's worldview, security, economic relationships and international engagement. Actively and ambitiously, the kingdom is attempting to navigate these geopolitical dynamics, while implementing a major state-led social and economic transition known as Vision 2030. This requires the country to balance its preference for a US-focused security relationship with its more eastern-facing economic links. The prospect of an emergent multipolar world order, where power is distributed among many countries, is at the same time prompting Saudi Arabia to seek to maximize its influence – pursuing a greater multi-aligned multilateral role while engaging more directly over regional security challenges. The chapter will discuss these various strands within Saudi Arabia's approach to international order.

A major driver of all this is Vision 2030 – an economic diversification and social transformation project begun in 2016 under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (known colloquially as MBS). Vision 2030 represents a bold state-led capitalist reform agenda for Saudi Arabia and aims to reshape the country's economy, society and global standing. By diversifying its economic base and sources of income, reducing its dependence on oil revenues, enhancing public services and promoting sustainable development, the kingdom seeks to secure a prosperous and resilient future amid changes in the global order. As Vision 2030 seeks to attract significant foreign

direct investment, a new global-facing Saudi Arabia is attempting to emerge – one that promotes stronger international linkages, greater regional stability and strategic autonomy.[147]

Saudi Arabia and the changing international order

Saudi Arabia holds a complex and multifaceted view of the liberal international order. The kingdom has historically been a close ally of the United States and has benefited from US security guarantees and the stability and economic opportunities provided by the liberal international order. However, Saudi internal politics and regional ambitions often diverge from the principles typically associated with that order. Saudi Arabia sees itself as a growing middle power with economic relevance, as the leader of the Islamic world and a regional convener in the Middle East.[148]

Alongside important economic reforms and diversification efforts, recent years have seen significant social changes, such as granting women the right to drive and opening up the entertainment sector. All these various reforms have been championed by the West and by Saudi youth who form the majority of the population. The reforms are partly influenced by the need to modernize the economy and society, temper religious radicalism, and make Saudi Arabia more attractive to international investors and tourists.[149]

Reflecting a desire for diversification in foreign policy, Saudi Arabia continues to balance its traditional alliances with the West with its emerging partnerships with other global powers. Riyadh's long strategic partnership with the US developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, and was grounded in mutual interests: security guarantees and military support in exchange for stable oil supplies and cooperation in counterterrorism.[150] Since 2019, the US's hydrocarbon independence coupled with a more inward focus on domestic priorities has disrupted US ties with Saudi Arabia, leading to challenges in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, Riyadh continues to seek US security guarantees through a stable defence agreement that would anchor and better structure the relationship.

Saudi Arabia views the liberal international order through a pragmatic lens. It values the stability and economic opportunities provided by this order but diverges significantly over political governance and regional strategies.[151] The kingdom's political system – a closed absolute monarchy with limited room for dissent – is at odds with the democratic principles and human rights values

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147 Haykel, B. (2023), 'Saudi Arabia's New Nationalism', Project Syndicate, 29 September 2023, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/mbs-behind-saudi-nationalist-surge-by-bernard-haykel-2023-09.
148 Bianco, C. (2024), *Global Saudi: How Europeans can work with an evolving kingdom*, Policy Brief, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/publication/global-saudi-how-europeans-can-work-with-an-evolving-kingdom.
149 Schieder, F. (2021), 'The Stalling Visions of the Gulf: The Case of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030', Washington Institute, 14 May 2021, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/stalling-visions-gulf-case-saudi-arabias-vision-2030.
150 Rundell, D. (2020), *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads*, London: Bloomsbury.
151 Chivvis, C., Miller, A. and Geaghan-Breiner, B. (2023), 'Saudi Arabia in the Emerging World Order', Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, 6 November 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/saudi-arabia-in-the-emerging-world-order?lang=en.

of the liberal international order. Saudi Arabia's human rights record – including the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, continued jailing of activists, the long-running war in Yemen since 2015, among other touchpoints – has strained relations with the US and European states. The use of capital punishment, which last year reached its highest level in decades, is sure to draw further criticism.[152]

While efforts to liberalize Saudi society – such as the announced curtailing of the religious police in 2016 – have earned praise from the West, dissent and political debate remain tightly controlled. A new Saudi nationalism and identity that shift away from religion to embrace national celebrations and citizen empowerment are being crafted. The aim is to support top-down changes, rally around the leadership and harness national energy to deliver Vision 2030.[153] National discourse remains united around these themes; any citizens who have divergent or more critical views self-censor and are very cautious about making public statements. Civil society members, activists, journalists and members of the economic and political elite have been jailed, barred from international travel and targeted for their political criticism, partly due to an anti-corruption campaign under way since 2017.

The kingdom has long been frustrated by what it sees as Western double standards where principles of non-aggression and sovereignty are not fairly applied.

The kingdom has long been frustrated by what it sees as Western double standards where principles of non-aggression and sovereignty are not fairly applied. This tension has been acute since the start of the war in Gaza following Hamas's attacks on 7 October 2023, and given what the Saudis see as the West's unequivocal support for Israel. Accusations of hypocrisy are not new and date back over two decades to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 where Saudi Arabia saw the US try to bend international rules for its own purposes. It is worth noting that the kingdom was vehemently opposed to the US invasion, fearing that the removal of the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, whose regime had helped to contain Iranian regional influence, would lead to Iran's empowerment across the region. Riyadh accused the US and Western partners of inconsistency during the 2011 Arab Spring protests, pointing repeatedly to Syria where in 2012 President Barack Obama rowed back on his famous 'red line' that US action would follow were the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, to use chemical weapons against his people. Further charges of double standards stem from the unilateral Western defence of Ukraine and sanctions against Russia while little support or action has been seen to protect Palestinian life.

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152 Amnesty International (2024), 'Saudi Arabia: Highest execution toll in decades as authorities put to death 198 people', 28 September 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/saudi-arabia-highest-execution-toll-in-decades-as-authorities-put-to-death-198-people.
153 Smith Diwan, K. (2022), 'Saudi Arabia's New Nationalist Foreign Policy', The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 31 October 2022, https://agsiw.org/saudi-arabias-new-nationalist-foreign-policy.

Riyadh essentially sees a mismatch between Western actions and value-driven statements. In response, particularly when Riyadh's interests appear to be harmed, Saudi leadership and policymakers have challenged Western policy more forcefully, pushing back against Western critiques of the kingdom. This occurred after the Russian invasion of Ukraine when Saudi Arabia did not immediately condemn Russia's violation of international law and kept an open channel to Moscow. Riyadh will likely use future tension points and accusations of double standards to push back against interference in its domestic affairs and defend what it sees as its national interests.[154]

Saudi perceptions of US power

Like much of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has been deeply impacted by what it views as increasing inconsistency in US politics and policy. During the Obama presidency (2009–17), the kingdom witnessed Washington pull away from the Middle East and prioritize geopolitical competition with China and Russia, alongside a US-centric domestic agenda. To the dismay of leaders in Riyadh, the subsequent Trump and Biden administrations continued the same theme. A list of divergences that have included Washington's response to the 2011 Arab uprisings (seen as supportive of protests at the expense of traditional regional partners), the poorly planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and, above all, the uneven US approach to Middle East security have produced tensions between both capitals. Criticism by Congress of the kingdom's human rights record and its war in Yemen also ruffled feathers in Riyadh.[155]

Saudi leaders have been frustrated by US policy fluctuations *vis-à-vis* Iran – notably from the negotiations that led to the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement to the US withdrawal from that agreement in 2018, and President Donald Trump's imposition of 'maximum pressure' sanctions. The Iran-backed attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 complicated things further. Trump initially responded with forceful rhetoric but then retreated from confrontation, making it clear that the US did not want a direct war with Iran. Trump was judged to be close to the Saudi political establishment, so his vacillation alarmed the kingdom's leaders. In January 2020, the US eventually killed Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force. Despite this, Washington's inconsistency alongside the lack of an effective plan to manage Iran's nuclear and regional behaviour left an indelible mark on the US–Saudi relationship. Little was changed subsequently by President Joe Biden's approach of incremental conflict management through side agreements to contain Iran's regional activities and nuclear acceleration – an approach which Riyadh views to be neither durable nor effective.

Differences with the US administration persisted, fuelled by pointed criticism in the US of Khashoggi's murder and Biden's withdrawal of offensive support for the war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia responded with a new, cooler approach. It rebuffed

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154 Singh, M. (2022), 'The Middle East in a Multipolar Era: Why America's Allies Are Flirting With Russia and China', *Foreign Affairs*, 7 December 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/middle-east-multipolar-era.
155 Gause, F. G. (2023), 'The Kingdom and the Power: How to Salvage the U.S.-Saudi Relationship', *Foreign Affairs*, 20 December 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/gregory-gause-kingdom-and-power-us-saudi-relationship.

US pressure to pick sides over the Ukraine invasion, and instead has maintained strategic relations with Moscow.[156] The kingdom is seeking to broaden and diversify economic and political ties with other global players and middle powers. Nonetheless, the various shifts and strains within the US–Saudi relationship have resulted in an important, pragmatic mutual re-evaluation – one in which Riyadh continues to favour a security-based relationship with Washington.

Saudi Arabia seeks consistency above all in its relationship with the US. The kingdom engaged in negotiations with the former Biden administration to stabilize the relationship via a defence and security treaty that would provide some mutually binding defence commitments and expand cooperation to include energy and counterterrorism policy. Having seen how the Iranian nuclear deal was a non-binding US commitment instituted through an executive order, Riyadh was insisting on obtaining approval from the US Congress to secure the deal.[157] The proposed security pact has also been linked to broader US efforts aimed at promoting Saudi–Israeli normalization.

On Israeli–Palestinian relations, Riyadh was disappointed that these issues were not at the forefront of the Biden agenda in the Middle East. However, Washington did embrace accelerated plans to enhance greater regional integration and normalization of ties between Israel and Arab states, building on the 2020 Abraham Accords. Prior to the 7 October Hamas attacks and war in Gaza, as part of an intended tripartite Saudi–Israeli normalization deal, Riyadh would have obtained important defence and security guarantees from Washington, while Israel would have revived a peace process with Palestine. That vision was also articulated at the 2023 G20 Summit in India where Biden unveiled plans for the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) that would build connectivity and infrastructure across geographies including Israel, Jordan and the Gulf states.[158]

Given the war in Gaza, the prospect of Israel normalizing ties with Saudi Arabia seems dim, and plans of regional integration that include a broader vision of economic connectivity have stalled. In November 2024, frustrated by Israel's war aims and lack of engagement on a peace process, the Crown Prince accused Israel of genocide.[159] The kingdom has led an international coalition of more than 90 countries to support the establishment of a Palestinian state – a move that Riyadh sees as critical to its broader vision of regional stability.[160] While not advocating for Palestinian statehood, Trump in his second presidency will push American Arab partners like Saudi Arabia to share the burden of regional security crises, including in Gaza. Despite his wild statement calling for the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza so that the territory could be redeveloped into the 'Riviera of the Middle East', Trump is expected to promote Israeli–Saudi normalization in an effort to secure

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156 Coates Ulrichsen, K. (2023), 'Saudi-US Relations in a Changing Global and Regional Landscape', Arab Center Washington DC, 29 June 2023, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-us-relations-in-a-changing-global-and-regional-landscape.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Gardner, F. and Khalil, H. (2024), 'Saudi Crown Prince Says Israel Committing Genocide in Gaza', BBC News, 11 November 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp8x5570514o.
160 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024), 'The First Meeting of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution Continues its Work with the Participation of the Deputy Minister for Multilateral International Affairs, Senior Officials, and International Organizations', 31 October 2024, https://www.mofa.gov.sa/en/ministry/news/Pages/-The-First-Meeting-of-the-Global-Coalition-for-the-Implementation-of-the-Two-State-Solution-Continues-its-Work-with-the-Par.aspx.

what is often referred to as 'the deal of the century'.[161] For Saudi Arabia, the broader aim of such a negotiation would be to achieve a permanent US-oriented security arrangement while also establishing a political horizon for Palestinian statehood which it now sees as necessary to achieve broader regional security.

Managing multipolarity: the best of all worlds

In an increasingly multipolar world beset with geopolitical tensions, Riyadh is primarily seeking strategic autonomy. It aims to maintain balance in its relationships with major powers like the US, China, Russia and to a lesser extent Europe. The Saudi minister of investment, Khalid al Falih, said: 'I don't see our relationship with the U.S. [and] with China as being mutually exclusive. I think, in fact, they complement each other.'[162]

In an increasingly multipolar world beset with geopolitical tensions, Riyadh is primarily seeking strategic autonomy. It aims to maintain balance in its relationships with major powers like the US, China, Russia and to a lesser extent Europe.

Notwithstanding its traditional security partnership with the US, Riyadh has pursued independent policies, especially in energy and regional politics. For example, in 2022, at the outset of the Ukraine invasion, Riyadh rebuffed US calls to increase energy production, insisting on production cuts with OPEC+ that led to higher prices that benefited Russia. Washington saw this move as politically motivated.

The kingdom has described its position as one of 'active neutrality' leading it to balance strategic decisions with diplomatic gestures. In 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted 40 countries for a two-day Jeddah peace summit and invited the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to the Arab League summit. The kingdom, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), also helped to negotiate prisoner swaps between Russia and Ukraine, continues to put itself forward as a mediator between the US and Russia,[163] and at the time of writing had already hosted separate sets of talks between, respectively, the US and Russia and the US and Ukraine.

In the same vein and despite US concerns, Sino-Saudi relations have continued to accelerate. They have moved from limited interactions to a comprehensive and strategic partnership that encompasses economic, political and cultural dimensions. China is Saudi Arabia's top export destination. According to 2023 IMF figures,[164]

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161 Bowen, J. (2020), 'Trump's Middle East Plan: Deal of the century is a huge gamble', BBC News, 29 January 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-51263815.
162 Turak, N. (2023), 'Saudi Arabia and China are part of a multipolar world order, and their mutual interests are "strong and rising," minister says', CNBC, 13 June 2023, https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/14/china-and-saudi-arabia-are-part-of-a-multipolar-world-order-minister.html.
163 Gause (2023), 'The Kingdom and the Power: How to Salvage the U.S.-Saudi Relationship'.
164 International Monetary Fund (2024), 'Saudi Arabia: Concluding Statement of the 2024 Article IV Mission', 14 June 2024, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2024/06/13/mission-concluding-statement-saudi-arabia-concluding-statement-of-the-2024-article-iv-mission.

Saudi exports to China, the majority of which consist of crude oil, amounted to $54.3 billion, three times higher than exports to the US. The comprehensive strategic partnership has brought China's Belt and Road Initiative and the kingdom's Vision 2030 into 'alignment', notably via agreements over technology, hydrogen and infrastructure investment.[165] Military cooperation has also increased, with China supporting the development of Saudi Arabia's ballistic missile capability. In addition, Beijing played a key mediating role in bringing Riyadh and Tehran's long-time estrangement to an end in March 2023. Like many autocratic Arab states, Saudi Arabia also appreciates China's policy of non-interference in domestic affairs.[166] As both nations continue to evolve economically and politically, their partnership is likely to deepen further. However, Beijing's limited ability to manage or contain Middle East conflicts and its unwillingness to choose sides in regional contests reveal the limitations of this cooperation for Riyadh.

As mentioned above, Riyadh continues to see Washington as the primary security guarantor of the Middle East. With the second Trump administration, Riyadh will seek to obtain a long-term stable arrangement with Washington. As part of any agreement, Washington will impose limits on Saudi Arabia's technical and military cooperation with China, while the kingdom may benefit from US technological and defence investments. Saudi Arabia also hopes to gain US support for its own civilian nuclear programme, although Washington is unlikely to provide Riyadh with sought-after nuclear fission processing technology.

Ultimately, Riyadh is seeking the best of both worlds – to advance its multipolar aims and to avoid having to pick sides. To advance its objectives, the kingdom is strategically cultivating a portfolio of diverse international relationships. With its security still anchored in the West and its economy in the East, multipolarity is seen as a better outcome for Riyadh.

Foreign policy and multilateralism

To more effectively counter geopolitical shifts and tensions, Riyadh is adopting a more assertive foreign policy aimed at showcasing its leadership in the Middle East and North Africa region and its relevance as a middle power on the international stage. This assertiveness is also tied to domestic shifts associated with Vision 2030.

The kingdom has also been playing a global mediation and multilateral role, requiring Saudi policymakers to invest in complex mediation and conflict stabilization efforts.[167] With Saudi Arabia having once turned down the Arab seat at the United Nations Security Council, this shift towards greater multilateral

165 Lons, C. (2024), *East meets middle: China's blossoming relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE*, Policy Brief, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/publication/east-meets-middle-chinas-blossoming-relationship-with-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae.
166 Fulton, J. (2020), *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*, London: Routledge.
167 Jacobs, A. (2023), 'Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy', International Crisis Group Commentary, 14 September 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/saudi-arabia/understanding-saudi-arabias.

involvement reflects a dramatic change in the kingdom's posture. Riyadh's G20 presidency, held during the COVID-19 pandemic, should be seen as the beginning of its outward-facing diplomatic presence. The kingdom also convened multilateral summits such as the extraordinary Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Arab League gatherings in December 2023 to press (albeit without success) for a ceasefire, humanitarian aid and a peace settlement to the war in Gaza. It also led on a 2023 regional initiative to invite Syria under its then president, Bashar al-Assad, back to the Arab League after a decade-long suspension.[168]

To more effectively counter geopolitical shifts and tensions, Riyadh is adopting a more assertive foreign policy aimed at showcasing its leadership in the Middle East and North Africa region and its relevance as a middle power on the international stage.

Riyadh has been simultaneously bolstering its international relationships and its participation in alternative minilateral and multilateral forums. It became a dialogue partner at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in March 2023 and has been considering joining the BRICS grouping to leverage greater economic cooperation with partner countries.[169] However, Riyadh's delay in accepting the invitation to the group is likely due to the unclear and conflicting objectives of the many countries involved that range from Iran to Ethiopia to India. Through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia has hosted summits with China, Central Asian states and the US. In 2020, Riyadh founded a council of countries from around the Red Sea basin. It is important to note that the council has not provided maritime support to contain Houthi action in the Red Sea since the war in Gaza.[170]

Saudi Arabia faces competition from its smaller, nimbler neighbour, the UAE. The two states have been on competing sides in a number of regional conflicts including in Sudan, Libya and Yemen. Economic competition between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh has also intensified. Should these dynamics continue without resolution or more direct management, they could undermine Riyadh's bold Vision 2030-focused objectives.

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168 Atta, I. (2023), 'From Confrontational to Subtle Diplomacy: The Reorientation of Saudi Foreign Policy', Gulf International Forum, 13 May 2023, https://gulfif.org/from-confrontational-to-subtle-diplomacy-the-reorientation-of-saudi-foreign-policy.
169 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members), South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, and Indonesia (2025).
170 Atta (2003), 'From Confrontational to Subtle Diplomacy: The Reorientation of Saudi Foreign Policy'.

Attention to regional security

The kingdom's leadership has understood that Saudi security is predicated on regional security. This has led Riyadh to pursue direct diplomacy in often adversarial regional relationships and to embrace pragmatic outreach. Since the war in Gaza, and given that conflict's impacts on the broader region, the kingdom has been more assertive in managing crises.

A direct approach in managing regional rivalries has led to some de-escalation and reconciliation with long-standing adversaries. As a result, Saudi Arabia has improved relations with Turkey and Iran, and has extended collaboration with Central Asian states, Brazil, India and South Korea, among others. This outreach is connected to the Vision 2030 goals of increasing foreign direct investment as well as investing in soft power to build long-term partnerships and increase security for the kingdom.[171]

Part of this foreign policy shift involves a political rehabilitation of the kingdom's image, important both for broader economic and international objectives and for the Crown Prince. Saudi Arabia's reputation has long been marred by criticism of human rights abuses and of its sponsorship of Islamic radicalism. However, its reputation hit new lows during the 2015–19 period. Reflecting the ambitions and the impatience of the new Saudi leadership, that period could be considered a 'trial-and-error' phase of foreign policy application. Riyadh was enmeshed in its long and brutal war in Yemen and was pursuing some clumsy diplomacy. Conflict with Lebanon led to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in 2017, with suggestions that he was held hostage in Riyadh. In 2018, trade and diplomatic ties with the Canadian government were suspended after it criticized Saudi Arabia's detention of women activists on social media; the ties were only restored in 2023. Also in 2018 was the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, drawing worldwide outrage and condemnation.[172]

The 2017 blockade of Qatar imposed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt was another low point. This badly conceived attempt to intervene in a neighbouring state caused a rift which lasted until 2021. The action failed to garner broader support and led to Qatar's strengthened ties with Iran, Turkey and even the US, all of which were moves that the blockading parties were seeking to avoid. The 2021 Al Ula agreement enabled Gulf states to resume diplomatic relations and helped Saudi leaders to make amends with Turkey, where ties had also been strained.[173]

Another important development has been the rapprochement with Iran negotiated over 18 months, and which resulted in the March 2023 agreement brokered by China. Current diplomatic efforts are now aimed at producing direct engagement to stem bilateral and regional conflict. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has seen lengthy periods of rivalry, regional competition and antagonism. Through its sponsorship of regional proxies, Iran had developed deterrence capabilities, expanded its regional influence and threatened neighbours including

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171 Borck, T. (2023), 'Kingdom of Change: Saudi Arabia's Evolving Foreign Policy', Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, 5 June 2023, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/kingdom-change-saudi-arabias-evolving-foreign-policy.
172 Bianco (2024), *Global Saudi: How Europeans can work with an evolving kingdom*.
173 Jacobs (2023), 'Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy'.

Saudi Arabia. As part of the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has seen an uptick in diplomatic and military exchanges, Riyadh hopes to contain Iranian transgressions and gradually achieve a change in Tehran's behaviour.[174] Israeli efforts to degrade Iranian-backed groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, alongside the dramatic departure of Tehran's ally, Bashar al-Assad, from Syria, have left Iran in a weaker regional position. Despite these key changes, Iran's nuclear programme and drone and missile capabilities still pose challenges for Riyadh, which sees no alternative other than to engage in a direct approach. President Trump's intention to reimpose maximum pressure sanctions on Tehran could prompt incidents similar to the 2019 Iran-backed attacks on Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais. To manage such challenges and to prevent further regional instability, the kingdom will likely try to temper the Trump administration's approach.

Ending the costly war in Yemen has become a focal point for Riyadh's broader objective of achieving regional stability. Despite Saudi, UAE, UK and US military efforts, Houthi advancements in Yemen have not been curtailed. With Iran's support and sponsorship, the Houthis have acquired the capacity and technology to direct missiles and drones over Saudi Arabia. These capabilities, which led to numerous strikes in Saudi Arabia and also hit the UAE in January 2022, have raised the long-term risk potential to damage infrastructure, disrupt tourism and deter investment in the Saudi Vision.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Saudi Arabia declared a unilateral ceasefire in 2020 to encourage the Houthis to engage in peace talks. Although this did not produce a lasting ceasefire, it was an attempt to reduce hostilities and create a conducive environment for negotiations. Saudi Arabia proposed a new peace initiative in March 2021, which included a nationwide ceasefire, the reopening of Sanaa airport, and the easing of restrictions on Hodeidah port. The initiative was supported by the UN and the US but faced resistance from the Houthis.[175] Since then, diplomatic efforts have focused on a permanent peace agreement. However, those have been derailed by Houthi activities in the Red Sea related to the Gaza war, jeopardizing Riyadh's immediate goals of ending the Yemen conflict. Containment of that conflict and delicate management of relations with the Houthis will be paramount to achieving the economic objectives of Vision 2030, and to improving security on the Arabian Peninsula and in the Red Sea.

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174 Farouk, Y. (2023), 'Riyadh's Motivations in the Saudi-Iran Deal', Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/03/riyadhs-motivations-behind-the-saudi-iran-deal?lang=en.
175 Nagi, A. (2022), 'The Pitfall of Saudi Arabia's Security Strategy in Yemen', Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/01/the-pitfalls-of-saudi-arabias-security-centric-strategy-in-yemen?lang=en&center=middle-east.

08
Continuity and non-alignment shape Indonesia's worldview

The world's third largest democracy has a long-held commitment to strategic autonomy and multilateralism – yet growing China–US rivalry will increasingly put Indonesia's non-alignment to the test.

Ralf Emmers

Continuity characterizes the vision of the international order that is held by Indonesian foreign policy elites. Indonesia openly proclaims a non-aligned policy and favours an autonomous regional order. It emphasizes that national resilience and stability can only be obtained through national sovereignty that is free from external interference and domination.

Given the prominence of continuity in Indonesian foreign policy, it is important to situate the country's vision for international order within a historical context. The concept of non-alignment remains central to the Indonesian perception of the international order.[176] Non-alignment spread rapidly during the Cold War period, especially after the April 1955 Bandung Conference organized by the Indonesian president, Sukarno. Over the years, Indonesia has repeatedly committed itself to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and has called for regional solutions to regional problems, free from outside interference.[177] For example, Jakarta has continued to support the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declaration and the 1995 Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ). ZOPFAN seeks to achieve regional autonomy by limiting outside interference

176 Leifer, M. (1983), *Indonesia's Foreign Policy*, London: George Allen & Unwin.
177 Anwar, D.F. (2008), 'Indonesia and the Bandung Conference, Then and Now' in Acharya, A. and Tan, S.S. (eds) (2008), *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.

in Southeast Asia,[178] and the declaration expresses a belief in not having to choose between Washington, Moscow or Beijing.[179] While ZOPFAN has not been realized, it remains an ambition of Indonesia to achieve autonomy *vis-à-vis* the great powers.

Indonesian foreign policy elites perceive their country as a rising Asian power and a middle power in the international order.[180] Indonesia's middle-power behaviour emerged in the mid-2000s during the presidency of the retired three-star general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The period preceding his presidency had been politically and economically unstable, with Indonesia greatly affected by the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. The country faced serious socio-economic problems, which for a time diminished its international influence and diplomatic position in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Over the last 20 years, Indonesia has benefited from a new status, driven by sustained economic growth and political stability.[181] This has generally strengthened Indonesia's reputation both regionally and internationally, as illustrated by it becoming the only Southeast Asian nation to be a full member of the G20.[182] The country's new status is also linked to political change which started in 1998 after the downfall of President Suharto and which transformed the country into the third largest democracy worldwide. Indonesia's national identity now includes respect for democracy and human rights.

Indonesia's political transformation has been extended to its foreign policy through a normative agenda implemented in Southeast Asia and beyond.[183] Jakarta has, for example, promoted democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia through ASEAN and other bodies like the Bali Democracy Forum.[184] Yet these efforts have had limited success.

Furthermore, foreign policy elites in Indonesia share a vision of the international order structured around the importance of international law and multilateralism. The country has acted as a normative power in various regional and international institutions. Its attempt at exercising influence in the international order through multilateralism is best illustrated in the context of ASEAN. Indonesia co-founded the regional organization in 1967 together with Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and it has since then been viewed by all the other Southeast Asian members as ASEAN's natural or *de facto* leader due to the country's territorial size and large population.[185] Indonesia has also continued to reaffirm its commitment to multilateralism in Asia through the establishment of other regional platforms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

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178 International Center for Not-For-Profit-Law (undated), '1971 ZONE OF PEACE, FREEDOM AND NEUTRALITY DECLARATION: Adopted by the Foreign Ministers at the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 27 November 1971', https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Transnational_zone.pdf.
179 Emmers, R. (2018), 'Unpacking ASEAN Neutrality: The Quest for Autonomy and Impartiality in Southeast Asia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 40(3), December 2018, pp. 349–70.
180 Shekhar, V. (2014), *Indonesia's Rise: Seeking Regional and Global Roles*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press; Emmers, R. and Teo, S. (2018), *Security Strategies of Middle Powers in the Asia Pacific*, Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Press.
181 On power dynamics and ranking in the Indo-Pacific, see Lowy Institute (2024), Lowy Institute Asia Power Index, Edition 2024, https://power.lowyinstitute.org.
182 Emmerson, D. (2012), 'Is Indonesia Rising? It Depends', in Reid, A. (ed.) (2012), *Indonesia Rising: The Repositioning of Asia's Third Giant*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 49–76.
183 Acharya, A. (2015), *Indonesia Matters: Asia's Emerging Democratic Power*, Singapore: World Scientific.
184 Emmers, R. (2021), 'Democratization, National Identity, and Indonesia's Foreign Policy', in Rozman, G. (ed.) (2021), *Democratization, National Identity and Foreign Policy in Asia*, London: Routledge, pp. 141–54.
185 Leifer, M. (1989), *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia*, London: Routledge; and Anwar, D. W. (1994), *Indonesia in ASEAN: Foreign Policy and Regionalism*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

Indonesia has also engaged in global multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations and the G20. It has been on four occasions a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and is a contributor to UN peacekeeping operations. Still, Indonesia is often viewed domestically and by the wider international community as punching below its weight in global institutions due to a lack of capacity and strategic vision.

Perceptions of power, foreign policy objectives and the role of Indonesia in the international order are not a source of great debate in Jakarta, as broad agreement generally prevails on such questions among the few involved in making foreign policy.

In short, there is consensus among foreign policy elites in Indonesia about the role and status of the country in the international order, and about its ongoing commitment to the concept of non-alignment and autonomy, to international law, and to the use of multilateralism. Perceptions of power, foreign policy objectives and the role of Indonesia in the international order are not a source of great debate in Jakarta, as broad agreement generally prevails on such questions among the few involved in making foreign policy. It is interesting to note that Indonesia is a majority Muslim state but that Islam has not directly influenced the country's view on the liberal international order and how it interacts with the US and China. Hence, while religious values certainly matter in Indonesia, its foreign policy has remained rather secular in its approach to the liberal international order in comparison to other majority Muslim states like Turkey.

While Indonesia accepts the liberal international order and its core principles, its foreign policy elites do not view the country as a shaper of that order. Instead, they wish to pursue some form of strategic autonomy and to support continuity in the national vision of the international order. Moreover, Jakarta does not reject or seek to undermine the international order, as it benefits directly from the public goods it provides. Indonesia is also aware that the international order and the global multilateral system that sustains it are currently failing. This is viewed with concern in a country committed, in particular, to the UN system.

Indonesia's perceptions of US power

Indonesia established diplomatic relations with the US in 1949 and the two countries deepened their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2015. Yet, Jakarta and Washington often regard their relationship as underdeveloped and as having the potential for more cooperation.[186]

186 Kivimaki, T. (2023), 'Less is More: US Engagement with Indonesia (1945-2021)', in Turner, O., Nymalm, N. and Aslam, W. (eds) (2023), *The Routledge Handbook of US Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific*, London: Routledge, pp. 269–84.

Indonesia has historically favoured a regional order determined by the Southeast Asian states and free from external intervention. However, other states in the region have long relied on the US to guarantee their defence and national security. The Philippines and Thailand are treaty allies of the US, and most other states in the region have signed security and economic partnerships with Washington. Moreover, most Southeast Asian states have never perceived ASEAN as a long-term alternative to bilateral links with the US. Indonesia has gradually accepted this reality and it has generally endorsed the role that Washington plays in upholding the existing regional and international order.

The relationship with the US is also strategic for Indonesia, whose armed forces are dependent on US military equipment and training. The country benefits from a rather benign security environment. Yet it is concerned about Chinese military expansion and rising assertiveness in the South China Sea. Indonesia exploits fisheries and hydrocarbon reserves around the Natuna Islands, a maritime zone that might overlap with Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Hence, Jakarta unofficially supports the presence of the US Navy in Southeast Asia to counterbalance Chinese activities, and its armed forces have held annual joint military exercises with US forces under the Garuda Shield programme since 2004.

US–Indonesian relations deepened during President Barack Obama's administration. A comprehensive partnership was signed in 2010 that provided a framework for closer economic and security links; in 2015 this was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership, at an equivalent level to the China–Indonesia strategic partnership of 2013.[187] Obama's personal history in and connection to Indonesia contributed to closer relations and were influential on Indonesian public opinion.

The transactional nature of President Donald Trump's first term in office (2017–21) and his shift away from free trade influenced the foreign policy of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Jokowi introduced a greater domestic orientation into his foreign policy by emphasizing the importance of economic growth.[188] His priorities included ties with great and middle powers to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and support domestic infrastructure projects. This made China a key partner of President Jokowi while the Trump administration and its absence of economic initiatives were viewed as less significant in Jakarta. The Jokowi administration was also apprehensive about the geopolitical rivalry between Beijing and Washington and its effect on Indonesia.

During the administration of President Joe Biden, there was renewed collaboration in the security and economic sphere. Indonesia supported two US-led initiatives: the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and the Just Energy Transition Partnership.[189] It acquired US military equipment and, since 2022, held upgraded Super Garuda Shield military exercises. Yet Jakarta has not supported

187 Mubah, A.S. (2019), 'Indonesia's Double Hedging Strategy toward the United States–China Competition: Shaping Regional Order in the Indo-Pacific?' *Issues & Studies*, (55)4, p. 20.
188 Bland, B. (2024), 'The President Who Never Picked a Side: Indonesia's Jokowi Showed How Asian Countries Can Skirt the U.S.-China Rivalry', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 October 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/indonesia/president-who-never-picked-side.
189 Priamarizki, A. (2024), 'Understanding the Domestic Determinants of Indonesia's Hedging Policy towards the United States and China', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 46(1), p. 29.

or joined US-led minilateral security arrangements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ('Quad' – of Australia, India, Japan and the US) or the AUKUS security partnership, announced in 2021, which ties Australia, the UK and the US.[190]

In Indonesia, the perception of US democracy and foreign policy priorities has been affected by the war in Gaza. The scale of the loss of lives and the destruction in Gaza have been a source of concern for Indonesian public opinion. In the annual survey of foreign policy elites by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, the level of support for the US in Southeast Asia dropped by 11 points in 2024 compared to the previous year. In the same survey, only 27 per cent of Indonesian respondents said they viewed the US favourably, in contrast to 73 per cent doing so for China.[191] Most analysts believe that this significant drop in US popularity was linked to the Biden administration's pro-Israel position.[192] It is too soon to predict the longer-term consequences of the US response to the Gaza war on Indonesia and its view of the international order.

It is also difficult to predict what Trump's return to the presidency could mean for Indonesia and its relationship with the US. This is due to the unpredictability and transactional nature of Trump and the people likely to advise him at the start of his second administration. That said, foreign policy elites in Jakarta appear to have already priced in some likely aspects of a second Trump administration and its possible consequences for Southeast Asia. These expectations are mostly based on Trump's first presidency. Such indications include a use of trade tariffs as a negotiation tool, a US foreign and defence policy in Asia structured around China and its rising power in the region, and a focus on bilateralism at the expense of multilateral institutions like ASEAN.

Foreign policy: a reliance on multilateralism

Indonesia has always refused to commit itself to a collective defence arrangement, arguing that military alliances threaten international security as they have a common external enemy in mind. Instead of joining an alliance to balance an external threat, regional diplomacy and autonomy from great power politics have historically been at the core of Indonesia's foreign policy. Jakarta prefers to find regional solutions to regional problems to limit external interventions. Hence, the search for strategic autonomy pre-dates the current pressure to choose sides between Beijing and Washington, as it is linked to Jakarta's long-term ambition to preserve its agency and room for manoeuvre in regional affairs.

190 Ibid., pp. 29–30.
191 ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2024), *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 2 April 2024.
192 See Koh, T. (2024), 'Both the US and China have fallen short in their Quest to win SE Asia', *The Straits Times*, 8 May 2024; and Vaswani, K. (2024), 'Why Indonesia is China's new best Friend in Southeast Asia', Bloomberg UK, 21 April 2024.

Indonesia's strategic outlook aims for a 'free and active' foreign policy (*bebas dan aktif*), a concept first articulated by Vice-President Mohammad Hatta in 1948.[193] 'Free and active' has been central to Indonesia's foreign policy from Sukarno to the present day.[194]

Another constant has been the attention given to ASEAN, which is regularly described as the main pillar of Indonesia's foreign policy.[195] Indonesia relies on ASEAN and its related institutions like the ARF and the EAS to exercise and amplify its own regional influence. In addition to multilateralism, Indonesia has enhanced its status by focusing on network diplomacy. Jakarta has established strategic partnerships with China and the US as well as with Australia, India, Japan and other states. These cover a broad range of issues and enhance Indonesia's role in international affairs.

Indonesia relies on ASEAN and its related institutions to exercise and amplify its own regional influence.

Indonesia has had some success in mediation with its diplomatic efforts – for example, in a dispute on the border between Cambodia and Thailand in 2011, the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and the conflict in Myanmar over the rights of the Rohingya minority group. However, Indonesia has been unable to mediate the recurrence of clashes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea or regarding the ongoing civil war in Myanmar. Jakarta has also supported regional and global initiatives to promote democracy and human rights. It has attempted to enhance functional cooperation to tackle forms of transnational crime, like human smuggling and trafficking, but with limited success.

Nevertheless, limited domestic resources and a lack of strategic vision have restricted Indonesian foreign policy, which partly explains why Indonesia often punches below its weight in international affairs.

The country's foreign policy elites aspire to maintain the status quo in the international order by sustaining the rule of law, the role of international institutions and the promotion of democracy and human rights. In addition, Jakarta aspires to address the material limitations that have prevented it so far from achieving its desired international status and objectives. It wants to position itself as a rising Asian power in the international order. It will continue its commitment to non-alignment and its reliance on ASEAN to amplify its international voice and influence. Indonesia's foreign policy elites see this as achievable as long as the country continues to be stable and peaceful domestically and its economic development remains sustainable.

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193 Hatta, M. (1953), 'Indonesian foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs*, (31)3, pp. 444–45.
194 Perwita, A. B. (2007), *Indonesia and the Muslim World: Islam and Secularism in the Foreign Policy of Soeharto and Beyond*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, p. 8.
195 See Muhibat, S. (2013), 'Indonesia and the concept of regional power', *The Indonesian Quarterly*, 41(3); and Emmers, R. (2014), 'Indonesia's Role in ASEAN: A Case of Incomplete and Sectorial Leadership', *The Pacific Review*, 27(4), September 2014, pp. 543–62.

Concern at the China–US rivalry

Indonesia observes with concern the rise of great power competition in Asia. Jakarta wants to stick to non-alignment and strategic autonomy, and does not want to be forced to choose between Beijing and Washington.[196] Yet the growing rivalry between the two powers has narrowed Indonesia's policy options. This has made it harder for the country to promote bilateral and multilateral initiatives in its foreign policy.

Since the 1990s, Indonesia has contributed to building a regional security architecture that covers most states in the Asia-Pacific. Consisting of overlapping multilateral bodies – such as the EAS, the ARF, the ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) and others – this architecture is based on the notion of inclusiveness. It focuses on dialogue and confidence-building measures to improve the climate of regional relations. But achieving these cooperative goals is much harder in a period of rising geopolitical tensions.[197] Indonesia continues to resort to ASEAN and to preserve the organization's centrality to regional security.[198]

However, Indonesia is concerned by the increase in minilateral arrangements that may offer an alternative to ASEAN and its various regional platforms. Arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS are excluding China in a bid to constrain rising Chinese influence in the region. By adopting an exclusive approach to cooperation, such arrangements undermine ASEAN's centrality and preference for inclusiveness.[199] China and the US have so far not undermined ASEAN's role in regional cooperation, but they have invested more time and resources in pushing their own diplomatic initiatives.

Indonesia realizes that it will become increasingly difficult to stay neutral and manage China–US competition. For Jakarta, a worst-case scenario involves losing its autonomy and having to choose between the two powers.

Indonesia realizes that it will become increasingly difficult to stay neutral and manage China–US competition. For Jakarta, a worst-case scenario involves losing its autonomy and having to choose between the two powers. Indonesia sticks to its 'free and active' foreign policy, avoiding taking sides and refraining from joining collective defence arrangements. Yet not choosing sides is difficult, for example, in the context of the overlapping disputes in the South China Sea. Jakarta is committed to international law and the law of the sea convention. It also supports

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196 Kausikan, B. (2017), 'Dodging and Hedging in Southeast Asia', *The American Interest*, 12(5), 12 January 2017.
197 Sukma, R. (2024), 'If ASEAN is to remain Central to the Region it must deal with its institutional weaknesses', *East Asia Forum*, 29 September 2024.
198 See Laksmana, E. (2024), 'Indonesia's Reference-Point Diplomacy Decade under Jokowi', International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 25 October 2024, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/10/indonesias-reference-point-diplomacy-decade-under-jokowi.
199 Emmers, R. (2023), 'ASEAN's Struggle for Relevance in an Era of Great Power Competition', *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs*, 9, August 2023, pp. 19–23.

the negotiation of a code of conduct for the South China Sea that would include China and the 10 ASEAN members. However, the increasing China–US competition would make such a negotiation even more challenging. In short, Indonesia's non-aligned position is being tested by unfolding events.

There have been some shifts already in Indonesia's approach, especially in trade and investments. President Jokowi prioritized domestic economic development, and Indonesia has in recent years become more dependent on Chinese FDI.[200] China is now the country's main trading partner and source of investments. The Jokowi administration developed large infrastructure projects, funded mostly through Chinese and Japanese joint ventures, to unlock economic growth. Beijing has also supported Jokowi's plan to turn the city of Nusantara in Borneo into the new capital of Indonesia and has provided some necessary investment. In contrast, there was an absence of ambitious US trade and investment policies towards Indonesia under the previous Trump and Biden administrations.[201]

Notwithstanding these developments, Chinese FDI has become a domestic political issue. Chinese companies operating in Indonesia rely on Chinese migrant workers rather than local ones. China's rising influence in the mining sector is also viewed negatively and large Chinese-led projects have often been marred by extra costs.[202]

Managing the China–US rivalry will be a significant challenge for President Prabowo Subianto, who took office in October 2024. Like his predecessors, he can be expected to seek a balance in Indonesia's relationships with Beijing and Washington. He travelled to China as president-elect in April 2024, which provoked speculation about his foreign policy priorities.[203] Yet, in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June, Prabowo hinted that Jakarta would maintain its non-aligned position despite the China–US strategic competition. This is likely to remain the case under the second Trump administration.

Prabowo must now establish a good working relationship with Donald Trump and the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and preserve some form of diplomatic equidistance between the two – even as both powers gradually increase pressure on Indonesia to budge from its non-aligned position.

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200 See Bland (2024), 'The President Who Never Picked a Side'.
201 Vaswani (2024), 'Why Indonesia is China's new best Friend in Southeast Asia'.
202 Ibid.
203 See Haziq Bin Jani, M. (2024), 'Prabowo's First 100 Days: Foreign Policy, Trade Challenges, and Bilateral Opportunities', IDSS Paper 086/2024, Singapore: Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 22 October 2024.

09

Turkey seeks a vision fit for a multipolar world

For many years, Turkey has viewed foreign policy through a domestic lens. Will its ambitions for strategic autonomy in a multipolar world force its leaders to articulate a broader vision?

Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Ayşe Zarakol

For Turkey's ruling elite, multipolarity is already defining the future shape of international order. To some degree, this view is spurring Turkey's policymakers to reappraise its partnerships to strengthen self-reliance and national security for the country. Yet it is far from clear whether this approach is part of an articulated vision of international order from Turkey's leadership.

The same political elite has governed the country for more than two decades. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power since 2002, including in a power-sharing arrangement with a minority partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), since 2016. The AKP leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became prime minister in 2003, president in 2014, and executive president in 2018. He claimed nearly limitless executive powers during the state of emergency after a failed coup attempt in 2016, and the following year the constitution was changed to make those powers permanent. Although Erdoğan and the AKP faced some constitutional constraints on their vision for Turkey before then, much of that was related to domestic matters. Ever since coming to power, they have faced relatively weak pressure from former state elites or the opposition on foreign policy. In other words, nothing has prevented Erdoğan and the AKP from articulating a clear and consistent vision of international order from a Turkish perspective – yet they have not produced anything that could be considered an alternative to existing arrangements.

There are a couple of reasons for this. First, setting aside core issues such as the Kurds, Turkey's foreign policy for the past 10 years has been relatively opportunistic and focused on power consolidation. Foreign policy is used to generate material incentives that can help to steady an ailing economy, and as an ideational domestic instrument to push Turkish society's worldview towards a high dose of anti-Westernism within which populist authoritarian rule can take hold.

The relative decline of Western/US hegemony and the transition to multipolarity – which Turkey assumes to be inevitable – suits such a foreign policy well because it increases Erdoğan's room for manoeuvre. This foreign policy approach has been formalized under the label of 'strategic autonomy'.

Second, Turkey does not have a well-established intellectual tradition of thinking about grand strategy. Most entrenched foreign policy concerns (even before Erdoğan) have been about specific issues and places in the country's immediate periphery; for example, Cyprus, the Aegean, Syria and Azerbaijan. Despite the ambition to be a regional power, domestic debates and foreign policy news coverage within Turkey tend to be parochial. It is thus not easy for policymakers to make the jump from caring only about Turkey-specific issues to articulating an alternative vision of world order and selling it to domestic or foreign audiences.

Despite the ambition to be a regional power, domestic debates and foreign policy news coverage within Turkey tend to be parochial. It is thus not easy for policymakers to make the jump from caring only about Turkey-specific issues to articulating an alternative vision of world order.

This does not mean that Turkey will not attempt to articulate a new vision of world order, especially when countries in similar situations increasingly claim to have one. During his long tenure, Erdoğan has at times flirted with the notion that his task was to change the world order which in its existing form is seen as an unfair arrangement for Turkey and for the parts of the world that Turkey claims to represent. Ambitious politicians – such as Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as foreign minister (2009–14) and prime minister (2014–16) – have at times used openings provided by Erdoğan to float trial balloons for strategic visions influenced by notions such as neo-Ottomanism, Eurasianism or post-colonialism.

In recent years, however, Erdoğan has settled on the slogan '*Dünya Beşten Büyüktür*' (The world is bigger than five). Under this banner, Turkey has poured generous funds into events such as the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (to rival similar meetings such as the Munich Security Forum or the Shangri-La Dialogue), pushing the slogan and the vision associated with it. As reimagined by the current foreign minister, Hakan Fidan (formerly the head of the Turkish Intelligence Agency), the agenda pushed by such events emphasizes, at least rhetorically, a more equitable world order not dominated by any hegemon, with Turkey a key power broker connecting previously disconnected regions. Some of the country's recent overtures in Africa and South America also flow from this vision. Whether this is a sustainable or consistent message, or how genuinely committed Turkey is to it, remains to be seen. However, this is more a call for formalizing trends already under way than an ambitious plan to aggressively reorder the world. In other words, even when it appears critical, Ankara's message is relatively status quo-oriented.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, it sets out the general contours of the foreign policy vision of Erdoğan and his regime based on their current reading of the world order. Second, it reviews the opposition's approach to foreign policy. This is because, although most Western observers think dimly of Turkey's democratic prospects, the odds of Erdoğan and the AKP being ousted democratically and replaced by an opposition government are not negligible. The presidential election of 2023 was very close, and the main opposition party won the 2024 municipal elections in a near-landslide, despite an environment that fully favours the government in terms of, for example, spending, press coverage, voter suppression and legal decisions. Third, the chapter briefly discusses Turkey's various attempts to articulate an alternative world vision.

The government's understanding of the world order

Following the 2008 global financial crisis and the foreign policy shocks of the 2010s, Turkish policymakers came to believe that the international order was moving towards multipolarity, with the gradual but permanent replacement of the US-led liberal international order, which in Turkey is called the 'West-centred' order. In the words of Fidan, 'After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the discussions of the world order from unipolarity to bipolarity, and finally to multipolarity, are the symptoms of a problem in the current global governance mechanisms.'[204] For Turkey's current governing elite, therefore, the liberal international order and Western hegemony are already over, the power of the United States is in decline and states are now operating in a post-Western and multipolar world.

For Turkish policymakers, this requires their country to establish selective partnerships based on pursuing its national interests so as to strengthen its self-reliance and national security. They use the concept of strategic autonomy to underline the idea that Turkey should increasingly work with non-Western great powers such as China and Russia and, by doing so, counterbalance the US-led order. Turkey should pursue its interests, assume autonomy from the West in making and implementing its decisions, and act as an independent state with regional and global engagements and aspirations. This vision is reflected strongly in Turkey's economic relations. Its total trade volume with the EU increased from $40.6 billion in 2002 to $182 billion in 2022. However, during the same period, trade with Asia (comprising the Near and Middle East and 'other Asia' including China and Russia) increased from $19 billion to $220 billion.[205] Turkey now trades more with the non-Western world than the

204 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023), 'Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Hakan Fidan'ın 14. Büyükelçiler Konferansı Açılışında Yaptığı Konuşma' [The speech given by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr Hakan Fidan at the opening of the 14th Ambassadors Conference], 7 August 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-hakan-fidan-in-14-buyukelciler-konferansi-acilisinda-yaptigi-konusma--7-agustos-2023.tr.mfa.
205 Aydın-Düzgit, S., Kutlay, M. and Keyman, E. F. (2025), '"Strategic autonomy" in Turkish foreign policy in an age of multipolarity: Lineages and contradictions of an idea', *International Politics*.

Western one. The most striking change regards China and Russia: trade with the two combined rose from $6.7 billion in 2002 to $106.8 billion in 2022.[206] Furthermore, Turkey applied to join the BRICS group[207] in October 2024, though the outcome is still uncertain.

Turkish policymakers also use the concept of national foreign policy (*milli dış politika*) in this new era. They believe that the rift between Turkey and its transatlantic allies is the West's fault. Turkey's intelligence chief, İbrahim Kalın, has expressed this view:

> I believe the West alienates itself from the rest of the world, losing control of most problems. The war in Ukraine, relations with China, the fight against terrorism, and the shifting economic centre of the world from the West to the East. I believe there is a lack of strategic thinking in most Western circles.[208]

Like their peers in other regional and middle powers, Turkish policymakers consider the changing international order an opportunity to make the country's voice heard more in regional and global governance. They also see assuming a more active role in key regional conflicts like those in Libya, the Caucasus and Syria[209] as a geopolitical imperative because of the US hesitation to be fully involved there. As a result, Turkish foreign policy has become more assertive, with Ankara not shying away from flexing its military muscles and clashing with traditional Western allies and other actors in the region. Foreign Minister Fidan highlighted this point as follows: 'We will strive relentlessly to strengthen Turkey's position as an active and effective, fully independent actor that sets or disrupts the game when required.'[210]

This does not mean that Turkish policymakers are pushing for all relations with the West to be severed. They believe that Turkey should remain in Western-led institutions such as NATO 'despite certain differing points of view'[211] – but with a weak anchorage that allows flexible alliances and closer ties with the non-Western world and, if necessary, not hesitating to use military force. They argue that through strategic autonomy Ankara can at the same time be a balancer, broker or mediator in geopolitical conflicts and their possible resolution, as in the case of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and prioritize hard power to secure Turkish national security and sovereignty, as in Iraq, Libya and Syria. They claim that, in doing so, Turkey can initiate flexible alliances with countries like China, Iran and Russia without compromising its place in Western institutions and the transatlantic alliance.

Yet, it is difficult to refer to this policy – seeking strategic autonomy in a multipolar post-Western world – as a long-term 'vision', as it is already hampered by two important constraints. One relates to domestic politics. The discourse on the need

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206 Kutlay, M. and Karaoğuz, E. (2023), *Development and Foreign Policy in Turkey: Rethinking Interconnectedness in a Multipolar World*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 153.
207 The BRICS group of regional powers are Brazil, Russia, India and China (as founding members) South Africa (which joined in 2010), plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which joined in 2024, and Indonesia (2025).
208 İbrahim Kalın quoted in Türkten, F. (2023), 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü Kalın: Batı, dünyanın geri kalanına yabancılaşıyor' [Presidential spokesperson Kalın: The West is getting alienated from the rest of the world], Anadolu Ajansı, 4 May 2023, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-kalin-bati-dunyanin-geri-kalanina-yabancilasiyor/2889327.
209 At the time of writing, this gambit seems to have paid off in Syria, as the post-Assad government has close relations with Ankara, and Turkey has accepted accolades for its supposed role in bringing about Assad's downfall. Whether this closeness is sustainable in the long run remains to be seen.
210 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023), 'Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Hakan Fidan'ın 14. Büyükelçiler Konferansı Açılışında Yaptığı Konuşma'.
211 Fidan, H. (2023), 'Turkish Foreign Policy at the turn of the "Century of Türkiye": challenges, vision, objectives, and transformation?', *Insight Turkey*, 25(3), p. 20.

to attain strategic autonomy in a post-Western world has been used not just to define the direction of foreign policy but also to discipline and marginalize dissenting voices in the opposition. The narrative of an autonomous Turkey that is no longer dependent on the West and that resorts to coercive means where necessary has served as a domestic legitimating discourse through which the government's supporters are mobilized and the opposition is discredited, particularly during times of domestic crisis. Since the 2013 Gezi protests,[212] internal challenges and dissent, such as the 2016 failed coup attempt, have been portrayed as always and necessarily a product of Western interference and manipulation in collaboration with the opposition, thus instilling a sense of victimhood and mobilizing public support behind Erdoğan's controversial, divisive and anti-Western policy choices.[213] In the run-up to the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, the government's campaign focused heavily on Turkey's advances in security and defence. These were presented as a symbol of how the government, in particular Erdoğan, had elevated the country's international status against its Western enemies and their domestic collaborators (meaning the opposition) by enhancing its sovereignty and attaining autonomy from Western imperialists. This discourse was accompanied by displays of Bayraktar drones, Turkey's first drone-aircraft carrier and even the first domestically produced electric car. Erdoğan repeatedly highlighted in campaign speeches how the US victimized Turkey and refused to provide it with drones, and that it was thanks to his efforts that the country had become self-sufficient in producing its own drones and other military equipment. There is some evidence that the government's narrative on autonomy, tied mainly to the advances in security and defence, won it the support of voters who had voted for the AKP/MHP coalition in previous elections but who were not considered partisans, and who were thus most likely to switch to the opposition due to the ongoing economic crisis.[214]

The discourse on strategic autonomy is not only a domestic instrument for political power; it also conditions foreign policy choices. The main pillars of the AKP's rule – nationalism, state capitalism and domestic legitimacy – are central to its foreign policy, which often puts Turkey at odds with its traditional Western allies.[215] For instance, when Turkey increased tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean by dispatching drilling ships and research vessels into Cypriot waters in 2020, this was presented at the highest level in the country as the expression of sovereignty, of an assertive and independent foreign policy, of protection of borders and of a just fight against the West.[216] Ankara's initially balanced tone in response to the events of 7 October 2023 and the Gaza–Israel war soon gave way to a more radical discourse in which Erdoğan referred to Hamas as 'freedom fighters'.[217] This was a clear break with its NATO allies and the European Union, and was driven largely by attacks from the fringe parties of the Islamist far right. Soon after, during the

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212 The Gezi protests started from environmental and urban planning grievances but quickly turned into a nationwide youth protest against government policies.
213 Kaliber, A. and Kaliber, E. (2019), 'From de-Europeanisation to anti-Western populism: Turkish foreign policy in flux', *The International Spectator*, 54(4), pp. 1–16.
214 Öztürk, A. (2023), 'Whisper sweet nothings to me Erdoğan: developmentalist propaganda, partisan emotions, and economic evaluations in Turkey', *Democratization*, 30(7), pp. 1357–379.
215 Aydın-Düzgit, S. (2023), 'Authoritarian middle powers and the liberal order: Turkey's contestation of the EU', *International Affairs*, 99(6), pp. 2319–337.
216 Taş, H. (2022), 'The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean', *Mediterranean Politics*, 27(5), pp. 563–87.
217 Gavin, G. (2023), 'Mediator no more: Erdoğan takes aim at Israel, backing Hamas "freedom fighters"', *Politico*, 25 October 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-israel-hamas-war-freedom-fighters.

week of the centenary of the instauration of the republic, Erdoğan held rallies in support of Palestine attended by millions of people, to rally his base, to present himself as the global leader of Muslims and to boost his legitimacy.

The constraints of domestic politics result in a situation whereby Turkey pursues short-term political calculations to serve domestic political interests, at the expense of a longer-term vision of strategic autonomy defined through the lens of collective national interest. The outcome is an inconsistent foreign policy that hampers Turkey's long-term credibility at the global level. While serving at times the interests of the governing elite, such a policy comes at a high cost to the country in terms of deepening its economic, political and foreign policy problems. Nowhere has this result been more visible than in Turkey's relations with the EU, where Turkey has positioned itself as the gatekeeper of migration at the EU's borders thanks to the EU–Turkey migration deal. This arrangement has primarily benefited Turkey's ruling elite by removing democratic conditionality in its relations with the EU. Meanwhile it has also benefited the EU by reducing the number of refugees transiting through Turkey. Yet, the mass migration of almost 4 million Syrian refugees after the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, which made Turkey the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, ushered in a host of novel problems regarding the economic and societal integration of those refugees. After Bashar al-Assad's downfall in December 2024, the current expectation in Turkey is that most of these refugees will go back home. The transactional arrangement with the EU also failed to foster cooperation in other areas between the two sides. The opposite has in fact happened. As the US withdraws from the Middle East, it also remains to be seen whether Turkey and the US will be able to overcome long-standing mutual distrust to cooperate on security and defence-related issues.

The constraints of domestic politics result in a situation whereby Turkey pursues short-term political calculations to serve domestic political interests, at the expense of a longer-term vision of strategic autonomy defined through the lens of collective national interest.

Another major constraint relates to the lack of political economy fundamentals to sustain a policy of strategic autonomy.[218] Developing closer trade and investment ties with the non-Western world without abandoning Turkey's long-standing political-economic relations with the Western world has been stated as a key principle of the government's foreign policy strategy. Yet Turkey's diversification away from the West towards the non-Western markets in its trade ties leads to certain challenges with carving out a more autonomous space in its foreign relations. This is because increasing trade relations with the large non-Western countries, especially Russia and China, is likely to create new dependencies. Turkey's foreign trade with

218 Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman (2025), '"Strategic autonomy" in Turkish foreign policy in an age of multipolarity: Lineages and contradictions of an idea'.

the EU is much more balanced, which is not the case for trade with Russia and China. The export/import ratio for Turkey with China is less than 10 per cent, and is just 13 per cent with Russia. As long as the composition of Turkish foreign trade remains the same, the trade deficit with those countries is likely to grow, which will put additional pressure on Turkey's current account deficits. Furthermore, Turkey does not have strategic sectors such as energy or high-tech that would give it competitive leverage. The country heavily relies on Western capital in the financial, investment and technology domains.

At the root of the problem lies the structure of the Turkish economy. Turkey's 'deficit-led' economic growth model generates simultaneous external dependencies on different major powers due to its high reliance on low- and medium-end exports.[219] Turkey's dependence on the import of intermediary goods and advanced technologies from other countries causes balance-of-payments problems and exacerbates the financial fragility of the country. Hence, Turkey needs a more coherent economic security framework to support its autonomy-seeking policies in a multipolar world.

The opposition's understanding of the world order

The main opposition force, the Republican People's Party (CHP), has generally been far from presenting a coherent view on the international order and Turkey's place in it.

Under its former leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP was usually supportive of the government's search for strategic autonomy, as this concept is strongly rooted in a nationalist understanding of foreign policy that is widely supported across society. Yet, Kılıçdaroğlu's actions were not consistent. While he opposed some military operations, such as that in Libya, he was in favour of others in northern Iraq. He also approved of the contestation of the EU and some of its member states in the Eastern Mediterranean. The major difference between the government and the CHP was in the way the latter approached Turkey's relations with the West. Instead of a purely transactional relationship, the CHP preferred more values-based cooperation, premised on the return to democracy and the rule of law, particularly in relations with the EU. Before the 2023 elections, the CHP also pledged to revitalize Turkey's EU accession process, to strike a more balanced relationship with Russia (criticizing the current approach as being too pro-Moscow), to regain access for Turkey to the US F-35 fighter jet programme and to restore the country's credibility within NATO.

Since the change of opposition leadership in November 2023, the new cadres seem to share the previous line-up's concern that Turkey should improve relations with its Western allies, make its relations with the EU less transactional and seek relations with Russia that are more balanced, transparent and less personalistic. The CHP is also less keen to contest the West on some key foreign policy matters.

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219 Öniş, Z. (2019), 'Turkey under the challenge of state capitalism: the political economy of the late AKP era', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 19(2), pp. 201–25.

For instance, on the question of Israel and Palestine, İlhan Uzgel, who is the new vice-chair responsible for foreign policy, has declared that the party condemns Israeli atrocities but also believes that Hamas 'harms the Palestinian cause'.[220] He has also outlined the CHP's view that the international order is becoming a multipolar system characterized by the rise of China and the Global South, and in which even smaller powers than Turkey now have more room for manoeuvre. His criticism of the government centred not on the attempt to seek strategic autonomy, but on the argument that the government bases this goal on what is needed for the security of the regime rather than that of the country.[221]

One important impediment that the main opposition has not been able to overcome so far relates to its entrapment in the government's broader foreign policy rhetoric. The strongly nationalist nature of foreign policy has made it more difficult for the opposition to object to foreign policy moves and the rhetoric of the government, given that Turkey is a context where nationalist sentiment reigns across the political spectrum and among the public at large. It is also questionable how well the opposition is informed about the sometimes rapid changes in the shifting geopolitical landscape. This was best demonstrated in the case of Syria, where the CHP leader called on the government to work with Assad just days before his fall from power.

Can Turkey articulate its own alternative vision?

Turkey's dominant foreign policy vision, from the establishment of the modern republic to the AKP's rise, has been Westernization. Since that mission has lost force with the ascent of the AKP and the changes in the international order, there have been a couple of alternative visions for where Turkey should place itself in the international order. Some of these have found new life with the rise of multipolarity in the international system.

One such vision is Eurasianism, which stipulates that Turkey should withdraw from NATO and forge closer ties with China and Russia. Although this view is still present among some secular nationalists and was briefly taken up by the government during the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, it lacks a broad societal base, which means it struggles to have any considerable political heft. However, the view has adherents among members of the ultranationalist parties, some members of the state apparatus and former military officers, so at times arguments associated with a Eurasianist worldview appear more forcefully than expected in policy discussions.

Another vision is neo-Ottomanism, which was very popular during the Arab Spring of 2011. Associated closely with the former premier Davutoğlu, this vision rests on the belief that Turkey could use its historical and religious ties with the Middle East and North Africa to expand its presence and influence there. The major reason why the government pushed neo-Ottomanism during the Arab Spring stemmed from its firm belief that democratization in the Muslim world would bring into

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220 Çakır, R. (2023), 'Ruşen Çakır'ın konuğu Prof. Dr. İlhan Uzgel: CHP'nin yeni dönem dış politika perspektifleri' [Ruşen Çakır hosts Prof. Dr. İlhan Uzgel: CHP's foreign policy perspectives in the new era], *Medyascope*, 6 December 2023, https://medyascope.tv/2023/12/06/rusen-cakirin-konugu-prof-dr-ilhan-uzgel-chpnin-yeni-donem-dis-politika-perspektifleri.
221 Uzgel, İ. (2024), 'Dış politikada kaybet kaybet sarmalı' [Lose-lose spiral in foreign policy], *Birgün*, 20 June 2024, https://www.birgun.net/makale/dis-politikada-kaybet-kaybet-sarmali-538749.

power the Muslim Brotherhood, which shared close historical and ideological ties with Turkish Islamists. During that time neo-Ottoman arguments also found favour in the West, especially in Washington, because they lent credence to the belief that Turkey could help the US to manage a democratizing Middle East. The failure of the Arab Spring, and the region's sharp return to authoritarianism, significantly weakened the appeal of this vision, although neo-Ottoman-flavoured arguments resurfaced to some extent in the domestic pro-government discourse after the fall of Assad in Syria. Turkey also uses a kinship discourse to increase its influence in sub-Saharan Africa.

In sum, Turkey does not currently articulate a coherent alternative vision of the international order, except for Erdoğan's slogan of 'The world is bigger than five', which takes aim at what he considers to be the unjust composition of the UN Security Council that no longer corresponds to the global distribution of power. Erdoğan has even published a book in which he lists his arguments for the reform of the Security Council and proposals for how to do so.[222] Yet there are no signs that this will constitute part of a broader vision of international order. Rather, it seems to be an endorsement of that order's current transitional phase.

222 Erdoğan, R. T. (2021), *Daha Adil bir Dünya Mümkün* [A Fairer World is Possible], İstanbul: Turkuvaz.

10
Germany: An internationalist vision in crisis

For decades, Germany has been a linchpin of the EU and loyal to international institutions. But domestic political upheaval and problematic policies on Russia, Ukraine and energy have left it vulnerable to global turbulence.

Constanze Stelzenmüller

Germany's commitment to and dependence on the norms, institutions and politics of the international order have been somewhat singular among the large post-1945 Western democracies. After the Second World War, this dedication was necessary to persuade the world that Germany was truly determined to break with its 20th-century record of war and genocide, which had left it physically and morally devastated – an occupied and divided pariah among nations. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, West and East Germany alike leveraged the international order to boost their status, prosperity and security despite the constraints of their limited sovereignty. From 1990, a reunified and now fully sovereign Germany found that the US unipolar moment, with Russia weakened, the European Union and NATO steadily enlarging, and China just beginning to open up to international trade, together created conditions for an extraordinary surge of Germany's economic and political power – enough to give it *de facto* hegemonic status, at least in Europe.

But, beginning with the global financial crisis in 2008, a series of shocks, crises and wars (as well as less tangible tectonic-plate movements) have come together to produce a nearly complete deterioration in Germany's geostrategic environment. And there is a distinct possibility of worse to come.

Germany is uniquely vulnerable in this moment. Whether its elites or its citizens are prepared for the immense challenges they face, much less whether they have a vision for the future of the international order, is an open question. The choices

that Germany makes will have consequences not only for itself but for all of Europe – and beyond it, inasmuch as a coherent Europe might have an important role to play in an increasingly escalation-prone global environment.

From pariah to pillar: the Cold War

With the help of an economic miracle enabled by the Marshall Plan, post-war West Germany[223] (often called the Bonn Republic after its capital) raced to establish itself as a peer in the community of civilized nations. The prerequisite was the promulgation of the 1949 Basic Law. This set out a carefully crafted parliamentary democracy with strong horizontal and vertical separation and balance of powers, as well as special protections for political pluralism and civil and individual rights. The objective was to create the foundations of an anti-Weimar Republic: a stable equilibrium of state, economy and society that would be exceptionally resistant to disruption.

West Germany's understanding of its role within the international order rested on a distinctly idealist set of principles. While grounded in trauma and shame, and asserted with genuine conviction, these guiding ideas tended to be balanced in practice with a robust pragmatism (by no means excluding opportunism or hypocrisy).

Wiedergutmachung (atonement): West Germany early on defined its relationships with Israel, France and, later, Poland as key pillars of its strategy of atonement and reconciliation for the crimes of the Nazi era. The commitment to the security of Israel was later even declared a *Staatsraison* (foundational principle of German statehood). That said, processing the full extent of German guilt, and offering reparations to all the countries and populations that had been attacked by Nazi Germany, took until well into the 2000s, and remains incomplete. And, while Bonn supplied Tel Aviv with nuclear-capable submarines, it also developed lucrative energy and arms trading relationships with a number of Israel's Arab enemies and Iran.

Westbindung (cleaving to the West): West Germany was a founding member in 1951 of the European Coal and Steel Community, the EU's precursor. It joined NATO in 1955, having had to stand up a 12-division army from scratch to do so because the Basic Law had deliberately omitted the creation of armed forces. Finally, it joined the United Nations in 1973, at the same time as East Germany, thus completing the triad of membership of international institutions that defined the ambit of its diplomacy in the Cold War. The Bonn Republic became a committed international institutionalist, deploying considerable diplomatic and financial resources to the European organizations, the UN and its sub-organizations, and NATO. Its closest and most important bilateral relationship within the West was with the United States; it hosted hundreds of thousands of American soldiers and an unspecified number

223 For purposes of brevity and because communist East Germany departed the political stage in 1989, this section concentrates on West Germany. East Germany's international relations left little trace in the reunified country. Its diplomatic service and military were disbanded, its embassies closed. Some of the East German diplomatic service's excellent regional experts were later hired by the United Nations; for example, in Afghanistan.

of US nuclear weapons. In the 1970s, West Germany began to balance *Westbindung* with *Ostpolitik*, a policy of engagement with the Soviet Union under the motto of *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through rapprochement), which left aside its Eastern European neighbours and was viewed with considerable reservations in other Western capitals.

Verrechtlichung (rule of law): West Germany was throughout the Cold War a dedicated contributor to international norm-setting efforts, such as the UN human rights conventions, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the European legal system. Uniquely for a major Western democracy, influential German political theorists, such as Ernst-Otto Czempiel and Jürgen Habermas, viewed what they saw as an inexorably thickening web of international legal rules, and especially of universal human rights, as a step towards a global normative order that would increasingly constrain and ultimately delegitimize the use of force.

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Zivilmacht (civilian power): As its prosperity grew, West Germany became adept at wielding the entire panoply of non-military power – trade relations, aid, cultural diplomacy and political foundations – to promote development, good governance and human rights, as well as to cultivate good relations and its own interests worldwide. At the same time, the Bundeswehr (federal armed forces) had half a million men under arms at the height of the Cold War, all of them under NATO command. West Germany spent an average of 3 per cent of its GDP on defence annually, albeit a defence that was singularly concentrated on defending the 1,700-kilometre border with communist East Germany against a Soviet attack until the expected onset of nuclear war.

As its wealth, power and international recognition grew, the Bonn Republic somewhat paradoxically tended to emphasize the constraints on its agency, whether external (occupation, alliances, norms) or self-chosen (*Selbstbindung*) – a sometimes more, sometimes less conscious habit that lasted well beyond reunification. The constraints were often real, but the reference to them was also deployed as deflection: to avoid choice, to pretend that a certain choice was inevitable, or to suggest that a German national interest was identical with European or alliance interests. Few West German policymakers were more adroit at this than the wily Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who was foreign minister between 1974 and 1992.

Reunification and the reluctant hegemon

In 1989, a democratic groundswell that had begun in Poland and Hungary toppled the Berlin Wall. It ended 44 years of communist rule in East Germany and led to reunification in 1990, as well as to the end of the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. Democratic revolutions in Latin America, Asia and Africa followed suit. The EU and NATO expanded; by 2010, almost all of Europe was 'whole and free'. Germany, now with the largest economy in Europe, found itself 'encircled by friends', in the much-cited words of former chancellor Helmut Kohl.

Nowhere was Francis Fukuyama's notion of the 'end of history' and the victory of the West through the global spread of democratic transformation, economic interdependence and a US-led international order more enthusiastically embraced than in Germany – because it was misunderstood as confirming the country's redemption. Once a pariah, suddenly Germany was a model; the apocalyptic vision of a nuclear Judgment Day was replaced by the shining vista of Kantian peace.[224] Calls for the abolition of NATO or of the Bundeswehr were common in political debates.

Cheered on by Washington (President George H. W. Bush in 1989 had famously addressed Germany as a 'partner in leadership'),[225] the new Berlin Republic saw itself as the linchpin of the newly enlarged EU: if the US was first among equals in NATO, Germany would assume that role in Europe. And, to a very considerable degree, it did – not least because of chancellors like Kohl (1982–98) and Angela Merkel (2005–21), who over their long tenures were skilful and determined brokers of big-tent European consensus.[226] Germany's smaller neighbours often aligned with its policies; the economies of the EU's new eastern members, especially, became deeply integrated with German manufacturing industries. The result was – after a near-decade of economic downturn between the late 1990s and early 2000s – an extraordinary growth in economic and political power that by the 2010s had turned the country into a *de facto* (if reluctant) hegemon in Europe.[227]

However, the eurozone crisis and the profound European cleavages over Russia, Ukraine and energy policy soon showed the limits of Germany's ability to lead (or, as its critics said, to impose its preferences). In the case of Russia particularly, the warnings of its Eastern European neighbours, which many in Berlin dismissed, turned out to be correct.

Despite the fact that their country was by that point one of the world's five largest economies, Germany's elites continued to think of it as a middle power in global terms. Much energy was expended in diplomatic circles on conceptualizing Germany's international role as that of an essentially benevolent player actively seeking multilateralism-based solutions for global public goods problems.

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224 The German enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant's 1795 treatise 'Zum ewigen Frieden: ein philosophischer Entwurf' (Perpetual Peace: a philosophical sketch) laid the foundations of democratic peace theory and remains a strong influence in German pacifist debates.
225 Bush, G. H. W. (1989), 'Remarks to the citizens in Mainz, Federal Republic of Germany', speech, Mainz, 31 May 1989, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/476.
226 Both leaders' records are tarnished in retrospect: Kohl's by a party financing scandal and Merkel's by her refusal (confirmed in her autobiography published in November 2024) to acknowledge the enabling role played by Germany's policies on Russia and energy.
227 Minton Beddoes, Z. (2013), 'Europe's reluctant hegemon', *The Economist*, 13 June 2013, https://www.economist.com/special-report/2013/06/13/europes-reluctant-hegemon.

In 2012, the government nonetheless published what came to be known as the *Gestaltungsmächtekonzept* (shaping powers concept), which suggested that Germany might be considered a power, among others, capable of shaping globalization.[228] In 2014, the federal foreign ministry undertook a comprehensive review of its structures and created an entire new division intended to support stabilization and nation-building in the non-Western world.

But some were scandalized when a think-tank project charted the country's strategic relationships, dividing key countries into allies, challengers (including China and Russia) and spoilers.[229] At the Munich Security Conference in 2014, President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen took the stage to announce in coordinated speeches that Germany would in future exercise an international responsibility more commensurate with its power – acting 'earlier, more decisively, and more substantially as a good partner'.[230] Russia invaded and annexed Crimea three weeks later; in retrospect, this was a key waypoint in Germany's strategic downturn. Merkel's reaction – to initiate the so-called Minsk agreements, which failed to stop Russia's aggression in Donbas, and to refuse weapons deliveries to Ukraine – arguably put an end to the 'Munich consensus' before it had even taken hold.

One aspect in which reunified Germany differed decisively from its West and East German predecessors was that it overcame its aversion to using the military as an instrument of power – albeit under considerable pressure from its allies and after a lengthy, contorted national debate over the constitutional legality of employing military force. Between 1991 and 2010, the Bundeswehr joined multinational missions in Afghanistan, Africa, Asia, the Balkans and the Mediterranean; at the high point of its deployments, in 2002, there were more than 10,000 German soldiers serving abroad.[231] Over the course of those two decades, the German military underwent significant cultural shifts, from a highly specialized focus on territorial defence throughout the Cold War to a disparate sequence of missions representing largely tactical responses to international events. These responses included: sending a handful of medics via a UN mission in Cambodia (1992); providing an underutilized UN support brigade in Somalia (1993); establishing an air bridge between Nairobi and Kigali (1994); manning stabilization missions in the Balkans (1995 onwards); and supplying a medley of expeditionary stabilization and combat troops in Afghanistan (2002–21). However, these shifts also meant drastic downsizing and ultimately professionalization. Conscription was suspended in 2011; the Bundeswehr had shrunk to 180,000 personnel by 2014.

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228 Deutscher Bundestag (2012), 'Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung: Globalisierung gestalten – Partnerschaften ausbauen–Verantwortung teilen' [Briefing by the Federal Government: Shaping globalization – expanding partnerships – sharing responsibility], 8 February 2012, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/17/086/1708600.pdf.
229 The author was a co-manager of the project. German Marshall Fund of the United States and German Institute for International and Security Affairs (2013), 'New Power, New Responsibility', Berlin, October 2013, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/projekt_papiere/GermanForeignSecurityPolicy_SWP_GMF_2013.pdf.
230 Munich Security Conference (undated), 'Reden auf der MSC 2014' [Speeches at the MSC 2014], webpage, https://securityconference.org/msc-2014/reden.
231 Federal Ministry of Defence (2024), 'Weltweit gefordert: Die Einsätze der Bundeswehr' [In demand worldwide: the Bundeswehr's missions], https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr.

Still, there was a remarkable consensus in German debates that the events which had required these military missions were – while serious enough to warrant intervention – temporary or at least very distant anomalies. Protected as Germany supposedly was by a cordon of neighbours and allies, there was very little consciousness in the first decade or two after reunification that the land and sea borders of the European bloc are attenuated and ultimately indefensible, that the country shared a continent with a Russia that was becoming increasingly restive, and that it was encircled by zones of rising tension in Africa, the Balkans, the South Caucasus and the Middle East. Germany's hyper-globalized strategic posture – its security outsourced to the US, its energy needs to Russia and its export-led growth to China[232] – was premised on the blithe assumption that the inexorable logic of global convergence towards liberal democracy, market economics and peace would continue apace. Not only would its neighbourhood become a peaceful and well-regulated market for German goods and services, but rivals and adversaries farther afield would also become domesticated and herbivorous, or fade and disappear, like the dinosaurs.

Germany's hyper-globalized strategic posture – its security outsourced to the US, its energy needs to Russia and its export-led growth to China – was premised on the blithe assumption that the inexorable logic of global convergence towards liberal democracy, market economics and peace would continue apace.

Yet there were early warning signs that the world, and even Europe, was not bending towards Kantian utopia: the genocide in Rwanda (1994); the wars in Yugoslavia (1992–95); and 9/11 and the ensuing waves of terrorism in Europe, which were reinforced by the war in Iraq (2003–11). The lights started flashing red from 2008 on: the global financial crisis and the Russia–Georgia war (2008); the eurozone crisis (2010); Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea (2014); the migration crisis (2015) that fuelled the rise of the hard right, Brexit and the election of a US president with a distinct hostility towards Europe and Germany (2016); the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party entering Germany's parliament (2017); and a Russian proxy war in eastern Ukraine that claimed 10,000 lives between 2014 and 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion on 24 February. Nonetheless it took until 2023 for Germany to adopt its first national security strategy document, making it the last large Western democracy to do so.[233]

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232 *The Economist* (2022), 'The war in Ukraine is going to change geopolitics profoundly', 5 March 2022, https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/03/05/the-war-in-ukraine-is-going-to-change-geopolitics-profoundly.
233 Government of the Federal Republic of Germany (2023), 'Integrated Security for Germany: National Security Strategy', 1 July 2023, https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-Executive-Summary-EN.pdf.

2025: Everything everywhere all at once

When Germany's 'traffic light' coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party and the Greens took office in 2021, it was determined to overcome the 16 years of delayed reforms and cautious incrementalism under Chancellor Merkel with a forceful and comprehensive transformation agenda. But what it had in mind was social justice, fiscal discipline and climate change adaptation, not war in Europe.

To its credit, the government refocused immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz rose to the moment with his *Zeitenwende* (historic turn) speech three days after the beginning of the invasion. Today, Germany is almost fully decoupled from Russia regarding imports of fossil fuels;[234] it is spending 2 per cent of its GDP on defence and is permanently stationing a brigade in Lithuania; and it is Ukraine's second largest supporter with money and weapons after the US.[235]

Three years later, however, the *Zeitenwende* is incomplete and faltering. Defence and defence-industrial reforms are mired in bureaucratic delays. Scholz had no illusions about President Vladimir Putin or Russia, but he stubbornly (in his words, 'prudently') refused to give Ukraine weapons and ammunition in the quantities and at the speed it needed to succeed, citing the risk of escalation by Moscow.

By November 2024, the traffic light coalition had become tarnished by very ordinary failures of governance: a bungled heat-pump law, a nepotism scandal, a Constitutional Court judgment forbidding it to use accounting tricks to finance its climate-transformation plans.[236] Its three parties had already been trounced in the June European Parliament elections, but, while the opposition conservatives remained the largest party, the real winners were the far-right AfD and the new far-left Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) party.[237] Tensions in Berlin were mounting throughout the latter months of 2024. These stemmed in part from three regional elections in eastern Germany in September where the AfD and the BSW made significant inroads, but also from within the coalition over differences on how to manage the budget and the constitutional debt brake. On 6 November 2024, Chancellor Scholz fired Finance Minister Christian Lindner, ending the coalition, triggering a confidence vote on 16 December and prompting early federal elections on 23 February 2025 – which were won by the conservative CDU/CSU under the leadership of Friedrich Merz.

Germany's new chancellor finds himself before a grim panorama: Russia back on the offensive in Ukraine; a horrific resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the potential to set off a regional conflagration; a potentially Islamist power transition in Syria; a second Trump administration that in the course of less than two months revealed itself as far more globally revisionist and hostile to Europe

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234 Germany stopped importing Russian coal and oil by the end of 2022, but it was Russia that cut off gas supplies in September of that year. Gross, S. and Stelzenmüller, C. (2024), 'Europe's messy Russian gas divorce', Brookings Institution, 18 June 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/europes-messy-russian-gas-divorce.
235 Kiel Institute for the World Economy (2024), 'Ukraine Support Tracker', webpage, https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker.
236 *The Economist* (2024), 'Germany's government is barely holding together', 15 May 2024, https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/15/germanys-government-is-barely-holding-together.
237 Stelzenmüller, C. (2024), 'Stability for Europe, tensions at home: Germany's paradoxical European Parliament vote', Brookings Institution, 11 June 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/stability-for-europe-tensions-at-home-germanys-paradoxical-european-parliament-vote.

than the first; ever-deepening authoritarian consolidation in China; a largely hedging Global South; a growing alignment among the West's adversaries (China, Iran, North Korea and Russia); and far-right movements bent on constitutional 'regime change' surging across much of the West. On top of it all, Russia is ramping up its disinformation, cyberattacks, espionage and sabotage across Europe with, apparently, a special emphasis on Germany and France.[238] (Germany's security agencies have grown conspicuously more willing to acknowledge and attribute such acts recently.)[239]

This all looks perilously like a wholesale unravelling of the post-Cold War order, and with it a crumbling of most of the foundational assumptions of Germany's strategic posture. While France's parliamentary election in July 2024 did not produce a far-right government, it led to extraordinary political volatility and it has certainly diminished President Emmanuel Macron. Europe's already sputtering Franco-German motor is now even weaker.

Scholz's government had held cabinet-level consultations with its counterpart in Poland. It had been quietly building out relationships with some countries (such as Norway), and eagerly reached out to the new Labour government in the UK. But Berlin appears entirely unprepared to play a greater role in leading and defending the European Union. In marked contrast to previous German governments, the traffic light coalition made little effort to articulate a vision of its own for Europe's future; and in fact, other EU member states have become increasingly concerned by the German government's tendency to vote against majority consensus on key items of European legislation. Scholz's telephone call with Putin in November 2024, of which most European states were only informed *ex post facto*, aroused particular anger and disdain, and was seen as yet another instance of a German *Sonderweg* (unilateralist response).

In the Middle East, the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not only forced Berlin into a more confrontational relationship with Tel Aviv, but has also exacerbated tensions between Germany's Jewish and Muslim citizens. Even in the case of a ceasefire or a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine, there is no way back to detente (or gas deliveries) with Putin, who appears to harbour an implacable enmity towards not just Ukraine but also liberal modernity. Consequently, *Ostpolitik 2.0*, for the foreseeable future, means deterrence, defence and resilience.[240] Scholz's chancellery, apprehensive about scenarios of conflict between China and the US, had mostly sidelined the more critical stance of Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Economics Minister Robert Habeck, both from the Greens, in a quest for smooth and stable relations with Beijing. Parts of German industry supported the chancellor vociferously. But the visible hardening of China's support for Russia suggests this relationship, too, is on course to deteriorate, with incalculable consequences for Germany's prosperity.

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238 *The Economist* (2024), 'Russia is ramping up sabotage across Europe', 12 May 2024, https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/12/russia-is-ramping-up-sabotage-across-europe.
239 Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (2023), 'Toolbox Russland: Russlands nachrichtendienstlicher Werkzeugkasten gegen Deutschland' [Toolbox Russia: Russia's intelligence toolbox against Germany], https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2023/2023-08-23-toolbox-russland.html.
240 Stelzenmüller, C. (2023), 'The return of the enemy', Brookings Institution, August 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-return-of-the-enemy.

Yet the most dismaying prospect Scholz's successor, Merz, faces is the one opening up in the US – the ally that rescued Germany from itself 80 years ago and put it back on a path of decency, democracy, prosperity and security. The second Trump administration will not just determine the future course of Washington's foreign policy, alliances and willingness to underwrite a rules-based international order, but it will also shape the future of the US's domestic liberal constitutional order. The potential effects of the decision made by US voters for the security of Europe and Germany could be severe.

Germany's new leadership appears determined to rise to the moment by radically increasing spending on defence and infrastructure.

The disintegration of the German traffic light coalition in early November 2024 had been announcing itself for a while; but the fact that it took place on the day after the US elections seemed somehow fitting. Without the return of Donald Trump, Merz's new grand coalition with the SPD would doubtlessly have pursued a foreign and security policy of continuity within the traditional paradigms of *Westbindung*, transatlanticism and continued EU integration. But the second Trump administration's predatory extractive imperialism, its overtures to Russia, its disdain for Ukraine and Europe, and not least the repeated endorsements of the AfD by both Elon Musk and Vice-President JD Vance during the German election campaign sent shockwaves across the continent and appalled the Germans. Europeans are racing to protect Ukraine and to reconfigure their security order – a challenge that will require extraordinary exertions, especially of Berlin. Germany's new leadership appears determined to rise to the moment by radically increasing spending on defence and infrastructure. Yet the continued rise of the AfD and the surprising return of the left-wing Die Linke, combined with enduring divisions within the democratic parties over Germany's role in the world, could remain a domestic constraint on Berlin's attempt to revise the country's external posture.

Remarkably, Friedrich Merz, following his electoral victory, called not just for 'independence' from the US, but for talks with Britain and France on nuclear deterrence.[241] Indeed, some of Berlin's foreign policy elites had, for the first time in their country's post-war history, been toying with the idea of a national nuclear deterrent.[242] Because of the urgent need to upgrade Germany's conventional deterrence and defence capabilities, Berlin is in no position to afford a nuclear option. But for a country with such high-minded dreams of Kantian peace, it is a bleakly ironic twist.

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241 Joshi, S. (2025), 'Europe thinks the unthinkable on a nuclear bomb', *The Economist*, 12 March 2025, https://www.economist.com/international/2025/03/12/europe-thinks-the-unthinkable-on-a-nuclear-bomb.
242 Horovitz, L. and Major, C. (2023), 'Der gefährliche Traum von der deutschen Atombombe' [The dangerous dream of the German nuclear bomb], *Der Spiegel*, 30 December 2023, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/aufruestung-der-gefaehrliche-traum-von-der-deutschen-atombombe-gastbeitrag-a-a2cbeefb-22f7-4e88-8880-69915d9a56cf.

11
French global status rests on averting bloc geopolitics

The French view of the changing international order is marked by pessimism – especially at France's own declining influence – and pragmatism over how best to preserve the country's interests.

Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer and Martin Quencez

France's current domestic political turmoil reflects deep insecurities about its role and place on the world stage. The perception of decline, applied to the country as well as to Europe in the context of US–China competition, is shared by a large majority of the population and fosters an appetite for change. Some policymakers, such as President Emmanuel Macron, have argued that the evolution of the international order requires France to lead the emergence of a geopolitical Europe in order to promote and defend French interests. Others, notably among the far-right National Rally, favour a return to a more nationalist approach of foreign policy and reject the constraints of any form of supranational rule or organization.

The European security landscape has undergone a significant transformation in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Combined with the United States' strategic focus on China and questions surrounding the reliability of US leadership, the evolution of France's strategic environment has accelerated the debate about the country's role in the international system. The direction of French foreign policy will be influenced by shifting power dynamics in the deeply divided domestic political arena, as well as by the changing role of the US in European affairs.

France aims to preserve the existing multilateral organizations which have bestowed on Paris a strong international influence. Support for targeted reforms is meant to consolidate these organizations and help the international order to overcome current geopolitical crises. This strategy, however, does not fully address the issue of France's relative power decline at the international level, and the costly implications of US–China competition.

A guarantor of the liberal international order

France's power depends on stability of the order

France was one of the principal beneficiaries of the creation of the post-Second World War international order, joining a select group of nations tasked with shaping and leading new global institutions. Its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and its special role within the International Monetary Fund are testament to this position. France's attachment to a rules-based order pre-dates 1945, as illustrated by its involvement in the creation of the League of Nations. Its foreign policy culture has long valued the country's contribution to international law.[243]

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The Ministry of Foreign Affairs encourages French citizens to join international organizations and sees this as a form of leverage for the country's international influence. As of 2023, France was a member of 190 such organizations and approximately 20,000 French citizens worked for one of these, making up almost 9 per cent of their staff.[244]

The attributes of France's power in the world today explain its attachment to the post-1945 international order. Its foreign, economic and defence policies rely on institutions and capabilities that depend on the stability of this order. The country's position as a founding member of the European Union and of NATO provides the main leverage for its action in Europe. It is also one of the five acknowledged nuclear powers, an active defender of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a major contributor to the budget of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Decolonization has also left a legacy of diplomatic ties with powers in the Global South as well as a far-reaching territorial presence and stewardship of the world's most extensive exclusive economic zone, as defined by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

243 Sur, S. (2020), 'L'influence française sur le droit international' [French influence on international law, in *France's External Action*], in Soutou, G-H. (ed.) (2020), *L'Action extérieure de la France*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 229–48.
244 French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (2023), 'Les Français dans les organisations internationales' [The French in international organizations], https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/infographie_-_presence_francaise_dans_organisations_internationales_cle096b5d.pdf.

Reforming to preserve the order

The defence of France's interests is inherently linked to the preservation of the liberal international order, particularly its multilateral institutions. Despite facing relative economic, demographic and military decline, Paris has managed to leverage its position to strengthen its industrial and trade assets. The use of diplomatic influence to maximize economic interests, illustrated by growing trade prerogatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is visible in the multiple arms deals that France has signed over the past decade. These contracts, often linked to a strategic partnership with the purchasing country, made France the second largest arms exporter in the world between 2019 and 2023.[245] Such commercial successes depend on the stability of the system of institutions, norms and values on which France's international influence is founded. The 2022 National Strategic Review on Defence and Security emphasized the need to 'promote a stable international order' and underlined the risks for France's security and interests in the event of a fragmentation of international rules.[246] The unravelling of the arms control agreements concerning Europe is one of the most striking illustrations of these risks.

In light of this, France's political leaders have tried to find the right balance between preserving the status quo and supporting reforms to the international order to guarantee its survival. The reform of the UN Security Council is emblematic of this endeavour. France officially supports the efforts of Brazil, Germany, India and Japan to become permanent members, and it recognizes the need to have an 'increased presence' of African countries. This stance is meant to reinforce the legitimacy of the Security Council and to increase its peacekeeping responsibilities.

In this context, France wants to position itself as a moderate voice in the competition among great powers. French policymakers oppose the more radical changes promoted by China or Russia, but they are also inclined to hold the US accountable when it appears to disregard international norms and regulations. In the recent debates around the International Criminal Court's decision on Israel and Hamas, France clearly expressed its support for the court's independence.[247] However, while this position was generally shared by the figures who dominated the French political landscape until the 2010s, the rise of the far-right National Rally may change that broad consensus. The National Rally is opposed to any form of supranational constraints on France's national sovereignty and, should it win the presidency in 2027 or form a government, it is likely to seek to invest less in the reform and survival of the liberal international order.

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245 Wezeman, P. et al. (2024), 'Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023', SIPRI, March 2024, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2023.
246 Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale (SGDSN) (2022), *National Strategic Review on Defence and Security*, https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf.
247 Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs (2024), 'Cour pénale internationale – Demande de mandats d'arrêts par le Procureur auprès de la CPI' [International Criminal Court – Request for arrest warrants by the Prosecutor of the ICC], 20 May 2024, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/justice-internationale/evenements/article/cour-penale-internationale-demande-de-mandats-d-arrets-par-le-procureur-aupres#:~:text=La France a condamné dès,diffusant et en les célébrant.

A pessimistic vision of the international order and US politics

A more violent and competitive world

France's political leaders have a profoundly cautious perspective on the current shifts in the global landscape. This reflects their concern over the rapid and complex changes that are reshaping international relations and the potential implications for their country's strategic interests. Their vigilance is indicative of a broader apprehension about the stability and predictability of the evolving world order.

France's political leaders have a profoundly cautious perspective on the current shifts in the global landscape. Their vigilance is indicative of a broader apprehension about the stability and predictability of the evolving world order.

There is widespread agreement that the global environment is set to become more hostile, with increased power competition likely to undermine the principles of the liberal international order and cooperation. The 'return of geopolitics' is seen as inevitable and underpins France's focus on the necessity for Europe to defend its interests more assertively through competition rather than through cooperation. This was highlighted in all of the recent strategic documents produced by the governments of presidents Nicolas Sarkozy,[248] François Hollande[249] and Macron,[250] displaying the broad consensus within the French strategic and political community.

This sentiment also reflects the French public's deeper concerns. Since 2014, the share of French adults who say in polls that France is in decline has fluctuated between 69 per cent and 86 per cent, with 34 per cent saying in September 2023 that its decline had become irreversible.[251] The French are also likelier than other Europeans to expect a shift in the global balance of power to the benefit of China. In the 2023 edition of *Transatlantic Trends*, 60 per cent of French respondents said that the US was the most influential actor in the world while 18 per cent said China was; but asked which would be the most influential actor in five years, 42 per cent said China, compared to 25 per cent for the US.[252]

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248 *Défense et Sécurité nationale. Le Livre Blanc* [The French White Paper on Defence and National Security, 2008], Paris: Odile Jacob / La Documentation Française.
249 *Livre blanc. Défense et sécurité nationale 2013* [The French White Paper on Defence and National Security], Paris: Direction de l'information légale et administrative.
250 *Revue stratégique de défense et sécurité nationale 2017* [Defence and National Security Strategic Review, 2017], Paris: DICoD – Bureau des Éditions; SGDSN (2022), *National Strategic Review on Defence and Security*.
251 Teinturier, B., Gallard, M. and Latrille, P. (2023), *Fractures françaises* [French Fractures], 11th edition, Paris: Ipsos/Sopra Steria, https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/Ipsos Sopra Steria – Fractures Françaises – septembre_2023.pdf.
252 De Hoop Scheffer, A., Quencez, M. and Weber, G. (2023), *Transatlantic Trends 2023*, Paris: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, pp. 10–13.

The transformation of the international order is therefore broadly viewed as negative from a French standpoint, as it is likely to result in two main trends: the return of a logic of blocs among great powers, and an increase in violent competition in areas that are relevant to French interests.

Macron has repeatedly decried the return to a logic of blocs that pits a US-centric world against a China-centric one. For example, in 2022 he said: 'Geopolitics is increasingly structured around the competition between the United States and China. And this competition is problematic to us for different reasons.'[253] This reflects a commitment to a multipolar world order and a rejection of a simplistic bifurcation of global power structures. While French leaders have consistently affirmed a closer alignment with the US than with China, Paris stands against a strict decoupling from Beijing, and even de-risking policies trigger fierce debates. The US–China competition is seen as one of the main drivers of the erosion of multilateralism at the global level. The deadlock of UN institutions and the impossibility of any form of international cooperation on common challenges like climate change or terrorism are viewed as very costly consequences of this competition.

French economic and military interests are also directly affected by the growing competition among great and middle powers. Over the past decade, France has been challenged by Russia's presence in Central and West Africa as well as by the competing actions of actors such as China and Turkey in North Africa. France's disengagement from Mali and Niger, although driven primarily by local dynamics, was accelerated due to the actions of these external rivals. They have widely used disinformation campaigns and hybrid warfare in French overseas territories across the world, as seen in the recent actions by Azerbaijan and Russia to stoke the violent riots in New Caledonia.[254] In this regard, France expects more frequent and violent contestation of its influence in the coming years, with its relations with Russia expected to stay at a new low and China likely to become increasingly active in undermining French strategic ambitions beyond Europe.

US disengagement, regardless of Trump

The trajectory of politics in the US is pivotal to France's vision of the international order. A significant number of foreign policy experts have traditionally been sceptical of US leadership, and the relationship between the two countries has experienced significant strains over the last two decades, including disagreements over the Iraq war, President Barack Obama's policy on Syria, President Donald Trump's stance on Iran and climate issues, and the AUKUS alliance between Australia, the UK and the US. Since the Obama years, however, France's chief concerns have been over potential US disengagement from European affairs. The diplomatic corps and strategic community consider the episode of the Obama administration's 'red line' over Syria in 2013 as the embodiment of a new era in transatlantic relations, one characterized by a narrower definition of US interests and a decoupling of US and European strategic thinking.

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253 Office of the President of the French Republic (2022), 'Speech to the French diplomatic corps', President Emmanuel Macron, 1 September 2022.
254 Guibert, N. (2024), 'Nouvelle-Calédonie : les indépendantistes invités par l'Azerbaïdjan suscitent de nouveau la réprobation' [New-Caledonia: Separatists invited by Azerbaijan cause disapproval again], *Le Monde*, 18 July 2024.

This perspective was reinforced during both the first Trump administration (2017–21) and the Biden administration (2021–25), with the perception among French policymakers of two parallel developments: a shift in US strategic emphasis towards the Indo-Pacific region with the definition of China-focused foreign, trade, technological and defence priorities; and the US political class becoming more inward-looking and stuck in domestic disputes. The return of Trump to the presidency is being viewed as a major challenge, especially if it means the active deconstruction of the liberal international order.[255] The French strategic community anticipates an incremental disengagement by the US from European affairs in the long run, regardless of the political party in power in Washington, as well as US protectionist decisions that will weaken international trade.

Redefining France's role in the international order

Europe and national sovereignty as pillars of French power

France's role in global affairs has led to a paradox among its foreign policy decision-makers. They find themselves facing the country's waning influence on the world stage, while holding on to the belief that France must maintain its influence as a major power to preserve the status quo of the international system. This tension has sparked varied perspectives on the best approach for France to protect its interests in the evolving global landscape.

Since becoming president in 2017, Macron has consistently championed a perspective that is widely shared by political figures from the centre-right to the centre-left. This advocates France strategically using its role within the EU to maintain and enhance its position among the world's leading powers. The EU is perceived as a bulwark against US hegemony and China's economic coercion, and as the indispensable vehicle to prevent the 'vassalization' of France and Europe by either of those powers. This requires the EU to develop all the tools of a great power (economic and industrial strength, technological innovation and military capabilities) and to articulate its interests outside the transatlantic relationship whenever necessary. This approach also posits that the EU must be prepared to engage on an equal footing with its competitors, even at the cost of straying from certain tenets of the liberal international order. Specifically, in trade relations Macron has urged the EU to adopt a more pragmatic stance and to pursue an 'EU sovereignty' strategy aimed at reducing its strategic and economic dependencies while adopting protective measures in response to US and Chinese protectionism. He has also shown willingness to apply similar thinking to EU foreign and defence policy.

255 Lafont Rapnouil, M. (2017), 'La chute de l'ordre international libéral?' [The fall of the liberal international order], *Esprit*, June 2017, https://esprit.presse.fr/article/manuel-lafont-rapnouil/la-chute-de-l-ordre-international-liberal-39478.

In the short term, this assertive vision requires France to take a leadership role in supporting Ukraine[256] and to increase its contribution to defence and deterrence on NATO's eastern flank. It also explains Macron's recent decisions and declarations on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as he perceives the war as a turning point for the EU as a geopolitical actor.

Another perspective on France's global role highlights its distinct stance towards the US–China rivalry. It seeks to maintain its specificity within the Western alliances to which it is committed. This approach is deeply ingrained in the Gaullist tradition of French diplomacy and can take different forms – from the *puissance d'équilibre* [balancing power] concept introduced during Macron's presidency to the aspiration for a 'third way' that presents an option for countries reluctant to side with either Beijing or Washington. This underlying concept in the French foreign policy debate either could suggest a pro-European outlook where the EU embodies this 'third way' – or it could point to a more nationally driven foreign policy that emphasizes the preservation of France's sovereignty and ability to navigate great power competition.

Two points of consensus in the foreign policy debate

In terms of reinventing French foreign policy, both the alternatives above – the pro-European outlook and the more nationally driven approach – largely share two ideas: the rejection of a binary division of the world between the West and the 'rest', and a pragmatic attitude towards new formats of cooperation.

Since 2022 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, France's political elites as well as its private sector and civil servants have expressed concern regarding the widening perception gap between the West and the Global South over various ongoing conflicts and crises. The country's traditional role in the international arena, coupled with its colonial past and its economic interests spread across the globe, has shaped its approach to foreign policy. The global tensions stemming from the war in Ukraine and the Israel–Hamas war have raised alarm in Paris. Similarly, France has rejected any binary division of the world, notably promoted by the former Biden administration's narrative – and also used by the European Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen – of a competition between autocracies and democracies. In France, this rejection can be found among the proponents of a strong geopolitical Europe, as they promote a multipolar order that is not structured around an 'us versus them' divide, and among the proponents of national sovereignty, who favour partnerships with India or the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although its public discourse often highlights values, France's foreign policy is primarily driven by pragmatism and a commitment to engage with all countries.

The same pragmatism can be found regarding formats of cooperation. While France regrets the slow unravelling of global institutions and continues to aim to 'reinvent multilateralism',[257] it is ready to engage in minilateralism as well

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256 Cadier, D. and Quencez, M. (2023), 'France's policy shifts on Ukraine NATO membership', War on the Rocks, 10 August 2023, https://warontherocks.com/2023/08/frances-policy-shift-on-ukraines-nato-membership.
257 Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations (2019), 'Alliance pour le Multilatéralisme. Conférence de presse conjointe de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, ministre de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères de la France et M. Heiko Maas, ministre des Affaires étrangères de l'Allemagne' [Alliance for Multilateralism. Joint press conference of Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Mr Heiko Maas, German Minister for Foreign Affairs], 2 April 2019, https://onu.delegfrance.org/Conference-de-presse-de-M-Jean-Yves-Le-Drian-et-M-Heiko-Maas.

as bilateral strategic partnerships. The French vision for European cooperation – typically involving smaller, capable and willing coalitions within the EU – is reflected at the global level. Such groupings and agreements as the European Intervention Initiative, the Weimar Triangle with Germany and Poland, the Lancaster House Treaty with the United Kingdom and the Elysée Treaty with Germany have gained prominence in recent years. During Macron's presidency, France has signed or reaffirmed bilateral partnerships with countries in Europe (Greece and Italy) as well as globally (India and the UAE). France even views the trilateral initiative with India and the UAE as a potential cornerstone for its strategy in the Indian Ocean.

While France regrets the slow unravelling of global institutions and continues to aim to 'reinvent multilateralism', it is ready to engage in minilateralism as well as bilateral strategic partnerships.

To sum up, France's ability to meet current and future global challenges will probably come from a mix of the different approaches outlined above. Regardless of how domestic politics unfold, policymakers will aim to forge alliances with European partners, extending beyond the Franco-German axis, and to reshape partnerships with countries beyond the transatlantic sphere, including in areas of crisis management and diplomatic negotiations. Deepening cooperation with leading powers of the Global South, such as Brazil and India, will be an important priority in the coming years. The situations in Ukraine and Gaza will require the engagement of pivotal regional and international stakeholders: France can play an important mediating role in this by asserting its strategic complementarity with the US.

12

Is Japan's model the future of the liberal order?

Favouring pragmatism in diplomacy and human security over a Western-led liberal agenda has been the mainstay for Japanese foreign policy and may offer the way ahead for the liberal international order.

Jennifer Lind

In the project of liberal order-building after the Second World War, it's easy to tell a story of Japan as a leader in this effort. Indeed, Japan became one of the world's most successful democracies and richest liberal nations, an economic powerhouse in the Bretton Woods trading order, a leader in global governance and a key US security partner. However, illiberal Japanese policies across a number of realms chafed against the international order. Japan's post-war economic development was highly statist (rather than market-driven), and its trade policy notably mercantilist. This in fact led to significant vitriol between Tokyo and its US and European trading partners.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Western ambitions for the liberal order expanded further. A militarily dominant United States and its European partners sought to weaken the global sovereignty norm, to aggressively promote democracy across the globe, and to expand the movement of people across borders. During this period Japan stood awkwardly in the corner: a nationalist at the cosmopolitan party. Tokyo cooperated as far as it felt comfortable but pursued more restrained policies. Emerging new trends – the return to great power politics and a new class of middle powers – will check American and European cosmopolitan ambitions. In the coming, more conservative, international order, Japan will be much more at home. Indeed, the future of the liberal order resembles the version Tokyo has pursued all along.

Japan's leading role in the post-war international order

Japan's membership of the liberal international order created by the US and its European and Asian allies from 1945 was by no means inevitable. After all, many of the countries influential in post-war diplomacy and trade had fought Japan in the brutal Second World War; at its end, Japan was economically devastated and diplomatically isolated. But the US–Japan security alliance cemented Tokyo's membership in the broader post-war order. The country was a key logistical and staging area in the 1950–53 Korean War, a role which boosted Japan's initial post-war economic reconstruction.[258] US occupation reforms brought democracy to Japan; the US drafted a new Japanese constitution, which enshrined democratic principles and women's rights. Over time, seeking to build up Japan as an anti-communist ally, Washington sponsored Japan's 1955 entry into the trading order (membership of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)), and into other areas of global governance.

In many ways, Japan became a leader of the post-war international order. The country successfully transitioned to a stable democracy, in which its people now enjoy among the highest level of freedoms, health, security and prosperity in the world. It grew to become the world's second largest economy (today, it is fourth largest). It is a global technological leader and a major exporter whose products are known and valued around the world. Tokyo has signed more than 20 free-trade agreements since 2000.[259]

In international finance, Japan has been a leading creditor nation and a powerhouse in global financial governance. In the late 20th century, as Japan became one of the world's leading economies, the Japanese yen became globally influential as a reserve currency and in foreign exchange markets. Japan's influence is evident in its contributions to international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. The country became one of the largest donors and shareholders in these institutions, playing a key role in shaping their policies, particularly in Asia. Japan also founded its own development bank: the Asian Development Bank (headquartered in Manila) in 1966. The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and other state-supported financial institutions have been instrumental in funding projects across Asia, Africa and Latin America, contributing to global economic development in alignment with liberal international values. Today, Japan continues to engage in global financial governance, particularly through the G7 and G20 forums.

Japanese diplomats have occupied prominent leadership positions in UN agencies, guiding their work on disaster relief, peacekeeping, refugee and other human rights issues. Japan's highly educated people work at home and around the world in numerous non-governmental organizations in the fields of global health, nuclear disarmament and climate. Across numerous realms of the international order, then, Japan has played a leading role.

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258 Beckley, M., Horiuchi, Y. and Miller, J. M. (2018), 'America's role in the making of the Japanese miracle', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 18(1), pp. 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2017.24.
259 See Solís, M. (2023), *Japan's Quiet Leadership*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Trade reveals limits of Japan's role in the liberal order

A closer look at Japanese policy shows a significant strain of nationalism in Japanese policies that departed from the spirit (and sometimes the letter) of liberal order-building. In its post-war reconstruction, Japan's government pursued a statist approach to economic development and enacted numerous trade barriers (both formal and informal) that adversely affected its trading partners' ability to do business in Japan and to compete overseas with Japanese products.

A closer look at Japanese policy shows a significant strain of nationalism in Japanese policies that departed from the spirit (and sometimes the letter) of liberal order-building.

Japanese industrial policy in the post-war period resulted in discriminatory trade practices. Through its Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), Japan targeted the development of strategic industries such as automobiles, electronics and shipbuilding. MITI subsidized firms, protected sectors from foreign competition, guided private sector investment and directed cheap capital towards specific sectors. Furthermore, the Japanese government's procurement system essentially blocked foreign firms from bidding on government contracts (for example, in public infrastructure projects) due to opaque bidding processes and a preference for local suppliers. Thus, long before the US began complaining about discriminatory Chinese trade policies in the early 21st century, Washington had been frustrated by similar policies in Japan.

Although a member of the GATT,[260] Japan continued to enact high tariffs in some areas, notably the agricultural sector. Rice, as a staple of the Japanese diet and a cultural symbol, was one of the most protected commodities. For decades, Japan maintained a near-complete ban on rice imports through high tariffs and quantitative restrictions. Beyond rice, Japan also imposed high tariffs and quotas on other agricultural products such as dairy, beef and pork. In the 1980s and during the 1990s Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations, these restrictions were a major sticking point in trade negotiations with the US, Australia and other countries that were seeking better market access for their agricultural exports.

Japan also became notorious for enacting an array of informal or non-tariff barriers (NTBs) that protected domestic firms against foreign competition. NTBs refer to regulations or policies other than tariffs that make it difficult for foreign goods to enter the domestic market. Complex licensing procedures discouraged foreign firms from entering the Japanese market by creating delays and raising

260 Later known as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

costs. For example, obtaining approval to sell pharmaceuticals or agricultural products in Japan involved a long, complicated process, often requiring extensive documentation, product-testing and inspections.

Foreign firms protested that onerous product standards and technical regulations were overly strict relative to international norms. For example, in the 1980s Japan was accused of using stringent technical standards to block the import of foreign-made automobiles, despite their compliance with international safety and quality regulations.

Another aspect of discriminatory trade practices was Japan's *keiretsu* system, a network of interlinked corporations with close financial ties. *Keiretsu* were vertically or horizontally integrated conglomerates, often consisting of suppliers, manufacturers and financial institutions, which collaborated closely and were linked by cross-ownership of shares. Because *keiretsu* firms favoured doing business within their own network, they avoided foreign companies. In the 1980s and 1990s, this became a major point of contention in Japan's trade relations with the US and Europe. Foreign governments accused Japan of creating an insular market where domestic firms had a built-in advantage, despite the country's formal commitment to free trade.

All told, these Japanese policies created significant challenges for US and European firms. Bolstered by domestic protection, Japanese products outcompeted those of Japan's trading partners. This imbalance triggered a fierce backlash from Western policymakers, who accused Japan of 'unfair trade' and creating an uneven playing field. In the 1980s Washington imposed import quotas on Japanese goods such as cars and electronics, and pressed Japan to ease its restrictions. Such trade disputes led to a period of sustained tension, with Japan's trade practices perceived as protectionist and mercantilist, undermining international trust and fuelling wider debates over equitable trade and globalization.

For a leading country in the liberal international order, Japanese policies – particularly over trade – departed notably from both the letter and the spirit of this order. US and European retaliation further eroded the liberal trading system.

Abe's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War transformed the international system in the 1990s from bipolarity into one dominated by the US. Unconstrained by a great power competitor, US and European partners encouraged the liberal order to expand across several realms[261] – notably by greatly increasing population flows, by advocating a 'responsibility to protect' that challenged the long-standing and foundational norm of sovereignty,[262] and by actively promoting democracy.

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261 Lind, J. and Wohlforth, W. C. (2019), 'The future of the liberal order is conservative: A strategy to save the system', *Foreign Affairs*, April 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-12/future-liberal-order-conservative.
262 The norm of sovereignty – the idea that a sovereign government has authority over all of a state's internal matters – dates back to the 17th century and was codified into the United Nations Charter in 1945.

At times, Japan has appeared to join its partners in pursuing a more expansive version of liberal order. During Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's first term in 2006–07, he initially articulated the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) vision, which became the foundation of Japan's regional diplomacy. Abe stated:

> Now, as this new 'broader Asia' takes shape at the confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, I feel that it is imperative that the democratic nations located at opposite edges of these seas deepen the friendship among their citizens at every possible level.[263]

The then foreign minister, Taro Aso, similarly advocated an 'arc of freedom and stability' and support for countries that shared Japan's values of human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law.[264]

Abe advocated a 'democratic security diamond' (consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the US) and his administration promoted security cooperation with those countries, notably through the 'Quad'.[265] Such cooperation was animated by the belief that, 'At the end of the day, Japan's diplomacy must always be rooted in democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights,' he wrote in 2012, adding: 'These universal values have guided Japan's postwar development.'[266] It was the first time that a Japanese administration had openly articulated its willingness to contribute to creating a global system of democratic norms.[267] Beyond Asia, Japan extended its diplomatic efforts to increased cooperation with European countries with interests in East Asia, as well as with the EU.[268]

Japan's FOIP vision and its close partnership with the US even prompted observers to describe Tokyo as a potential new leader of the liberal international order. During the first Trump presidency, commentators speculated that Japan might step in to fill the void created by the absence of strong US leadership.[269] Trump's 2016 election had been a significant blow for Tokyo, as he pulled the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement which Abe had spent significant political capital to get adopted by Japan's parliament. After the US withdrawal, Solís argues, Tokyo stepped up, 'deftly' preventing the TPP from 'unravelling'. Due to strong Japanese leadership, the accord was later signed as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.[270]

But the narrative of Tokyo assuming the mantle of liberal order-building was flawed for a few reasons. It ignores the extent of Japan's nationalist/mercantilist policies in the post-war era, and it disregards how in more recent years Japan resisted the ebullient liberalism and cosmopolitanism favoured by its Western

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263 Abe, S. (2007), 'Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Parliament of the Republic of India, "Confluence of the Two Seas"', 22 August 2007, https://www.mofa. go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html.
264 Ichihara, M. (2013), 'Understanding Japanese Democracy Assistance', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 March 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2013/03/understanding-japanese-democracy-assistance?lang=en.
265 Hosoya, Y. (2019), 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 26(1), pp. 18–28, doi: 10.1080/13439006.2019.1622868.
266 Abe, S. (2012), 'Asia's democratic security diamond', Project Syndicate, 27 December 2012.
267 Ichihara (2013), 'Understanding Japanese Democracy Assistance'.
268 Wilkins, T. (2021), 'Japan as a contributor to the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific', Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 22 September 2021, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/thomas_02.html.
269 Paris, R. (2019), *Can Middle Powers Save the Liberal World Order?*, Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/can-middle-powers-save-liberal-world-order.
270 Solís, M. (2020), 'The underappreciated power: Japan after Abe', *Foreign Affairs*, 99(6), pp. 123–32, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/2020-10-13/underappreciated-power.

partners. This is evident in Japanese pragmatism in diplomacy towards autocratic states, in its preference for human security over a human rights-driven interventionism,[271] and in immigration policies that advance nationalist – not cosmopolitan – goals.

Pragmatism in diplomacy and regional relations

Japan's pragmatic rather than values-based diplomacy means it maintains cordial and engaged relations with authoritarian regimes. In the 1970s, under Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, Japan practised what it called 'omnidirectional diplomacy', particularly aimed at China, in an effort to prioritize economic engagement over politics. This led it to expand economic and political relations with China and Southeast Asian countries.

Japan's pragmatic rather than values-based diplomacy means it maintains cordial and engaged relations with authoritarian regimes.

After Japanese leaders introduced the FOIP concept, criticism at home and among regional partners led Tokyo to downplay rhetoric about liberal democracy. Japan's neighbours worried that, in an international environment increasingly characterized by US–China tensions, support for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific suggested participation in an anti-China balancing coalition: something that regional countries wanted to avoid.[272] The emphasis on liberal democracy also threatened productive relations with Japan's autocratic neighbours. Seeking good relations in Southeast Asia, Tokyo avoided criticizing certain regional countries for their lack of democratic reforms and human rights protections. According to Ichihara, this meant that 'in practice democratic norms and principles [did] not become a major feature of Japan's engagement in the region or beyond'.[273]

Within Japan, critics of the FOIP vision also worried that an emphasis on liberal democracy would poison relations with China. Tokyo's concerns about maintaining stable relations with that key partner resulted in a shift away from 'values-based' diplomacy. Satake and Sahashi argue that Japan anticipates that 'by means of gradual persuasion' China can be transformed into supporting a rules-based international order. In their view, 'Japan's vision does not necessarily include

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271 In the 1990s, human rights advocates in the West began to challenge the sovereignty norm, arguing for a 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) populations whose leaders abused their human rights. It was invoked in military operations against authoritarian regimes, as in Libya and Serbia; see, for example, Albright, M. K. and Williamson, R. (2013), 'The United States and R2P: From words to action', Brookings Institution, 23 July 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-and-r2p-from-words-to-action/; and Paris, R. (2020), 'The right to dominate: How old ideas about sovereignty pose new challenges for world order', *International Organization*, 74(3), pp. 453–89.
272 Hosoya (2019), 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'; Satake, T. and Sahashi, R. (2020), 'The Rise of China and Japan's "Vision" for Free and Open Indo-Pacific', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30(127), pp. 18–35. doi:10.1080/10670564.2020.1766907.
273 Ichihara, M. (2014), 'Japan's strategic approach to democracy support', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 March 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/07/japan-s-strategic-approach-to-democracy-support-pub-54816.

pursuing balancing acts against China or confrontational order-making'.[274] These perspectives differ strikingly from the US view that rejects liberal engagement with China as a disastrous failure, and from Washington's shift towards a highly competitive, counter-hegemonic policy towards China.[275] By contrast, Nakano writes that because China's and Japan's futures – economic, environmental, social and political – are closely linked, 'Japan has no choice but to work with China while managing China's multiple risks'.[276] Japan's participation in the trilateral summit with China and South Korea in May 2024 can be interpreted in this vein; that is, as seeking to create a floor below which relations do not drop.

The FOIP concept has evolved into what Hosoya has called 'FOIP 2.0' – from a values-based concept emphasizing liberal democracy to one that emphasizes the rule of law and promotes principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.[277] Priority issues on the FOIP agenda all invite cooperation with authoritarian states: for example, the development of regional infrastructure, trade, institutional capacity-building, non-proliferation, and counterterrorism and counter-piracy activities.[278] Solís argues that Japan pursues 'lower-case democracy' efforts rather than pushing a values-based approach. Such efforts include funding development projects in judicial capacity-building, civil code development and election support considered essential to prevent abuse of state power, protect human rights, adjudicate conflicts and develop the institutions of a market economy.[279]

Human security and conservative immigration policy

Japan has been unenthusiastic about increasing calls for interventionism based on ideas about a 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) against human rights abuses. The reaction stems in part from Japan's conceptualization of human rights. Rather than emphasize human rights grounded in Western ideas about individual liberty, Japan prioritizes policies that promote poverty reduction and institution-building: 'community building though empowerment and protection of individuals to live happily and in dignity, free from fear and want', according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[280]

Another influencing factor is Japan's traditional emphasis on human security. Since the Second World War, Japan's foreign policy has included policies of significant military restraint as well as respect for the United Nations. As such, Japan's

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274 Satake and Sahashi (2020), 'The Rise of China and Japan's "Vision" for Free and Open Indo-Pacific'.
275 On the failure of the US 'engagement' policy towards China, see Friedberg, A. L. (2022), *Getting China Wrong*, New York: Wiley; Campbell, K. M. and Ratner, E. (2018), 'The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations', *Foreign Affairs*, 97(2), pp. 60–70, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning.
276 Nakano, R. (2023), 'Japan and the liberal order: Rules-based, multilateral, inclusive, and localized', *International Affairs*, 99(4), pp. 1421–38.
277 Hosoya (2019), 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'.
278 Nakano (2023), 'Japan and the liberal order', p. 1435.
279 Solís, M. (2021), 'Japan's democratic renewal and the survival of the liberal order', Brookings Institution, 22 January 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/japans-democratic-renewal-and-the-survival-of-the-liberal-order.
280 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021), 'Concept of the Human Security', 22 March 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/human_index.html.

government has stressed that militarized intervention should remain a last resort and be tightly bound by UN authorization, aligning with a multilateral approach that prioritizes diplomacy and capacity-building within sovereign states. In 2008, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda stated Japan's position on R2P as follows:

> Japan does not intervene by force, as a matter of national policy, in such conflict situations where the international community may have to seriously consider fulfilling their 'responsibility to protect'; we are a nation that has primarily focused on humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.[281]

This position reflects Japan's broader commitment to sovereignty as a fundamental norm of international politics as established in the 1945 UN Charter. Japan's caution is also influenced by its regional context and its close diplomatic relationships in Asia, where sovereignty is highly valued.

Consequently, rather than endorse a trend towards militarized humanitarian intervention, Japan has focused on the first two pillars of R2P – prevention and assistance to build state capacity – in addition to its commitment to human security. Such activities have included human development initiatives in conflict zones and areas hit by climate change, efforts to support developing countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts around the world to promote universal health coverage. In fact, Japan's approach towards advancing human rights dovetails with China's efforts (much criticized in the West) to re-conceptualize human rights away from Western ideals and towards a 'right to development'.[282]

Japan's immigration policy remains decidedly nationalist rather than cosmopolitan.[283] In 2019, Japan received more than 15,000 applications for refugee status, of which 38 were approved. Two years before, when millions of Syrian refugees were seeking asylum around the world, Tokyo agreed to accept 150 Syrian young people – as exchange students, not as refugees.[284] Japan's immigration policies sometimes trigger criticism from UN refugee agencies – despite significant Japanese financial aid to refugee programmes – and from among Japan's liberal partners. Although Tokyo accepted a larger number of refugees in the wake of the Ukraine war, Japan is still widely criticized for its tight refugee policies.[285]

Japanese officials underline significant obstacles to integration posed by their difficult language and unique culture for immigrants from, for example, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa. Because Japan prioritizes social harmony, most of Japan's immigrants come from Asia or from small Japanese communities in South America, whose residents already have Japanese language skills and cultural knowledge.

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281 Fukuda, Y. (2008), 'Address by H. E. Mr. Yasuo Fukuda, Prime Minister of Japan', Session on the Responsibility to Protect: Human Security and International Action, Davos, Switzerland, 26 January 2008.
282 Oud, M. (2020), 'Harmonic convergence: China and the right to development', in Rolland, N. (ed.) (2020), *An Emerging China-Centric Order: China's Vision for a New World Order in Practice*, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, pp. 85–100.
283 Lind, J. (2018), 'Nationalist in a liberal order: How populism missed Japan', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 25(1), pp. 52–74.
284 Flowers, P. (2023), 'Ukraine crisis doesn't herald a new era for refugee rights in Japan', *East Asia Forum*, 11 January 2023, https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/01/11/ukraine-crisis-doesnt-herald-a-new-era-for-refugee-rights-in-japan.
285 Sumilan, A. (2024), 'Biden calls ally Japan "xenophobic" like China, Russia, at campaign event', *Washington Post*, 2 May 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/05/02/biden-xenophobic-japan-china-russia-india.

In stark contrast to trends in Europe and the US, the share of the Japanese population that is foreign-born has grown very slowly. In 1990 that share was less than 1 per cent; this rose to 1.7 per cent by 2010.[286] The number in 2021 remained quite low, at 2.2 per cent.[287] Japan's cautious approach to immigration is perhaps the factor that differentiated it the most from its liberal partners in recent years.

The future of the international order is Japanese

Japan's approach to the international order has been to maintain stable relations with autocracies, and to prioritize human security and the rule of law rather than liberal democracy. Tokyo's cosmopolitan critics have chastised Japan for not accepting more immigrants (particularly refugees). Furthermore, critics have attacked Tokyo's pragmatism to argue that, as a leading democracy, Japan has a responsibility to isolate, shame and pressure dictators who engage in human rights and other abuses.[288]

Japan's approach to the international order has been to maintain stable relations with autocracies, and to prioritize human security and the rule of law rather than liberal democracy.

Yet new developments in international politics may throw a new light on Japan's approach. Decades of liberal expansionism are being curtailed by several trends. An increasingly powerful China is supporting authoritarian states and undermining the spread of democracy in numerous ways.[289] More capable but less liberal middle powers are pushing back against a perceived West-led internationalist agenda.[290] The US and other leading architects of the liberal international order will necessarily find themselves more constrained in the future – and Japan's model offers a way forward.

The Japanese model offers a vision for international order that is liberal – yet works pragmatically with and respects the sovereign rights of authoritarian countries. Its emphasis on advancing human security favours quiet, constant work in global public health and infrastructure-building rather than high-profile militarized

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286 World Bank (2010), 'Japan, International migrant stock as percentage of population', https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.TOTL.ZS?locations=JP.
287 OECD (2024), 'Executive summary', in *Recruiting Immigrant Workers: Japan 2024*, Paris: OECD Publishing, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/recruiting-immigrant-workers-japan-2024_1bd4ed29-en.
288 See, for example, Kingston, J. (2020), 'The emptiness of Japan's values diplomacy in Asia', *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18(19-1), 1 October 2020, https://apjjf.org/2020/19/Kingston.html; and Brown, J. D. J. (2018), 'Japan's values-free and token Indo-Pacific strategy', *The Diplomat*, 30 March 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/japans-values-free-and-token-indo-pacific-strategy.
289 Cooley, A. (2015), 'Authoritarianism goes global: Countering democratic norms', *Journal of Democracy*, 26(3), pp. 49–63; and Lin, B. (2023), 'The China-Russia Axis Takes Shape', *Foreign Policy* (blog), 11 September 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/china-russia-alliance-cooperation-brics-sco-economy-military-war-ukraine-putin-xi.
290 Aydin, U. (2021), 'Emerging middle powers and the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 97(5), p. 1378.

intervention during crises. Although this may elicit criticism for inaction at times of crisis, this approach has the potential to save more lives while avoiding the high costs – diplomatic, financial and human – associated with military solutions, as well as the other inevitable problems that such solutions entail.[291] Finally, the Japanese model pursues liberal goals while prioritizing the national interest. Leaders' failures to do this in the US and Europe have led to significant public backlash in recent years – in the form of Brexit, far-right European electoral victories, and the rise and resurrection of Trump. Today, as liberals in the US and Europe are looking for how to navigate their goals amid such challenges, Japan offers a way forward.

291 Advocating this approach for the United States is Valentino, B. A. (2011), 'The True Costs of Humanitarian Intervention', *Foreign Affairs* 90(6), pp. 60–73.

13
Envisioning the future international order

Today's geopolitical disruptions have hastened the end of the post-war liberal international order, and will create the possibility for a new period of international order-building. Great powers may seek to divide the world into spheres of influence, but middle and emerging powers seek greater autonomy, and oppose the prospect of a world that forces them to take sides.

Leslie Vinjamuri

The liberal international order has shaped and given structure and predictability to international relations for more than seven decades. But the shortcomings of the order are well known. Hypocrisy has been a feature, rather than a bug. Sovereignty has rarely translated into equality. Major powers, and especially the United States, have enjoyed special status, while other states were relegated to the perimeters of the order.

Today, the critics and adversaries of the US and of the old order are both more determined and more capable. They have stoked division in Western democracies, and sought to divide Europe from the US, in a bid to weaken the transatlantic partnership and undermine its role as the anchor of this order.[292] Many states reject the special status granted to the US and are determined to secure their autonomy. Yet few of these states agree on an alternative vision to give coherence and predictability to international relations. Turkey and Saudi Arabia, for instance, continue to seek close relations with the US but also are committed to securing their freedom of manoeuvre – in part, by diversifying their foreign policy through partnerships with China and Russia.

292 Kupchan. C. A. and Vinjamuri, L. (2021), 'Anchoring the World: International Order in the Twenty-First Century', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 April 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/anthologies/2021-04-15/anchoring-world.

Similar hedging is evident among other rising powers. Brazil may embrace the liberal international order, but it also welcomes multipolarity precisely because it sees this shift as lessening the dominance of the US. India seeks a strong bilateral partnership with the US, but maintains close ties to Russia and portrays itself as a leader (with Global South partners) in the developing world. Both Brazil and India have been denied access to the most prized seats in the major multilateral organizations, but they – and others – are unlikely to accept this exclusion forever. If reform of the UN Security Council remains a pipe dream, or if voting shares at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are not redistributed to reflect changes in the distribution of power, not least China's rise, these institutions will lose their relevance and legitimacy. Rising expectations among emerging powers will be met through new points of access and influence.

The more surprising developments are those which come from Europe. Political leaders in France and Germany still cling to the fundamentals of the US-led order. But increasingly, these two key European powers seek to enhance their national but also intra-European capabilities and deepen Europe's collective influence in NATO, with the goal of achieving greater strategic autonomy from the US. At the same time, the power of far-right groups in Europe has grown. These groups openly embrace values antithetical to the liberal order, and pose a continuing challenge to the effort to forge a stronger and more coherent agenda among European states.

The US had always been a reluctant multilateralist, asserting its exceptionalism, rejecting ratification of numerous international legal treaties, and insisting that it have veto power, a dominant voting share or some other legal exemption to safeguard its sovereignty even in the context of multilateralism.

But the most fundamental shift of all has been the turn by the US against the organizing principles of the liberal international order. Many will note that the US had always been a reluctant multilateralist, asserting its exceptionalism, rejecting ratification of numerous international legal treaties, and insisting that it have veto power, a dominant voting share or some other legal exemption to safeguard its sovereignty even in the context of multilateralism. America's commitments to multilateralism and free trade have also been in decline for more than two decades. Despite this trend, the US has stood by the belief that America benefits from participation in multilateral institutions. That is, until today. The election of President Donald Trump for a second term has brought a sustained attack on multilateralism, the rule of law, and even the sovereignty norm.

This has set the path for a new period in international relations. Conceptually, this next period of international relations can be seen as a moment of 'reordering', one that has multiple structural drivers – but President Trump is more than a symptom. He is upending the three defining features of the liberal international

order, by rejecting multilateralism and the centrality of alliances, further undermining the principles of free trade, and challenging the norms that underpin democracy at home.

The rest of the world has also changed. China is now a peer competitor to the US, and emerging and middle powers now have the ability to shape and affect outcomes at the regional level. Only some of these states harbour global ambitions. But global problems are in urgent need of international cooperation. Rapid technological advances are occurring alongside a climate crisis, large-scale demographic and social change, and the prospect of a migration and refugee crisis, while global health challenges continue to threaten disruption.

Taken together, these changes signal the need for a new international order. This research paper has offered one lens into the desire by a range of states to contribute to this.

Our research took as its starting point the assumption that in a system where power is far more dispersed than at any point since the Second World War, it matters how states other than the US conceive of international order. We also recognize that the process of order-building is dynamic, interactive and subject to events, some known but some unknown, with varying levels of significance. Many anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to a fundamental reordering of international relations, for example. In the end, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and imbalances and left many of the fundamentals of power in place. Other developments, such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons, have the potential to alter regional orders but as yet in undetermined ways.

The future international order

It could be two decades before we can safely describe, much less characterize, a future international order. What possible arrangements might we anticipate? There has already been a surge in the number of alternative structures for governing among discrete groups of states, and on discrete issues. This period of dynamism, adaptation, contestation and change is likely to be the defining feature of international relations for the foreseeable future.

The end of the West and of the transatlantic partnership

In response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the transatlantic partnership demonstrated unexpected unity and resilience, building on patterns of cooperation cemented by a decades-old alliance. This partnership held firm in the face of actions by an authoritarian state determined to violate Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and, in so doing, to strike at the most fundamental norm in the post-1945 order. Now, though, Western solidarity against aggression and norm-breaking looks unlikely to persist. Three years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Trump is seeking to strike a deal with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. Europe has come under pressure from President Trump to commit to its own defence, and the continent's leaders are gearing up for more unpredictable and potentially adversarial relations with the US.

This may yield an international order that is bound together by a transatlantic partnership bonded by shared interests, but the confidence in this future has been severely weakened. As the chapters on Russia, China and Iran elaborate, the West has powerful adversaries. At the same time, the US now seems to be re-evaluating its own alignments and unsettling the transatlantic partnership. However, today's turbulence is not the first instance of division within the West,[293] and the resilience of the transatlantic alliance as a shared geographical and values-based partnership may yet prove to be stronger than sceptics believe.

A dominant China?

Some scholars anticipate that the next phase in the development of international relations will be marked not by international 'order' but by disorder, a disorder that China is prepared for and that America is not.[294] Others posit that China will benefit from Trump-related disruptions and is well positioned to become a dominant, perhaps even hegemonic, power in a future international order.[295] The past seven decades suggest that there is an international desire for predictability and stability, even if underpinned by an order that is imperfect. Yet the chapters in this research paper unambiguously reveal that among great and emerging powers, none wishes to see China or the US dominate the international order. For most states, the pursuit of strategic autonomy is designed precisely to avoid overdependence on either the US or China.

Spheres of influence

President Trump's recent attempts to assert control over Canada, Greenland and the Panama Canal, and his admiring references to President William McKinley, have prompted a flurry of scholarship and commentary speculating that the US might seek to dominate sovereignty in the Western Hemisphere. Such speculation, in turn, has considered the consequent possibility of a return to an international order defined by spheres of influence divided between the great powers.[296]

The prospect of a grand bargain among regional hegemons fails to capture the complexity of international relations today.

How exactly the world might be carved up in such a scenario is not clear. The prospect that America would cede influence to China in the Indo-Pacific, not least on the issue of Taiwan, in exchange for control over the Western Hemisphere would require a major reversal of US policy. For Europe and Russia to reach

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293 Anderson, J., Ikenberry, G. J. and Risse, T. (2008), *The End of the West? Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order*, Cornell University Press, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1tm7j6s.
294 Leonard, M. (2023), 'China Is Ready for a World of Disorder', *Foreign Affairs*, 20 June 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-ready-world-disorder.
295 Schuman, M. (2025), 'Trump Hands the World to China', *The Atlantic*, 19 February 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/02/foreign-policy-mistake-china/681732.
296 Toft, M. D. (2025), 'The Return of Spheres of Influence', *Foreign Affairs*, 13 March 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/return-spheres-influence.

an accommodation over spheres of influence in their regions would also require a reversal of 30 years of history. Indeed the prospect of a grand bargain among regional hegemons fails to capture the complexity of international relations today. The US is unlikely to relinquish its interests in Australia, India, Japan or South Korea, let alone the rest of Asia. Asia-Pacific states are themselves disinclined to oblige this type of great power contest. Nor does China show any sign of being willing to give up its footprints in Latin America or Africa. Europe's own collective capabilities to defend and secure a sphere of influence (the contours of which, in any event, would be hard to define) are far from being realized.

Multipolarity

Many of the states covered in this paper describe the existing order as multipolar, rather than as unipolar or bipolar. Some states welcome multipolarity because they believe it gives them an opportunity to diversify partnerships and limit their external dependence. Yet the reality is that global power is far less distributed than some states would believe. Brazil, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey are all significant powers in their own right – but by most conventional definitions of military and economic power, the US and China are in a category of their own. The notion of a multipolar world in which there are many powers with regional influence, multiple alignments and a degree of autonomy is nonetheless significant, not least because states believe such a world to exist.

The reinvention of the liberal international order and of the West?

Few today are considering the possibility that the rise of President Trump is merely an aberration, and that his disruption will be limited to a four-year term. Scholars, policy analysts and policymakers are converging, instead, on the assumption that a more transformative and enduring shift is taking place. There is one exception presented in this research paper. In her chapter on Japan, Jennifer Lind argues that Japan benefits from the US-led international order but would prefer an order that is slimmed down, rules-based, embraces sovereignty, and focuses on developmental imperatives and human security. In this vision, human rights and democracy promotion are best left to sovereign states.

It is also possible that democracy in the US proves to be far more resilient than today's sceptics anticipate. A new US Republican or Democratic Party may still embrace a more calibrated US engagement with the rest of the world. This could see a US leadership make the case for a form of internationalism that is grounded in shared interests and that, while defined by the US national interest, is also in the interests of other states. Conceivably, this agenda might focus on international cooperation to address major global public challenges: technological change (including artificial intelligence), climate change, public health, and of course peace and security. This newly envisioned liberal international order might also provide more scope for regionalism, minilateralism and plurilateralism. It could empower coalitions of the willing, respect sovereignty, and place less emphasis on enforcing human rights or exporting (and imposing) values.

The importance of agency and contingency

The US and those 11 adversaries, partners and allies that we consider in this paper will be among the most influential in determining the nature and structures of the future international order. But other states will be critical in shaping the resilience of any potential for global governance or international order. Africa deserves an entire paper of its own, for its likely future significance. Technological advance, climate change, immigration and demographic change will test the ability of states to cooperate.

In all of this, it is essential not to discount the role of agency and contingency. Structures matter; leadership is too often underestimated. The people, coalitions and resources that political leaders mobilize may also have a large impact – whether by design or by accident – on the effort to forge a future that is desirable, sustainable and prosperous. We should, where we can, take this lesson to heart and choose our leaders wisely.

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Acknowledgments

The US and the Americas Programme wishes to thank Charles A. Kupchan for his guidance in helping to define and shape this project. We are grateful to Dana Allin, Creon Butler, Henrik Seip and the participants of the workshop where these papers were initially presented for their incisive feedback on chapter drafts. We would also like to thank those individuals who contributed generously as anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments. These comments, along with those the authors provided to the group at our project workshop, have added significantly to the contours and quality of this research paper. Anar Bata has played an essential role from start to finish, helping to conceptualize this project, coordinating its execution and ensuring its delivery. We are grateful to Nick Bouchet for his edits on the private publication, to Anna Brown for her tireless and meticulous editing, and to Jake Statham for his additional input and steadfast editorial work across the entire project. We also wish to thank Kanishkh Kanodia for assisting in multiple ways with this project.

The US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House would especially like to thank the US National Intelligence Council for its support of the project 'Competing Visions for International Order'; that support was integral to the publication of this paper.

We also wish to thank the numerous individuals, corporations, governments and foundations that support our work at Chatham House. We are grateful for the many intellectual contributions from across the institute's network that have helped to shape and inform the programme's work.

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ISBN 978 1 78413 638 3
DOI 10.55317/9781784136383

Cite this paper: Vinjamuri, L. (ed.) et al. (2025), *Competing visions of international order: Responses to US power in a fracturing world*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136383.

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.
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Charity Registration Number: 208223