

UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 3 (35), 2024

INDIA POLICY
ASPIRATIONS
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FUTURE

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Publisher:

Published by NGO «Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation» (Ukraine),
Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the
Representation of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Ukraine

UA: Ukraine Analytica is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English
on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed
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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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RISE OF THE NEW 'AXIS OF EVIL' AND NATO'S CHALLENGING PATH AHEAD

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The resurgence of Russian expansionist ambitions and the development of a modern-day 'Axis of Evil,' shaped by the Kremlin's alliances with other authoritarian regimes, pose a significant threat to both target countries and overall global stability. In addressing them, NATO strives to identify new measures. However, existing security cooperation or assistance programmes have proven the lack of coordination, collectiveness, and efficiency. To stop Russian aggression in Ukraine and prevent other members of the new 'Axis of Evil' from attacking other sovereign nations, a systematic and efficient Western response is vital.

Introduction

The most important threat of today is the expansionist and even imperialist policies of the Russian Federation and its allies. The policies and strategies of these countries are highly capable of adversely affecting the interests and survivability of different states, including the United States of America. Russia's invasion of Ukraine without any legal justification is the clearest evidence of this. However, since Russia could not achieve the desired success against Ukraine so far, it has resorted to unorthodox warfare methods, over time. From the deployment of foreign troops ranging from Syrian and Chechen mercenaries to North Korean military advisors, to the use of Iranian-made drones, Moscow is both engaging in war economics and establishing new political/diplomatic alliances. In this way, a new 'Axis of Evil' is emerging. While this picture is frightening enough on its own account, Russia's provocative and disruptive

activities not only in Ukraine but also in countries such as the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina raise even more concerns. All of these negative projections pose an enormous challenge to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2024, this was the first time in its history that problems needing to be solved, existing and potential crises, and new geopolitical and military rivalries were so high on NATO's agenda.

The Concept of an 'Axis of Evil' and its New Version

The term 'Axis of Evil' was first used by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002, to refer to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Baathist Republic of Iraq under the Saddam Hussein administration, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and their hostile behaviour.¹ In his speech, President Bush

1 A. Glass, *President Bush Cites 'Axis of Evil'*, Politico, 29.01.2002, [<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/29/bush-axis-of-evil-2002-1127725>]

presented the main characteristics of the 'axis', stating that those states and their terrorist non-state allies constituted an 'axis of evil', that they threatened world peace, especially through their possession of weapons of mass destruction, and that they could harm the USA and its allies by supporting terrorists or individually committing acts of terrorism. In the 22 years since that speech, the administration of one of the three members of the axis of evil has fallen, two have survived and several new possible members have joined it.



***The list of hostile states
may change over time.
What is more important,
and problematic, is the strategic
mindset of these states***

Over time, various American statesmen, military leaders, lawyers, and academics have included different countries in their own lists. In a statement dated 10 April 2024, General Christopher G. Cavoli, Commander of the US Army European Command, identified the enemies of the Euro-Atlantic security perimeter as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.² In addition to these countries, as of 28 November 2023, the Republic of Cuba and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela under the Maduro regime were also classified as hostile states,

according to United States Code of Federal Regulation (Title 15, Subtitle A, Part 7).³

The list of hostile states may change over time. What is more important, and problematic, is the strategic mindset of these states. These states act purely in line with their own interests, and disregard the basic rules, customs, and principles of international law, such as prohibition of the use of force, respect for territorial integrity, non-intervention or *bona fides* (good faith). They generally claim sovereignty over the territories they ruled in the past, and they believe that they have the right to do so at the moment as well. Russian President Putin's article alone, titled «On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians», and written about six months before he launched the invasion against Ukraine, reveals the horror inherent in this approach.⁴ In the aforementioned article, Putin claims that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians have the same roots, by referring to many mutual subjects they share, ranging from literature to art, anthropology to history; and thus legitimising the invasion months before it started.

China, Iran, and North Korea share a similar ideological approach. Beijing pursues expansionist policies, with aspirations on the island of Taiwan and towards the South China Sea. Tehran acts in the same way on the Shiite Crescent in the Middle East and the Gulf. Pyongyang aims to unify the peninsula and subjugate the south.⁵ In order to achieve these goals, countries disrespect

2 C. G. Cavoli, *Official Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, United States Army United States European Command, «EUCOM»*, 10.04.2024, [<https://www.eucom.mil/document/42803/useucom-gen-cavoli-cpshasc2024pdf>], p.4

3 The United States Code of Federal Regulations Title 15, Subtitle A, Part 7

4 Presidency of Russia, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12.07.2021, [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>]

5 F. Spohr, *Kim Jong Un Abandons the Goal of Peaceful Reunification*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 17.01.2024, [<https://www.freiheit.org/north-and-south-korea/kim-jong-un-abandons-goal-peaceful-reunification>]

the sovereignty of other states, interfere in other nations' fates and, if necessary, start wars.⁶⁻⁷ Overall, as President Bush, former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen⁸, and the current Speaker of the US House of Representatives Mike Johnson⁹ have said, they pose a grave risk to world peace, as every action taken by these countries to achieve their goals can disrupt the lives of millions of people. Moreover, it is highly likely that their goals will not be limited to the island of Taiwan, the Shiite Crescent, the Korean peninsula or Eastern Europe, and these states, which have already achieved their goals to a certain extent, will not be satisfied and want more over time, by taking into consideration their leaders' and key officials' discourses.¹⁰

Russia's invasion of the north of Georgia and recognising the de facto independence of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions¹¹, or their annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and later attempt to occupy the entire country of Ukraine, can be considered as strong indications of their malevolent intentions.¹² Upon considering the historical struggles and official discourses, it can be asserted that other axis countries such as

China¹³, North Korea, or Iran¹⁴ may take similar steps in this regard.

The concept of the 'Axis of Evil', which emerged in the recent past, is in constant evolution, as countries with aggressive foreign policies pursue expansionist policies in line with their historical claims and ideological goals. Russia's invasion of Ukraine not only challenges international norms and threatens regional stability, but also sharply and indisputably emphasises the risks posed by such ambitions. While it is unclear which other members of the 'axis' will follow the same policies in the future, the ongoing war and similar rhetoric by others underscores the growing tendency to use military force in contravention of the spirit of international law, and sets a dangerous precedent for the future.

The Effects of the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has set a precedent in many ways. The first negative example is related to sanctions. From the very first days following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the West introduced economic

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- 6 The White House, *Notice on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to North Korea*, 13.06.2024, [<https://bit.ly/4fsrEZx>]
 - 7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan), *Faced with China's Military Threats and Intimidation, The R.O.C. (Taiwan) Government Continues to Seek UN Participation, Urging the UN To Cherish Taiwan's Efforts and Bring Taiwan Into Its Fold*, 6.09.2022, [https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1328&s=98551]
 - 8 N. Liu, *Former NATO Chief Warns Against 'Axis of Autocracies'*, VOA, 19.01.2024, [<https://www.voanews.com/a/former-nato-chief-warns-against-axis-of-autocracies-/7447098.html>]
 - 9 *US House Speaker supports Ukraine bill, announces new 'Axis of Evil'*, Al Mayadeen, 20.04.2024, [<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/us-house-speaker-supports-ukraine-bill--announces-new-axis>]
 - 10 *Russia and the Western Balkans*, European Parliament, 18.04.2023, [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747096_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf)]
 - 11 V. Morkva, *Unlocking the Caucasus for Empire: Roots, Causes and Consequences of the Russian Annexation of the East Georgian Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, 1801*, «*Cappadocia Journal of Area Studies*», 31.12.2021, Vol.3 No.2, p.153-154
 - 12 P. Remler, *Russia's Stony Path in the South Caucasus*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20.10.2020, [<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/10/russias-stony-path-in-the-south-caucasus?lang=en>]
 - 13 *China's Xi says 'Reunification' with Taiwan is Inevitable*, Reuters, 31.12.2023, [<https://bit.ly/4iN9CuF>].
 - 14 H. Pompeya, *Iran's Three Paths of Action to Expand its Influence*, Universidad de Navarra, 2019, [<https://bit.ly/40bshrf>]

and political sanctions and boycotts against the Russia and Belarus governments, as well as a number of Russian and Belarusian statesmen and high-ranking military officers. The European Union, the USA and many other NATO members are currently the toughest sanctioning actors, both institutionally and individually. Through their various sanctions, these actors seek to produce a concrete response against Moscow, and break the Russian government's power and resilience to continue the war on military, economic, and political grounds. The sanctions are mostly focused on the sectors of finance, logistics and transportation, energy, defence, raw materials and manufactured goods, services, and the media. Ten Russian banks and the Russian Central Bank have been banned from international SWIFT¹⁵ transactions and the financial ecosystem. Russia's access to capital and financial markets in Europe has been blocked, and crypto-wallets of Russian origin have been excluded from official international transactions. European airspace has been closed to all Russian flights, while Russian trucks and lorries have been disqualified from entering the EU area. The purchase of Russian coal, steel, iron, and oil has been banned, the use of Russian-origin products used in the oil refining sector has been barred, and the purchase and sale of all Russian-made armaments has been blocked.¹⁶ These sanctions are being implemented through the EU's institutional bodies or by individual EU member states. Many European companies established under the laws of these countries and

operating on an international scale have either terminated or substantially reduced their activities in Russia. In addition to the EU, the USA are also imposing severe sanctions against Russia and Belarus, and thereby trying to put economic pressure on Moscow.

From day one, these international sanctions have had a tangible impact on Russia. According to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, in 2022 alone, Russia's gross national product decreased by 2.1%, Russia's oil revenues fell by 40% compared to the previous year, the assets of the Russian Central Bank amounting to 300 billion euros were blocked, 70% of the assets of the Russian banking system became ineffective under sanctions, and the assets of sanctioned Russian statesmen were frozen to a total of 20 billion euros. In addition, the Russian rouble has also depreciated dramatically against the US dollar and the euro.¹⁷ Russian currency lost at least 40% of its value after the outbreak of the war.¹⁸

The Kremlin has not only failed to achieve any tangible military success, while losing tens of thousands of soldiers, but has also been hit very hard by economic sanctions. At present, the Russian economy is getting weaker, and the costs of this war are becoming unbearable for the Moscow government and the Russian people, according to official data of the European Council¹⁹ and Swedish governmental

15 Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

16 Council of the European Union, *EU sanctions against Russia Explained*, 27.06.2024, [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>]

17 Council of the European Union, *Impact of Sanctions on the Russian Economy*, 12.10.2023, [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/>]

18 J. S. Davis, K. Patel, *Russian Ruble Buckles under Trade Sanctions, Declining Export Earnings*, «Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas» 10.10.2023, [<https://www.dallasfed.org/research/economics/2023/1010>]

19 *Impact of Sanctions on the Russian Economy*, European Council, 12.10.2023, [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/>]

offices.²⁰ Given the probability that sanctions against Russia will continue until the end of the war, it is reasonable to assume that the Russian economy will continue to weaken until that day comes. Moreover, given that the daily financial burden of the war on Russia is around one billion euros, the constant economic pressure of international sanctions increases the difficulties faced by the Russian economy. While sanctions are a foreign policy tool, apart from the direct costs of military conflict they can to some extent weaken Russia's resolve and persistence in continuing the war.



Finally, Russia's invasion has taught its allied countries that their critically important natural resources can be used as a trump card

However, even though Russia is suffering from economic sanctions, there was no harsh, collective, and determined military response from the West. Therefore, Russia managed to continue the war against all odds, by trading various raw materials and manufactured goods with its allied countries, circumventing sanctions through deals with different countries, increasing its influence in Africa, and exploiting raw materials from these countries. Particularly, by buying machine parts and microelectronic devices from China, unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) from Iran, and weapons and ammunition from North Korea, Russia has

created a war economy, with the assistance of these countries.²¹ As General Christopher G. Cavoli stressed «...The PRC, Iran, and DPRK are sustaining Russia's economy and enabling it to continue its aggression in Ukraine. This new axis of adversaries will create strategic dilemmas within an increasingly challenging international security environment...».²² In short, while it is certainly not possible to say that the current sanctions are ineffective, Russia is somehow managing to cover the costs of war in the absence of a harsh and collective military response from the West.

This type of situation gives other expansionist countries confidence that even the worst reaction to a similar action would still allow them to build war economies and continue their actions. These countries are encouraged by the low potential costs of their expansionist policies. It is also possible to suggest that the economic sanctions of the West may eventually prove ineffective for these countries, which have developed their own conflict-driven ecosystem. The fact that the reactions against Russia have remained on purely economic or socio-cultural grounds and that there has been no collective and systematic deterrent response to Russia in the form of hard power, has signalled to other countries that they are likely to face similar sanctions if they engage in unlawful actions, such as invasions or attacks.

Another thing that the Russian-Ukrainian war has taught the other axis countries is that the use of new generation warfare techniques is quite effective. Faced with

20 *Russia is Lying about its Economic Strength: Sanctions are Working – and We Need More*, Government Offices of Sweden, 25.07.2024, [<https://www.government.se/opinion-pieces/2024/07/russia-is-lying-about-its-economic-strength-sanctions-are-working--and-we-need-more/>]

21 *North Korea sent Russia Millions of Munitions in Exchange for Food*, Al Jazeera, 28.02.2024, [<https://bit.ly/408H5s8l>.]

22 C. G. Cavoli, Official Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, United States Army United States European Command, «EUCOM», 10.04.2024, [<https://www.eucom.mil/document/42803/useucom-gen-cavoli-cpshasc2024pdf>], p.5

massive resistance and unable to break it, Russia has been deploying Syrian, Libyan, Nepalese or Chechen mercenaries, Hezbollah²³ militants, and sympathetic mercenaries from far right or far left political groups from the rest of the world, in order to achieve military success and avoid legal responsibility.²⁴ Moreover, the Russians have also made an agreement with North Korea to provide the Pyongyang government with oil²⁵, natural gas, various minerals, and food, in exchange for sending elite military units to Ukraine.²⁶ All this has demonstrated that different methods can always be tried to win a war, and different resources can be applied. When in a difficult situation, one can establish cooperation with other countries, recruit soldiers from them, or else connect directly with terrorist groups.

Finally, Russia's invasion has taught its allied countries that their critically important natural resources can be used as a trump card. Russia is one of the world's largest oil and natural gas producers. It played a vital role in meeting Europe's basic energy needs before the war. Even today some countries in Europe, which still face an energy deficit and are looking for ways to cover it with energy from the Middle East or North Africa, try to circumvent the law and continue their

relations with Russia. For instance, Hungary, an EU member state, has started to get closer to Russia and even China, in order to meet its energy needs.²⁷ Such a policy of Hungary has drawn reactions from within NATO and the EU. Even the Italian Foreign Minister Tajani stated that Hungary was free to act as it wished, but it should not disrupt the integrity of the EU and NATO.²⁸

Along with Hungary, some European nations, such as Greece and Malta, also facilitate transportation of Russian oil around the world, and keep Russian exports going by using ghost ships, ship-to-ship transportation methods and offshore registration systems, which is also known as the legal practice of using a flag of convenience. In the first half of 2022, before the EU Regulations of 6 October 2022 came into force, Greek shipping companies took advantage of the loopholes in the original regulations, and the specific institutions and practices of the maritime law, to transport Russian oil to Europe and other parts of the world, acting as intermediaries for Russian companies and the government.²⁹

However, such actions did not remain unnoticed. Ukrainian government officials, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy,

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- 23 J. Haboush, *Hezbollah Denies Sending Fighters to Ukraine in Support of Russian Invasion*, Al Arabiya, 28.03.2022, [https://bit.ly/408vWrq]
- 24 *Ukraine DM: Haftar Promises to Send Volunteers to Support Russia*, Middle East Monitor, 21.03.2022, [https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220321-ukraine-dm-haftar-promises-to-send-volunteers-to-support-russia]
- 25 S. Holland, *Exclusive: Russia is Shipping Oil to North Korea above UN Mandated Levels – US Official*, Reuters, 7.05.2024, [https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-is-shipping-oil-north-korea-above-un-mandated-levels-us-official-2024-05-02/]
- 26 K. Tong-Hyung, *South Korean Defense Chief Says North Korea Has Supplied 7,000 Containers of Munitions to Russia*, AP News, 18.03.2024, [https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-arms-transfers-ukraine-a37bc290ed3ee59cfbbafdc2a994dc58]
- 27 H. Ridgwell, *Hungary Appears to Be Strengthening Ties with Russia, China*, VOA, 23.02.2024, [https://www.voanews.com/a/hungary-appears-to-be-strengthening-ties-with-russia-china/7499682.html]
- 28 B. Seçkin, *Italy Says Hungarian Premier Free to Choose His Visits, But Should Not Weaken EU, NATO Unity*, Anadolu Agency, 10.07.2024, [https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/italy-says-hungarian-premier-free-to-choose-his-visits-but-should-not-weaken-eu-nato-unity/3271624]
- 29 E. Braw, *How Greek Companies and Ghost Ships Are Helping Russia* Foreign Policy, 23.11.2022 [https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/23/how-greek-companies-and-ghost-ships-are-helping-russia/]

have reacted openly and demanded a halt to trade with Russia, arguing that this trade is not in the interests of either the EU or these countries. All these legal and political manoeuvres by the Hungarians, the Greeks or the Maltese have not only helped Russia but have also caused much greater harm: they have taught the revisionist countries that they can even cooperate openly with Western countries and exploit loopholes in the law, and thus get around the sanctions imposed on them.



In this panorama, it is not only NATO members or the USA individually that have a role to play. Regional actors threatened by Russia, China or Iran also need to choose the path that is right for them

In conclusion, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has so far not been an absolute success, and has put Russia in an enormous economic and political predicament. However, in another sense, this invasion has been successful in that it has taught Russia and other countries of the so-called 'axis of evil' the methods of unconventional warfare and circumvention of economic sanctions. It is obvious that NATO, the USA, and other allied countries have some stern measures to take. What NATO, the USA or its regional allies should do is not to pursue a wait-and-see policy, but to develop a proactive and forceful policy and to implement it decisively.

NATO's New Roadmap

In 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, at the NATO summit in Madrid, a new strategic concept was adopted. This new concept, which reaffirmed core values and established the need for a collective defence for NATO itself and for its allies, set out three main tasks:

- 1) Increasing deterrence and defence power,
- 2) Maximising crisis prevention and management processes, and
- 3) Creating a cooperative security understanding.³⁰

In this new strategic concept, the importance of the security of the Black Sea, the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa, where Russia has been markedly threatening the established regional order, was also emphasised. In the same concept, China was defined as a geopolitical and geo-economic competitor once again, and the increasing armaments capacity of countries such as Iran and North Korea was highlighted. The new concept, which recommended unity and increased cooperation with regional allies in order to prevent Russia's expansionist efforts, also reflected a notable change of mindset in NATO after many years.³¹ At the 2023 Vilnius summit, this concept was revised while preserving its core values, and in the recent Washington summit in 2024, a clear roadmap was again laid out.

All these strategies have not had the desired practical impact, and allied states have failed to show similar enthusiasm to apply these

30 *Madrid Summit Declaration*, NATO, 29.06.2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm]

31 P. Daehnhardt, *The Madrid Summit and Nato's New Strategic Concept*, Instituto da Defesa Nacional – Government of Portugal, 01.07.2022, [https://www.idn.gov.pt/pt/publicacoes/idnbrief/Documents/2022/IDN%20brief%20julho_Ing%C3%AAs%202022.pdf]

strategies and fulfil the targets outlined in the new concept. The indifference of other countries to French President Macron's call to send troops to Ukraine³², or the German military's reluctance to send Taurus missiles to Ukraine³³ are a few illustrations of NATO members' inability to act as one. That puts Ukraine in a difficult situation, negatively affects the morale of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, and sets a bad example for other countries targeted by Russia and other 'axis' countries.

The ultimate goal of NATO, of course, should not be an all-out conventional war with Russia, or any other country; as such a war would lead to World War III, which would undoubtedly mean a nuclear apocalypse. However, a strong message should be sent to Russia, and this should not be limited to diplomatic or legal condemnation. There are a few simple but effective ways in which NATO can do this, namely by imposing the most severe sanctions that will completely paralyse the economic and financial structure of hostile countries, providing full and unwavering support to Ukraine in terms of ammunition and arms transfers, dispatching military advisers and experts to the region when necessary for the training of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, and additionally deploying military advisers and experts in Georgia, the Republic of China, Moldova and other countries at risk, in order to prevent possible invasions. Creating strategic, military, legal and diplomatic alliances with legitimate and democratically elected local actors, against Russian-backed military coups and coup threats in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and North Africa, where Russia has been trying to increase its influence in recent years, is also a must.

If such conditions are met, and if the rules are fully respected by NATO and non-NATO allied countries, then effective strategies against revisionist countries can be carried out.

Instead of Conclusion: What Regional Allies Must Do

In this panorama, it is not only NATO members or the USA individually that have a role to play. Regional actors threatened by Russia, China or Iran also need to choose the path that is right for them. Governments in Tbilisi, Chisinau, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Taipei, in other African and Central Asian states need to take a clear stand against the threats posed towards them. They should define and demonstrate what they want, both in their domestic and foreign policies. For instance, African or Middle Eastern countries under the threat of coups should show the utmost caution in cooperating with Russia or China. It is also essential for these countries to increase their military capabilities and modernise their armies against a possible invasion or coup threat. This is because they may be facing an enemy that does not recognise any rules, legal values, or conventions, and will attack more rigorously unless and until it sees profitability. Russia's growing interest in the Caucasus and the Balkans, as well as a Russian-sponsored series of coup d'états in sub-Saharan Africa, such as the ones in the Republic of Mali, Burkina Faso, the Republic of the Niger, or the Republic of Guinea are clear evidence of this growing aggression.³⁴ Undoubtedly, this anti-Western, Russian-led and authoritarian political wave is extremely unpredictable and threatening for the civilized world.

32 L. Pelham & L. Newton, *NATO Allies Reject Emmanuel Macron Idea of Troops to Ukraine*, BBC, 28.02.2024, [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68417223>]

33 J.P. Gougeon, *War in Ukraine, Taurus Missiles, Russian Espionage: Is Germany in Trouble?*, IRIS, 08.03.2024, [<https://www.iris-france.org/184295-war-in-ukraine-taurus-missiles-russian-espionage-is-germany-in-trouble/>]

34 E. Egbojule, *More Control, Less Deniability: What Next for Russia in Africa after Wagner?* The Guardian, 21.05.2024, [<https://bit.ly/41M0kqUe>]

In conclusion, despite NATO's shortcomings and weaknesses, embracing the fundamental transatlantic values such as the rule of law, human rights, democracy, and individual freedoms, and taking the necessary political, legal, military, economic and diplomatic steps in this regard, while staying with the longest-lasting and strongest alliance in the civilized world, is the most logical path for countries that do not want to become Russian satellites or new members of an 'axis', in another option. It is unclear what the countries that do not choose the right side will face in the future, or what they will become, and at this point it is not possible to draw a positive projection for these countries.

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THE 2024 UNITED STATES ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Brendan H. Gallagher

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Economic and technological advancements have reshaped the dynamics of the international order since World War II. The United States has served as the guarantor of the liberal international order that has led to unprecedented prosperity and stability. However, rising challenges from political polarisation, apathy, and discontented rivals have resulted in gathering storm clouds of uncertainty. This paper looks at the apprehensions held by countries aligned with the status quo of the prevailing international order, considering what the future holds and what weaknesses its adversaries will try to exploit.

The United States is often thought of as a revolutionary state. President Biden even referred to it as «the greatest experiment in self-government»¹ when congratulating Donald Trump on his re-election. While such statements elicit raised eyebrows, Americans across the political spectrum embrace them, within the narrative of exceptionalism. President Biden was reminding them of this. Successful US politicians have always convinced their supporters that they are participating in a revolutionary movement. That is why American voters frequently place their faith in bold risk-takers, to the consternation of non-Americans, friends, or foes alike. Paradoxically, the United States also has a reputation for being a stabilising force. This dichotomy can bewilder, but it explains the contradictory political discourse especially salient in 21st century

presidential elections. Concerns about the idiosyncrasies of American politics are warranted. Is this a critical juncture in history, or merely a storm that will pass?

Where We Are Today

Since the end of World War II, there has been a surge in economic growth and overall wealth. Technology has followed a similar trajectory, facilitating commerce, personal and professional communications, and cultural exchange, as incalculable volumes of information now circulate the globe. Smart factories, equipped with robotics and automation, render the rank-and-file toiling worker practically obsolete, and crank out vast quantities of goods that crisscross the planet to customers. The extraction, storage, and exploitation of fossil fuels, essential minerals, and renewable sources of energy

1 J. R. Biden Jr., Remarks by President Biden in Address to the Nation. The White House, Washington, D.C., 7.11.2024. [<https://bit.ly/40iWMNH>]

have become more efficient than ever. Masses move daily between cities, countries, and continents for leisure, business, or as migrants seeking opportunities or fleeing disasters.

Navigating the chaotic norms of our dynamic modern society is a monumental task, inducing the establishment of a myriad of institutions, standards, and agreements. This is the framework of the liberal international order: The United States is this system's lynchpin, collaborating with other countries, such as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or Japan, South Korea, and Israel. These countries have become stakeholders, enjoying the luxuries of security and stability through the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The Cold War's ending facilitated the expansion of the liberal international order to most of the globe.



A deep-seated fear in other states is that the same challenges facing the US could also be lurking within their communities. Polarisation, isolationism and protectionism, widespread apathy, and distrust in governance and multilateral institutions

The United States, a nation of immigrants, abundant in resources, and technological, scientific, and informational expertise, has long been a source of inspiration, assistance, or protection. Currently, pulled unceasingly

to the political left and right, much of the population is apathetic to the rapidly changing world. A deep-seated fear in other states is that the same challenges facing the US could also be lurking within their communities. Polarisation, isolationism and protectionism, widespread apathy, and distrust in governance and multilateral institutions, are pressing concerns extending beyond those lands that stretch from the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters.

How Did We Get Here over the Long Term?

The stability of the liberal international order begets economic, political, and social prosperity. The benefits therefrom serve as justification for cooperation within a status quo that is inherently hegemonic. It is crucial for leaders of states to cultivate a domestic consensus supporting participation in the international order, as this facilitates smooth functioning, from the overarching systemic level down to the local level.² Consent cannot be coerced from abroad; history has shown hegemonic orders imposed on reluctant nations are destined for failure. The collective willingness of associate states and their citizens gives the present-day liberal international order its lasting strength.

Adversaries and challengers lie in wait, poised to exploit any signs of decline. The rises and falls in influence and capabilities are often viewed as zero-sum. Influential realist theorists claim this to be the keystone for understanding international relations.³

- 2 R.D. Putnam, Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1988), pp. 427-460.
- 3 K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company: Reading, Massachusetts, 1979, p. 70; R.W. Cox, Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. In: Keohane, Robert O. (ed.) *Neorealism and Its Critics*, pp. 204-254. Columbia University Press: New York, 1986.; R. Jervis, Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate. *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, July 1999, pp. 42-63.; J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2001.; W. Wohlforth, Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War. *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2009, p. 30; S. Charap, & T.J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*. International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2017.

In turn, certain state decision-makers internalise the zero-sum principle in their strategic calculations, making the theory a reality, at least, when dealing with these leaders. Consequently, disruptions to the system can be construed as threats to the prosperity of all its stakeholders.

While classic hegemony dictates that the hegemon issues commands to its passive client states,⁴ the liberal international order has a more symbiotic existence. Stakeholders in this system see themselves as fellow protectors of the status quo, not wholly reliant on the hegemon. Loosely stated, a liberal international order can be characterised as a civilizational bloc based on the universal principles of individual equality and rights espoused by John Locke.⁵ The core principle of this system is that political rights and civil liberties are guaranteed by the rule of law. Citizens subsequently confirm their rights and the sovereignty of the state by participating in representative self-governance. Their involvement in selecting representatives, creating and enacting laws, and adhering to those laws legitimises this framework.

The free market principles promoted in this system encourage individuals to improve their economic well-being. Citizens who have a stake in the economy, also have a stake in the structure of the order, safeguarding it against failure. When the free market works as intended, it yields higher-quality goods and services at lower prices. The government's role is to ensure compliance with food safety regulations, construction codes, and manufacturing standards.

Externally, the government conducts foreign policy on a multilateral basis, thereby enhancing the scale, volume, and efficiency of agreements.

The United States acts as the overarching guarantor of this system, deterring or defending against threats to its integrity. With the physical security assurance provided by the US, allied governments can concentrate on developing their infrastructure, public health and education services, and ensuring overall economic prosperity. These measures, in turn, enhance the legitimacy of these governments, allowing them to enact policies that uphold the existing liberal international order.



With the physical security assurance provided by the US, allied governments can concentrate on developing their infrastructure, public health and education services, and ensuring overall economic prosperity

Before World War I, the prevailing international order was organised around the regional balance of power in Europe, which was maintained through bilateral agreements that included favoured nation clauses.⁶ That system, marked by cycles of peace interrupted by particularly violent episodes of industrial warfare, extended worldwide through imperialist policies. European enmities also spread in concert.

4 G. Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism*. University of California Press: Berkeley, California, 1998, p. 64.

5 D.A. Lake, L.L. Martin & T. Risse, Challenges to the Liberal International Order: Reflections on International Organization. *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 225–257.

6 B.A. Iqbal, N. Rahman & J. Elimimian, The future of global trade in the presence of the Sino-US trade war. *Economic and Political Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2019, p. 217.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the United States followed isolationist policies, in part due to its aversion to the cyclical nature of peace and war associated with European imperialism.



Two key developments raise concerns about the potential deterioration of the international world order: retrenchment and political polarisation

Isolationism often coincides with protectionism. During this era, a heavily partisan and polarised United States Congress⁷ found common ground in both agendas. Congress and individual states wielded more influence over domestic politics than the executive branch at that time.⁸ This dynamic, along with the polarisation of society, contributed to the rebellion and secession attempts of the southern, slavery-supporting states. However, public attitudes began to change as interest grew in South America and along the Pacific Rim. The strengthening American naval power and other military capabilities complemented the change in interests. Inversely, as attitudes towards power projection rose, views on immigration tightened. Concerns familiar to contemporary discourse emerged: job security, unbridgeable cultural cleavages, criminal activity, and public safety. It took many years for the American public to accept the idea of the United States as an

interventionist world power. Reverting fully to isolationism, as has now been mooted, is also likely to take a significant amount of time. Nonetheless, worries about this are raising alarm bells among friends and adversaries.

How Did We Get Here in the Short Term?

Two key developments raise concerns about the potential deterioration of the international world order: retrenchment and political polarisation. The ideas of retrenchment materialised during the 2008 presidential election campaign.⁹ Public sentiment had soured towards foreign military engagements after the George W. Bush administration's policies were broadly viewed as failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Global public opinion likewise condemned the United States for overstepping its bounds. Thus, policies of retrenchment were quite popular and garnered international support.

This inspired a lacklustre foreign policy under the Obama administration.¹⁰ First came the controversial strategy of 'leading from behind' to support primarily NATO states intervening against Libya's eccentric dictator, Muammar Gaddafi.¹¹ Despite their good intentions, these countries were woefully unprepared for a sustained military campaign, and less equipped to enforce peace afterwards. Meanwhile, Syria slid into civil war. Rattled by their Libya campaign, NATO countries became reluctant to take action without American

7 D. Brady & J. Stewart Jr., Congressional Party Realignment and Transformations of Public Policy in Three Realignment Eras. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May 1982), pp. 333–360.

8 M. Josephson, *The Politicos: 1856-1896*. Harcourt, Brace and World: New York, 1938.

9 B. Obama, Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. 23.04.2007, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2r9rsewVRg&t=5s>]

10 M. Bose, Appraising the Foreign Policy Legacy of the Obama Presidency. In: Rich, Wilbur C. (ed.) *Looking Back on President Barack Obama's Legacy: Hope and Change*, pp. 93-114. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2019, p. 102.

11 K. Marsh, «Leading from behind»: neoclassical realism and operation Odyssey Dawn. *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2014, 120–132.

leadership. Instead, Washington withdrew combat troops from neighbouring Iraq. In a disastrous turn of events, the Islamic State terrorist group, incubated in the chaotic civil war in Syria, overran much of western Iraq in the summer of 2014. Heinous violence, often broadcast on social media, and terrorist attacks in Europe forced Washington and their NATO allies to carry out airstrikes and deploy troops in both countries. Resuming military operations inadvertently deepened the public sentiment of war-weariness. This influenced later decision-making, when Russia launched the invasions of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Although retrenchment faced unfavourable circumstances for implementation, it was certainly a popular decision.¹² However, it set the United States towards a more isolationist future.

Donald Trump recognised the prevailing public sentiment during his first campaign for the White House, adopting retrenchment as his own policy plank. It converged with the broader message of refocusing the United States' attention inward. Like his predecessor, however, President Trump struggled to implement the policies he had promised.¹³ Nevertheless, the perception of Trump as the architect of American retrenchment marked a significant narrative reversal. Since then, the Democrats have

been linked with irresponsible involvement in foreign entanglements, an unpopular distinction.

President Trump also took advantage of an intensifying polarisation. In the second half of the 20th century, voters shifted to being independents¹⁴ separated into two categories: those focused on policies, and those who wanted to distance themselves from politics altogether. The former, known as centrists, have played a crucial role in elections, as candidates seek their support, realising that their votes can determine outcomes. Centrists are more likely to change their opinions¹⁵ and can lead to the moderating of policies from both parties.¹⁶ The latter are disenchanted, repelled, or exhausted by politics. They are unlikely to participate.¹⁷ From the beginning of the 20th century, forty to fifty per cent of eligible voters have not cast ballots in presidential elections,¹⁸ which is highly significant. Lower voter participation means partisan voices become more influential. Apathetic non-voters can prove decisive, but only if they turn out on election day. Both President Trump and President Obama were successful at converting people from this group into supporters.

Over time, the bases of each party have drifted to the political spectrum's extremes.¹⁹

12 A. Krieg, Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East. *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, 2016, p. 103.

13 M. O'Reilly & W.B. Renfro, The Perils of Retrenchment: Barack Obama's Middle East Policies. In: Grossman, M., Matthews, R. E., Schortgen, F. (eds.) *Achievements and Legacy of the Obama Presidency: «Hope and Change?»*, pp. 141-160. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2022.

14 B. Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. First Mariner Books: New York, 2009.

15 B.E. Berelson, P.F. Lazarsfeld & W.N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1954, p. 316.

16 D. Diermeier & C. Li, *Partisan Affect and Elite Polarization*. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113, No. 1, November 2018, p. 280.

17 L. Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2018, p. 8.

18 *Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1828-2020*. The American Presidency Project. [<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/voter-turnout-in-presidential-elections>]

19 M. Levendusky & N. Malhotra, (Mis)perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. S1, 2016, p. 388.



Certain moral and ethical transgressions are already dismissed as non-obstacles to electability in American politics. This results in lower quality candidates and outcomes for citizens

One reason for this is increased partisan divisiveness among elites,²⁰ whose prominent positions in society cue the average person with political messaging.²¹ Additionally, media outlets²² directly profit from polarising their audiences²³ by promoting partisan narratives. Finally, social media algorithms, designed to boost engagement, expose users to content that elicits strong emotional reactions.²⁴ Incidentally, more people are targeted by intentionally polarising political content.

Americans have increasingly begun to re-embrace prior political affiliations,²⁵ even

as a meaningful aspect of personal identity, like other traditional signifiers, such as geographical, cultural, religious, or kindred loyalties. Polarised elites, biased media, and social media algorithms are partly responsible,²⁶ as are traditional affiliations, gerrymandering, and familial influence.²⁷ While elections have always stimulated polarising sentiments, these feelings used to dissipate after the election cycle was over.²⁸ Today, election cycles seem to stretch endlessly,²⁹ preventing political attitudes from ebbing. Technological advancements, effective compressors of time and space, perpetuate this. Local issues now seem increasingly interconnected with broader narratives, disparities appear more pronounced, and feelings of insecurity are heightened.³⁰

Politicians take advantage of these conditions by appealing emotionally to personal identity. When joining a social group, individuals adopt the group's values and norms as models for their

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- 20 M.J. Hetherington, Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 621-623.
 - 21 R.L. Claassen & B. Highton, Policy Polarization among Party Elites and the Significance of Political Awareness in the Mass Public. *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2008, p. 546 & Zaller, John R. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press: London, 1992.
 - 22 S. Iyengar, Y. Lelkes, M. Levendusky, N. Malhotra & S. Westwood, The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22, 2019, p. 135.
 - 23 T. Bolsen, J. Druckman & F.L. Cook, The Influence of Partisan Motivated Reasoning on Public Opinion. *Political Behavior*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2014, pp. 236-237.
 - 24 S. González-Bailón, et al. Asymmetric ideological segregation in exposure to political news on Facebook. *Science*, Vol. 381, No. 6656, July 27, 2023, pp. 392-398. [<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.ade7138#con1>]
 - 25 G. Layman, T. Carsey, & J.M. Horowitz, Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2006, pp. 83-110.
 - 26 S. Iyengar, Y. Lelkes, M. Levendusky, N. Malhotra & S. Westwood, The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22, 2019, p. 135.
 - 27 L. Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2018, p. 5.
 - 28 N. Fasching, S. Iyengar, & S. Westwood, Persistent polarization: The unexpected durability of political animosity around US elections. *Science Advances*, Vol. 10, No. 36, 4.09.2024. [<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadvadm9198>]
 - 29 G. Hodgson, *All Things to All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1980, pp. 210-211, 224. Trump declared his candidacy over 720 days before the 2024 election. See: C. Schnatterbeck, The United States' Perpetual Election Cycle Is Unique. *Foreign Policy*, 01.11.2024. [<https://bit.ly/3ZPHDBJ>]
 - 30 C. Kinnvall, Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 5, October 2004, p. 742.

own perspectives and behaviours.³¹ They also develop emotional attachments to the groups they join.³² As new members enter groups, they are exposed to slightly different attitudes and behaviours, which evolve within the group. This dynamic intensifies as more members become willing to accept harsher viewpoints. Ultimately, attachment to the political group can outweigh the policies it ostensibly represents.³³ This fosters an environment where defeating one's opponents becomes the primary objective, and policies take a back seat. Moreover, candidates «are less likely to be sanctioned for demonstrating incompetence, dishonesty, and unethical behaviour» under these circumstances.³⁴ Certain moral and ethical transgressions are already dismissed as non-obstacles to electability in American politics. This results in lower quality candidates and outcomes for citizens.



The Russian Federation presents the most egregious challenge to the liberal international order

Polarisation is not an issue unique to the United States or to politics alone. Overwhelmed by information, individuals make sweeping black-and-white judgments, rather than taking time to analyse how inbound information pertains to personal viewpoints. These heuristic techniques serve as coping mechanisms to manage the quantities of information people encounter daily. Nefarious actors provoke polarised

attitudes, believing that overall divisiveness supports their objective of undermining the hold of the broader international order.

Who Are the Challengers?

Although the liberal international order has benefitted some countries now viewed as adversaries, benefits do not always equate to satisfaction. These challengers do not have uniform goals or strategies. A countervailing universalist set of ideals to directly confront the primacy of the existing international order would be the starkest challenge. Communism attempted this but failed, as did fascism. China managed to observe enough of the requirements to be allowed to join the international order's framework, but the circumstances and scale of China's capabilities are not replicable for other countries. In its efforts to discredit the core principles of the liberal international order, Russia undermines institutions and subverts societies, by sponsoring targeted information campaigns, financing fringe political groups, and highlighting the supposed hypocrisies of states laying claim to higher ideals and moral authority in the world.

The Russian Federation presents the most egregious challenge to the liberal international order. Its invasion of Ukraine violated multiple multilateral agreements that are essential to the status quo's framework. Perhaps worried about admitting vulnerabilities to the system, the United States and allied countries hesitated to condemn Russia and offer assistance to Ukraine in 2014. The Kremlin elites view the US as their primary adversary and the

31 M. Brewer & R. Brown, Intergroup Relations. In: Gilbert, D. T., Fiske, S. T., & Lindzey, G.. *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Volume I, Fourth Edition, pp. 554-594. The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.: Boston, 1998.

32 A. Gerber, G. Huber & E. Washington, Party Affiliation, Partisanship, and Political Beliefs: A Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review* Vol. 104, No. 4, November 2010, p. 720.

33 J. Benson, Democracy and the Epistemic Problems of Political Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 3.11.2023, p. 3. [<https://bit.ly/4iQ8GFO>]

34 S. Iyengar & M. Krupenkin, The Strengthening of Partisan Affect. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 3, 2018, p. 215.

architect of the liberal international order. In their view, most European countries are subordinate states bound to the will of the United States. This narrative can be spun variously, but it is thought that bringing down the system will take down its architect. As such, any lasting settlement with Russia is unlikely.

Exploiting the weakness and uncertainty associated with the United States becoming conspicuously less engaged is a common goal for its challengers. Russia acted in the knowledge that notions of unipolarity were in decline, coinciding with signs of retrenchment from Washington. Moscow has since fostered alliances with opponents of the international order. North Korea, for example, has sent soldiers to fight alongside Russia in Ukraine, and has provided stockpiles of artillery shells, rockets, and ballistic missiles.³⁵ Similarly, Iran has enabled Russia to produce the kamikaze drones used daily against Ukraine.³⁶ Russia's geopolitical strategy also includes supporting rogue governments in Syria and Venezuela and acquiring mineral deposits,³⁷ selling weapons and oil,³⁸ and spreading anti-western sentiments in the African Sahel.³⁹

Iran uses proxy forces in various parts of the Middle East to escalate tensions at low risk of retaliation. Tehran may have overplayed

its hand recently, as Israel and Iran have exchanged direct salvos amid the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. Iran's precise role in instigating the current hostilities is unknown. Still, it has supported Hamas materially and financially, and its influence over the Houthi movement and Hezbollah is well-documented.⁴⁰ Iran's objectives include provoking global public opinion against Israel and its supporters, imposing substantive costs on those same countries, and generally challenging the international order.

Disrupting the system's status quo is not viewed as prudent by everyone. Three of the BRICS nations – Brazil, India, and South Africa – maintain positive relations with the proponents of the liberal international order. Brazil and South Africa see the BRICS group as a means to advance their interests, complementing the agreements they have with the prevailing order. India shares a similar perspective but with the additional concern of countering China's growing influence and ambitions.⁴¹ New Delhi is wary of Beijing using the BRICS nations as its vehicle to position itself as the champion of the Global South. Consequently, India supports further expansion of the organisation, where it wields considerable influence and can promote its multilateral character.

35 B. Cole, *North Korean Troops Give Kim 'Leverage' Amid Putin's Ominous Korea Warning*. Newsweek, 15.11.2024. [<https://www.newsweek.com/south-korea-north-korea-russia-putin-1985186>]

36 E. Burrows & L. Hinnant, *Africans recruited to work in Russia say they were duped into building drones for use in Ukraine*. Associated Press, 10.10.2024. [<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-drones-shahed-africans-11602ab837f0ff4635926d884b422185>]

37 *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold*, December 2023. [<https://bloodgoldreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Blood-Gold-Report-2023-December.pdf>]

38 O. Ricketts & M. Amin, *Sudan war: Russia hedges bets by aiding both sides in conflict*. Middle East Eye, 6.05.2024. [<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-sudan-war-saf-rsf-hedges-bets-both-sides-support>]

39 M. Ferragamo, *Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa*. Council on Foreign Relations, 28.12.2023. [<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa>]

40 T. Johnston et al. *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2551.html]

41 A. Gabuev & O. Stuenkel, *The Battle for the BRICS*. Foreign Affairs, 24.09.2024. [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/battle-brics>]

Although reasonably satisfied with an international order that has facilitated its prosperity through manufacturing and exports, China sees changes on the horizon. Protectionist policies aimed at China by President Trump and continued under President Biden indicate that the two parties hold similar views towards Beijing.⁴² Sanctions against Chinese government-backed corporations, such as Huawei,⁴³ also enjoy broad bipartisan support.⁴⁴ Furthermore, revelations about spying, theft, and influence operations in the United States⁴⁵ damaged the relationship between the countries further. China's one-time advantages of having a large labour force, a lower cost of living, and less regulation no longer provide a significant competitive advantage, as advancements in robotics, automation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning reduce labour requirements for global manufacturing.⁴⁶ Cost-efficient, high-quality manufacturing centres can now be established in nearly any locale.

For the Chinese populace, the long era of humiliation and exploitation by foreign powers has finally come to an end. This patriotic sentiment serves as a pillar of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, the Chinese people have grown accustomed to taking pride in their

country, and an unforeseen incident that damages China's image could result in the CCP becoming a scapegoat. The strategic rivalry with the United States presents this risk, if confronted prematurely. A miscalculation, such as a botched invasion of Taiwan, could entail significant technological, economic, and military setbacks, potentially reigniting a sense of humiliation: a catalyst for a dangerous shift in public opinion.



In Chinese geopolitical thinking, time is viewed as an ally, contrasting with Russia's seemingly urgent and impatient motivation

Taiwan holds considerable strategic military importance. Controlling it would punch a hole in the so-called 'first island chain' that separates mainland Asia from the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁷ Speculation regarding China's superpower status must first account for navigating this obstacle. Lessons have surely been learned from Russia's wartime shortcomings in manufacturing, communications, and logistics. Capturing Taiwan would require a seaborne landing and resupply operation. An assertive

42 T. Wiesenmayer, The Fight for Economic and Digital Supremacy in the New Bipolar World Order: The EU's Response to Global Challenges. In: Karalekas, D., Liu, F., & Moldicz, C. (eds.) *Middle-Power Responses to China's BRI and America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Transformation of Geopolitics*, pp. 179–196. Emerald Publishing, Ltd.: Bingley, United Kingdom, 2022, p. 178.

43 T.M. Cheung, Fortifying China: *The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 2009, p. 216.

44 I. King & D. Wu, *Huawei Building Secret Network for Chips, Trade Group Warns*. Bloomberg, 23.08.2023. [<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-23/huawei-building-secret-chip-plants-in-china-to-bypass-us-sanctions-group-warns>]

45 D. Alderman & J. Ray, Artificial Intelligence, Emerging Technologies, and China-US Strategic Competition. In: Cheung, T. M. & Mahnken, T.G. (eds.) *The Gathering Pacific Storm: Emerging US-China Strategic Competition in Defense Technological and Industrial Development*, pp. 179–210. Cambria Press: Amherst, New York, 2018.

46 M. Beckley, China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure. *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), p. 53.

47 P. Mendis & J. Wang, The Sino-American Geopolitics and Geo-Economics from Taiwan to Sri Lanka and beyond. In: Karalekas, D., Liu, F., & Moldicz, C. (eds.) *Middle-Power Responses to China's BRI and America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Transformation of Geopolitics*, pp. 105–127. Emerald Publishing, Ltd.: Bingley, United Kingdom, 2022, p. 108.

foreign policy also invites backlash from its neighbours, due to their historical relationships via the tribute system.⁴⁸ This backlash has already been seen in the South China Sea, where Vietnam, despite its past enmity, has deepened ties with the United States as an offshore balancing power.



Countries like Iran and Russia see the American-led order as an invasive subversion of sovereignty, and are likely to continue challenging the foundations of the liberal international order

Another significant historical tradition for China is its belief in steadfastness. In Chinese geopolitical thinking, time is viewed as an ally, contrasting with Russia's seemingly urgent and impatient motivation. China aims to develop trade, energy, and digital infrastructure corridors through its well-known Belt and Road Initiative, but it also uses soft power influence. Achieving these goals would take many years under the best regional and global geopolitical conditions. Russian schemes to upend the entire international system do not resonate with China's traditional deference to order and patience. Furthermore, in less developed countries, disrupting the status quo can have dire consequences for social cohesion.⁴⁹ Chaos, quite simply, does not appeal to the Chinese.

China is similarly cautious about multipolarity. Multipolarity can heighten nationalist tendencies, potentially leading to protective tariffs directed at Chinese exports.

Moreover, Chinese minorities, particularly in Southeast Asia, could be vulnerable to racist policies stoked by nationalism. Expensive arms races in multiple theatres are another possibility. Japan and South Korea might even acquire nuclear weapons. Questions also arise about the trustworthiness of alliances in a multipolar world. Emboldened by an alliance with China, Russia would likely further undermine European cohesion. China's business, investment, and institutional partners would not react kindly. In both the long and short term, China prefers a system with more stability.

Conclusion

The significance of the American presidential election in international affairs cannot be overstated, given the worldwide influence of the United States on economic, political, commercial, and social landscapes. The varied congratulatory, critical, and cautionary responses from world leaders, prominent individuals, and everyday citizens regarding the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 should be understood in this context. For three generations, the United States has been a cornerstone of the multilateral institutions, security alliances, and trade agreements that frame the liberal international order. Going forward, however, stakeholders in the international order must now consider the possibility that the United States may no longer be a strong patron.

At the end of the Cold War, bigger-picture questions were not confronted, due to the belief in the dawning of a unipolar world⁵⁰ or even 'the end of history'.⁵¹ Now, the pivotal question of what role the United States will play in the future looms large.

48 D. Shambaugh, U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence? *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Spring 2018), p. 114.

49 S.D. Krasner, State Power and the Structure of International Trade. *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (April 1976), p.319.

50 R. Nixon, *Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World*. Simon & Schuster: New York, 1992.

51 F. Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press: New York, 1992.

One important ongoing debate is whether the liberal international order is eroding or even being displaced by a new multipolar framework. Multipolarity, it would seem, favours older balance-of-power dynamics, leading to a messier, more unstable world.⁵² Nevertheless, adversarial governments view the universal philosophical underpinnings of the international order with deep suspicion, potentially even as an existential threat. Countries like Iran and Russia see the American-led order as an invasive subversion of sovereignty, and are likely to continue challenging the foundations of the liberal international order. In contrast, China may seek some form of conciliatory arrangement.

The international order has faced and overcome, or at least mitigated, numerous challenges over the years, so there is reason to be optimistic. At the systemic level, the international order embodies the ideals and values of liberalism, which has thus far been the most successful system at engendering prosperity and reducing social unrest. While critics of the existing order often highlight its shortcomings, there is a lack of viable alternatives. The retrenchment policies of the United States may embolden nefarious actors, but they could also create new opportunities for regional organisations, such as the European Union, to enhance their roles and reduce reliance on a single hegemon. Such a shift would likely be welcomed by the American public, who are experiencing hegemon fatigue.



The retrenchment policies of the United States may embolden nefarious actors, but they could also create new opportunities for regional organisations, such as the European Union, to enhance their roles and reduce reliance on a single hegemon

How they deal with the challenge of polarisation may indicate how other countries dealing with the same problem will fare. Oddly enough, polarisation has made elected representatives more responsive to the opinions of their constituents. Once the pendulum of norms and values swings back towards consensus-building, politicians are likely to follow suit. This gives hope for a new era of international prosperity and cooperation.

We just need to navigate this challenging patch of rough water.

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52 J. Mearsheimer, Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War. *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1990, pp. 5-56.

CIVILIZATIONAL NARRATIVE IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF INDIA AND CHINA: THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

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The articulation of both the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China as civilizational states shapes their foreign policy goals and modes of behaviour. This article identifies civilizational narratives in the foreign policy of both states, focusing in particular on the Indian concepts of 'Vishvaguru' and 'Vishvamitra,' and the 'Chinese Dream' as an adaptation of the concept of Tianxia. The impact of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war on these narratives is examined, and the influence of these narratives on the dynamics of international relations is presented.

The Age of the 'Civilization-State'

G. Rahman, in an article for the *Financial Times* in 2019 argued that «the 21st century could be the century of the 'civilization state'», as this idea is reflected in various countries such as Türkiye, India, Russia, China, and even the United States of America. The article, referring to the term 'civilization state', emphasises the illiberal connotation of the concept by its undermining of the universality of the values of liberal democracy.¹ Thus, there is a logical inconsistency in the authors' biased use of the concept of 'civilisation state' referring to a combination of two factors: drawing on historical heritage and filling these articulations with anti-liberal connotations.

The concept of a 'civilization state' was developed for the first time by Martin Jacques, in relation to China, in his work 'When China Rules the World' in 2009. In defining the concept, he used two determinants. The first is exceptional durability, enabled by the appeal to a continuous civilizational heritage. This aspect is often misunderstood as imperialist nostalgia or even overlooked entirely. The second determinant is the appropriate geographical and demographic scale, rooted within a single, yet diversifying, space.² These factors can be described as objective in defining a civilization state, while the subjective factor is perceptual: the state's perceiving and defining of itself as a civilizational state. This implies

1 G. Rachman, *China, India and the rise of the 'civilisation state'*, *Financial Times*, 4.03.2019, [<https://www.ft.com/content/b6bc9ac2-3e5b-11e9-9bee-efab61506f44>].

2 M. Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, Penguin Books: London 2009, pp. 196-203.

the construction of national identity in terms of «civilizational law and colonial subjugation».³

This is particularly true for countries such as China and India, where civilizational heritage is a part of national identity, shaping both domestic and foreign policy. One of the key differences between a civilization state and a nation-state is that: ... *civilization-state generates ... a very different kind of politics from that of a conventional nation-state, with unity, rooted in the idea of civilization rather than nation, the overriding priority.*⁴


Determination by civilizational heritage and prioritisation of civilization over nation shapes an atypical pattern of behaviour in politics, including foreign policy. Ravi Bajpai suggests a set of criteria for assessing the behaviour of a civilization state, based on six assumptions: a subjective appeal to the civilizational past to create a utopian dream, the construction of contemporary discourses based on civilization narratives, the embedding of civilizational heritage in national identity, the revision of the concept of the 'nation-state', a tendency towards majoritarianism in domestic politics, and the making of unconventional decisions in international relations outside the usual frameworks.⁵

Both China and India meet all the criteria of civilization states: they possess a civilizational heritage, align with the right scale of diversity, and perceive themselves as successors to great civilizations. The Russian-Ukrainian war has created additional space for the deployment of civilizational narratives for both states. As

a result, existing civilizational narratives in their foreign policy are being updated and transformed.

'Vishwaguru' and/or 'Vishwamitra'

The Indian government under Narendra Modi, postulating a pragmatic approach to foreign policy based on the priority of hard power, had no alternative for the deployment of the normative dimension except for continued participation in the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine intensified the transformation, creating an additional dimension to the deployment of the Indian normative project.



Determination by civilizational heritage and prioritisation of civilization over nation shapes an atypical pattern of behaviour in politics, including foreign policy

The Western world's framing of the war in Ukraine, whether consciously or not, is shaped in terms of the confrontation between democracy and authoritarianism. According to Michito Tsuruoka, this approach is erroneous and unproductive for two reasons: first, it is misleading about the reasons for the unacceptability of the war; and second, it potentially narrows the range of support, as states need to be democracies to oppose Russian aggression.⁶ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Onis note that among the countries of the so-called Global South, there

3 R. Bajpai, *Civilizational Perspectives in International Relations and Contemporary China-India Relations*, Deakin University: Victoria 2021, p. 70.

4 M. Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, Penguin Books: London 2009, p. 201.

5 R. Bajpai, *Civilizational Perspectives in International Relations and Contemporary China-India Relations*, Deakin University: Victoria 2021, p. 70.

6 M. Tsuruoka, *Why the War in Ukraine is not about Democracy versus Authoritarianism*, RUSI, 27.06.2022, [<http://sur.li/fqzngo> access: 16 February 2024].

is a widespread perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war as a 'European war' that does not directly affect their interests, which is why a neutral position was considered the best strategy.⁷



Both China and India meet all the criteria of civilization states: they possess a civilizational heritage, align with the right scale of diversity, and perceive themselves as successors to great civilizations

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar claims that Western countries believe that Europe's problems are the problems of the whole world, while the problems of the world are not Europe's problems. He made this statement in response to accusations of insufficient support for Ukraine from the Global South, as the refusal to impose economic sanctions on Russia creates workarounds, or ways to circumvent the problem, and protects the Russian economy from the anticipated crisis.⁸ The Indian foreign minister's position is not an isolated one, but rather reflects a stance of the entire Global South. It is worth noting that the Indian government is articulating its own discourse: the Russian-Ukrainian crisis is an example of numerous crises in the world today, rooted in the post-

Soviet politics of NATO enlargement; and belonging to the broader context of relations between Russia and Europe.⁹

Therefore, the Russian-Ukrainian war has actually created a normative niche for the Republic of India – the voice of the so-called Global South – becoming part of a broader civilizational narrative: as the teacher/friend of the universe (*vishvaguru/vishvamitra*).

The closeness of the Indian discourse to the positioning of the states of the so-called Global South in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war is evident. First of all, neutrality is associated with the protection of national interests: Muhammad Abrar, Alfin Basundoro, and Trystanto Trystanto argue that the countries of the so-called Global South will normally prefer their selfish interests to preserving the values they share (respect for sovereignty).¹⁰ Thus, the Indian government prioritises the interests of the Global South in the respective regions, narrowing the Russian-Ukrainian war to the realm of problems in Europe for which others should not be responsible.

Such articulation ensures both the protection of national interests, and the preservation of a formal commitment to the traditional values of the Non-Aligned Movement, in particular respect for sovereignty and non-interference, even under conditions of neutrality. The argument goes that, although Ukraine's sovereignty has been

7 M. Kutlay, Z. Öniş, *A Critical Juncture: Russia, Ukraine and the Global South*. Survival, 2024, p. 21.

8 Ю. Шулюкас, «Проблеми Європи – це не проблеми світу» – чому Глобальний Південь не приєднується до санкцій проти Росії?, («The problems of Europe are not the problems of the world» – why the Global South does not join sanctions against Russia). LRT, 27.09.2023 [<https://www.lrt.lt/ua/novini/1263/2086502/problemi-evropi-tse-ne-problemi-svitu-chomu-global-nii-pivden-ne-priednuiet-sia-do-sanktsii-proti-rosiyi>].

9 *Ukraine crisis has its roots in post-Soviet politics: Jaishankar*, The Indian Express, 23.02.2022, [<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ukraine-crisis-has-its-roots-in-post-soviet-politics-jaishankar-7786688/>].

10 M. Abrar, A. Basundoro, T. Trystanto, *Assessing the Response of the Global South to Russo-Ukrainian War: Case Study of India*, *Global South Review*, 2022. p. 10.

violated, NATO's expansion has put Russia's national security and sovereignty at risk¹¹, and this leads to the picturing of neutrality as an impartial and objective approach to resolving the conflict, avoiding the situation of impasse.



The closeness of the Indian discourse to the positioning of the states of the so-called Global South in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war is evident

In December 2022, after India assumed the presidency of the G20, Jaishankar stated that the country would be the voice of the Global South, which was underrepresented in such forums.¹² As a guiding principle, the concept 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' was articulated, which is a part of the broader slogan used by Prime Minister Modi: «Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas Aur Sabka Vishwas», meaning «With all, development for all, and trust of all», meaning that when all cooperate, progress is achieved by all, which is possible when there is overall trust.

During the G20 presidency, India managed to accumulate the potential of the 'voice of the Global South' project, tipping the scales in its

favour due to three main factors. First, the agenda was framed in terms of the interests of the Global South: financial stability, economic growth, and development needs.¹³ Secondly, while the G20 leaders adopted a declaration condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine at the Bali summit in 2022, which was a reflection of the dominance of the Western narrative, in 2023, the Modi administration managed to shape the agenda in line with the Indian discourse. This can be viewed as a victory for Indian diplomacy. A joint declaration, despite the existing differences in the views of the G20 leaders, has given additional weight to the mantra 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', not just as a nice slogan, but an inclusive and ambitious idea which India can put into practice to ensure global peace by overcoming the existing trust deficit.¹⁴ The emphasis on bridging the trust deficit and promoting stability also reinforces the re-emergence of India's discourse as a friend of the universe.

The last factor in strengthening the position of the Republic of India as the 'voice of the Global South' is the implementation of the Indian initiative to grant full membership to the African Union in the G20, which represents the spirit of 'Sabka Saath'¹⁵; since, according to Modi, India embraces a vision based on inclusivity.¹⁶ As the 'voice of the Global South,' India can offer inclusion/inclusiveness in the existing international

11 This Russian assertion, that NATO's eastward expansion to near Russia's borders poses a threat to its national security and sovereignty, is accepted, and utilised by India and China as one of their arguments for refusing to place responsibility on and recognise Russia as an aggressor state.

12 R. Singh, *Govt says India to be 'voice of Global South': What the term means*, The Indian Express, 7.12.2022, [https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/govt-says-india-to-be-voice-of-global-south-what-the-term-means-8309807/].

13 H. Tran, *Will the G20 Summit help India become the voice of the Global South?*, Atlantic Council, 7.09.2023, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/will-the-g20-summit-help-india-become-the-voice-of-the-global-south/].

14 T. Brajesh, *PM Modi backs up 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' mantra with action*, The Sunday Guardian, 17.09.2023, [https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/pm-modi-backs-up-sabka-saath-sabka-vikas-mantra-with-action].

15 *English translation of Prime Minister's opening remarks at the G20 Summit*, Ministry of External Affairs of India, 09.09.2023 [https://bit.ly/4a98z4t].

16 Cited in: *Indian PM Modi proposes full G20 membership for African Union*, Al Jazeera, 27.08.2023 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/27/indian-pm-modi-proposes-full-g20-membership-for-african-union].

order through its established relations with both Western countries and Russia or China, as emphasised by both the Indian government and the countries of the so-called Global South.



***As the ‘voice of the Global South,’
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In addition to activities within existing organisations, India is also creating new initiatives. In January 2023, the first virtual summit, ‘Voice of the Global South,’ was held on the topic ‘Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose,’ to coordinate/unify the positions of countries on pressing issues.¹⁷ The second summit was held in November 2023, with key outcomes and challenges within the G20 being discussed.¹⁸ Interestingly, the initiative was also claimed to be inspired by the expanded principle of ‘Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas aur Sabka Vishwas’ to ‘*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas aur Sabka Prayas*’ [Together with all, development for all, trust of all, and efforts of all], drawing on the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.¹⁹ Before the start of Russia’s

full-scale aggression against Ukraine, this concept had already been voiced in public and had acquired a certain accumulative capacity, given India’s positioning during the Covid-19 pandemic, but its potential remained limited.

Kate Estrada postulates that the Indian concept of *vishwaguru* is framed through a ‘sense of mission’ in terms of ‘normative power’, taking into account historical heritage and civilizational beliefs, in order to achieve not just recognition of India’s status as an equal by other global actors, but also to achieve an inversion of the global hierarchy.²⁰ The concept is based on civilizational beliefs that originate in the Hindu worldview. Indian claims to the status of the teacher of the universe, as Bhanu Dhamija notes, are based on Kutumbakam’s idea that the world is one family. The primacy of this understanding, which is defended by Hindus, and adherence to the main principles of the philosophy, determines the vision behind the reasons for granting the status of guru to India.²¹

Philosopher Swami Vivekananda articulated that India, in order to become *vishwaguru*, must adopt an active approach of ‘karma yoga’ or ‘yoga of action’ – practical activity in the world to correct mistakes, alleviate social problems, and impart spiritual knowledge to others in India and beyond.²² Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyar criticises the notion that India holds the status of the teacher of the

17 *1st Voice of Global South Summit 2023*, Ministry of External Affairs of India, 12-13.01.2023, [<https://www.mea.gov.in/voice-of-global-summit.htm>].

18 *2nd Voice of Global South Summit 2023*, Ministry of External Affairs of India, 17.11.2023, [<https://www.mea.gov.in/second-vgss.htm>].

19 The philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam represents the concept «The Earth is One Family,» whereby all people bear a collective responsibility towards one another and a shared future, prioritising the common good over individual or familial interests, with significant emphasis on global solidarity and responsibility.

20 K. Estrada, What is a *vishwaguru*? Indian civilizational pedagogy as a transformative global imperative, *International Affairs*, 2023, pp.435-443.

21 B. Dhamija, *How to be Vishwa Guru: India must stop squandering its strengths and help solve today’s global problems*, The Times of India, 23.11.2017, [<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/how-to-be-vishwa-guru-india-must-stop-squandering-its-strengths-and-help-solve-todays-global-problems/>].

22 Cited in: I. Hall, Narendra Modi and India’s normative power, *International Affairs*, 2017, pp.126-127.

universe, because a guru is nothing without disciples, and India has none. In his opinion, the guru narrative is supported solely by the increased attention paid to India by its Western partners, in the context of the need to counter Chinese expansionism.²³

The Russian-Ukrainian war has influenced India's embodiment of karma yoga in two ways: it has given impetus to the creation of a framework for the concept of vishwaguru through the Global South Voice project and has prompted the creation of a new narrative, *vishwamitra*. In Modi's words: «The world looks at India as an important pillar of stability. A friend who can be trusted, a partner who believes in people-centric development, a voice that believes in global good, a voice of the global south ...»²⁴ Apart from the idea of *vishwamitra*, the idea of «*Vishwa ka atut saathi*» (India as a reliable global partner) is also gaining new traction in this context.

The 'Chinese Dream' and the Concept of Tianxia

The strengthening of China's civilizational narratives is associated with Xi Jinping's rise to power and the articulation of the 'Chinese Dream'. The rule of Hu Jintao (2003-2013) was characterised by the absence of both a consistent soft power strategy and strategic narratives.²⁵ It was the 'Chinese Dream' that marked the beginning of China's emergence as a 'normative power.'



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The 'Chinese Dream' is an idea first expressed by Xi in 2012, which is about taking action to achieve «... Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation».²⁶ In addition to referring to China's 'great past', the narrative pays much attention to specification markers. In particular, the emphasis on 'Chineseness' in the context of the spirit and the way points to certain features inherent in a particular civilization. In fact, the idea of specifications of civilizations formed the basis of the 'garden of civilizations' narrative: that is, the world is presented as a field of civilizations whose cultural heritage influences both domestic and foreign policy.

One of the most striking illustrations of the 'garden of civilizations' narrative is the concept of 'democracy with Chinese characteristics'. The white paper *'China: Democracy That Works'* in 2021 emphasises not only the peculiarity of the Chinese vision


23 Aiyar, A. S. *India's Modi is not the world's guru*, Nikkei Asia, 8.09.2023, [https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/India-s-Modi-is-not-the-world-s-guru].

24 P.A. Dabhi, *World looks at India as an important pillar of stability: PM Modi at Vibrant Gujarat summit*, The Indian Express, 11.01.2024, [https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/world-looks-at-india-as-an-important-pillar-of-stability-pm-modi-at-vibrant-gujarat-summit-9104182/].

25 D. Vogl, China's Strategic Narratives, in Frank Vogl (ed.), *China's Footprint in Strategic Spaces of the European Union. New Challenges for a Multi-dimensional EU-China Strategy*, Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie 2021, p. 20.

26 *What does Xi Jinping's China Dream mean?*, BBC, 6.06.2013, [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22726375].

of democracy, but also the broader thesis of the lack of universality due to dependence on the civilizational past: *There is no single road to democracy. The true barrier to democracy lies not in different models of democracy, but in arrogance, prejudice and hostility towards other countries' attempts to explore their own paths to democracy, and in assumed superiority and the determination to impose one's own model of democracy on others.*²⁷



The strengthening of China's civilizational narratives is associated with Xi Jinping's rise to power and the articulation of the 'Chinese Dream'

This opposes the Western narrative of the universality of the values of liberal democracy. The Chinese narrative has gained additional relevance against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, unlike India's, China's approach to war is difficult to define as a fully separate discourse: the manifestation of the idea of provoking Russian aggression by the Western states through NATO expansion finds similarities with the Russian narratives. Bjorn Duben believes that, from China's perspective, the Russian-Ukrainian war looks like a conflict between democracies and authoritarian

regimes, which actually shifts the Chinese discourse closer to the Western one.²⁸ The democracies-authoritarian regimes cliché actualises the narrative of the specifications of civilizational paths, as it does not encourage violent change but rather postulates acceptability without transformation.

This creates a foundation for inclusiveness: the Chinese narrative, unlike the Indian one, does not seek inclusion in existing international mechanisms like the UN or the G20. Instead, it offers an alternative to the established norms. The Chinese model aims at balancing the international economic order by creating new institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank, and by introducing global initiatives like the One Belt, One Road, and the Global Development Initiative. Notably, the One Belt, One Road initiative is seen as the first tangible manifestation of the Chinese Dream,²⁹ intended to re-establish the historic Silk Road, while the Global Civilization Initiative, launched in 2023, adds another layer to China's growing global influence.

The OBOR (further BRI)³⁰ initiative was announced by Xi in 2013, during visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, drawing on the historical context of the Silk Road. Scholars view this not only as an attempt to legitimise a unilateral initiative, but also as placing an emphasis on symbolism through historical

27 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China: Democracy That Works*, 2021, p. 50.

28 Н. Чурикова, Китай підтримує Росію у протистоянні із Заходом, але не з ідеологічних причин – експерти (*China supports Russia in its confrontation with the West, but not for ideological reasons, experts say*), *Voice of America*, 3.11.2022, [https://www.holosameryky.com/a/kytaj-pidtrymuje-rosiju-ne-z-ideologichykh-mirkuvan/6817997.html].

29 Y.-Y. Chang, Understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): An Initiative to Make China Great Again?, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2019, p. 12.

30 «One Belt, One Road» (OBOR), the original slogan of the New Silk Road, was renamed the «Belt and Road Initiative» (BRI) in 2016 to emphasise its broader, more inclusive, and multi-dimensional scope beyond just a single belt or road.

parallels.³¹ A deep strategic and political significance of the BRI is highlighted as a continuation of the idea of the Middle Kingdom, prioritising the non-violent spread of ‘inspiring virtue.’³²



the Chinese narrative, unlike the Indian one, does not seek inclusion in existing international mechanisms like the UN or the G20. Instead, it offers an alternative to the established norms

Bajpai further substantiates the thesis that the BRI is a manifestation of a civilizational narrative, by launching an ambitious campaign to include cultural sites along the Silk Road on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and thus emphasising that the list is viewed as a marker of civilizational standing. In total, 32 sites were proposed for inclusion, 22 of which are located in China.³³

It is important to emphasise that the proclamation of the key principles of the BRI, such as interpersonal connections, connectivity, openness, harmony, inclusivity, and mutually beneficial situations, repeats the essence of *Tianxia* (天下), which is an ancient Chinese concept that translates as ‘All under heaven’ and essentially refers to the aspiration for harmony and the unification of all under the ‘heavens.’ Y.-Y. Chang, citing the key elements of the *Tianxia*

concept – inclusivity, winning human support, creation of global institutions, and coexistence without formal rules and norms – points to their similarity with the postulates of the BRI, indicating a rethinking of this concept in modern times.³⁴

The concept of Community with a Shared Future for Mankind is another example of the adaptation of *Tianxia* to modernity, promoting the idea of global interdependence and cooperation. Importantly, the narrative retains its civilizational character, as it primarily focuses on the cooperation and coexistence of civilizations as subjects of international relations: *To build a global community of shared future is to pursue openness, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, equity, and justice. The goal is not to replace one system or civilization with another.*³⁵



the proclamation of the key principles of the BRI, such as interpersonal connections, connectivity, openness, harmony, inclusivity, and mutually beneficial situations, repeats the essence of Tianxia

The launch of the Global Civilization Initiative by the Chinese government in 2023 has gained particular relevance in the context of the deepening divide between democracies

31 Y.-Y. Chang, Understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): An Initiative to Make China Great Again?, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2019, p. 25.

32 Y.-Y. Chang, Understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): An Initiative to Make China Great Again?, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2019, p. 26.


33 R. Bajpai, *Civilizational Perspectives in International Relations and Contemporary China-India Relations*, Deakin University: Victoria 2021, p. 201.

34 Y.-Y. Chang, Understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): An Initiative to Make China Great Again?, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2019, p. 25.

35 *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, BRF, September 2023, [<http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c127-916.html>].

and authoritarian regimes, brought about by Russia's war against Ukraine. As part of the broader project alongside the Global Development and Security Initiatives, the Global Civilization Initiative focuses on the issue of the 'common aspirations' (not rights) of humanity, including «peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom.»³⁶

Notably, the adapted idea of *Tianxia* continues to be relevant, as according to the concept, cooperation should occur without the involvement of formal norms and rules. This positions China favourably, aligning it with the interests of the Global South. The clear pattern this demonstrates can be seen in the example of the Copenhagen Conference in 2008, where developing countries were unwilling to take on official commitments (despite already implementing policies to reduce emissions).³⁷ This reflects the logic of constructing national identity in terms of 'colonial subjugation'.



The ideas expressed in the Global Civilization Initiative are aimed at highlighting an alternative vision of the world in contrast to Western narratives

The ideas expressed in the Global Civilization Initiative are aimed at highlighting an alternative vision of the world in contrast to Western narratives. The articulation of civilizations as subjects of international relations helps the Chinese government strengthen the 'garden of civilization' narrative. Interestingly, while formally advocating the rejection of imposition and hegemony in favour of supporting the

equality and inclusivity of civilizations, it underscores the unique secular nature of Chinese civilization, which, unlike Western or Muslim civilizations, does not seek to transform others. At the same time, this positions China at the centre of international politics, in line with the concept of the Middle Kingdom.

Thus, the enhancing of Chinese civilizational narratives in foreign policy began with Xi's rise to power and the introduction of initiatives such as the 'Chinese Dream', the 'Belt and Road Initiative', and the Global Civilization Initiative. Through these, China put forward the creation of an alternative to Western universalism by respecting civilizational specifications. The appeal to the inclusivity and equality of all civilizations as subjects of international relations is an example of the adaptability of the *Tianxia* concept and its embodiment in modernity, seeking to recreate a modernised version of the tributary system and the concept of the Middle Kingdom. The onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine and the resulting divide between democracies and authoritarian regimes has further heightened the relevance of opposing Western narratives, so providing a normative space for Chinese and Indian narratives, which resonates within the countries of the so-called Global South.

Consequences for International Relations

The civilizational narratives of both states, – China and India, – are used in their foreign policies primarily to redefine their global roles. Notably, both states postulate an alternative vision of the global order, advocating for a move towards a multipolar world. At the same time, their visions of

36 R. Evan Ellis, *The Trouble With China's Global Civilization Initiative*, *The Diplomat*, 1.06.2023, [<https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/the-trouble-with-chinas-global-civilization-initiative/>].


37 T. Houser, *Copenhagen, the Accord, and the Way Forward*, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010, p. 7.

transformation towards multipolarity differ, although both articulate a narrative of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between states/civilisations, as well as the need for inclusivity. The Chinese approach involves creating alternatives to existing institutions, with the actual goal focused on the implementation of the adaptive idea of *Tianxia* in modernity. The Indian idea, on the other hand, is about reforming existing structures and infusing them with the civilizational experience of the teacher/friend of the universe.

The Chinese civilizational narrative, based on the concept of *Tianxia*, does not seek to forcibly transform others, but instead creates a path of cooperation and inclusivity through initiatives such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the Global Civilization Initiative. The additional relevance of inclusivity, as acceptance without demands, as opposed to the West, is created by the exacerbation of the divide between the so-called Global South and Global North due to the Russia-Ukraine war, and the introduction of the divide between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

The Indian government has also gained the opportunity to expand its normative project in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, as it has created a conceptual space for the 'Voice of the Global South' project, which is used to emphasise the complementarity of the Indian discourse with a wide range of states, due to its strategic neutrality regarding the war. This facilitates the articulation of adherence to the principle of '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas aur Sabka Prayas*', which is part of the broader philosophy of V. Kutumbakam, viewing the world as one family. The enhancement of the narrative of India's role as vishwaguru and vishwamitra is also linked to the 'Voice of the Global South' project, which is an example of the practical implementation of civilizational exclusivity through 'karma yoga'.

Thus, the strengthening of civilizational narratives has three significant consequences for international relations. First, the perception by states of themselves in civilizational terms evokes concerns, primarily in the regional neighbours of these states, as their vision of spreading civilizational heritage often goes beyond national borders. This also creates a problem of expanding the zone of state interests: for example, the Indian government has postulated that regional security should be considered within the framework of national security.



The civilizational narratives of both states, – China and India, – are used in their foreign policies primarily to redefine their global roles

Secondly, civilizational narratives are tools for building normative spaces. As early as 2009, it was noted that China lacked a consistent and comprehensive 'soft power', but now there is not only the strengthening of its 'soft power', but also an attempt to create new norms in international relations, which are based on the idea of civilizational particularities defining the path of state development and not to be altered by external rules. The rejection of the universality of values serves as a means of rejecting Western norms and implementing a new value system.

Thirdly, despite statements regarding equality and the aspirations for multipolarity, civilizational states place their own civilization at the centre of the transformation of the international system. The Chinese version of adaptive *Tianxia* demonstrates the predominance of a Chinese civilization based on its secular nature, which minimises intervention in

the affairs of others. This points to the central position of civilization as per the concept of the Middle Kingdom. The Indian civilizational narrative also highlights the ability to balance and guide in international relations, where cooperation can also be envisioned under certain supervision and advice.

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ANALYTICA

Issue 3 (35), 2024

ISSN 2518-7481