MULTIPOLARITY AFTER UKRAINE:

Old Wine in New Bottles?

edited by **Aldo Ferrari** and **Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**

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Introduction

One year since Russia's invasion, the war in Ukraine rages on. At this time, Moscow has not achieved its objective of toppling the Ukrainian government, nor has it been able to conquer the entirety of the Donbass. Instead, its war of aggression has elicited strong reactions from the West. As this book goes to press, we hear of an incoming Russian offensive from the east, and of a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive in the southeast. Be as it may, the war drags on and its "fog" doesn't allow us to shed light on who might come on top.

However, there are already several things that can be said about the effects of this war at the international level. In a nutshell, the invasion of Ukraine has put an end to several "taboos". The first: Germany and Japan, the two defeated countries of the Second World War, are rearming themselves – continuing a long-running trend, it could be argued, but this time without hiding behind any excuses. On the contrary, Berlin is explicitly claiming that the Ukraine invasion is a *zeitenwende* (turning point) and is set to bring its yearly defense expenditure from 50 to 80 billion euros.

A second taboo that has also been broken: long sitting in the "neutral" camp, just a few months after the invasion, both Finland and Sweden formally applied to join NATO. Everyone, it seems, is taking sides. Erdogan and Orbán permitting, NATO is getting larger very soon, while the space for neutrality in Europe will be shrinking.

The third taboo to fall: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put an end to the Western hope that trade and interdependence would bring countries together, or to the very least discourage war. In Europe, the *Wandel durch Handel* ("Change through trade") model exemplified by Germany was completely upset by the invasion, and in a very evident manner. Even as the Russian army mobilized along the Ukrainian border, the German government continued to allow the certification of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline up until 22 February 2022, two days before Moscow decided to invade Ukraine.

As taboos fall, one by one, some certainties appear to be rising as well. It is clear that the US, along with the West, wants Ukraine to hold steady. Since the war began, the US alone has committed 23 billion dollars in weapons and military aid to Ukraine, almost double the amount earmarked by the rest of the world combined (12 billion dollars), and seven times as much as the usual aid it sent to its largest military partner, Israel, in 2020 (3.3 billion dollars). And while it seems farfetched to argue that the West is using Ukraine to wage a "proxy war" on Russia, surely Ukraine today is being held up as a beacon of resistance against countries that do not respect the rule-based international order.

At the same time, the very number of countries that explicitly tackle the notion of a Western-led, rule-based international order is on the rise. On 21 February 2023, just a few days before the first anniversary of the invasion, the Russian President said that it would suspend its participation in the New START Treaty, the last remaining nuclear-arms treaty between Moscow and Washington, and a vestige of the security architecture that helped keep the peace for decades. And while a revanchist Russia appears increasingly bent on renegotiating the conditions that put an end to the cold war (whether successfully or not, it remains to be seen), Beijing seems to be playing along, as Russia and China share a common interest in weakening US dominance.

In this context, this Report sets out to answer to a few crucial questions: have things really changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Is the world becoming more and more multipolar, and is this actual news compared to a pre-invasion scenario? Is China and Russia's challenge to the Western-led rules-based international order really experiencing a step change, or is this just "new wine in old bottles"?

Over the past few years, Western governments and intellectuals have been prompted to think about the future of the liberal international order on several occasions. The war in Ukraine is only the latest and most dramatic event to spur such reflection. Since February 24, however, it seems that Western discourse has progressively moved away from the idea of "liberal international order", rather choosing to call Russia's aggression an attack on the "rule-based international order". In the first chapter, Zachary Paikin sheds light on the conceptual confusion surrounding these two terms, while reviewing them against the background of the shifting global order. This also serves as an attempt to determine what the place of both Russia and the West in this order will be following the end of the war. Paikin argues that the shape of the future international order will largely depend upon the West and Russia's willingness to either face a lengthy confrontation, or compromise on what they have long depicted as core and non-negotiable principles. In Paikin's mind, should the latter prevail, 2022 could go down in history as the year when multipolarity finally became reality.

It is precisely multipolarity that has been the leitmotif of Russia's foreign policy since the early '90s. This came to be particularly the case after 2014, when Moscow started to be more aggressive in its confrontation with the West. Although Russia's efforts in striving for multipolarity have been undeniable, it remains unclear what role it is bound to have in it, nor whether the Ukraine war is going to affect it. To answer these questions, Richard Sakwa considers contemporary international politics, which he defines as moving towards "highly uneven multipolarity". Sakwa proceeds to examine

Russia in the current multipolar world. Here, he claims that while isolated by Western counterparts in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has managed to cement its ties with China and other countries. Nevertheless, he argues that China will eventually compete with the US for the position of hegemony, whereas Russia will seek to balance the dominant powers.

As a new international system seems to be taking shape, there is another sphere in which the effects of the Ukraine conflict are already observable. Indeed, following the breakout of the war, global economy has also dramatically changed. Russia's invasion has brought into sharper focus supply chain vulnerabilities, reigniting once again the debate on the risks of getting too dependent on others' economies. Over the course of 2022, Europe has managed to progressively decouple from Moscow. If it is undeniable that the national security dimension has become more prominent in the mapping of supply chain routes and strategic dependencies, it might be too hasty to talk about deglobalization. To shed light on this matter, Rem Korteweg assesses the overall impact of Russia's war on the global trading system, drawing seven lessons from the conflict while also attempting to outline the future trajectories of globalization.

Besides Russia, a country that has often been mentioned by Western officials with regards to decoupling is China. Just like Russia, China has been among the most assertive actors in challenging the Western rule-based international order. It is this common revisionist stance to have brought these two actors closer in the first place. On February 4, 2022, during a meeting at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, presidents Putin and Xi Jinping proclaimed a "friendship without limits" between their countries, a joint declaration that seemed to crown Moscow and Beijing's endeavors to improve their bilateral relations. However, only three weeks later, Russia kicked off its large-scale invasion, putting China to the test. Sarah Kirchberger investigates how the China-Russia relations have changed since February 24. She describes China's

attitude towards Russia, before and during the Ukraine war, and discusses how the war might impact the future perspectives for a strategic partnership. Kirchberger navigates a multitude of levels of the Sino-Russian alignment, to eventually make the case that the future of the "friendship without limits" should be not taken for granted, especially when looked at from the Chinese side.

Irrespective of this, China and Russia have been some of the fiercest adversaries of the US-led global order. This competition with the West has at times been put into practice with the creation of international organizations and institutions. One of the most notable cases is that of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded on China's initiative in 2001. Today, SCO comprises 8 member states. Lately, many Western analysts have increasingly labelled the SCO as an anti-NATO. The chapter by Filippo Costa Buranelli and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti deals precisely with this issue. Certainly, there is an important security dimension, and some of the members are at odds with the West. Yet, Central Asian countries seem to be more interested in SCO for the trade and networking opportunities it can offer. Thus, the authors claim that the SCO may well develop to become one of the poles of power in the multipolar world, but it will not necessarily be as anti-Western as many might think.

Albeit wars are traditionally fought on the battlefield, it should not be forgotten that the Internet and the digital sphere represented a new ground for warfare. Oftentimes, we hear of armies of online trolls that, by spreading false information on social media, try to shape users' views and opinions. This appears to have become particularly relevant with the Ukraine war, which has been dubbed "The World's First TikTok War". In light of this, understanding the latest trends of propaganda and digital confrontation has become of the utmost importance. However, due to the huge amount of information, as well as the constant flow of user-generated content, identifying propaganda online can prove extremely hard. In her chapter,

İdil Galip helps us with that, in two ways: firstly, by extensively describing the reasonings behind propaganda; secondly, by elucidating on how memes and digital content have changed things. In her conclusion, Galip further elaborates on digital propaganda, giving final explanations as to why it can be promising and appealing for many actors.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President

1. After the Ukraine War: Liberal Order Revisited

Zachary Paikin

Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks yet another event forcing Western thinkers to contemplate the future of the international order.

Since the twin shocks of Brexit and Trump in 2016, such questioning has become commonplace. Debates initially focused on whether the "liberal international order" could be salvaged in the face of growing support for illiberal populists in the West, a rising China whose ultimate intentions remained opaque, and a revanchist Russia no longer bent on joining the West but rather on challenging it.

More recently, the term "liberal international order" (LIO) has given way to the more neutral-sounding "rules-based international order" (RBIO), perhaps a tacit acknowledgement that illiberal populists are here to stay – and that the rest of the world does not entirely share the liberal values and cultural heritage of the West. Yet although the RBIO nominally emphasises agreed rules for interstate conduct instead of shared values, the latter are not entirely absent from the concept. Indeed, values-based commitments have become enshrined in various documents which lie at the foundation of today's international order. The conceptual confusion runs both ways: rules-based cooperation in the form of international institutions, designed to limit conflict between states, is a core tenet of *liberal* internationalism.

If the RBIO refers to nothing other than the supremacy of international law, then it is not clear why the term is needed. As for the LIO, where this concept starts and ends remains uncertain. This calls for a re-evaluation of both concepts against the background of a shifting global order, which in turn can elucidate what the place of both Russia and the West in this order will be once the dust has settled on the Ukraine war. In short, neither side is likely to emerge a winner in an increasingly diffuse global political patchwork.

Contested Concepts

The mainstream Western perspective – found both among governments and the broader intellectual community – asserts that *the* liberal international order or *the* rules-based international order is under threat. Yet while in many respects the character of international relations in recent decades differs from previous eras, it would be mistaken to assert that the LIO or RBIO is coterminous with international order writ large.[1] Indeed, each of these two concepts is nebulous or contested in several fashions.

As John Ikenberry, one of liberal internationalism's most well-known proponents, has put it, "Liberal internationalism […] is not a fixed doctrine, but it is a family of evolving ideas and projects".[2] Nominally liberal orders have privileged different principles at different times – opting for a lighter touch in the interwar period but establishing "thicker" and more robust international institutions after World War II, for example.

Seemingly contradictory principles are featured in the present-day international order: sovereignty, national self-determination

[1] R Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 125.

[2] G.J. Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism and Cultural Diversity", in A. Phillips and C. Reus-Smit (eds.), *Culture and Order in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 137-38.

and respect for human rights can find themselves in conflict with one another. While these principles can be reconciled in theory, specific instances such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya demonstrate that they may not always be consistent with one another in practice. The post-1945 order's emphasis on both national *independence* (to posit respect for state borders following a war-plagued era) and *interdependence* (to reduce the likelihood of such wars repeating themselves) further illustrates the tension that lies at the very genesis of contemporary interstate relations. Liberalism also finds itself torn between its belief in respecting political diversity and its desire to promote liberal values.[3]

Beyond the contradictions found in this package of norms, there are principles which are fundamentally contested. One such principle is whether "Western leadership" is a core feature of today's order. Ikenberry notes that the LIO was a mere "inside system" during the Cold War but, with the Soviet Union's demise, became the "outside system".[4] In other words, the LIO was largely limited to the Western bloc during the confrontation between the two superpowers, but with the collapse of communism became synonymous with global order writ large. Whether Western leadership and liberal values were ever embraced across the globe is debatable. But whether the LIO can return to being a mere "inside system" in an era of great power competition – after decades of claiming the mantle of global order – is equally debatable. The perception that the US is abandoning the order it once championed easily lends itself to accusations of hypocrisy.

Ambiguity may be an inherent feature of international orders, given the political (and hence litigated) nature of norms.[5]

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[3] See G. Sørenson, *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing Between Imposition and Restraint*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011.

[4] G.J. Ikenberry, "The end of liberal international order?", *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2018, pp. 7-23.

[5] D.A. Lake, "Laws and Norms in the Making of International Hierarchies", in A. Zarkol (ed.), *Hierarchies in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University

But what of more neutral "rules", focused more on common standards of behaviour rather than high-minded principles or aspirations? Might the "rules-based international order" come closer to embodying a universally accepted order of global scope, largely free of contradictions?

To ensure a degree of predictability in interstate interactions, all international orders are, to some degree, based upon rules, whether formal or informal.[6] But if the more robust code of international law and institutions of the post-World War II era is what sets the RBIO apart from its historical predecessors, this raises the question of whether the inflexible and rigid application of rules can serve as a path to achieving order and stability in world politics. Russia-West relations in the post-Cold War period illustrate how the "competitive invocation of rules" encourages parties to talk past one another and refuse to compromise, laying the groundwork for resolving differences through less pleasant means.[7]

Given the more recent shift in Western discourse away from defending the LIO and toward emphasising the RBIO instead, there is suspicion in some non-Western capitals that the latter is but a rhetorical stand-in for the former, equally and implicitly aimed at legitimising a status quo in which the West is the primary terms-setter of international order. This perception is only reinforced by the many instances in which Western countries have been prepared to bend or break the rules when their own interests were concerned – an apparent attitude of "rules for thee but not for me". As such, while rules may be more specific in terms of what they prescribe in comparison with cardinal norms, this does not mean that the RBIO is any less contestable in principle than the LIO.

Press, 2017, p. 23.

[6] H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Third Edition, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002 [1977], pp. 64-68.

[7] P. Porter, "Sorry, Folks. There Is No Rules-Based World Order", *The National Interest*, 28 August 2016.

What of the RBIO's universality? While many tenets of the LIO may be challenged, do states not generally observe international law? The reality is that, while formal rules and institutions have become more important features of international relations, they have not supplanted the entire tradition of interstate conduct. Forces such as imperialism (formal or informal), the special role of great powers, and the perceived necessity of upholding a balance of power have been inherited from previous historical eras and have not been completely eliminated from state behaviour.[8]

Put differently, while the RBIO (unlike the LIO) may encompass a universal *geographic* scope, it does not encompass a universal *normative* scope. States can and do violate the rules. When they do so, it is not a repudiation of the notion that rules should guide state behaviour per se, but rather a manifestation that other forces are also at work in interstate relations. Indeed, the popular notion (whether correct or not) that Western "leadership" lies at the core of the present-day international order, even though such leadership is not a codified element of the RBIO, tacitly acknowledges that international orders can contain certain features which flow organically from historical and political dynamics, as opposed to from the establishment of formal rules.

Since the scope of both the LIO *and* the RBIO is not necessarily universal, one cannot escape the conclusion that the future global order will be a fragmented one. This raises the question: after the war in Ukraine, what place will the LIO occupy in this divided and complex global landscape? And where does this leave Russia?

Liberal Order After Ukraine

Liberal internationalism has stood for different principles at different times in its history. Interwar Wilsonian idealism placed a premium on the notion of national self-determination.

[8] Bull (2002), pp. 68-71.

By contrast, post-Cold War efforts to build an LIO of global scope privileged a form of "hyper-globalism".[9] Although most Westerners assert that today's LIO represents a defence of the status quo against revisionist powers such as Russia and China, these two historical embodiments of liberal internationalism offered revisionist projects: they were attempts to alter the status quo substance of international relations and replace it with a new one. This should perhaps be unsurprising, given the teleological nature of the liberal intellectual tradition.[10]

In the case of national self-determination, transforming the world's political map to reflect "national" borders is an exceedingly difficult proposition – as is believing that the world is composed of easily identifiable "nations". The path toward an international order based largely on self-determination would involve a significant amount of disorder, as indeed turned out to be the case in the interwar era.[11]

Hyper-globalism, for its part, obviously finds itself in tension with the precepts of state sovereignty and cultural pluralism. It also challenges the sense of societal fairness and democratic accountability within the hegemonic West. In the post-Cold War era, the novelty of the LIO's hyper-globalism paired itself somewhat uncomfortably with the persistence of Cold War-era institutions which were struggling to find their raison d'être. NATO was forced to go out of area to maintain its relevance, intervening in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Libya before being infamously called "brain dead" as recently as 2019.[12] This novelty/persistence contradiction could not be indefinitely sustained. By the time of Donald Trump's election and the shift

[9] D. Rodrik, "Peaceful Coexistence 2.0", *Project Syndicate*, 10 April 2019.

[10] See Sakwa (2017), p. 26; and J.S. Barkin, *Realist Constructivism: Rethinking International Relations Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[11] E. Kedourie, "A New International Disorder", in H. Bull and A. Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992 [1984], pp. 347-49.

[12] "Nato alliance experiencing brain death, says Macron", *BBC News*, 7 November 2019.

in US political consensus away from free trade, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and growing autocratic features in China had already made clear that an LIO of hyper-globalism – rooted in economic openness but also political uniformity – would not encompass the globe.

Although globalisation will survive in some form, Washington's embrace of great power competition with Beijing marks the end of hyper-globalism: economic openness will no longer in all cases be prioritised over strategic considerations. But Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine presages perhaps a more fundamental transformation of the LIO. In rallying to defend Ukraine's sovereignty and to pave a path for it into Western institutions, Western states are embracing a form of liberal ordering which appears more in line with Wilsonian self-determination than hyper-globalism.

At first glance, this development comes across as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of liberal internationalism. Much as previous eras have left their mark on the norms and practices which persist to this day (e.g., the balance of power), a century of efforts at liberal ordering has also created the space for certain liberal practices and ideas to survive in international politics. That said, a "retreat" of the LIO into the non-geographic West as a means of adapting to the realities of great power conflict will not entirely resolve the order's contradictions.

The present day differs from the Cold War in several respects. Most visibly, today's international order is global in scope, not only due to the integrated character of the global economy but also because of the rejection of spheres of influence. Although the Cold War did possess global institutions such as the United Nations, the world was effectively divided into (at least) two international orders. Today, rhetorical appeals to a global RBIO – whether these appeals are well-founded or not – ensure that the contestation of international norms will remain global in scope.

The Cold War also featured a standoff between *capitalist* and *communist* blocs over which model was best suited to bring about modernisation. It was plainly *not* a battle between

democracy and authoritarianism, as evidenced by the presence of non-democratic countries in the anti-communist camp. By contrast, the mainstream Western narrative today centres on a presumed contest between democracy and autocracy. That this narrative fails to conform to reality is evident – backsliding democracies such as Turkey and Hungary remain part of the Western alliance, while non-democracies such as Azerbaijan, Algeria and Venezuela are openly courted to help reduce Western dependence on Russian energy. As such, the inconsistencies which confronted Western foreign policy and the LIO in recent decades will not disappear in the transition from hyper-globalism back to Wilsonianism. And given that it was capitalism – and not liberal democracy – which won the Cold War, the tension between the LIO and a more diverse global order will persist.

A decisive Ukrainian victory is one potential outcome of the current war, not only re-energising Western institutions but possibly even reinforcing the West's deterrence of both Russia *and* China. However, even in this most optimistic of scenarios, a bolstered Western position in the emerging great power competition does not mean that the West will possess a narrative and a model that the rest of the world finds attractive.[13] Indeed, recent research has highlighted that EU member states have, by and large, devoted "little energy" to winning over global public opinion or to addressing the needs of the Global South in the context of the war.[14] If the West emerges with a stronger capacity to shape the European and Indo-Pacific security orders, but with a reduced ability to influence hearts and minds in the rest of the world, this may not necessarily be a net win.

That the prevailing Western narrative has centred on an epic struggle between democracy and authoritarianism should not be surprising – a binary framing may be necessary to sustain

[13] V. Ishchenko, "Ukrainian Voices?", *New Left Review*, no. 138, November/December 2022.

[14] K. Liik, "The old is dying and the new cannot be born: A power audit of EU-Russia relations", European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 December 2022.

public support for a prolonged confrontation with Russia and China. However, the price of this approach may be reduced global influence. In a politically and culturally diverse global landscape, an ideological approach is ultimately self-defeating – with many countries sitting on the fence and preferring not to choose sides.

The crisis of the LIO has been a topic of analysis and popular discussion for nearly a decade. Enough time has already elapsed to draw two main conclusions. First, while the post-Cold War conception of the LIO is dead, liberal internationalism is likely to survive in some capacity. And second, the persistent structural contradictions of the LIO, exacerbated by a Western rhetoric which lacks global appeal, suggest that the space that the LIO occupies in a fragmented global tapestry may continue to dwindle, even if it does not disappear entirely.

Russia and the Liberal Order

Where does an increasingly authoritarian Russia fit into this tapestry?

How Russia will emerge from its ill-fated invasion of Ukraine remains anyone's guess. But even if President Vladimir Putin survives the war in office, his hybrid Putinist system of "managed" or "sovereign" democracy will not. Putin is now forced to craft a new kind of governing legitimacy which combines popular support for the war with increased levels of domestic repression. A prolonged war could challenge the foundations of the Russian regime, but it could equally buttress its resilience if its legitimacy becomes tied to the need to fight until an acceptable battlefield outcome is reached. A lengthy conflict could just as easily test the durability of the Western approach, especially if it drags on into 2024 and becomes politicised during the US presidential election campaign.

A structural overview of the past three decades of Russia-West relations may be helpful in clarifying this murky picture. One of the core features of the post-Cold War LIO has been

the pursuit of sameness in the realm of economic, political and value systems. This is especially so in the case of Europe, where the approach to ordering the continent has been based on the expansion of the Brussels-centric normative orbit. Russia, for its part, began the post-Cold War period with an attempt to join the West, albeit only on terms that it deemed acceptable.

Under such conditions, Russia-West relations naturally went south as each failed to transform in line with the other's expectations: Russia failed to become a liberal democracy and the West maintained its structure of American leadership. Russia increasingly became seen as an existential threat to the LIO, while Moscow's perception that the West sought a weakened Russia encouraged Russian leaders to equate regime security with national security. Therefore, long before the invasion of Ukraine, the dynamic underpinning Western relations with Russia became one geared toward regime change as a prerequisite for a fundamental improvement in ties, even if this was not the explicit position of Western capitals.

Upon his return to the Kremlin in 2012, Putin undertook the process of reshaping Russia as a non-Western country in the political sense.[15] On the international stage, the Euromaidan revolution and the Arab Spring provided early opportunities for this new reality to manifest itself, with Russia annexing Crimea in 2014 and intervening in Syria in 2015. Yet certain scholars stopped short of calling Russia a fully revisionist power, claiming rather that it was merely challenging the West's hegemony and monopoly on the use of force, while continuing to defend the integrity of global norms more broadly.[16] Indeed, just as one can conceive of the United States as a revisionist power that aims to "impose [an order] that didn't exist before and expect[s] others to sign up" rather than a status quo power intent on

[15] K. Liik, "In search of 'business not as usual' with Russia", European Council on Foreign Relations, 29 May 2019.

[16] R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2015, pp. 30-35.

defending its hegemonic position,[17] it was equally possible to consider Russia a largely status quo power, given that its main preoccupation was to avoid losing something that it previously held – a sphere of influence.

Whether this hybrid status – between democracy and authoritarianism, between status quo and revisionism – could be indefinitely perpetuated cannot be known for certain. But it is unlikely to have been the case. The "universalising ideologies" of the XX century – communism, fascism and liberalism – caused the balance of power to erode as a universally accepted norm.[18] With the demise of the Soviet Union and the advent of American unipolarity, the balance of power as an empirical reality collapsed as well. As such, the great power system which had governed international relations in previous centuries ceased to exist.[19] Russia's national identity being deeply intertwined with the notion of great power status therefore became fundamentally incompatible with the post-Cold War, US-led LIO.

The process of Russia's conversion to full revisionism began before its invasion of Ukraine, with the 2020 constitutional referendum approving Russian law's supremacy over international law. That said, as late as mid-2021, efforts were still undertaken to reach a new Russia-West equilibrium. By focusing on a limited agenda centred around strategic stability and cybersecurity at the Biden-Putin presidential summit in Geneva, the US sought to create a "stable and predictable" relationship with Russia within the confines of an otherwise adversarial dynamic.[20] Putin's remarks after the summit

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[17] V. Jackson, "America Is the Preeminent Revisionist Power", *The Duck of Minerva*, 1 January 2023.

[18] R. Little, "Revisiting Realism and the Balance of Power", in A. Freyberg-Inan, E. Harrison, and P. James (eds.), *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, p. 22.

[19] E. Hobsbawm, *On Empire: America, War, and Global Supremacy*, New York, The New Press, 2009, p. 29.

[20] K. Liik, "Biden meets Putin: America, Russia, and the return of diplomacy", European Council on Foreign Relations, 18 June 2021.

similarly framed Russia and the West as holding common interests, noting the possibility for agreement on both policy fields in addition to regional conflicts.[21] Around the same time, France and Germany proposed a wide-ranging reset in the EU's relationship with Russia at the June 2021 European Council meeting.

But 2021 also featured two Russian military build-ups near the Ukrainian border, the latter of which produced a full-scale invasion. The demands that Moscow advanced for "security guarantees" in late 2021 – including a return to the pre-1997 status quo in NATO-Russia relations – were undoubtedly revisionist in nature. With both sides having talked past each other for years on questions related to the status of Ukraine and European security norms, Moscow concluded that what could not be achieved at the negotiating table must ultimately be acquired on the battlefield.

In a sense, although Putin as an agent made the decision to pull the trigger, war was a seemingly inevitable by-product of the fashion in which the Cold War concluded. While Russia was prepared to do away with communism, it was not prepared to accept that it had "lost" the Cold War in a geopolitical sense. If Russia remains politically distinct from Western liberal democracies and intent on preserving its status as an independent power, then it will not find a place in the LIO.

The structural tension between the LIO and the broader global order runs deeper than the difficulty of matching political conformity with cultural diversity. An LIO of hyper-globalism and one based on the defence of nation-states may differ in important ways, but in the post-World War II context US hegemony has become a core feature of both. The broader global order has inherited as concepts the balance of power and the special role of great powers, but the material and normative space for their application no longer exists. So long

[21] "Vladimir Putin Press Conference Transcript After Meeting With Biden in Geneva (English Translation)", *Rev.com*, 16 June 2021.

as international relations are constituted by sovereign states and great powers continue to exist in some form, this tension between the LIO and global order will persist.

A rising China and a Russia whose national power has been restored may both seek to assert their great power status, but as long as the United States rejects this premise as a matter of course, then collective great power management of the international order will not be the order's core organising principle. Barring a significant political transformation inside Russia, or a fundamental transformation in Western foreign policy away from the principles and premise of an LIO, the Russia-West standoff will continue in some form. And even if the Putin regime comes crashing down, unlike in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Western liberal model is no longer the only or most attractive model for Russia to emulate.

While making definitive predictions is senseless, there is therefore every possibility that the Ukraine war will continue (on and off) for years – and that the Russia-West confrontation will persist for decades. Such a development threatens to affect global order – and Europe's place in it – in significant ways.

Europe and Russia in a Decentred World

Rightly or wrongly, there now exists a widely held perception in parts of the Global South that the Western response to recent crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, has been unfair and to their disadvantage. Whether through the hoarding of vaccines or sanctions worsening a food crisis, the West has seemingly prioritised its own interests over those of the rest of the world. Against a backdrop of a liberal order already in crisis, this has encouraged many countries to favour Western *engagement* but to grow sceptical of Western *terms-setting*, demanding a relationship based not on emulation of standards but rather on equality and respect for their independent interests.

This is a pattern now visible across the globe. Middle Eastern countries are hedging their bets and no longer falling into line with Washington's agenda. While remaining wary of Chinese territorial encroachment, ASEAN has refused to sign up to a US-led coalition to contain China and has made clear that its vision of the Indo-Pacific does not include forcing countries to choose between great power competitors. India has remained stubbornly committed to its non-aligned position in the Russo-Ukrainian war despite Western pressure. Even Latin America is governed increasingly from the US-sceptic left.

While these trends favour the emergence of multipolarity – at least in the realm of norms if not in the material distribution of power – they may not represent the kind of multipolarity for which Russia has long been clamouring. Much as the EU cannot hope to be taken seriously as a global actor if it remains dependent on the US to manage security issues in its own neighbourhood, Russia's global great power status will be significantly impaired if it remains isolated from the continent where its influence should be strongest.

Whether Ukraine eventually obtains EU membership or simply becomes the West's easternmost bulwark against Russia, the shape of European security and the EU's place in it will change in important ways. If the EU plays a leading role in Ukraine's reconstruction and reform, while also transforming itself into a more serious defence actor, then a path will be cleared for Brussels to appear as a geopolitically capable actor on the European continent – one which can no longer be excluded from the top-tier table the way that it was in the leadup to the Russian invasion. While the obstacles along this path may be numerous – and may eventually require reform of the EU itself – it nonetheless remains an attractive path for Brussels to follow. However, the focus of this course of action would be decidedly regional rather than global, magnifying the "Brussels effect" in Ukraine but likely reducing it elsewhere.[22]

[22] For more, see S. Blockmans, D. Macchiarini Crosson, and Z. Paikin, "The

One knock-on effect of a prolonged conflict in Ukraine, already manifesting itself, is a sharp reduction in economic and energy integration between the EU and Russia. With time, as new supply chains form, the incentive to re-establish these ties will wane. As much as energy interdependence was weaponised in the EU-Russia relationship, a situation in which military coercion remains the only lever of Russian influence in Europe may be even worse, increasing even further the likelihood of a prolonged standoff.

Conclusion

In the event of a stalemate in Ukraine, both Russia and the West would face a choice: hunker down and embrace the reality of a lengthy confrontation, or compromise on what each side has long insisted represent core and non-negotiable principles. In either case, the forces catalysing change in the international order will receive a boost, either due to the self-absorption of Brussels and Moscow or because it will have been demonstrated that liberal norms are malleable after all. Early after the Russian invasion, Western capitals chose to argue that nothing less than the RBIO itself was at stake in the war. They may regret choosing to raise the stakes to such a degree.

The path back to a stable European security order may be very long and fraught. If this encourages Russia and the West to remain squarely focused on their confrontation with each other, rather than having something to offer the rest of the world, then 2022 may be remembered as the year when (a perhaps very diffuse) multipolarity became a reality. And since multipolarity finds itself naturally in tension with liberal ordering practices, the post-Cold War vision of a single global community may represent a very distant dream, even if segments of an integrated world survive.[23]

EU's Strategic Compass: A guide to reverse strategic shrinkage?", Centre for European Policy Studies, 31 March 2022.

[23] T.L. Knutsen, *The Rise and Fall of World Orders*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999, p. 271.

2. What Role for Russia in a Multipolar World?

Richard Sakwa

Multipolarity is a state of affairs in which no single power can dominate international politics, and where power is dispersed. Multipolarity is thereby an inherently dynamic process, indicating a period of flux in international affairs. The early post-Cold War years were marked by unipolarity, but by the beginning of the twenty-first century this gave way to a more complex multipolar configuration. Within the larger shift, elements of bipolarity were restored, no longer US-Soviet but Sino-American. This is sometimes interpreted as a power transition, whereby the baton of global dominance is passed from a relatively declining state to a rising one.[1] According to Kenneth Waltz, a pole is created in a larger system when a state accumulates a disproportionate share of resources and capabilities accompanied by "the size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military strength, political stability and competence".[2] Applying this definition, international politics today is moving towards a condition of

[1] For a recent examination of the issue, which suggests that the power shift can take place peacefully, see J. Shifrinson, *Ri. sing Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2018.

[2] K.N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World", *Daedalus*, vol. 93, no. 3, 1964, pp. 881-909, and Idem, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, Random House 1979, pp. 131 and *passim*.

"highly uneven multipolarity".[3] Power is distributed far from equally, with the great powers America and China contending for hegemony at the top, the major powers such as India, Russia and Japan occupying the second tier, the legacy powers such as Germany, Japan, France and the United Kingdom struggling to identify their role, accompanied by an emerging range of middle powers, such as Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and South Korea. This dynamic has prompted an extensive literature on how states should behave in such conditions, faced with a choice between balancing (resistance) or bandwagoning (acquiescence) with the dominant powers. By choice – if not by necessity – Russia set on the former path, and this paper will seek to understand the logic of its behaviour.

The Context of Contemporary Multipolarity

This section will briefly provide a taxonomy and conceptual framework in which multipolarity and Russia's place in it can be analysed. Above all, the Charter international system based on the United Nations should be distinguished from the shifting dynamics of relations between states conducted within its framework, the sphere of international politics. The Charter system established in 1945 was the successor to the ill-fated Versailles system created after the Great War, which in turn built on the Vienna system established in 1814-15, which developed the principles of the Westphalian peace order established in 1648. Each modern European international system sought to learn the lessons of the failure of the earlier order, and represented the gestation of new ideas of how norms and power should be organised at the international level. The creation of a core permanent membership in the UN Security Council incorporated the balance of power into the heart of the international system, and thus sought to overcome the lack of an

[3] D. Rodrik and S. Walt, "How to Construct A New Global Order", HKS Working Paper, 24 May 2021.

effective steering mechanism in the League of Nations. The five permanent members (China, the United States, Russia, France and the United Kingdom) were to act as a mechanism linking the international system with the dynamics of international politics, and thus temper conflict between the great powers while providing a framework for global conflict management.

Today, the changing global balance of power is reshaping international affairs and the dynamics of multipolarity. First, the postwar Charter international system is under unprecedented strain. It remains the framework for the normative and institutional conduct of international affairs and international law, yet its efficacy and even legitimacy is increasingly questioned. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 signalled that a whole epoch in international affairs is under threat. UN reform has long been on the agenda, but since the onset of the Second Cold War in 2014 it has become even more pressing. Russian actions were denounced in several UN General Assembly votes, but a large swath of the global South and non-aligned countries refused to be drawn into a conflict that was perceived not to be their concern. A total of 131 states voted for the 2 March 2022 General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with only 5 voting against and 35 abstaining. The resolution called for the full withdrawal of Russian forces and a reversal of its decision to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk. China and India abstained and avoided openly condemning Russia. In the 7 April General Assembly vote on membership of the UN Human Rights Council, 93 voted in favour of suspending Russia, 24 voted against, while 58 abstained. Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria and Vietnam were among those who voted against, while those abstaining included India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Singapore, Indonesia and Cambodia. The UN has increasingly become a venue for the waging of conflict rather than a forum for its resolution.

Second, the changing relations between the states comprising the system take place in the sphere of international politics. Here various "world orders" are created and contest others. In the early postwar years, two such orders took shape: the US-led political West and the Soviet-led communist bloc of states. At the end of WWII the US, in parallel to the Charter system, created its own world order. Based on principles of liberal internationalism, it combined the economic aspect, in the form of the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and IMF), and the security aspect, in the form of NATO and a ramified alliance system. In 1989-91 the Soviet bloc disintegrated, along with the Soviet state itself. This gave rise to what some believed would become a unipolar era, although in fact the period of effectively unchallenged Western dominance was relatively short-lived.[4] Even as unipolarity eroded, the distinctive feature of the post-Cold War era was the survival of the normative and organisational form of the political West that had taken shape in, and indeed had been shaped by, the Cold War. In organisational terms this meant the preservation and later expansion of NATO, along with the deepening and enlargement of the European Union. This was understandable since the political West had seen off the communist and Soviet challenges, appearing to vindicate its stance in the Cold War. The principles on which the political West was based – competitive markets, free trade, liberal constitutionalism and accountable governments – had triumphed and on that basis, at the "end of history", claimed to be universal. From this perspective, the whole notion of multipolarity was based on a false premise and harked back to a bygone age of great power politics. In this brave new world of globalisation the world would become "flat" and national egoisms would be subsumed into a postmodern culture of consumerism and meritocracy.[5]

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[4] For analysis, see C. Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1990-91, pp. 23-33; Idem, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited", *The National Interest*, vol. 70, Winter 2002-03, pp. 5-17.

[5] T.L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Century*,

Third, the collapse of the Soviet challenge in 1991 left the world free for the political West, allowing the radicalisation of its ideas. Liberal internationalism, in the view of its critics, became liberal hegemony, whose expansive ambitions were "doomed to fail".[6] Neglecting the power of nationalism and the blowback effects of globalisation on the domestic workforce, as well as repeated military failures accompanied by disastrous nation-building experiments, the political West faced repeated reverses. The idea of democratic internationalism nevertheless endured, and prompted the Manichean division of the world into democracies and autocracies. This is called "global liberal imperialism" by the veteran political analyst and academic Sergei Karaganov, who argues that the post-Cold War peace order was as unfair and unstable as the Versailles system. In his view, "a world based on NATO expansion and Western domination would [inevitably] lead to war".[7] In this struggle, time was allegedly on Russia's side.[8]

Fourth, in much of the global South the Ukraine war is viewed as the latest iteration of Europe's endemic civil wars, in a continent unable to overcome the logic of conflict.[9] The war demonstrated that the colonial era was definitively over. At its inception the UN contained 55 states, but since then a

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London, Penguin, 2006.

[6] J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, London and New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2018; and J.J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", *International Security*, vol. 43, no. 4, Spring 2019, pp. 7-50; joined by S.M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019. For an outside analysis, see P. Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020.

[7] S. Karaganov, "We Are Witnessing the Birth of a New World Order", *RT.com*, 31 October 2022.

[8] A. Sushentsov, "On Whose Side is Time in the Confrontation between Russia and the West?", Valdai Discussion Club, 6 October 2022.

[9] A. Krickovic and R.Sakwa, "War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies", *Journal of Military and Security Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2022, pp. 89-109.

world of some 200 sovereign states has come into being as the European empires disintegrated. This enlarged community of nations has now matured, endowing the international system with a robust multipolarity populated by a growing number of middle and small powers. They are now demanding that their voice be heard at the UN and in numerous other fora, including the G20, ASEAN+ and any number of other regional groupings. The emergence of alternatives to the predominance of the political West marks an epochal shift towards genuine multipolarity.

The balance of power in international politics is undoubtedly changing. This concerns not just the relative economic decline of the political West's contribution to global GDP, accompanied commensurately by the rise in the proportion delivered by the Asia-Pacific region. For the two decades between 2000 and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, China registered phenomenal growth, with its average GDP rising cumulatively by an average of 8.9% per annum and by 8.3% per capita.[10] With the liberalisation of some of the earlier constraints in the 1990s, India has also registered growth that by 2022 propelled it into fifth place in terms of nominal GDP. The market reforms of the 1990s followed by the windfall energy and commodity rents from 2000 also allowed Russia to recover some of its transition losses, and by 2022 was in sixth place in nominal GDP terms, and eleventh in purchasing power parity terms. At the same time, a distinctive "political East" is emerging, shaped by the imperatives of Cold War II but above all by the institutionalisation of regional multipolarity. This entails the creation of an alternative institutional and financial architecture, to break the threat of US-led sanctions and the weaponisation of the dominance of the dollar.

Already in 2009 Fareed Zakaria noted that, with the exception of the politico-military level, the distribution of global power was shifting away from American dominance.

[10] J. Mills, *Why the West is Failing*, Cambridge, Polity, 2022, p. 3.

This inaugurated what he called the post-American world, "one defined and directed from many places and many people".[11] This would not necessarily be an anti-American world but one in which "countries in all parts of the world are no longer objects or observers, but players in their own right. It is the birth of a truly global order".[12] Oliver Stuenkel later called this a "post-Western" world.[13] The idea is useful in descriptive terms, but the prefix "post" is analytically misleading since it privileges what came before as a reaction to what came after. In other words, the onset of a new era of multipolarity is generated not so much by a reaction to the temporal predominance of the West but by objective processes that may have little to do with the policies of the political West. The long-term recovery of agency by the political East represents a return to a pattern that endured for centuries, if not millennia, before the modern era. Today the recovery is most visible in the creation of a range of institutions that exclude the political West, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS (Brazil Russia, India, China and South Africa), those that are global but based in the political East, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, as well as a plethora of regional associations.

The political East is only in its formative stages, and is unlikely to become a direct counterpart of the political West. Its putative members eschew the divisive and conflictual bloc politics represented by its Western protagonist. The normative principle of the political East is sovereign internationalism, the fundamental concept underlying the Charter international system. This was also the case with the Bandung Declaration of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1955, and is at the heart of the various declarations and communiqués issued by the summits and secretariats of the organisations of the political East. As far as Russia and some of the other states are concerned, the

[11] F. Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York, Norton, 2009, p. 3.
[12] Ibid., p. 36.
[13] O. Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers are Remaking Global Order*, Cambridge, Polity, 2016.

US-led "rules-based order" represents a usurpation of the rights and prerogatives vested in the UN, its agencies and norms. This was the natural result of the type of politics practiced by the political West, namely democratic internationalism, in which the political character of a state determines the quality of its relationship with the political West. By definition, this erodes the possibility of fruitful diplomacy and reproduces the cold war logic, as is only fitting for a political West that is the progeny of the Cold War.

Russia and Multipolarity

The concept of multipolarity has been a *leitmotif* of Moscow's foreign policy since Russia became an independent state, although with varying degrees of intensity. In the first phase, dominated by the liberal and Atlanticist views of the foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev, it barely figured, although even then the defence of Russia's perceived great power national interests was far from neglected.[14] However, it was only when he was replaced by Yevgeny Primakov in January 1996 that multipolarity (typically rendered in Russian as polycentrism) became the dominant concept. It signalled that Russia would remain apart from the political West and pursue its own great power ambitions, although not necessarily in a confrontational manner. This was a contradictory period of cooperation, notably with Russia joining the Council of Europe and working with the European Union; but at the same time there was confrontation over the perpetually vexed question of NATO enlargement. Primakov represented the old Soviet foreign policy establishment, and on that basis advanced the idea of a Russia-India-China (RIC) bloc, the forerunner of the BRICS and what is now becoming the political East. Following Russia's partial default of August 1998, Primakov became prime

[14] Vividly described in his memoirs, A. Kozyrev, *The Firebird: A Memoir. The Elusive Fate of Russian Democracy*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.

minister, and it was in this capacity that in March 1999 he was forced to accept the incorporation of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO, at the very time when NATO started bombing Serbia. On his way to a meeting of the IMF in Washington, Primakov turned the plane back to Moscow, a symbolic reversal that resonates to this day.

On coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin sought to finesse the problem of NATO enlargement by suggesting that Russia should join, but his overtures were rejected.[15] Instead, Russian concerns were to be allayed by the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. In contrast to Primakov's revival of 1950s-style peaceful coexistence, predicated on the view that relations with the political West would be confrontational although not necessarily bellicose, Putin's new realism represented a sober assessment of Russia's sovereignty and status in the world, shorn of such a grand conceptual framework as Primakovian multipolarity. Instead, the emphasis was on a deideologised pragmatic relationship with the political West and other states. This was the framework that endured until 2012, although with decreasing conviction as the list of Russian grievances grew ever-longer – including opposition to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the deployment of ballistic missile defences in Eastern Europe, failure to ratify the modified Conventional Forces in Europe agreement, and dismissal of interim President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal for a European Security Treaty in 2008-09, culminating in another military intervention, this time in Libya in 2011. In his landmark speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 Putin roundly denounced the universal pretensions of the political West, and in particular its alleged flouting of the norms represented by the Charter international system. He stressed the "universal, indivisible character of security" and condemned attempts to establish a "unipolar world … in which

[15] Analysed by R. Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 86-87 and *passim*.

there is one master, one sovereign".[16] This was the first sustained condemnation of the alleged usurpation by the political West of the prerogatives vested in the Charter system and the associated body of international law. Later this was couched in terms of the US-led "rules-based order" arrogating rights that properly belonged to the system as a whole. As far as Moscow and Beijing are concerned, the "rules-based order" is little more than a synonym of the political West. The rules are never defined but represent an order that undermines the international law and norms associated with the Charter system.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 signalled the onset of a new phase in Russian foreign policy, in which Moscow sought to convert multipolarity from a slogan into a functioning set of institutions.[17] This period was marked by a sharp turn towards a harder authoritarianism at home accompanied by a conservative cultural shift. The intensification of plans for Eurasian economic integration effectively signalled that the institutions of the political West would no longer be hegemonic across the continent. The EU-centred vision of Europe was challenged. Already the Moscow-led Cooperative Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) offered an alternative, though at a far lower level of integration, to NATO. In both cases the intent was clear – Russia would seek to establish its own hegemony across Eurasia, and thus contest the region's drift towards the West.

The first major casualty of the strategy was Ukraine. Confrontation resulted from what Moscow perceived to be a coup against the incumbent President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014, after he had indicated a turn towards Moscow and postponed signing the long-planned Association Agreement with the EU. The subsequent seizure of Crimea and support for the autonomist insurgency in the Donbass heralded

[16] "Russian President Vladimir Putin's Speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy", 10 February 2007.

[17] Examined by N.A. Simoniya and A.V. Torkunov, "Novyi Mirovoi Poryadok: Ot Bipolyarnosti k Mnogopolyusnosti" ("New World Order: From Bipolarity to Multipolarity"), *Polis*, no. 3, 2015, pp. 27-37.

an era of intensifying sanctions against Russia, accompanied by growing Western military support for Ukraine. The battle lines were drawn for a proxy war between Russia and the political West. Russia's invasion in early 2022 transformed a covert struggle into open warfare. The conflict destroyed not only the post-Cold War European peace order but also threatened the foundations of the Charter international system in its entirety.

Multipolarity Today

The UN Charter is a manifesto of multipolarity. It acts as the "constitution" of an international system based on the sovereignty of its 193 members, and generates the political practice of sovereign internationalism. The so-called "anarchy" described by realists in the International Relations literature is confined to the sphere of international politics, and in different ways to the other two main arenas of global affairs – international political economy and transnational civil society (spheres that are not the focus of this chapter). The Charter system establishes the normative framework for the other three levels based on the tension between sovereignty and multilateralism. The tension is far from being a contradiction, let alone an antinomy – a contradiction that cannot be resolved – but a creative tension between the foundational principles of our era. Sovereignty is constrained by the very act of signing the UN Charter, which outlaws war as an instrument of policy and entails a myriad other commitments, balanced by a commitment to cooperative multilateralism in relations between states and in dealing with the problems facing humanity as a whole. In the post-Cold War era the contradiction took the form of the tension between the principles of freedom of choice on the one hand and the indivisibility of security on the other. The relatively unmitigated sovereignty devolved to princes by the Westphalian settlement has been superseded by the sovereign internationalism enshrined in the Charter and the subsequent body of international law and norms.

This also means that the putative anarchy at the level of international politics is tempered. This is in no way suggesting that the UN acts as some sort of surrogate world government, far from it. There is a constant struggle for power, status and influence between states and the "orders" associated with them. The quality of multipolarity at this level differs from that normatively endowed by the Charter system, although it is moderated by Charter principles. So far, no state has repudiated the existing order, unlike 'revisionist' Japan and Germany in the interwar years. Hence it is important to distinguish between the international system writ large and the various orders contained within it.[18] This is something that Henry Kissinger notoriously failed to do in his study of world order, and is a failing common to much contemporary realist analysis.[19] For them, the arrangement of powers within international politics *is* the system, which if the model presented here has any validity is a category mistake.[20]

The selection of analytical categories shapes the subsequent political analysis. One of the immediate implications is rethinking the view that Russia and China have become "revisionist" powers. The charge has been laid against them in recent iterations of US national security and defence doctrines, but the accusation needs to be dissected.[21] At the level of international politics the two countries, and those who align with them, are indeed revisionist – to the extent that they refuse to become elements of the broader hegemony exercised by the political West. Put crudely, they repudiate the expansive logic of the political West and resist becoming subalterns in

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[18] For a critical assessment, see J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions", *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994/5, pp. 5-49, and in greater detail, Idem, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition, New York, W. W. Norton, 2014, originally published 2001.

[19] H. Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, London, Allen Lane, 2014.

[20] For a creative analysis, see W.C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War", *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, Winter 1994/95, pp. 91-129.

[21] The latest version is White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022.

the manner of the postwar European states. However, in terms of their relationship to the overarching international system, they are conservative status quo powers. For example, the Joint Declaration signed by Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing on 4 February 2022 represented a ringing endorsement of Charter principles.[22] From this perspective, it is the political West that has become revisionist, in assuming the powers that properly belong to the international community as a whole, as constituted by the Charter system. The whole notion of "revisionism", which bears such a strong analytical burden today, requires disaggregation. Too often it is applied as a polemical rather than an analytical category. In the Russian case, the two facets generated a neo-revisionist stance: revisionist concerning its status and place in international politics, but status quo when it comes to the international system.[23]

This ambivalence characterised Russia's approach to multipolarity in the post-Cold War period. In his major study of Russia and multipolarity, Martin Smith identifies three Russian responses: the "confrontationalist" view, which broadly corresponds to Primakov's stance accompanied by aspirations to recreate something akin to a bipolar structure in international politics; the "competitive" view, which characterised Putin's early years before he became more confrontational; and the "concert-based" view, which harks back to the Vienna system and remains the default position of the Russian elite.[24] Mikhail Gorbachev implicitly appealed to the nineteenth-century Concert system of cooperative and inclusive multipolarity when he spoke of a common European home in Strasburg in 1989. Later, this perspective was elaborated based on the argument that in a

[22] "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development", 4 February 2022.

[23] R. Sakwa, "Russian Neo-Revisionism", *Russian Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-21.

[24] M.A. Smith, "Russia and Multipolarity since the End of the Cold War", *East European Politics*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2013, pp. 36-51.

globalised and interconnected world, peace and development was a shared endeavour that no single state could uphold on its own. Hence there was a need to maintain the balance of power accompanied by mutual respect for the interests of others. In this model the great powers act as "telamons holding up the sky", pillars supporting the entablature of multipolarity.[25] A more 'civilisational' view is advanced by Elena Chebankova, who argues that the model of globalisation advanced by the West subsumed particularities into a generalised form of modernity. By contrast, the Russian view of multipolarity is one in which the balance of interests is reinforced by a multiplicity of politico-cultural forms and multiple centres of power.[26]

This raises the fundamental question of the degree to which Russia, China, India and other countries actually adhere to Charter norms. None has repudiated the Charter system, which in the case of Russia and China would mean renouncing their privileged position as permanent members of the UN Security Council, but this does not mean that they observe the principles to which they rhetorically remain committed. When perceived national interests and Charter norms diverge, the former usually triumph. In recent years, a slew of countries have moved in an illiberal direction, some of which, notably Hungary and Poland, can be found at the heart of the political West. As for the US, it has always had an ambivalent relationship with the Charter system. As Stephen Wertheim argues, US policymakers in 1940 argued that US primacy would not be of the classical imperial type but embedded in a set of multilateral institutions, above all in what was to become the UN. America did not renounce the right to act as it saw fit, even without legitimation by the UN, a practice exacerbated by the Cold War but then part of the ingrained habit of a dominant state.[27]

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[25] A. Sushentsov, "'Telamons Holding the Sky': Russian Views on Evolving Balance of Power", Valdai Discussion Club, 2 May 2017.

[26] E. Chebankova, "Russia's Idea of the Multipolar World Order: Origins and Main Dimensions", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2017, pp. 217-34.

[27] S. Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of US Global Supremacy*, Harvard,

Great power status entails great responsibility, which today means defending the principles, norms and procedures of the Charter system.

Russia in the Multipolar World

The notion of a political West and its Eastern counterpart are abstract concepts, yet help to provide analytical clarity in a complex and potentially catastrophic global situation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a 9/11 moment for Europe; so, in similar terms, 24/2 represents a moment of rupture.[28] Some of the trends that have taken hold since the end the Cold War remain, but globalisation is now fragmenting and the idea of an inclusive post-Cold War peace order encompassing the whole of Europe has been irretrievably lost. The unprecedented barrage of sanctions, the bulk of which are unlikely to be removed even if some sort of peace is achieved in Ukraine, means that Russia faces an extended period of separation from the political West. Its economy faces the prospect of technological degradation and the Russian polity will come under unprecedented strain.

When confronted by pressure from the West, Russia has historically proved remarkably resilient. As long as the present leadership and elite constellation remains in place, Russia's conflict with the political West will continue. In his Valdai speech in October 2022, Putin outlined his vision of a multipolar world to supplant the Western-dominated model of international politics that emerged after the end of Cold War I. Although Putin makes no secret of his disdain for Lenin, he quoted him to argue that "this is a revolutionary situation to some extent – the elites cannot and the people do not want to live like that any longer". He suggested that the confrontation would continue for at least another decade, until a new global

Belknap Press, 2020.

[28] The analogy is drawn by M. Edele, "It's NATO, Stupid!", *Inside Story*, 22 November 2022.

configuration is achieved.[29] The character of this new order was left unspecified, but it implied more substantive multipolarity.[30] The normalisation of Russia's relations with the political West would not come soon, and it would only come about when the observable trends came to fruition. The assumption among the Russian elite is that the political West is fated to decline, along with the "old system of institutions and regimes" (freedom of trade and respect for private property).[31] Some observers even talk of an "American collapse".[32] This will be accompanied by the crumbling of institutions like the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, the OSCE and the EU.[33] As the Valdai Club report for 2022 put it, this would be a world without superpowers.[34]

In the meantime, Russia deepened relations with putative members of the political East. Top of the list is China, with whom Russia has enjoyed a deepening "strategic partnership" that flowered into a remarkable personal friendship between Putin and Xi. There are undoubtedly strains in the relationship, driven by historical grievances (the unequal treaties in which China ceded large tracts in the Russian Far East in the late XIX century) and incompatible economies and cultures. Above all, their asymmetrical character generates strains, with China far exceeding Russia in economic power, something that is

[29] Vladimir Putin, "Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting", 27 October 2022.

[30] Developed again by Putin at various summits in Central Asia that month, notably in Astana. A. Gereikhanova, "Mnogopolyarnyi Den" ("A Day of Multipolarity"), *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 14 October 2022, pp. 1-2.

[31] Much of the literature is focused on US decline. For a balanced assessment, see C. Whitton, "End of Superpower Monopoly can be Good for America", Valdai Discussion Club, 24 October 2022. He notes that the US national debt has reached $30 trillion, or 123% of GDP, although he notes the resilience of the US economy "even as its unipolar margin of error declines".

[32] A. Martyanov, "Disintegration: Indicators of the Coming American Collapse", Atlanta, GA, Clarity, 2021.

[33] Karaganov (2022).

[34] O. Barabanov, T. Bordachev, Y. Lissovolik, F. Lukyanov, A. Sushentsov, and I. Timofeev, *A World Without Superpowers*, Valdai Discussion Club Report of October 2022.

rapidly being converted into military power as well. Russia traditionally brought technological sophistication in weaponry to the relationship, but even that advantage has eroded, offset by growing military ties between the two countries. Russia's position is also bolstered by its strong diplomatic tradition and global network of relationships, as well as its cultural and linguistic "soft power" in post-Soviet Eurasia, assets undermined by the Ukraine war. Above all, there is a synergy based on Russian commodities, first and foremost energy exports, to a country with a voracious appetite for resources to fuel its continuing growth. It is unlikely that alignment will become an alliance, but it will endure and deepen.

In conditions of uneven multipolarity, middle and even smaller powers are increasingly asserting their influence. This has been evident in a number of multilateral fora, including ASEAN+, BRICS+, SCO, the Organisation of African Unity, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and, of most significance globally, the G20. This was evident at the Bali summit in November 2022, when the Indonesian chair and a number of other non-aligned powers resisted attempts by the G7 group representing the political West from hijacking the agenda. Members of the G7 sought to prevent Russian leaders from attending. Although the final communiqué condemned the war in Ukraine, it added that "There were other views and different assessments of the situation and sanctions" while calling for "diplomacy and dialogue".[35] Despite the Ukraine war, Russia continued to build relationships with its partners in the political East, notably with India, Vietnam and Indonesia, while consolidating its relationship with traditional partners such as Cuba and Venezuela. The global South, as in Cold War I, became the arena for contestation between the US and China, with Russia, as a great power (in its view a cut above legacy powers such as Britain and France), seeking to consolidate its influence in Africa and Latin America. Despite

[35] "G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration", Bali, 15-16 November 2022, Paragraph 3.

the onerous sanctions and military deadlock, Russia established a presence in Mali, the Central African Republic as well as some other states, and hosted summits of African leaders. Russia increasingly presents itself as an anti-colonial power, a pastiche of the Soviet Union's earlier position in support of independence movements. Nevertheless, the stance reflects the concern of the global South that once again their development needs, as well as larger issues associated with climate change (droughts, floods, famine and inundation of coastal and island communities), are being neglected as the global North slips back into its default condition of interminable internecine warfare.

Conclusion

The international system is under unprecedented strain. The internalisation of the balance of power in the UN Security Council failed to provide a forum for the resolution of conflicts. The addition of India, Brazil and a representative from Africa would undoubtedly render the Charter international system more reflective of the changed correlation of forces in international politics and of the concerns of the great majority of UN members. In the absence of UN reform, the First Cold War has regenerated in the form of great power contestation and global division. In conditions of uneven multipolarity two main axes have emerged: China-US, and Russia against the political West, accompanied by a broader ideological, even civilisational, contest between the political West and the nascent political East. Standing to one side, numerous middle and smaller powers seek to preserve their autonomy through neutrality, while condemning the irresponsibility that sparked renewed cold war tensions. For them, in the current climate emergency situation, peace and development is the priority, not relitigating the First Cold War. However, these conflicts will endure. There appears to be no viable pathway towards their resolution, jeopardising the international system as a whole. The struggle is not only over hegemony in international politics

but also over the way in which the international system should work. Once again, as in Cold War I, ideology, norms and power are entwined. The struggle between democracies and illiberal authoritarian states is only one facet in a multidimensional struggle over pre-eminence in international politics as well as the fate of the entire international system. A new era of international politics has dawned, though so far contained within the framework of the Charter international system. If that were to go, then uneven multipolarity would give way to an unrestrained war of all against all. As the second UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, put it in May 1954: "The United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell".[36]

[36] Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld at University of California Convocation, Berkeley, California, Thursday, 13 May 1954, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1291161?ln=en

3. Lessons from the Ukraine War: Decoupling and Diversification

Rem Korteweg

What impact does Russia's war against Ukraine have for the global trading system? How has Russia's war against Ukraine impacted global trade relations? This chapter assesses the impact of the war on global supply chains and the trajectory of globalisation generally. One year into Russia's war, here are seven lessons that illustrate how the war has acted as a catalyst to move the global trading system towards greater fragmentation.

Lesson 1: The War Disrupted Global Food Supplies

The war has been devastating to Ukraine's economy. In the first months of Russia's offensive Ukraine's export figures collapsed, particularly its exports of cereals and other food stuffs, which had a global impact. Russia and Ukraine are among the largest exporters of wheat, grain and corn, and a war between the two sent shockwaves through global food supply chains. Developing economies were hit particularly hard. The war also sparked soaring energy prices and tightened the supply of fertilisers, further pushing up food prices. Natural gas is an important ingredient for the production of fertilisers and in response to international sanctions, Russia – the world's largest exporter of fertilisers – stopped some sales.[1] The impact on global food

[1] J. Glauber and D. Laborde, "How sanctions on Russia and Belarus are

markets was substantial, and it raised the spectre that a war in Europe could produce a famine across the "Global South". If anything, it illustrated the downside of the interdependence of today's global economy. The Russian-Ukrainian grain deal – which has reinstated a degree of Ukrainian cereal exports – is the only international diplomatic success so far in managing the economic downsides of the war.

Lesson 2: Western Countries Are Using Globalisation As a Sword

Before the war started, Western countries warned Russia about massive economic retaliation if it decided to move ahead with its military campaign. What that economic retaliation would be was left unspecified. Of course, it depended on the type of steps President Putin would take. As dawn broke on February 24, it was clear that Putin had decided to go "all-in". Instead of taking incremental steps and occupying increasingly larger parts of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, Russia instead aimed for the country's capital. Putin's intentions were clear. His plan was to conquer all of Ukraine and remove president Volodymyr Zelensky from power. It triggered a shockwave in European capitals; it was the darkest scenario they had considered, and thus required the strongest response. Within a matter of weeks the EU had agreed on the first of a dozen sanctions packages, the Nord-Stream 2 pipeline project was stopped, Russian Central Bank assets were frozen, Russian banks were banned from the SWIFT financial transactions system, travel bans were put in place and a process was set in motion to seize the assets of Russian oligarchs. At the time, French minister of finance Bruno le Maire said the SWIFT ban was a "financial nuclear weapon". He also said – though he later softened his comments – that "we are going to wage a total economic and financial

impacting exports of agricultural products and fertilizer" IFPRI Blog, Issue Post, 9 November 2022.

war on Russia". German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, said that the sanctions will be "hitting the Putin system … at its core of power".[2] It captured the mood. Had Putin pursued a less blatant approach in his military campaign, Europe's response may well have been very different. But the aggression exhibited by the Russian military and the attempt to seize Kyiv triggered a swift and resolute economic response and generated European unity. Western economies embarked on a strategy to use globalisation as a sword against the Russian economy. They sought to leverage economic interdependence against Russia, attempting to cut Russia off from key parts of the global economy and to isolate Russia economically. In addition to the sanctions, the countries of the G7 pushed to remove some of Russia's trade privileges as member of the World Trade Organisation and enticed some firms to leave the country. The reasoning behind this was that the economic pain would cause Russia to reconsider, or at least, would make it more difficult for Russia to continue the war.

Since then, there has been much discussion about the effectiveness of the various packages of sanctions passed by the EU. Since a large part of the global economy has not supported Western economic measures – most notably China and India seek to remain neutral – the Russian economy has not been "decoupled" from the global economy. Instead, European economies – and those of other G7 members – are decoupling from Russia.

The war has severed economic ties between the West and Russia. Never before have G7 economies imposed such a wide-ranging set of economic sanctions on such a large economy. This development may well have permanent features. Maximalist conditions are attached to Western sanctions packages, which are very difficult for Russia to realistically meet, raising the prospect that these measures may be in place for quite some time.

[2] P. Wintour, "The sanctions war against Russia: a year of playing cat and mouse", *The Guardian*, 20 February 2023.

European economies also embarked on a strategy to reduce their exposure to Russian energy politics. Two weeks after the war broke out, the European Commission published a plan to dramatically reduce its imports of Russian gas. Some demand reduction occurred through energy-saving measures, but a lot of import substitution took place. Before the war, Europe imported roughly 45 per cent of its natural gas from Russia, some 150 billion cubic metres. One year later, it was down to less than 10 per cent. The EU is reordering its mix of energy imports, substituting imports from Russia with diversified supplies. Particularly supplies of liquid natural gas have increased, including through long-term contracts with major exporters like the United States and Qatar, but pipeline imports from Norway, Azerbaijan and Algeria have also increased.

As part of the sanctions, the EU has also phased out imports of Russian coal and has imposed a boycott on Russian shipborne oil and oil products (along with a price cap). Though Russia still supplies some gas and oil to the European market, the trend is clear. Russia's erstwhile position as a premier source of European energy is over. The West and Russia are now more decoupled in energy terms than they were during the Cold War.

Lesson 3: Economic Resilience Is the Future

For Europe, the objective to decouple from the Russian economy heralds a new phase in thinking about trade and economic ties. Over the past few years, supply chain dependencies have been thrust into the spotlight. The Xi-Trump tariff war of 2018 raised the prospect that European firms – and their suppliers – could be caught in the middle of a geopolitical tug-of-war. This led to discussions about splitting supply chains. Later, a container ship stranded in the Suez Canal illustrated the vulnerabilities of a just-in-time delivery system. A global pandemic illustrated how offshoring production had made our societies less resilient, particularly as a scramble for basic medicines and protective equipment occurred. "Just-in-case"

started to replace "just-in-time". The Ukraine war now acts as a catalyst underlining the growing concern about supply risks. But the war did not just amplify existing trends, it also led to an increased focus on the role that geopolitics can play in disturbing supply chains, and how supply-chain dependencies can become tools of geopolitical pressure. The war engendered a new debate in Europe – one that had been taking place in the US all along – about how national security considerations should become more integrated into the development of trade and industrial policy. It has led to a reappraisal of the role of the state and a farewell to the liberal "laissez-faire" model. Among the European public, it has become more widely accepted that governments – national or EU – intervene in markets to address geopolitical uncertainties.

The war has also led to a growing realisation that trade and geopolitics are intimately connected. The war brought greater urgency to Europe's ongoing discussions about economic resilience and reducing so-called strategic dependencies.

Lesson 4: Russia Is Turning Towards China

For decades, Europe was Russia's primary energy export market. Since February 2022 European governments have taken steps to decouple from the Russian Federation. And as Europe turns its back on Russia, so too is Moscow turning away and pivoting politically and economically to the East. While growing Sino-Russian rapprochement has been ongoing for some time, the war has acted as an accelerant. The Chinese and Russian economies are complementary: China needs raw materials and energy, and Russia needs high-end technologies and consumable goods. In the weeks preceding the war, President Xi and Putin declared they had a friendship that has "no limits". The war has pushed the two countries closer still and relations should be expected to develop further. Declines in the export of Russian gas and oil to Europe have been met with commensurate increases by China, followed by India and

Pakistan. As Alexander Gabuev at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace writes, "China will likely gobble up more of Russia's overall trade. It will become an essential market for Russian exports (notably natural resources) while Russian consumers will increasingly rely on Chinese goods. And it will take advantage of Russia's predicament to assert the renminbi as both a dominant regional and major international currency".[3] In other words, China will opportunistically use the war to advance its own geopolitical agenda: Russia will be forced to focus more on Beijing, and China should be expected to welcome Russia into its economic and political orbit. This is not to say that China and Russia do not have bilateral irritants, but the war in Ukraine has created an overriding interest for Moscow to forge closer ties with Beijing.

While trade with the G7 has fallen, Russia's trade with China has boomed, reaching $190 billion in 2022, up more than 30 per cent from the previous year. China will also negotiate favourable terms to gain access to Russian energy supplies. On the financial front, Russia will become increasingly dependent on the renminbi, moving away from the dollar and the euro. This will contribute to weakening the dominant position of the dollar in the international financial system, and contribute to a form of "financial decoupling". This serves China's longer-term ambitions fine.

More broadly, Russia will use its ample natural resources to build and sustain a new network of semi-official alliances, both in the economic, security and ideological realm. By currying the favour of countries like China, Pakistan, Egypt or India, it will enable Moscow to cushion the Russian economy from the worst impact of Western sanctions and avoid the political and economic isolation that Western governments hoped to achieve. This development will lead to a redrawing of global energy and resource supplies.

[3] A. Gabuev, "China's New Vassal", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 August 9 2022.

Lesson 5: China Is Drawing Lessons of Its Own

Just as European governments are mapping their undesired dependencies on Russia, Beijing has drawn the same conclusion. While China may not want to decouple from various economic relations with Europe, it has been preparing its ability to do so.

Beijing is opportunistically exploiting Russia's political and economic shift to the East. It is also drawing a series of strategic lessons from the war that will help it to prepare for possible Western countermeasures in the event of a crisis over Taiwan, Hong Kong or the South China Sea. For instance, Beijing may well be planning how Western countries might respond to any Chinese action to assert control over Taiwan; for Chinese policymakers, the West's "playbook" of economic decoupling and sanctions employed against Russia would be the first place to look.

The Western decision to block Russian banks from the SWIFT financial information system will intensify Chinese efforts to move forward with growing its own system. In 2015, the Chinese central bank launched CIPS, the Cross-Border Interbank Payments System, the Chinese alternative to SWIFT. Transactions have been growing ever since and the war is acting as a catalyst. In the same year that CIPS was launched, China announced the policy to promote "domestic-international dual circulation". This blueprint for increased self-sufficiency aims to decrease exposure to international markets and grow indigenous innovation, domestic production and the Chinese consumer market. Not only is this designed to increase domestic higher value-added production, it is also meant to make China less reliant on international value chains. This has obvious geopolitical benefits in a context where Western countries have shown their willingness to instrumentalise economic ties against its "no-limits friend" Russia.

Beijing will see the war in Ukraine as a massive vindication for the dual-circulation policy it announced in 2015. China will also ensure that fewer of its central bank assets are placed

outside China or are denominated in dollars (and to a lesser extent euros). Dollar assets may increasingly be viewed as a geopolitical liability.

But in its analysis of what the war in Ukraine means for its own economic vulnerabilities, China will also draw the conclusion that it has important leverage over Western economies. Particularly in the area of access to critical materials and green tech – an area of increasing Western demand to reduce the dependency on hydrocarbons – China wields tremendous market power.

It remains to be seen how China's focus on dual circulation will play out in East Asia. Here, countries like Japan and South Korea are strong supporters of the Western response against Russia, yet remain economically close to China and dependent on Chinese supplies. This may well be the region where the geopolitical implications of the decoupling promoted by the Ukraine war are felt most strongly.

Lesson 6: The West Is Asking Itself If China Is a Vulnerability Too?

Western concerns about strategic dependencies triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine are also leading to questions about similar dependencies on China. The US, though less exposed to Russian imports than Europe, is increasingly worried about its exposure to China. Washington is dissuading the import of various Chinese high-end technologies out of national security concerns, fracturing the traditional "Chimerica"[4] model of production. In Europe, politicians are now also worried whether there is a Chinese equivalent to Europe's earlier dependence on Russian natural gas.

One example is in the area of critical raw materials, where extraction or processing – or both – is in some important

[4] Chimerica is a portmanteau coined by Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick describing the symbiotic relationship between China and the United States.

instances concentrated in China. Such is the case, for example, for lithium and rare-earth metals; these categories of metals are crucial to the production of green technologies like high-end batteries or electric vehicles. To reduce European dependencies on China, the EU is pursuing a critical raw materials act, which includes a mix of industrial subsidies and trade measures to diversify supply, pursue substitutes and develop new resource partnerships. Similarly, the US Inflation Reduction Act contains clauses designed to decouple from Chinese high-tech or from Chinese sources of critical materials. Across the board, Western governments are now identifying areas where they have unwanted dependencies on Beijing. Though this may also have taken place without the Ukraine war, the conflict has focused minds in Europe and has added a national security dimension to the debate about economic resilience that was previously absent.

A word of warning, however, is warranted. Diversifying away from China is not as easy as substituting imports of Russian natural gas and oil. For starters, China's share of EU imports and exports is much larger than Russia's. And China controls a number of key supplies that the EU needs to reduce its dependence on Russia. Ironically, in its attempt to become less reliant on Russian oil and gas, the EU is doubling down on the climate transition. But to meet the decarbonisation targets, the EU will increase its dependence on Chinese-sourced materials, products and technologies. The EU's critical raw materials act is a step in the right direction, but for the next decade China's dominant position in this area will continue.

Lesson 7: Globalisation Is Also a Shield

Supply chain vulnerabilities have been brought into sharper focus by the war in Ukraine. This has sparked a greater push for decoupling across various supply chains, not just in the energy domain. This comes alongside similar trends over the past few years. What is new, however, is the national security dimension that has become more prominent since 24 February

2022. Europe's response to the war has been to decouple from Russia, and explore whether that can also be done from China. Governments are mapping their strategic dependencies and are asking the private sector to do the same.

The policy reflex has been to put more emphasis on reshoring and bringing back production from faraway places in countries with problematic regimes. But this has its limits, as self-sufficiency is a pipe dream for developed, open economies. Reshoring will be the preserve of a limited number of sectors.

Towards Deglobalisation? Concluding Thoughts

Decoupling from Russia or China is not the same as deglobalisation. Instead, the lesson from the Ukraine war is to see globalisation as a shield. Diversification and spreading supply risks – not reshoring – is the means to reduce geopolitical leverage from being overly dependent on single sources of supply. This means more globalisation, not less. Western governments and firms must start to value interdependence as a means to improve resilience, not as a source that undermines it. In this light, the war thus marks a new phase of globalisation. Decoupling and diversification, not deglobalisation.

Decoupling between Western economies and China will happen – inspired in part by the Ukraine war – but this will be relegated to sensitive technologies, like semiconductors, artificial intelligence, next-generation telecommunications and green tech. This will likely remain the exception, as other, less-sensitive goods will continue to be traded and are somewhat immune to the geopolitical tremors shaping the trade system. A case in point is that in 2022 – despite the growing policy rhetoric about decoupling – US-Chinese trade in goods climbed to a record levels of $690 billion.

Trade will become more complex, and more costly, as a consequence of the Ukraine war. But through diversification, trade will also show its benefits. It is a way to spread risk, guarantee supply continuity and facilitate exchange. This also

has geopolitical benefits. Trade is ultimately about keeping lines of communication open. In a context of growing geopolitical tensions, this is a value in itself.

Finally, as national security concerns become more prominent in shaping trade and industrial policy in Western capitals, the consequences for multilateral trade cooperation remain uncertain. The World Trade Organization will face increasing challenges as members use the "national security exception" to carve out a policy space to subsidise certain productions, or restrict imports of sensitive technologies. As geopolitical tensions rise, multilateral institutions will invariably find it more difficult to produce consensus. A post-WTO world looms on the horizon.

The EU should start thinking about how to build new trade institutions that fit into this more fragmented trade landscape. One step to consider is a transatlantic trade pact that can help forge trusted supply chains in key technologies and goods, and that could contribute to setting new rules of the road for a trade environment that is more decoupled and diversified. There is much work to be done.

4. Russia-China Relations After the Invasion of Ukraine

Sarah Kirchberger

Roughly since 2014 the year Russia annexed Crimea Russia-China relations had been on a steadily deepening path. Notwithstanding a history of deep animosity during the Cold War, and despite massive distrust among some constituencies within both countries towards each other, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping seemed to have found unprecedented common ground in their joint opposition to the "political West".[1] United in a sense of opposing an international order they considered unjust, and painting their countries as victims of various historical grievances, both leaders seemed intent on restoring their countries' "rightful place" in the world, by forceful means if necessary.

As various case studies in a recent volume on the Russia-China relationship indicate,[2] though this trend of an unprecedented convergence of interest between Russia and China is not completely devoid of road bumps, and while instances of mutual distrust and divergences of interests in some fields can still be occasionally found, by and large, mutual cooperation on increasingly sensitive issues (including first-tier military

[1] J.I. Bekkevold, "Imperialist Master, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China's Changing Views of Russia", in S. Kirchberger, S. Sinjen, and N. Wörmer (eds.), *Russia-China Relations: emerging alliance or eternal rivals?*, Cham, Springer, 2022, pp. 41-58.

[2] Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer (2022).

technology development, such as a conventional submarine design, naval gas turbines, and hydroacoustics in the Arctic) has slowly but steadily deepened.[3] Worryingly from the point of view of smaller neighbouring nations in the periphery of both China and Russia, a rapprochement between these two Eurasian giants enhances the risk of mutual support for bullying smaller nations in their respective peripheries.[4] Both are after all nuclear powers, and both enjoy veto rights as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine a key strategic partner of China in military-technological cooperation without whose hardware deliveries[5] and extensive support[6] the Chinese Navy's aircraft carrier capability would not exist in its current form today presented the first real test to the so-called "friendship without limits" that was jointly proclaimed by presidents Xi and Putin on 4 February 2022, when they met face-to-face at the opening of the Beijing Olympics, a mere three weeks before the full invasion of Ukraine on 24 February began.[7] To understand the significance of China's behaviour towards Russia after 24 February 2022, China's own bilateral relationship with Ukraine must be considered as an important factor that has been impacting China's somewhat ambiguous stance toward the war.

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[3] Cf. C. Larson, "Russia and China want to build a 'non-nuclear' submarine together", *The National Interest,* 28 August 2020; G. Dominguez and M. Capeleto, "China, Russia agree to co-operate in development of gas turbines", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (electronic edition), 19 June 2017; F. Jüris, "Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space", in Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer (2022), pp. 185-202.

[4] H. Adomeit, "Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?", in Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer (2022), pp. 17-39.

[5] R. Farley, "What if China never bought Ukraine's aircraft carrier and rebuilt it?", *The National Interest*, 6 October 2018.

[6] "Liaoning jian zong sheji shi fu Hua shoupin huo dazao geng qiangda hangmu" ("Chief designer of the Liaoning went to China to work, or to build a more powerful aircraft carrier"), *DWNews.com*, 4 September 2017.

[7] Kremlin, Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, Beijing, 4 February 2022.

From the point of view of Chinese observers, Russia's war against Ukraine has a distinct meaning with regard to China's own revisionist agenda towards the island of Taiwan, whose eventual integration into the People's Republic of China is considered, according to the latest Chinese White Paper on the Taiwan question, "indispensable for the realization of China's rejuvenation" and "a historic mission of the Communist Party of China".[8] Long before the 24 February 2022 full invasion of Ukraine, Chinese military strategists had been drawing parallels between the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and a potential Chinese attempt to establish control over Taiwan via hybrid means.[9] For example, in a December 2014 article the well-known navalist Zhang Wenmu of Beihang University in Beijing argued that Vladimir Putin's bold move to stage a hybrid takeover of Crimea with "little green men" might be successfully copied by China. If the collective political West were to be caught wrong-footed again, as it was during the Crimea takeover in early 2014, Zhang argued that China would in such a case ultimately be able to create facts on the ground faster than the US and NATO could hope to respond. Pointing to the Chinese notion of "core interests" (*hexin liyi*) for which a nation is willing to use "unlimited means" (*wuxian shouduan*), Zhang essentially made the case that the US and its allies would be too far removed geographically and also unwilling to sacrifice enough resources for what would be to them a mere non-core interest. China, by contrast, would in such a case be able to use "unlimited means", just like Russia did in Crimea, and thereby impose its preference on the world.[10]

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[8] The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office, The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era, White Paper, August 2022.

[9] Cf. L. Saalman, "Little Grey Men: China and the Ukraine Crisis", *Survival*, vol. 58, November 2016, pp. 135-56, here p. 135; L.J. Goldstein, "Get Ready: China Could Pull a 'Crimea' in Asia", *The National Interest*, 11 April 2015.

[10] W. Zhang, "Ukelan shijian de shijie yiyi ji qi dui Zhongguo de jingshi" ("The global significance of the Ukraine Incident and its warning to China"), *Guoji anquan yanjiu* (*Journal of International Security Studies*), vol. 4, 28 December 2014.

This view by Zhang does not take into account some key geostrategic differences between the cases of Taiwan and Crimea, including a very different geography which results in vastly different tactical environments from the point of view of an invading force. Further, it also overlooks the existence of a de facto security guarantee for Taiwan from the United States via the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which gives Taiwan a better position in terms of its long-term status as a quasi US ally than Ukraine.[11] Nor does an analysis such as Zhang's appreciate the important factor of Taiwan's own self-defence capability. In that sense, it betrays a similar mindset as the one that was evident in many leading Russian commentators of the 2022 Ukraine war, who continue to paint it as a proxy war within the framework of great-power conflict between Russia and the US and NATO, with little to no agency accorded to Ukraine itself, which is consequently seen as little more than a pawn.[12]

The unexpectedly successful defense of Ukraine against what the majority of observers deemed a vastly superior Russian military, and in particular the extreme losses, humiliating defeats and surprising tactical shortcomings on the Russian side have by now proven that a line of thinking that overlooks the agency of an invaded country and its motivation to defend itself can lead to dangerous miscalculations, overestimating the chances of military success and the potential geostrategic rewards to be reaped through a "bold" move to annex territory from a weaker neighbour. It can therefore be assumed that for China, the genesis, conduct, and final outcome of the Russian war against Ukraine will carry significant meaning for evaluating any scenarios that Chinese leaders might contemplate for a forceful takeover of Taiwan.

This chapter's objective is twofold: first, it is going to outline what can be inferred about China's own role towards Russia before and during the Ukraine war, before then discussing the

[11] Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8, 10 April 1979.

[12] See e.g. TASS, "West uses Ukraine as pawn in geopolitical game against Moscow – Russia's UN envoy", 12 February 2019.

war's potential impact on the Russia-China strategic partnership going forward.

China's staunch pro-Russian stance before the invasion: rejected US warnings and a joint statement of "limitless" friendship

During the months leading up to the 24 February 2022 invasion, when Russia was already amassing more than 100,000 troops directly on Ukraine's borders while issuing unprecedented threats that included an ultimatum to NATO during mid-December 2021, the US government, following a Biden-Xi direct talk via video link, tried to convince China of Russia's impending invasion plan by sharing related intelligence with Beijing. The US also asked China to intervene with Russia – reportedly without any success. The Chinese side professed not to believe in the US intelligence presented through various channels from ca. mid-November 2021 onward;[13] and even worse, China seems to have turned this American intelligence directly over to Russia.[14] Then, on the 4th of February, less than three weeks before the invasion, Xi and Putin met at the Beijing Olympics and issued a joint statement proclaiming a "limitless" friendship between both countries in a statement that reads like a full-frontal challenge against the rules-based international order.[15] This statement was backed up by a large new long-term oil and gas trade deal as well as an agreement that allows for China to procure effectively all the grain Russia wants to export. This signalled to Russia China's willingness and ability to help Russia withstand the effects of punitive sanctions that might be leveraged against it by the West in retaliation for an impending

[13] E. Wong, "U.S. Officials Repeatedly Urged China to Help Avert War in Ukraine", *The New York Times*, 25 February 2022.

[14] B. Gertz, "China shared U.S. intelligence on Ukraine crisis with Russia", *The Washington Times*, 25 February 2022.

[15] Kremlin, Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, Beijing, 4 February 2022.

invasion of Ukraine, and indicates also that Xi had most likely given Putin at least tacit approval for a move against Ukraine, if not China's full moral support.[16] All this ultimately empowered Putin to risk the invasion of Ukraine despite American and NATO warnings.

During the War: Only Covert Chinese Support for Russia

Some observers have argued that China's lack of overt military support for its strategic partner Russia during the war despite Putin's increasingly urgent appeals to send arms showed that the Russia-China relationship is not actually deeply strategic. However, this perspective overlooks a long history of strategic bilateral relations between China and *Ukraine*, particularly in the period before 2014, which to a certain degree still binds China and reduces its options of supporting Russia in this war. As I have argued elsewhere, Ukrainian military-technological support for China's military build-up since the mid-1990s was foundational to an almost greater extent than even Russia's at least in terms of the quality of some systems Ukraine provided, and at least in some key military-technological areas (such as naval gas turbines, phased-array radar technology, but especially aircraft carrier hull technology and carrier pilot training) that are particularly decisive for building up a world-class navy.[17] But Ukraine has provided China with some key capabilities in the air and space sector as well. One can argue that without Ukraine's hardware and technology transfers since the fall of the Soviet Union, and without the extensive consulting services that were rendered over many years by Ukrainian technical experts, not a single aircraft carrier would be operational in

[16] I. Ralby, D. Soud, and R. Ralby, "Why the U.S. Needs to Act Fast to Prevent Russia from Weaponizing Food Supply Chains", *Politico*, 27 February 2022.
[17] S. Kirchberger, "Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor", in Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer (2022), pp. 84-88.

the PLA Navy today.[18] Furthermore, as Andrew Erickson has pointed out, the "Treaty of Friendship & Cooperation between the PRC and Ukraine" that was signed on 5 December 2013 by Xi Jinping himself contains extensive sovereignty and security provisions, building on an earlier bilateral security guarantee that was extended by China to Ukraine on 4 December 1994 in the wake of Ukraine signing the Budapest Memorandum and giving up its nuclear arms.[19] The existence of such formal, binding treaties, one of them even signed by Xi Jinping himself, makes giving direct military assistance to a nuclear-armed aggressor like Russia that is invading a non-nuclear armed close partner state like Ukraine, let alone one that has provided extensive and extremely valuable military-technological assistance to China in the past, at the very least awkward. This could have damaging repercussions for many other bilateral relationships of China with smaller countries. The Xi administration's more covert economic, political and moral support for Russia by alleviating the effects of Western economic sanctions through China's increased hydrocarbons and grain imports from Russia, not condemning the invasion, not calling it a war, blaming exclusively NATO expansion and the US rather than Russia for the war, and by voting neutral in the UNO rather than siding with the majority of nations against Russia should probably be seen as the maximum of support China can actually provide to Russia in this particular context without damaging its own reputation and geopolitical interests significantly.

[18] E. Dou and P.L. Wu, "Ukraine helped build China's modern military, but when war came, Beijing chose Russia", *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2022.

[19] A.S. Erickson, "2013 PRC-Ukraine Treaty of Friendship & Cooperation/Joint Communiqué: Russian, Ukrainian & Chinese Documents, Context, Timeline", AndrewErickson.com, 21 August 2022.

The War Turns Bad: Shielding from the Fallout of Putin's Strategic Miscalculation

In addition to the problem of having to balance China's obligations towards both Russia and Ukraine, when the war effort began to turn bad for Russia, Xi likely became increasingly sensitive to the danger of siding with a failed invasion. There is an aspect of looking incompetent by association with a dangerously foolish, rogue leader like Putin, and also an aspect of drawing additional danger to China's already fraying national economy that was having to withstand the effects of Xi's crippling "Zero Covid" policy while struggling to fend off problems in the real estate and financial markets. Western sanctions on top of the already existing restrictions could have pushed China's economy into dangerous territory right at a time when Xi was seeking to extend his mandate to rule to a third term. This is likely the reason why Beijing carefully avoided overtly breaching the Western sanctions against Russia, and why for instance the telecommunication firm Huawei reduced its exposure to the Russian market, and why China closed its sky to aircraft Russian airlines had refused to return to their rightful owners after their lease was terminated due to the sanctions.[20] On the other hand, China remained happy to absorb Russian hydrocarbons exports at a bargain, benefiting from the loss of European markets for Russia's chief export products.[21] At the same time, after witnessing Russia's economic vulnerability to sanctions, China began to take even more active measures to insulate its economy from the danger of potential Western sanctions.[22]

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[20] W. Soon, "A Chinese telecom giant has suspended Russian operations and furloughed employees as sanctions bite: reports", *Business Insider*, 13 April 2022; J. Webster, "China bans Russian flights", *The China Project*, 2 June 2022.

[21] M. Xu and E. Chou, "China reaps energy windfall as West shuns Russian supplies", *Reuters*, 14 September 2022.

[22] H. Tran, "Dual circulation in China: A progress report", *EconoGraphics*, Atlantic Council, 24 October 2022.

It is possible that Chinese support for Russia's war against Ukraine might have been far more overt and decisive, had Putin not miscalculated as badly and achieved a quick military success, as was originally expected by most observers. That not being the case, it is easy to see how distancing oneself from the fallout of a disastrously misguided decision came to be seen as a rational choice or even a necessity from Xi's point of view, not least to appease domestic critics of his "limitless" Chinese-Russian partnership policy. The removal in mid-June 2022 of Deputy Prime Minister Le Yucheng, who had been Xi's most important adviser on Russia issues and a key advocate of the "limitless friendship" with Russia, and who had even been considered a serious contender for the post of prime minister until his surprise transfer to a less prestigious post in the broadcasting system, was interpreted by many observers as a clear sign of Xi's dissatisfaction with the Russia advice given to the state and party leadership by Le.[23]

Notwithstanding a desire to distance himself from the problematic fallout of the Ukraine war, it is unlikely that Xi would welcome seeing Russia totally defeated or even humiliated by a West-supported Ukraine. In that context, it was notable that shortly after the SCO summit in Samarkand on 15-16 September 2022, during which Xi seems to have privately voiced "questions and concerns" over the war towards Putin (in a notable difference of phrasing when compared with India's Prime Minister Modi, who publicly if tactfully criticised the war as such).[24] By some, this was interpreted – probably somewhat prematurely – as criticism of Russia's brutal way of warfare. It is far more likely, however, that the "questions and concerns" were related to Russia's lack of military success. This is at least what can be inferred from the actions taken by Putin

[23] K. Nakazawa, "Analysis: Russia hand's demotion signals shift in Xi's strategy", *Nikkei Asia*, 23 June 2022.

[24] A. Troianovski and K. Bradsher, "Putin nods to Xi's 'concerns,' and the limits of their cooperation", *Japan Times*, 16 September 2022; S. Haidar, "PM Modi tells Vladimir Putin 'now is not an era of war'", *The Hindu*, 16 September 2022.

immediately after receiving Xi's admonishment: following significant gains by Ukraine's military in the East and South over the summer, and only days after the meeting in Samarkand, Putin on 21 September 2022 ordered a partial mobilisation, despite the significant risk of a domestic backlash.[25] He also hastily ordered sham referendums in the occupied areas and then "annexed" them, despite a lack of factual Russian control over them in their entirety and impending losses of parts of their territory.[26] Further, he appointed a general who was responsible for the brutal Russian warfare in Syria, Sergei Surovikin, as the new commander-in-chief for Ukraine, and had the Russian military conduct devastating air strikes on civilian targets and energy infrastructures all over Ukraine in a seeming attempt to quickly turn the war around and force at least a partial success or what could be sold to the domestic public and Russian allies as such.[27] In light of these combined measures taken by Putin directly after the Samarkand SCO summit, it seems plausible to assume that any concerns over the war that Xi may privately have expressed to Putin were most likely an attempt to pressure Putin into scoring some sort of quick success before ending the war from a position of strength – in order not to make Xi look bad for siding with the Kremlin at a time of Xi's impending appointment for a third leadership term. In that case, with Chinese support being crucial for the Kremlin at a time when Russia was suffering economically and when Putin had made the country an international pariah, the military actions taken by Putin after the Samarkand meeting look like an attempt to salvage what was left of Xi's goodwill.

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[25] M.F. Cancian, "What does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' mean?", CSIS, 26 September 2022.

[26] E. Maishman and N. Williams, "Ukraine war: Putin signs Ukraine annexation laws amid military setbacks", *BBC*, 6 October 2022.

[27] A. Macias, "Russia appoints new overall commander for its military in Ukraine", *CNBC*, 8 October 2022; A. Prokip, "Russian Air Attacks on Ukraine's Power System", *Focus Ukraine,* Wilson Center, 19 October 2022.

Although it is difficult to assess from the outside what the Chinese public thinks and knows about the details of the war in Ukraine, there are indications that at least among intellectuals, the Xi administration has not been altogether successful in controlling the narrative in the public information sphere even during the earlier phases of the war. The case of the Chinese vlogger Wang Jixian, a man based in Odessa at the beginning of the war who began to post videos that directly contradicted the Russian propaganda narrative pushed by the Chinese government at home, which led him to become the target of censorship and harsh criticism, yet also enabled him to provide Chinese viewers with an alternative view of the war is an interesting example.[28] Chinese observers have indicated in private communications that there has been increasing questioning of the wisdom of Xi's policy of siding with Putin over the past decade leading up to the war, and increased criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine despite strong pressure to conform with the Chinese government's political line.

Effects of the Ukraine War on the China-Russia Relationship Going Forward

China's President Xi likely expected Russia to score a quick victory in a short, sharp war. Ideally, the campaign would have ended quickly with Ukraine surrendering without too much bloodshed and destruction on either side, and with the Western-oriented Zelenskyy government either deposed and arrested by Russia or gone into exile, while a Russia-friendly puppet government would have been installed to bring Ukraine firmly back into Russia's orbit, like another Belarus. China could then have entered the scene as a benefactor and offered generous financial assistance for rebuilding Ukraine,

[28] J. Yeung and Y. Xiong, "A Chinese vlogger shared videos of war-torn Ukraine. He's been labeled a national traitor", *CNN*, 18 March 2022.

all the while fortifying Beijing's political influence and furthering Chinese economic as well as military-technological interests there. The blame for the outbreak of the war in such a scenario would have been placed by China strictly at the feet of the US and NATO, and the proven inability of the West to prop up Ukraine militarily would have in that case had the strategic benefit of poking yet another hole into the notion of Western political and military superiority, proving to the rest of the world that the political West, being unable to shape the geostrategic playing field even within Europe itself, was to be seen as in inevitable decline versus a rising China and Russia. This would have furthered a major common goal of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin: bringing about an end to the US-led rules-based international order and establishing the right of great powers to control a sphere of influence in their near abroad.

Against the backdrop of such an expectation, Xi and his close advisers must have been shocked to discover during the first few weeks of fighting how badly Putin and his military had in fact miscalculated. Not only did Ukraine not surrender, it was quickly able to galvanise widespread international support in moral, economic, and even military-technological terms, even though NATO and the US stayed true to their previously announced intention of not becoming directly involved in the conflict. Though some observers have painted the Western reluctance to fight for Ukraine as a sign of weakness, in practice this has also had the effect of preserving the military resources of NATO countries and enhancing the credibility of NATO's self-conception as a defensive alliance, while Russia conversely was forced to exhaust its arsenal and manpower and thereby became militarily weakened in relation to NATO at least for the short-to-mid-term. Further, the Western world has been galvanised to unite in imposing unprecedented, crippling sanctions on Russia, and successfully deterred even China from openly breaching those sanctions; We know from public statements of Chinese officials that they are at least trying to portray their

actions as conforming to the sanctions.[29] Meanwhile NATO, far from being proven to be an obsolete "paper tiger" by Putin's war, has on the contrary been reinvigorated, with a further round of enlargement through the accession of Finland and Sweden appearing now all but inevitable. This accession round will, when completed, more than double Russia's direct NATO border from previously ca. 936km to ca. 2,275km. This alone represents a major strategic failure for Putin, as Finland and Sweden have been extended an interim security guarantee by several nuclear-armed NATO members even during the accession process.[30]

One key element that brought the governments of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping closer together than ever in Russian-Chinese history had been their shared opposition to the rules-based international order created by the political West after World War II, or what the late Russia expert Hannes Adomeit termed their joint ride on the "bumpy road of Via Antiamericana", on which they were travelling not necessarily in tandem on the same bike, but rather next to each other.[31] As such, changes in their respective relationship with the political West are going to influence the future prospects of the Sino-Russian alliance, and so might changes in the Russian and Chinese leadership personnel, for instance should Putin be removed as leader.

Apart from the severe Russian military and economic losses incurred through the war that are already visible, Putin's image as a strategic genius and Russia's image as a military great power, a reliable provider of oil and gas also to Western countries, as well as the allure of Russian culture and other forms of soft power in the Western world have all but been destroyed through this war.

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[29] Y. Lun Tian, "China says not deliberately circumventing sanctions on Russia", *Reuters*, 2 April 2022.

[30] R. Gramer, A. Mackinnon, and C. Lu, "NATO Countries Begin Ushering Finland and Sweden Into the Fold", *Foreign Policy*, 16 May 2022.

[31] H. Adomeit, "Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?", in Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer (2022), pp. 17-39, p. 35.

Furthermore, Russia's remaining ability to coerce European nations via their energy dependence on Russian hydrocarbon supplies is soon coming to an end.[32] This will inevitably lead to Russia becoming a much weaker player on the global stage overall, and will make it firmly dependent on economic and political support from China (and to some degree, India). This lesson is particularly relevant for Xi's government, as the rise of China to a status on par with or even surpassing the United States until 2049, as envisaged in the "China Dream", would clearly be endangered by military adventurism if that goes similarly wrong and ends in a protracted, unsuccessful conflict. Xi's advisors are therefore in all likelihood busy studying how Putin's government could have so massively miscalculated its chances of military success, and how similar intelligence failures could be averted when it comes to e.g. a Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

Conclusion

One key outcome of the Russian invasion is the surprising revelation that so-called Western "decadence" has been revealed as actual strength. Democracies have the in-built characteristic of airing all their dirty laundry in public, and transparently discussing failures and weaknesses in a free press can make a political system seem infested with problems and overall weak to the citizens of an authoritarian regime when observing such communication processes from abroad. At the same time, it is easy for citizens of democratic societies to mistake authoritarian regimes as more coherent, efficient, and powerful than they really are due to a lack of available information on their internal fissures, such as corruption, in the absence of free reporting. As the example of Russia shows, corruption in particular can have corrosive effects that impact military readiness. The

[32] A. Cohen, "Europe Is Winning The Energy War Against Russia", *Forbes*, 19 January 2023.

unexpectedly decisive and successful reaction of Ukraine that enabled its society to withstand the Russian onslaught, and the willingness of a supposedly "declining" West to come to its support (without, however, actively joining the war effort), ran diametrically counter to the narrative of both the Russian and the Chinese authoritarian rulers who have painted the US-led West as either hopelessly disunited and weak, or as warmongers eager to pick fights and invade other countries. The actual Western reaction defied both these misconceptions.

Since late 2022, diplomatic signals from China towards Western countries have been unusually conciliatory. This was probably influenced by pressure from internal Chinese developments surrounding popular Chinese criticism of Xi's policy of Zero Covid, the large Covid surge resulting from a hasty ending of all Covid-related restrictions in China, and stalling Chinese economic growth. The "wolf warrior" style of diplomacy – that had been previously favoured by Xi – suffered setbacks, most prominently in the demotion of China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian; but also various further overtures extended to the US and Europe seemingly indicated a willingness of Xi Jinping to walk back from the brink.[33] This cautious Chinese reorientation towards the West does not, however, involve a thorough rejection of China's partnership with Russia, which was also recently reinforced.[34] Rather, China is likely to eagerly reap the benefits of having Russia become fully dependent on Chinese political and economic support for access to cheap hydrocarbons and grain imports and for breaking down the last remaining taboos in Russia's military and technological cooperation with China. In military and military-technological terms, such taboos have involved the transfer of especially sensitive technologies for the propulsion

[33] J. Ruwitch, "A 'wolf warrior' is sidelined, as China softens its approach on the world stage", *NPR*, 12 January 2023; W. Yang, "Is China pivoting away from 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy?", *DW.com*, 18 January 2023.

[34] J. Yeung, D. Tarasova, and A. Stambaugh, "Putin and Xi meet against backdrop of growing crises for both leaders", *CNN*, 30 December 2022.

and quieting of nuclear submarines, and basing access in the Russian Arctic for Chinese naval vessels, including in particular submarines. There is, in short, a danger that China could utilise the moment of Russian weakness and dependency for making unprecedented progress in areas that a stronger Russia would be reluctant to grant to China and that could greatly enhance China's strategic posture.

At the same time, Western countries should be aware that conciliatory Chinese gestures towards the political West might be empty of actual substance. They might represent merely a change in tone and a return to a "hide and bide" strategy to weather the current geopolitical storm, rather than showing a genuine change of course, thereby preparing the ground before becoming assertive once more at a more opportune time. Western countries should therefore measure China by its actions rather than words, and should hold Xi Jinping personally to account for the role China played before and during the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

5. The SCO: Geopolitical Bloc, Normative Order, or Pragmatic Platform?

Filippo Costa Buranelli, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti

On 15-16 September 2022, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held its 22nd meeting of Heads of States in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. At the height of the war in Ukraine, and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 wave that had ravaged societies and economies alike, the meeting was heralded as one of the most important summits of 2022. After all, it was the first time that Russian President Vladimir Putin attended in person such a high-calibre, multilateral event since Russia's invasion of Ukraine; it was Chinese President Xi Jinping's first participation in an official, multilateral meeting after the Covid-19 outbreak; and it was the occasion on which Iran, often considered a pariah and rogue state by Western powers and their Middle Eastern allies, was formally admitted to the organisation. Hence, the focus of the press and analysts alike was very much on this gathering of powerful Eurasian leaders, all members of this organisation. In fact, the focus was once again on the organisation itself. We say "once again" because the SCO has been at the centre of analyses, commentaries and speculations about its geopolitical and normative identity since its foundation in 2005. After all, we are talking about an organisation which accounts for half of the world's GDP and includes more than half of the world's population, and arguably features the most entrenched authoritarian ecology

in the world and yet includes among its members the biggest democracy known to the world. From a systemic perspective, it is an organisation that includes two of the most important, if not the two most important, rivals of the West – Russia and China – but also all the Central Asian republics except for Turkmenistan, and two of the most mutually suspicious states in the world – India and Pakistan.

At the same time, it is an organisation that bears little resemblance to the European integrationist project, and even less resemblance to the allied nature of NATO. In other words, it is often easier to define the SCO by what it is not, rather than by what it is. Hence, this chapter sets itself the ambitious task of analysing and dissecting the SCO in its structural as well as its normative components, and of presenting a picture of the organisation that is as faithful as possible to what its members claim it to be and how they perceive it. This means paying attention to what local actors say and do, as well as to those organisational dynamics that shed light on this group's specific peculiarities and key aspects.

In quantum-theory fashion, one of the main theses of this chapter is that, given its heterogeneity and diverse composition, the meaning and function of the SCO is in the eye of the beholder. In other words, different members have different perceptions and understandings not of how the SCO works, but rather of what the SCO is the most appropriate vehicle for. Another thesis is that the SCO is less concerned with security than many analysts believe it to be, although it is undeniable that there are underlying security logics that permeate the workings of the organisation. Finally, a third thesis is that the main aspect of the SCO is its normative slant, i.e., the willingness and the ability to present an alternative model for world order premised on normative parameters and priorities that differ from those of the West, or at least from the Western interpretation thereof.

To illustrate these theses, the chapter is structured as follows. The next section outlines the historical evolution, the norms, the identity and the institutions at the heart of the SCO, clarifying

their meaning and function. The subsequent section elaborates on the previous one and deals with the role of 'security' within the organisation, arguing that while security is indeed an important component of the SCO, it is polysemic insofar as it assumes different meanings and degrees of importance for different members. The third section builds on the second one and seeks to understand how the SCO is contributing to the construction of an alternative political order, while also advancing the pragmatic interests of its members in the economic and business sectors. In the conclusions, we call for a sober assessment of the SCO: while it would be a mistake – and potentially dangerous – to dismiss the organisation as irrelevant, it would also be misleading to conceive it as an anti-NATO bloc or securitise it as a threat.

The Historical Evolution of the SCO: An Anti-NATO Organisation in the Making?

After the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, China and Russia started their rapprochement. The tensions originating from the Sino-Russian split and conflicts over contested borders gave way to a gradual warming of relations and increased cooperation, which eventually also involved three Central Asian countries that form part of Moscow and Beijing's "shared neighbourhood". This process led to the informal meetings of the members of the Shanghai Five group – China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan – in 1996. Herein lie the origins of the SCO. Beijing initiated a proposal for more structured cooperation between the countries within the Shanghai Five framework, which was eventually enlarged with Uzbekistan's accession upon the SCO's formal establishment as an international organisation in 2001.

Initially, this mechanism was supposed to focus exclusively on issues in the security sphere, notably those pertaining to extremism, separatism and terrorism, but later the PRC proposed extending cooperation to the economic and energy

fields. According to some, this development contributed to the rivalry between China and Russia in the Central Asian region, given that China's economic power could somehow overshadow Russia's waning influence. To others, on the other hand, it signalled their willingness to enter an era of "division of labour" in the region: "Russian leaders understood the folly of any attempt to challenge China's economic penetration of Central Asia, where Beijing had been gaining influence as a major trade and investment partner; instead, they decided to seek a division of labour in the region with Beijing: Russia would wield the gun and China the money, but on condition that it respected Russia-led multilateral mechanisms in the region such as the Eurasian Economic Union".[1]

Today, in addition to its founding members, the organisation also comprises India, Pakistan and Iran (slated to formally join by April 2023),[2] three Observer States interested in acceding to full membership (Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia) and several "Dialogue Partners" (among them, NATO member Turkey). The mechanism of Observer States and Dialogue Partners is useful to engage other states potentially interested in cooperation with SCO, hence serving as an indication of the attractiveness of the organisation. The areas of cooperation among SCO members in the field of international security include the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism – considered the "three evils" by the SCO members –, illegal arms and drug trafficking, and cybercrime. The SCO has been gradually institutionalised for over two decades, with dialogue and cooperation mechanisms that include annual summits of leaders and high-level officials and ministerial meetings covering defence and security, and trade and finance. A Secretariat was set

[1] A. Gabuev and V. Spivak, "The Asymmetrical Russia-China Axis: An Overview". in A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (eds.), *Russia and China. Anatomy of a Partnership*, ISPI Report, Milano, Ledizioni, 2019, p. 56.

[2] On Iran's accession to the SCO, and its impact on the organisation, see M. Tishehyar, "Why Is Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Important?", Valdai Club, 28 December 2022.

up in 2004, followed a year later by a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) located in Tashkent (Uzbekistan).

While there are important trade and economic cooperation paths – including attempts to create a single free trade and economic area, which will be discussed in the last section of the chapter, as well as an SCO Bank – the security dimension has grabbed the most attention. In particular, the focus is on the SCO's potential to become part of a new security architecture together with other regional institutions such as the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the actions taken by both China and Russia to try to transform Greater Eurasia into what is sometimes described as a "non-Western international society".[3] Moreover, many Western analysts have increasingly labelled the SCO as anti-NATO. An ECFR paper published as recently as 2022 claims that this perception stems mainly from Russian efforts aimed at a "reinforcement of the organisation's military dimension".[4] China's growing tensions with the US have also contributed to creating this image. For decades, both Moscow and Beijing have framed NATO first and foremost as an aggressive organisation "stuck in Cold War confrontational worldviews while Russia and China are open to dialogue and cooperation", proving – according to this narrative – their "self-proclaimed moral superiority".[5] According to the Australian-based Chinese scholar Jingdong Yuan, Beijing saw the establishment of the SCO as a response to non-traditional security challenges emerging after the fall of the USSR. Over time, Beijing has sought to "influence and shape the organisation in support of its institutional balancing

[3] J. Yuan, "Forging a New Security Order in Eurasia: China, the SCO, and the Impacts on Regional Governance", *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2022, p. 2.

[4] A. Aydıntaşbaş, M. Dumoulin, E. Geranmayeh, and J. Oertel, "Rogue NATO: The new face of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", ECFR Commentary, 16 September 2022.

[5] L. Lams, H. De Smaele, F. De Coninck, C. Lippens, and L. Smeyers, "Strategic Comrades? Russian and Chinese Media Representations of NATO", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2022.

strategy […] against the US, to prevent the latter from gaining access and influence in Central Asia/Eurasia; to foster trust among member states, and develop the SCO into a regional security community, and to safeguard Chinese interests in both geo-economic (trade and energy) and geopolitical (security and regional stability) terms".[6]

Given the increasing anti-Western attitudes of the founding – and leading – members, it is plausible that the two countries will try to cement consensus among other SCO members on their policies and positions *vis-à-vis* the US and the EU. Yet it is doubtful whether the SCO could and would become a highly institutionalised security bloc that could credibly counter NATO. As a matter of fact, several differences between SCO and NATO are unlikely to be overcome in the future. First, the level of commitment required from members. While NATO is a binding alliance, the SCO is more of a loose partnership: all members remain free to pursue their own policies and even alliances. Nothing remotely equivalent to NATO's Article 5 would guarantee collective security in case of an external attack; the possibility that such an article could be envisaged is far-fetched, not least because of Russia's current war against Ukraine and the historical animosities between the two SCO members India and Pakistan. Second, the value dimension of the organisation. According to its charter, NATO explicitly promotes democratic values. NATO's founding treaty – the 1949 Washington Treaty – stresses the nature of NATO as an alliance of democracies, aiming to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law".[7] Hence, what differentiates NATO from other military clubs is its commitment to shared democratic values, which is so central that the current President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Gerald E. Connolly (United States) has placed

[6] Yuan (2022), p. 1.

[7] NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Debunking misconceptions about a Democratic Resilience Center within NATO.

safeguarding the Alliance's shared democratic values at the heart of his presidency.[8] So, while it is safe to say that today not all NATO members can be defined as liberal democracies (Turkey and Hungary, for example, have been experiencing severe democratic backsliding), it is also evident that the Alliance has been consistently marketing itself as a democratic organisation. The SCO, for its part, despite being made up mainly of authoritarian countries, does not harbour any aspirations to herald or become a champion of either illiberal or liberal values. On the contrary, it simply promotes the so-called Shanghai Spirit, which embodies the principles of "mutual trust and benefit, equality, consultation, respect for the diversity of civilisations and pursuit of common development".[9] Moreover, sitting among the majority of autocratic members is also India, the world's largest democracy. Finally, while NATO is markedly a security alliance, the SCO's economic and business dimension should not be disregarded, as the last section of this chapter will highlight. But before turning to the pragmatic political and business interests underpinning the SCO, it is worth delving into the security question, which as noted has been at the centre of recent debates about the possible, perceived evolution of the SCO into an anti-Western bloc.

The (non-)role of security

It was mentioned in the introduction that one of the theses of this chapter is that 'security' is not the main strategic driver of the SCO, despite the perceptions and impressions circulating among some Western scholars noted in the previous section. This section aims to elucidate this statement, by contextualising it within the wider remit of the organisation and by providing some reflections on how security itself is understood and practised within it. First, a clarification. Does security matter

[8] Ibid.

[9] Z. Xin, "The undying importance of the 'Shanghai Spirit'", CGTN, 6 March 2018.

for the SCO? Yes, it does. It is the adversarial interpretation of security, understood as the pursuit of a geopolitical counterbalance to the West, that we claim does not sit at the centre of the SCO's strategic and normative architecture. This calls for a brief reflection on the term "security" itself before proceeding with the analysis.

Security, in international relations as well as in geopolitics and diplomacy, is traditionally understood as the defence of the national interest and the survival of the state itself in situations of threat, real or perceived, coming from hostile forces, often states, acting alone or in concert. This is the logic of security that underpinned, for example, the foundation of NATO in 1949 and the CSTO in 1992, by explicitly referring to "external forces" in the treaties constituting these organisations. The SCO, by contrast, is not an alliance, let alone a security organisation, understood as a centrifugal, outward-looking securitising body. Instead, the *raison d'etre* of security within the SCO is centripetal, internal, state-centric and regime-oriented security. It is not by chance that the SCO founding documents and structures, such as the organisation's founding charter and the Meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils,[10] all refer to the abovementioned extremism, separatism and terrorism as the "three evils" against which the organisation must equip itself. In fact, extremism and separatism are two threats from within the state, whereas terrorism is seen as a threat that is both transnational and domestic.

In other words, if we follow the logic of the process of securitisation by which "security" *per se* is nothing but the product of a series of rhetorical constructs and speech acts aimed at elevating a given referent person or object as being under threat, the referent objects for the SCO are the state as a subject of international law, its territory and the incumbent regime governing it. In normative terms, as was discussed in

[10] Meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils, available at http://rus.sectsco.org/structure/20190715/564868.html (in Russian).

the previous section, this is translated into the mantras of non-interference, non-intervention, cooperation without integration (i.e., avoidance of supranationalism) and the primacy of stability and authority over human, political and social rights. In light of the above, it would therefore be unfair at best and naïve at worst to treat the SCO as a "geopolitical bluff",[11] or an "Asian anti-NATO" organisation,[12] for geopolitics has never been among its primary objectives. Instead, it is the maintenance of state-centric order, stability, the preservation of the rule of incumbent regimes (which means the prevention of "coloured revolutions"),[13] and the eradication of potential transnational threats that have been, in security terms, the main drivers of the group.

This is evident, for example, in the only formal structure of the SCO that deals with security, the RATS. Located in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the body is tasked with the collection, sharing and dissemination of information related to internationally recognised terrorist groups (or, more problematically, groups labelled as such by one member of the organisation with the support of all the others), and is in charge of organising training and regular joint exercises of those branches of the security services and armed forces that deal with transnational terrorist threats. The three other platforms that support the SCO and the RATS, i.e., the Meetings of Defence Ministers, the meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils and the Meetings of the Chiefs of the General Staff of the Armed Forces all work to "coordinate the efforts of the SCO member states in jointly countering security challenges and threats in accordance with international treaties within the framework of the SCO on the joint fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism, illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic

[11] See M. Laumulin, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as 'Geopolitical Bluff?' A View from Astana", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 12, July 2006.

[12] S. Saha, "The future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", East Asia Forum, 17 October 2014.

[13] S. Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, Springer, 2009.

substances, illegal trade weapons, transnational organised crime, illegal migration and other threats to national, regional and international security" and to foster military convergence in exercises and drills in the abovementioned areas.[14]

The best way to characterise the significance of "security" for the SCO seems to be to say that, ultimately, within the organisation, security simply means different things to different people. For Russia, the SCO is a vehicle to discuss the Afghan problem multilaterally, keep an eye on drug trafficking from the south, balance China's presence in Eurasia and sit at yet another table with its Central Asian neighbours. For China, the main driver behind its participation in the organisation (and indeed behind its foundation) is primarily the locking-in of Xinjiang. As a matter of fact, since its creation in 2005, the SCO has been oriented towards the formation of an economic, security and infrastructural cordon sanitaire around this western Chinese province, which harbours nationalistic and secessionist sentiments from the centre, with the intent of fully integrating within the macro-regional order promoted by Beijing. In addition to this, China has often used SCO platforms to advance its economic-infrastructure project known as Belt and Road Initiative, taking advantage of bilateral and multilateral meetings to sign lucrative deals, as was the case at the latest meeting when the agreement for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway was finalised.

For the Central Asian republics, the main function performed by the SCO in terms of security is that of guaranteeing a modicum of equilibrium between Russia and China, and benefitting from a double umbrella of economic cooperation and security partnership on the one hand, and authoritarian legitimacy on the other. At the same time, since Central Asia is a diverse region with strategic overlaps but also significant idiosyncrasies, it is important to briefly outline what in security

[14] Meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils, available at http://rus.sectsco.org/structure/20190715/564868.html (in Russian).

terms the SCO does for the Central Asian states individually. For Kazakhstan, for example, the main rationale for taking part in the SCO, on top of the reasons listed above, is territorial security (the country borders with both Russia and China) and the possibility to leverage, infrastructurally, on its position as a crossroads between East and West. For Uzbekistan, on the other hand, the main focus is on overcoming the drawbacks of being a double-landlocked country by taking advantage of opportunities for cooperation with several maritime states (including Pakistan and India) as well as having a multilateral forum with both regional great powers to look for cooperation and support with respect to Afghanistan. For the two smaller and weaker states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, security within the SCO is mostly connected to internal (regime-oriented), territorial, economic and, again, infrastructure issues. For India and Pakistan, terrorism is once again the main focus of security activities within the SCO, while, for Iran, membership of the organisation is mainly linked to ideological security (legitimation of the Revolution), again prevention of terrorist acts, and economic security through the consolidation of other multilateral markets to avoid Western sanctions.

While Afghanistan seems in one way or another to be a link that binds together all members in security terms (either because of spillover of violence due to state failure or because of drug trafficking, or terrorist acts, or all of the above), it is important to note that even in its regard the SCO lacks any sort of "collective security" mandate. First, "the SCO itself serves mainly as a platform for member states to coordinate their individual policies and cooperation with Afghanistan, rather than actively pushing cooperation projects".[15] Furthermore, "military interventions are simply not within the organisation's mandate. While the group's goals include cooperation on a wide range, including economic, political, security, culture,

[15] E. Seiwert, "The SCO Will Not Fill Any Vacuums in Afghanistan", Oxus Society, 30 September 2021.

research, education, tourism, environment protection, and more, military cooperation is not one of them".[16] Over the years, member states have repeatedly stressed how the SCO is best characterised as having a non-bloc status and "should not be seen as a 'scale' balancing between the West, on the one hand, and Russia or China".[17] In sum, security does play a role within the SCO, and quite an important one. Yet, it is one of the several pillars of the organisation, which over the years has consistently moved towards other, non-traditional aspects of international relations such as food security and sustainable development. When security is mentioned within the SCO, it is often understood as *internal*, *territorial* and *regime-oriented*, thus characterising the organisation as an example of protective integration.[18] The SCO, it is important to stress yet again, has never claimed, and is unlikely to claim, any anti-Western or Asian-bloc status, especially in military terms.[19] Rather, it is a complex governance structure that, while also taking into account the security of its members, promotes summitry, legitimacy, negotiation, the management of great powers,[20] and the outlining of an alternative normative architecture for world order as illustrated in the previous section.

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[16] Ibid.

[17] N. Imamova, "Uzbekistan, Central Asia Try to Redefine Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *VOANews*, 17 September 2022; see also R. Temirov, "Diverging interests scuttle attempts to make SCO an anti-Western bloc", *Central Asia News*, 23 September 2022.

[18] R. Allison, "Protective Integration and Security Policy Coordination: Comparing the SCO and CSTO", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11, Issue 3, Autumn 2018, pp. 297-338.

[19] For an excellent overview of these misconceptions, see A. Schmitz, "SCO Summit in Samarkand: Alliance Politics in the Eurasian Region", SWP, 20 September 2022.

[20] A. Tskhay and F. Costa Buranelli, "Accommodating Revisionism through Balancing Regionalism: The Case of Central Asia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 72, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1033-52.

Pragmatic Interests and Normative Alternatives

While the SCO is usually viewed as a security bloc in the West, the previous section has demonstrated how the organisation means much more than that, especially for its Central Asian members. According to Muzaffar Djalalov, head of Inha University in Tashkent, Central Asians actually prioritise cooperation areas such as education, science and healthcare, and view the SCO primarily as a development platform.[21]

Since 2001, several documents have envisaged the creation of a single trade and economic space. While a single economic space is still far from being achieved, trade turnover among SCO members has been gradually increasing, in line with the expansion of the organisation's membership. In 2019, for example, two years after India and Pakistan joined, the total mutual trade of the eight members reached US$ 602.94 billion, nearly 20 times that of 2000.[22] Moreover, several organisations have been created to work towards further economic integration. Since 2005, for instance, the Interbank Consortium has been helping to establish banking relations between members. In China's initial plans, the Consortium was meant to serve as the basis for the creation of the SCO Development Bank; however, Russia blocked the bank's creation due to fears of China's excessive influence in Central Asia through its dominant role within the SCO development bank framework.[23] Despite the failed attempt to set up the SCO Development Bank, the Interbank Consortium is proving its usefulness. In fall 2022, Chinese media reported that the "China Development Bank

[21] Quoted in N. Imamova, "Uzbekistan, Central Asia Try to Redefine Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Voice of America*, 17 September 2022.

[22] L. Xin and Y.X. Wang, "The Results of the 20-Year Economic Cooperation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Development Prospects", *Finance Theory and Practice*, vol. 25, no. 3, July 2021, pp. 159-74.

[23] B. Hooijmaaijers, "Understanding Success and Failure in Establishing New Multilateral Development Banks: The SCO Development Bank, the NDB, and the AIIB", *Asian Perspective*, vol. 45 no. 2, 2021, p. 445-67.

completed 63 cooperation projects under the framework of the SCO Interbank Consortium, extending loans totalling $14.6 billion to member banks and partner banks […], covering production capacity cooperation, infrastructure, green and low-carbon development, and agriculture".[24]

In 2006, the SCO established a Business Council to help attract investments, further develop economic cooperation within the organisation and provide expert business assessments to companies from the SCO member states. Moreover, The SCO has been setting up development zones to allow investing businesses from the SCO nations to expand cooperation in specific locations and share technologies, expertise and product types to develop new collaborations and manufacturing processes. The first of these development zones is the China-Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Local Economic & Trade Cooperation Demonstration Area established in the Jiaozhou area of Qingdao on China's East Coast. The concept, which is intended to be extended to other Industrial Zones in SCO countries, aims to become a sort of "SCO incubator".[25] Furthermore, several meetings and initiatives organised by SCO members offer networking and business opportunities and are widely promoted within the SCO network. For instance, the 2022 edition of the International Business Week Forum – a professional platform promoting dialogue between the state and businesses held annually in the Russian city of Ufa – was opened by SCO Secretary-General Zhang Ming.[26]

Finally, a key long-term economic strategy shared by most SCO members is strengthening the development of local-currency cross-border payment and settlement systems. For example, at the 2022 summit in Uzbekistan, the SCO

[24] "SCO economic cooperation in spotlight amid global challenges", *Global Times*, 14 September 2022.

[25] "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Establishes Economic Cooperation Zones", Silk Road Briefing, 16 June 2022.

[26] SCO Secretariat, Development of interregional business ties in SCO space, 17 December 2022.

members agreed on a road map to expand trade in local currencies and develop alternative payment and settlement systems – something the SCO has been planning for years. This agenda is in line with the individual policies of the group's most relevant members, including "Russia's attempt to cushion the blow of Western sanctions, China's deteriorating relations with the United States, India's use of nondollar currencies in its trade with Russia, and Iran's recent proposal for a single SCO currency".[27] While this strategy mainly speaks to China and Russia's ambition to de-dollarise the international economy,[28] and to reform the broader WTO system, it is also meant to bring concrete benefits to other SCO members.

Hence, while the SCO is being increasingly seen as an anti-Western bloc due to the deterioration of ties between the West and the two SCO founding members, Russia and China, the organisation also has an economic and business dimension that is at least as – if not much more – important than the security dimension. More than a military or an anti-Western bloc, most Eurasian states see the SCO as an instrument for maintaining stability and sustainable development in the region, while at the same time balancing out their ties with China and Russia. This pragmatic dimension ties into a broader understanding of politics that, crucially, does not reject the fundamental normative underpinnings of contemporary world order but advances a more state-centric, pluralist and developmentalist interpretation of it, emphasising the importance of sovereignty and non-interference/non-intervention, the supremacy of territorial over humanitarian international law, diplomatic consensus and inclusivity, state-led market economy, and what has been recently termed 'authoritarian environmentalism'.[29]

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[27] Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "China Is Quietly Trying to Dethrone the Dollar", *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2022.

[28] See V. Nosov, "The Sino-Russian Challenge to the US Dollar Hegemony", in Ferrari and Tafuro (2019).

[29] See G. Agostinis and F. Urdinez, "The Nexus between Authoritarian and Environmental Regionalism: An Analysis of China's Driving Role in the

Conclusion: What the SCO Is, and Will Be

Far from being a paper tiger, and at the same time far from being an aggressive anti-NATO bloc, the SCO is a regional international organisation that operates, and develops, on the basis of specific principles, understandings, goals and norms. Based on the ideas of regime security, stability, developmentalism and consensus, the SCO is perhaps best seen as an institutionalised platform to pursue three macro-goals: security cooperation; state-led sustainable development and economic diversification; and normative convergence along pluralist lines. These three goals, crucially, are interpreted and managed in different ways by the different member states, and should be interpreted as broad normative preferences allowing for internal diversity and flexibility. Any intellectual, let alone political, attempt to dismiss the SCO as irrelevant or meaningless is necessarily doomed to miss the fundamental role that it plays in bringing together different actors and societies in pursuing an alternative understanding of world order and sources for development without (notoriously Western) conditionality. At the same time, any claim that the SCO is structuring and conceiving itself as an anti-NATO organisation is inevitably destined to misinterpret the fundamentally *internal* logics of security that inform the workings of the organisation, and in fact will contribute to exacerbating tensions and fuelling confrontation. Premised on an essentially anti-bloc understanding, the SCO allows for flexible membership and for diversification of multi-vectoral foreign policies, with the result that most of its members (especially the Central and South Asian countries) do engage in security and economic cooperative relations with the West, too.

In light of the foregoing analysis, and of the member states' preferences, one can expect the SCO to continue to play the

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Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 69, no. 4-5, pp. 330-44.

role of "aggregator" of interests, concerns and connectivity in the Eurasian order, while at the same time promoting normative change at the international level and focusing on the internal security of its member states' regimes. It is thus unlikely that the SCO will morph into a geopolitical bloc manifestly hostile to the West, while at the same time it is difficult to imagine a militarisation of the organisation in the near future – mostly because of the different capabilities, perceptions of security and diversity of foreign policy interests of the member states. In conclusion, as the SCO is the world's largest regional organisation in terms of geographic extension and population, accounting for almost 40% of the world population and more than 30% of global GDP, it would be equally wrong – and potentially dangerous – to dismiss it as irrelevant and to securitise it as a threat. Sober, in-depth assessments of its role in agenda-setting, consensus-building, regime-boosting and fostering normative change are needed in order to focus not only on its logics of consequences but also, and especially, on its logics of legitimacy in world politics.

6. Propaganda, Digital Diplomacy, Meme Wars: How Digital Confrontation Is Shaping the New World Order

İdil Galip

The internet has never been far-removed from warfare. The ideological foundations of the precursors of the internet as we know it, such as the ARPANET, were established during the Cold War by anxious nation states. In the era of early net experimentation, critic Howard Rheingold imagined the great potential of virtual communities, underlining that there was a real possibility of openness, democracy and freedom for many within their bounds. He also predicted that "big boy monopolies" and their methods of surveillance would be implicated within the growth and spread of such communities facilitated by the internet.[1]

Today, much of what Rheingold predicted has come to life: whether this be the establishment of globalised cultures and virtual spaces dominated by a constant flow of user-generated information as well as user-generated "content", hyper-accelerated discourse, the breakdown between "offline" and "online" spheres, growing numbers of niche virtual communities that appeal to any and all possible combination of identities, and finally the facilitation of it all by platform monopolies that capitalise on and surveil the users and communities in question.

[1] H. Rheingold, "Introduction", in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Electronic, 1993.

Much of the information shared within mainstream public spheres of the internet is mediated through platform monopolies. As a result, to be able to understand how digital confrontation occurs and how digital propaganda takes place, the primary source we should turn our attention to are these platforms and their affordances. The way that propaganda is shaped and in turn shapes social media platforms, in particular, is key in understanding the current state of digital communication and contemporary modes of warfare. This point becomes much more important when our aim is to contextualise the war in Ukraine, which has otherwise been dubbed "The World's First TikTok War".[2]

War and Visual Media

The Crimean War (1853-56) is one of the primary points of reference when discussing the emergence of war photography, journalism and reportage. Roger Fenton, a lawyer and a photographer tasked with photographing the Crimean War by the British government, is said to be one of the first war photographers. In her seminal work *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag[3] comments that governments commission war photography to "drum up support for the soldier's sacrifice" and that, as a result, Fenton was one of the first agents of war to be implicated in this wholly "disgraceful aim". On the reason why Fenton was asked to produce war photography of a *dignified* kind, according to Sontag, was the British government's "need to counteract the alarming printed accounts of the unanticipated risks and privations endured by the British soldiers dispatched there the previous year" and to give a "more positive impression of the increasingly unpopular war[4]". What Sontag is referring to here, and what she discusses in depth in the remainder of the

[2] K. Chayka, "Watching The World's First 'TikTok War'", *The New Yorker*, 2022.
[3] S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003.
[4] Sontag is referring to the Crimean War.

text, is the photographic staging of the supposed "truth of war" or the photographic alteration of perceived reality.

Fenton's infamous photograph *Valley of The Shadow of Death* serves as an example for Sontag's discussion of truth and photography. Sontag posits that Fenton must have planted the loose cannonballs on the road in the photograph himself, in order to express a sense of danger that is absent in an almost-identical photograph Fenton took from the same tripod position.[5] There have been various discussions about the *truth* of what Fenton's photographs depict, especially as it relates to the commissioning of this work by the British government and the general unpopularity of the Crimean War, often characterised as the "most useless war in the history of Europe" by historians.[6]

This story of a state vying for the public's approval for an unpopular war through visual propaganda might sound familiar to modern-day readers, especially when we take the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia as an example. There is no mystery in why states, institutions, and actors orchestrate propaganda - the incentive is largely clear for us. However, what is becoming more challenging to track in what some thinkers call our "post-digital era", is how propaganda is diffused and memetically reproduced through digital mass communication technologies.

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[5] American documentary film director Errol Morris (2007) investigated the sources Sontag provided for her claim that Fenton staged the cannonballs in *Valley of The Shadow of Death*. Morris found that in a letter Fenton wrote to his wife, he described how he cleared the cannonballs off the road after taking the initial photograph. Morris asserts that there is a very strong possibility that Fenton took the photograph showing no cannonballs after he shot the first scene which included the cannonballs. This contradicts Susan Sontag's claim.

[6] T. Tran, "Behind the Myth: The Representation of the Crimean War in Nineteenth-Century British Newspapers, Government Archives & Contemporary Records", *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*, no. 66 Autumn, 31 December 2007.

Propaganda Today

Scholars have characterised propaganda as a modern phenomenon which is inseparable from the rise and use of mass media technologies. While the history of the practice itself is naturally older than the emergence of the camera as an everyday product, propaganda ultimately "encompasses mass-mediated manipulation organised on a grand scale to persuade a public".[7] Farkas and Neumayer (2020) comment on how previous theories of propaganda, namely vertical and horizontal modes,[8] are complicated by the polyphony, ephemerality, and vastness of digital spaces. They also warn against an oversimplification that the internet makes information free and democratic and the view of the internet as an inherently democratising tool, which is an idea that has already fallen out of favour not only among theorists and researchers,[9] but also among everyday internet users.

Digital propaganda can be difficult to identify, trace, and understand due to the apparent decentralisation of digital spaces, as well as the sheer amount of possible origin sources. Many states make use of troll armies[10] and/or bot farms to

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[7] J. Farkas and C. Neumayer, "Disguised Propaganda from Digital to Social Media", in *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, J. Hunsinger, L. Klastrup, and M.M. Allen (eds.), Dordrecht, Springer Netherlands, 2018, pp. 1-17.

[8] Farkas and Neumayer cite Jacques Ellul's conceptualisation of different types of propaganda from his 1965 book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Ellul argues that not all propaganda is orchestrated by states and social elites, but also by organisations and communities of individual citizens. He theorises that vertical propaganda is extended by social elites towards a common enemy, while horizontal propaganda "relies on small, autonomous groups cooperating based on a common ideology" (Farkas and Neumayer, 2018, p. 4).

[9] Especially when we think back to the critical optimism of the likes of Howard Rheingold, mentioned in the introduction of this text.

[10] Recent UK-government funded research argues that Kremlin operates a "large-scale disinformation campaign" in countries such as India, UK, and South Africa with trolls that use a variety of communication tactics to push pro-Kremlin content to the forefront of discussions on platforms such as Telegram,

disseminate disinformation and amplify useful "organic" content. It can be challenging to distinguish "bot content", "organic content", "semi-organic content" and "sponsored content", as everyday users knowingly and unknowingly amplify and memetically reproduce the templates, messages and visuals that may have been planted by propagandistic bots and actors in the first place. In fact, we could argue that a successful digital propaganda campaign is one that motivates masses of everyday users to amplify its messages, by introducing engaging modes of content production, especially through easily reproducible templates which can engender high levels of engagement,[11] and increased social interaction for those everyday users, as a result.

Fig. 4.1a - Pepe The Frog sporting a knowing smile. This pose as well as the figure of Pepe has become one of the most popular memetic templates in Anglophone meme culture

Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. They have reported that these trolls may be closely connected to the so-called "Internet Research Agency", a Russian agency that maintains online propaganda and influence operations for various organisations and actors. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-sick-russian-troll-factory-plaguing-social-media-with-kremlin-propaganda

[11] An example of a popular and easily reproducible meme template are Pepe memes. These memes make use of the memetic figure Pepe The Frog, and can be reproduced through web-based meme generators.

Fig. 4.1b - A screenshot of Donald Trump retweeting a memetic reimagining of him as Pepe the Frog in 2015

Photography, although made available to select groups of consumers over time, is a mode of technology that trickled down from the wealthier and more educated classes of society into the masses through commercial products. It took more than a hundred years from the emergence of photography for cameras to start finding their places in everyday homes. Today, there are more than 6 billion smartphone subscriptions in the world,[12] bringing the ability to not only photograph but also record people, places, things and events instantly to the average citizen. Furthermore, the sharing, or *posting*, of the recordings, photographs, images and audio that people take and collect on their smartphones has become a central part of everyday sociality in many societies and communities.

This major shift in culture in the XXI century has great repercussions on how information is created, shared, stored and manipulated. No longer are traditional typologies of horizontal

[12] P. Taylor, "Number of Smartphone Subscriptions Worldwide from 2016 to 2021, with Forecasts from 2022 to 2027", *Statista*, 2023.

and vertical propaganda enough to describe the general tendencies of how states and other actors create and spread propaganda campaigns. Most of the world now has access to a tool of instant content production and publication in their pockets, and access to an assemblage of information which is largely non-hierarchical, moreso rhizomatic in nature. With many potential sources and data points, and an ever-expanding rhizome-like structure, the internet is rife with content that has dubious origins. Furthermore, "viral" content can multiply through memetic means with enough speed, anonymity, randomness, as well as some kind of logical order, where it can look organic or at least "semi-organic", whether or not it was originally a manipulated information or propaganda campaign. As a result, states and actors can hide behind the covertness that the internet provides them, while social media companies falter when trying to identify and moderate potentially problematic content, such as disinformation campaigns. This is due to the sheer size of their platforms as well as the human moderation needed to sift through nuanced information, which artificial intelligence cannot reliably moderate.

It is also important to highlight that the platform monopolies which own, operate and extract capital from most social media technologies we use in our daily lives must keep users engaged and interacting on these social media technologies. Incendiary online discourse and confrontation is ultimately *engaging* for most social media users, especially when viewed as a kind of digital "spectator sport". A "balanced" dose of conflict in digital spaces generates spectators' interest and keeps users online – continuous use is beneficial for platform companies to keep extracting user data and capital. While these social media platforms are designed to keep users online, platform companies such as BATX and GAMA[13] are also becoming increasingly powerful across the globe. Platform companies have even started

[13] BATX stands for the four largest tech firms from China: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi while GAMA stands for the four largest tech firms from the United States: Google, Amazon, Meta and Apple.

to consolidate "powers of governance in cities" and "extremely influential, secretive relationships" with governments,[14] and are thus implicated in how digital propaganda spreads and finds a home on their platforms.

Platform companies have a vested interest in keeping their social media platforms engaging, but not necessarily free of propaganda and/or disinformation. This creates conditions for digital spaces abounding with propaganda that cannot be easily traced back and that keep proliferating through organic, semi-organic and artificial means.

Therefore, propaganda has never been more abundant and difficult to identify than it is today, primarily due to the popularity and accessibility of smartphones and digital spaces, and the decentralised and rhizomatic nature of digital spaces where most people go for news, information and sociality. Even though it is challenging to identify and moderate digital propaganda, there are certain modes and patterns of communication that we can discuss in order to understand not only how states run digital propaganda campaigns but also how digital confrontation occurs between opposing ideological parties in digital spaces. The core characteristic of both contexts is that the information is transmitted and reproduced memetically over digital platforms. As a result, we can look towards memes and memetic warfare as well as the affordances of social media platforms, and observe how they are utilised by both top-down actors and everyday citizens in instances of ideological confrontation.

Memes and Memetic Warfare

The NATO Open Perspectives Exchange Network (OPEN) describes itself as a "a network for understanding the modern security environment from other than military point of view

[14] J. Sadowski, "The Internet of Landlords: Digital Platforms and New Mechanisms of Rentier Capitalism", *Antipode*, vol. 52, no. 2, March 2020, pp. 562-80.

run by NATO Allied Command Transformation's Plans and Policy Branch". A 2015 issue of one of OPEN's peer-reviewed publications, titled "It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare", starts with a foreword by Jeff Giesea. Giesea is known to have organised for Donald Trump in 2016 and is closely affiliated with venture capitalist Peter Thiel, who funds various tech businesses and reactionary political causes. In this NATO publication, Giesea explains the motivation behind the conception of the issue about memetic warfare by asking: "why aren't we weaponizing trolling and memetics to fight ISIS and other enemies?". What he means by "other enemies" here is presumably those forces, state or otherwise, who threaten NATO members, or knowing his political positioning: enemies of Western civilisation. He warns that "memetic warfare is going to get more intense" and that "we must prepare for the worst" but also sees it as "an opportunity as well as a threat". He summarises memetic warfare as digital propaganda, as a warlike practice of competing over narratives, ideas and social control, and continues on to say that *trolling* is digital guerrilla warfare and its main currency is memes. He concludes with a call to arms: "Daesh is conducting memetic warfare. The Kremlin is doing it. It is inexpensive. The capabilities exist. Why are we not trying it?".[15]

Giesea has been described as the "man who helped build the Trump Meme Army". He co-organised the unofficial inaugural ball, "The DeploraBall" celebrating Donald Trump's 2016 US Presidency victory. This ball was advertised on 4chan's /pol/ board, through memes, and bespoke meme templates, and supporters were invited to "JOIN THE BIGGEST MEME EVER". Giesea's tactical meme agenda in this 2015 NATO publication is an especially thought-provoking artefact when viewed in conjunction with how Trump's meme legions were able to consistently feed memetic content into both fringe and mass media cultures. In the same issue, Giesea advised that

[15] J. Giesea, "It's Time To Embrace Memetic Warfare", *Defence Strategic Communications*, vol. 1, no. 1, 10 January 2016, pp. 68-76.

those interested in skirmishing through memetic means should "network across civilian disciplines, particularly with Internet trolls, hackers, marketers, and PR pros". Later, in an interview, referring to the notorious far-right internet troll Charles C. Johnson, Giesea said "when I met Chuck I wondered why we weren't weaponizing people like him".[16] After Trump's election to US presidency, Chuck Johnson, alongside Peter Thiel, was reportedly involved in "vetting" and "recommending" political appointees to serve under Donald Trump.[17]

The mobilisation of "meme troops" within the ideological battleground of mid-2010s US politics cannot be seen as a truly bottom-up endeavour.[18] The context from which political memes emerge from is not distinct from "real-life" and is therefore subject to the same tensions that we see in IRL[19] environments. Whether or not prominent meme-posters are genuine "civilian" supporters of Trump, or so-called "assets" of techno-political networks invested in Trump's election is somewhat irrelevant. The bottom line is that these memes successfully act as ideological currencies and are flooded into public forums in an appeal to shift and create narratives, to apply social and political pressure on various stakeholders. The reason why it may be difficult to separate "genuine" versus "simulated" memetic support for political candidates or causes is precisely because memes act as digital propaganda, or as ideological seeds that take on a life of their own.

In online communities, internet memes are used as a mode of cultural capital which can signal in-group membership. When an internet meme, or even a template for one, is "planted" or

[16] J. Bernstein, "This Man Helped Build The Trump Meme Army - Now He Wants To Reform It", *Buzzfeed News*, 2016.

[17] T. Mac, "A Troll Outside Trump Tower Is Helping To Pick Your Next Government", *Forbes*, 2016.

[18] This includes the supposed meme troops supposedly deployed by the notorious "Internet Research Agency", a Russian agency that maintains online propaganda and influence operations for various organisations and actors.

[19] IRL stands for "In Real Life" and is a popular internet slang term used to denote the world outside of digital communication, otherwise "real life".

introduced within such a community, the success of its virality and spread depends on whether or not it can be reinterpreted through low-effort, or efficient, means. Even if the seeds of certain memes are inserted by instigators supported from moneyed political groups, people such as Giesea and Thiel for instance, effective dissemination is often done quasi-earnestly by communities of users, but only if they accept and adopt the meme in question. The meme has to make sense within the wider ephemera of the group. Thus the narrative success of a meme is related not to its numbers but by the social allegiances it inspires in people. Memes are infinitely fluid, as they neither respect national nor subcultural boundaries. The key to understanding them also lies in their overall slipperiness.

The possibility of subversion is also a part of the pull of internet memes. Ridiculing top-down propaganda, and socio-political norms and expectations is especially subversive under more oppressive conditions. After all, as folklorist Alan Dundes once said, "the more repressive the regime, the more numerous the political jokes".[20] For several years, academic researchers painted internet memes as discursive tools that subvert dominant media messages. The assumption was that internet memes came from below, from the people, and were therefore inherently democratic. It is no secret that academic studies of subcultures have a fixation on the idea of *resistance*. Internet memes were therefore given the "as resistance" treatment by scholarly studies. The subversiveness of internet memes was also linked to their intertextual nature. Internet memes were subverting *the image*, akin to a Dadaist photomontage which sought to topple the idea of "the photograph as truth".

In contrast to how photography became a mass technology, through a top-down trickle down model of adoption, internet memes have been taken on as a useful propaganda tool by top-level actors due to their mass popularity amongst the public. Today not only are memes the *lingua franca* of the internet,

[20] A. Dundes, "Laughter Behind the Iron Curtain", *Ukrainian Quarterly*, no. 27, 1971, p. 51.

and the "everyperson" online, they are also heavily used by organisations and institutions with considerably more power than the individual citizen. Therefore, rather than seeing memes as inherently revolutionary, resistant, or propagandistic, we must now shift our view to understand them as tools with politics that can be utilised by any interested party – with differing levels of "success".

Influencers and Fandom-Governance

The influencer industry, in which social media users cultivate followings of other users who they can influence and monetise via brand deals, sponsorships and partnerships, is now also implicated within wider information and propaganda campaigns. A study which "compares emerging trends in digital disinformation and computational propaganda across 12 countries – Burma, Brazil, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United States" found that many political marketing agencies in these countries team up with nano-influencers to spread propaganda organically,[21] unsullied by artificial or artificial-seeming content.

A recent and visible example of this practice comes from an investigative report by journalist Günseli Yalçınkaya. In her article titled "How E-girl influencers are trying to get Gen Z into the military", Yalçınkaya describes how certain US-based TikTok influencers, especially internet-savvy young women otherwise dubbed as "e-girls",[22] create seemingly "ironic" and memetically-reproduced content directed towards young people

[21] S.C. Woolley, "Digital Propaganda: The Power of Influencers", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 33, no. 3, July 2022, pp. 115-29.

[22] E-girl is a term used to describe Gen Z women who are part of an online subculture influenced by emo, goth, Japanese street and K-pop subcultures. E-girls are often distinguished by their makeup and clothing choices and the online memetic templates they engage in.

on TikTok. A particular influencer that Yalçınkaya mentions "is a self-described "psychological operations specialist" for the US Army, whose online presence has led to countless memes speculating that she is a post-ironic psy-op[23] meant to recruit young people into the US army".[24] This content depicts the influencers on army bases, in combat uniform, using weapons, repeating memetic templates that are popular on TikTok and engaging in military propaganda. Yalçınkaya identifies that this may be all done with a heavy dose of irony. This memetic irony shields feelings of "cringe" that overt militarism might inspire in the cynically-inclined Gen-Z[25] social media users.

The utilisation of influencers and influencer-industry tactics to spread propaganda and vie for the public's favour in ideological confrontations is not just exemplified by this instance. It can also be seen in Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy's social media campaign, which was positively received by Western social media users and social media platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems. We can see commonalities between Zelenskyy's social media presence and what's been called "fandom governance", or otherwise "the moulding and managing of citizens as fans" that ultimately "retrenches state authority".[26] Researcher Wong describes how fandom governance was used by Chinese state-operated media during Covid-19 lockdowns, in particular by employing memes and online templates to turn mundane objects, events, and actors into "cute" social media icons, keeping citizens engaged over a shared sense of "cuteness".

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[23] Short for psychological-operation.

[24] G. Yalçınkaya, "How E-Girl Influencers Are Trying to Get Gen Z into the Military", *Dazed Digital*, 2023.

[25] Gen-Z or Generation Z is the generational cohort following Millennials (Generation Y) and preceding Generation Alpha

[26] J. Wong, "'Let's Go Baby Forklift': Fandom Governance in China within the Covid-19 Crisis", in *Critical Meme Reader II: Memetic Tacticality*, C. Arkenbout and L. Scherz (eds.), 2022, pp. 76-88.

Zelenskyy's social media presence made use of the promise of easily reproducible memetic templates, placing him within potentially memetic instances which were taken up by supporters and detractors alike. His savvy use of Twitter and online visibility is an example of top-down use of memetic circulation. On the other hand, from the bottom-up, we have been seeing TikTok videos that some younger Ukrainian citizens as well as soldiers have been posting about the war[27]. For instance, making use of the popular TikTok meme template "things that just make sense in *place name*", Ukrainian TikTok user @Valerisssh created a video in which she did a tongue-in-cheek tour of the bomb shelter in which she and her family have been living. Similarly, Alina Volik, posted a TikTok video titled "POV: you live in Ukraine", utilising another popular meme template showing the peculiarities of living under a besieged city. Another TikTok user @pokrovskiy_klop documents his daily walks from his home to the bomb shelter, joking about how air raid sirens are the new alarm clock in Ukraine. These interventions are memetic in composition, but they also act as a form of citizen journalism from the ground, pushing back against the narrative that pro-Russian state media and influencers present. Made to be consumed and shared quickly, TikTok has been a medium that Ukrainian social media users have employed widely.

[27] C. Stokel-Walker, "POV: You Live in Ukraine", *The Face*, 2022.

Fig. 4.2a - Screenshots of TikTok videos that use the "Things in *place name* that just make sense" memetic template

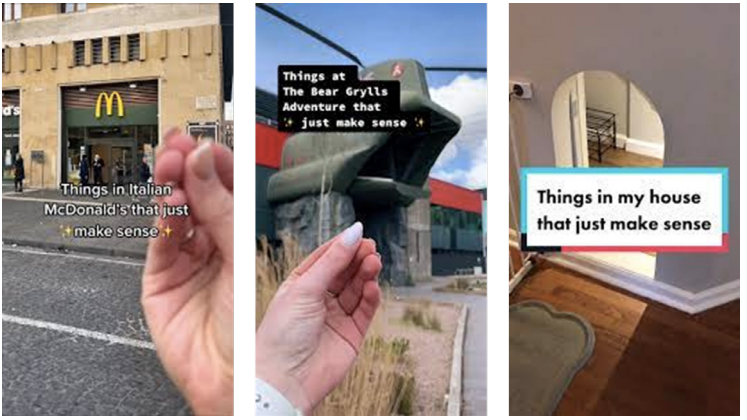
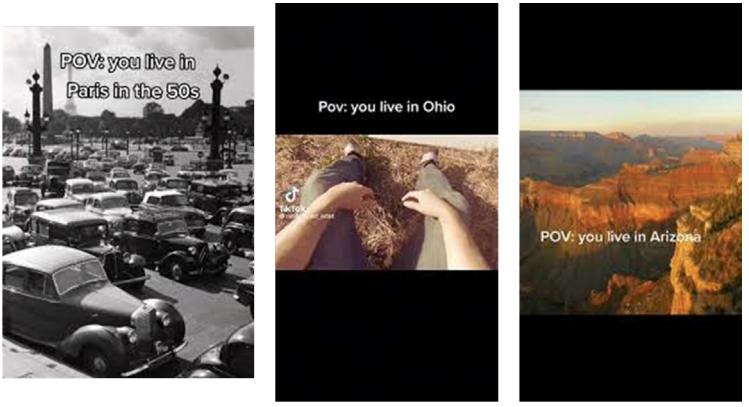


Fig. 4.2b - Screenshots of TikTok videos which use the "POV: you live in *insert place name*" memetic template



We see that digital confrontations between Ukraine and Russia naturally extend to TikTok among other social media platforms. Among citizen reportage and dark humour emerging from the cities and trenches in Ukraine, pro-Russian users have been creating and reproducing memetic templates, sounds, and

captions countering Ukrainian narratives. The role of TikTok is particularly unique among other social media platforms, as it offers itself as a possible fast-paced, fully embodied propaganda reproduction machine. In their conference presentation at the launch of the edited collection *Critical Meme Reader II: Memetic Tacticality* in Amsterdam, researchers Marloes Geboers and Elena Pilipets described how pro-Russian social media users, influencers and otherwise, created and reproduced digital warfare narratives on TikTok. They underlined that beyond textual and visual memetic templates, affective or gestural templates such as dances, movements, and gestures coupled with emotionally arresting sounds, such as the Russian wartime song Katyusha, were increasingly being used to create narratives and counter-narratives on ambiguous digital spaces such as TikTok. Their ongoing research pointed towards the rise of gestural memes and affective templates in digital propaganda, which can be seen in Yalçınkaya's e-girl militarism example as well. The combination of easily replicable memetic audio bites, video templates, viral dances and gestures coupled with the promise of parasocial relationships with popular users makes TikTok a particularly generative space for embodied propaganda. This may point us towards the emergence of contexts in which propaganda can be addressed to *the entire body*: complete with memetic phrases, text, images, sounds, gestures and an underlying logic of viral and self-governing proliferation, such as on TikTok.

This takes us to the final discussion of this paper, which presents a brief overview of memetic propaganda and citizenry beyond the war in Ukraine.

Memes, Censorship and Authoritarianism

In 2018 it was announced that China would end the two-term limit on presidents, which meant that Xi Jinping could serve as the leader of the country for life. Chinese internet users who were opposed to the idea of one-man rule congregated on social media and messaging apps to express their frustrations through

memes. Anyone who is familiar with Chinese meme culture may have already guessed that Winnie the Pooh, a memetic stand-in for Xi Jinping, took centre stage in these memes. As a political culture rich with allegory, and an internet that is heavily policed, internet memes seem like the logical choice for these users' rhetorical dissent. The fact that the real meaning behind memes can be hidden beneath intertextual layers and can only be decoded by the memetically literate, may have meant that the memes could stay online for a bit longer than text-based posts. Most of these memes were nevertheless removed and popular keywords and phrases were suppressed. If our mission is to understand the function of internet memes in different contexts, a necessary question to ask here would be: what does it mean to share "dangerous memes" under continuous digital censorship?

An important aspect in mundane politics – the politics that happen on an everyday and vernacular basis - is the telling of jokes and the consumption of political satire. Nowadays, social media platforms provide users with an extensive arsenal of visual and text based political humour. However, both researchers and humourists have varying opinions on whether the creation of political satire can be considered a method of "real" political dissent, a form of resistance, or a practice of citizenship. This is a significant topic of discussion specifically when it comes to political satire in authoritarian regimes. While the creation and distribution of oppositional political humour in largely liberal and democratic regimes can be seen simply as an exercise of citizens' right to freedom of speech or an expression of an opinion, such an act performed within regimes characterized to be more oppressive can be considered to be a public performance of resistance. This is undoubtedly partly due to the fact that there is a genuine possibility of enduring political, intellectual or social pressure by the government and its supporters when engaging in an act of resistance, regardless of how "small" it is. Furthermore, a public expression of dissent can also bring physical harm and potential imprisonment to the creator as

well as the consumer of said content. An extreme example from history is the role that political jokes played in the Soviet Union, and the personal implications of their sharing and discussion. The political significance of telling jokes often correlates to the personal risk that they may bring to the narrator of the joke. In the heavily policed discursive environment of the USSR, telling the wrong political joke in the wrong company could result in possible imprisonment, deportation and even death.

A more recent example is the case of Walid Kechida, who was sentenced to three years in prison and asked to pay a monetary fine by an Algerian court in 2021 for sharing satirical memes insulting the then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Kechida had created a Facebook page called "Hirak Memes" and was disseminating memes and political cartoons in support of the anti-government Hirak movement, a series of protests which erupted in February 2019 after Bouteflika announced that he was running for a fifth term. A similar instance occurred in Russia in 2018, when a law-student who had set up social media experiments by using memes was jailed for radicalism for 2.5 years. Alexander Kruze was sharing various sorts of "extremist" internet memes to collect data for his dissertation, which included Ukrainian nationalist and separatist memes. Authoritarian regimes often have extremism laws under which they can prosecute internet users for sharing posts that they deem to be dangerous. The extremism in question is always open to interpretation, and is frequently used to silence oppositional narratives. However, it is particularly poignant that the threat of imprisonment and fines does not discourage internet users who live under authoritarian rule from creating and disseminating potentially dangerous memes. This is a testament to the fact that internet memes have become a mundane and inescapable part of the contemporary political experience of the networked individual. Sharing and creating internet memes can be deeply and intentionally political at times, however they can also be highly ambivalent, particularly because they are such a ubiquitous part of being online in today's world. Beyond their

political and expressive functions, they are also a sort of *play*.

However, if we were to follow the argument that internet memes are subversive rhetorical interventions, we should also point out that mainstream figures also subvert the supposed subversive nature of internet memes. The memetic cycle does not end at the point of bottom-up rejection, instead it reverts back to propaganda from above. The ridiculing of political figures is countered by the same political figures utilising memetic templates to show their "hipness" and to vie for support from online subcultures. While some are in the vein of the Steve Buscemi "how do you do, fellow kids?" meme (see Pentagon's Soviet bear meme), some are more successful in appearing genuine.

Nayib Bukele, the current president of El Salvador, is a prominent example of a politician who seems to have a degree of meme literacy, which he uses as a marketing tool for his various, mostly crypto-centric, causes. Calling himself the "coolest dictator" he defiantly leans into the oppositional narratives about himself as an unpredictable crypto-bro. He is known for using Reddit lingo and viral meme templates to solidify his internet clout, and regularly changes his official Twitter profile picture into meme edits of himself. Again, on Twitter, Bukele has responded to older crypto-sceptical US Senators with "OK boomers" and said that El Salvador "DGAF" (meaning Don't Give A F**k) that Moody's had downgraded its sovereign debt due to its Bitcoin trades. The crypto community online seems to enjoy and support his devil-may-care attitude, as he weaponises the presumed anarchic character of meme culture.

Bukele is a cult internet figure who is similar to Elon Musk, patron saint of crypto-memers. Musk has previously declared that "a picture says 1000 words, and maybe a meme says 10,000 words". Aside from the interesting mathematical calculations, he may be right. Musk's influence on internet culture, and the fanbase that he has garnered as a result of his memetic dealings, is an indicator that big-tech figures have been persuaded by the political and financial potential of internet memes. Therefore,

internet memes cannot be seen as purely top-down or bottom-up technologies. The idea that internet memes are "everyday talk of everyday people", as well as the assumption that certain political memes become successful as a result of relentless troll-armies are both misleading. If we can pin down some of the social logic of internet memes, which dictates that they are more than just humorous expressions, we can better understand how they function within different contexts. Internet memes are explicitly intertextual as they carry not only the motive and viewpoint of their creators, but also information about the prevalent cultural, political, technological relations within society. Prevalence here does not imply conventionality though, as memes can embody both dominant perspectives and peripheral subcultures. As they become contested public spaces where discussions happen over multiple iterations of the same template and caption, they become fluid, ambivalent, and hard to define. One thing is for certain though, and that is that internet memes have become the building blocks of digital culture.

Conclusion

There is an unfathomable number of organic, semi-organic and artificial actors that are active in spreading information online and it is challenging for everyday users as well as researchers to make reliable conclusions about the root, aim and spread of digital propaganda. While it is hard to grasp the vast amount of information available to us online, we can still develop an understanding of memetic templates that are key in much of viral content dissemination. These templates have expanded from being image and text combinations, as in static memes such as Pepe the Frog reproductions, into embodied templates which combine audio, video, text, bodily gestures and sociality, as seen in viral TikTok instances.

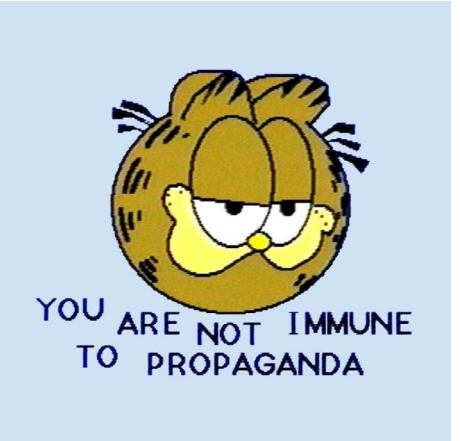
These developments complicate existent theorisations of propaganda which address vertical and horizontal modes, but do not account for the rhizomatic, ever-growing, and relatively

decentralised nature of the internet on which information washes over users from many sides. At the same time, the use of social media platforms and memetic templates by top-down actors complicate previously held beliefs about memes as the "everyday talk of everyday people". Internet memes are not just unserious modes of vernacularity anymore, they are taken as the language of the internet in which not only ordinary people but also states, governments, and politicians must be fluent. The reach of memes is nothing to balk at, and we have witnessed this most clearly in the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia and the resulting digital confrontations.

The potential of memetic virality is what makes digital propaganda a promising aim for many actors. Memes are cheap and easy to disseminate, and do not discriminate; but a successful meme is hard to construct and seed into a community. Memetic virality therefore lies in a degree of organic or semi-organic authenticity that motivates unknowing users to reproduce the information without overt coercion. This requires for propagandistic actors to be knowledgeable about online communities and community identities, meme templates and digital culture. These actors today are not only politicians, states and governments but also everyday users, citizens, journalists and influencers. In fact, despite the seeming decentrality of the internet, most people access information through the domain of platform monopolies. These platform companies engage in data-extractivism, collecting and capitalising on user data and their platform real estate, or ad space. Their interest therefore lies in increased user engagement, which polarising content, such as disinformation operations, motivates - therefore they are therefore not reliable moderators or custodians of information.

We then arrive at a conclusion that today, propaganda is memetic, multifarious, cheap, abundant, and primarily digital. It is also overseen by platform monopolies, who are not motivated by the possibility of providing a disinformation-free digital experience for their users. Online visibility and virality is becoming, if it has not already, the most valuable aim for a

digital propaganda campaign. Memetic templates are the main element of virality on social media platforms, and this makes it clear that building memetic literacy will play a key part in being politically informed moving forward. Approaching memes as political texts to be read and investigated, rather than as tools of either democracy or autocracy, may help us develop a more nuanced understanding.



Conclusions

Aldo Ferrari, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti

Are we facing increasing global fragmentation due to Russia's war against Ukraine or a re-consolidation of longstanding alliances? What principles underlie the formation of these blocs? What are the consequences of these dynamics for global security and the global economy? These were the core questions we set out to answer in this volume, with a few considerations in mind. On the one hand there seems to be consensus over the view that the invasion of Ukraine has led to the consolidation of multipolarity, but on the other hand we should be careful before jumping to conclusions as the war is still raging at the time of writing. No one can predict when the conflict will end, nor what its outcome will be. Still, just as February 24 has shaken the world at its very foundations, its conclusion too might bring profound change. This seems to be particularly the case for the actor that is the main focus of this Report – the Russian Federation. The future of Russia is in fact strongly linked to its military campaign: if this culminated in a debacle for Moscow's army, Russia might become very different from Russia as we know it; conversely, if Moscow managed to keep the seized territories under its control, it could present this as a victory against the "Collective West", adding further momentum to multipolarity. Only time will tell.

Nevertheless, focusing on the present day, we can still try to take stock of the evolving dynamics of the world order and Russia's place in it. Despite many warnings – especially by those countries that consider Russia a neo-imperialist state

– many saw the invasion as Russia contradicting itself. Indeed, the "sacredness" of principle of sovereignty has long featured among the leitmotifs of Russian political discourse. For a long time, the Russian elites have deemed interference and meddling by external forces in other states' internal affairs as absolutely unacceptable, especially if it was Western states behaving in this manner. In Moscow's view, it is the West that orchestrated the "Colour Revolutions" and "Arab Spring," thus destabilising former Soviet states and MENA countries.[1] Despite the importance attributed to sovereignty, its instrumental use in Moscow's foreign policy has caused growing concern following Russia's war with Georgia (2008), annexation of Crimea (2014) and intervention in Syria (2015). On these occasions, however, Moscow tried to legitimise its actions in the eyes of the international community, striving to give a semblance of legal legitimacy to its acts of aggression and only partially tarnishing its sovereignty narrative. In 2022, with the full-scale invasion of another sovereign country, all doubts were dispelled. One might have expected that Moscow would lose credibility as a result. And yet, it is managing to maintain a strong image among several states – especially in the so-called Global South – by pushing the narrative of NATO enlargement as the main provocation for the war.

Another possible blow to Russia's image comes from the difficulties that Russia is encountering on the battleground. Prior to the war, the Russian army was widely regarded as a mighty force – second only to that of the US. One year into the conflict, Russia's modest progress on the ground and the huge quantity of resources spent on the offensive are changing that perception. The apparent inefficiency of the Russian military apparatus and the fatigue caused by engagement in Ukraine also raise questions about Russia's role as a security provider for several of its neighbours in the South Caucasus and Central

[1] Y. Nikitina, "The 'Color Revolutions' and 'Arab Spring' in Russian Official Discourse", *Connections*, vol. 14, no. 1, Winter 2014, pp. 87-104.

Asia. This became evident in September 2022, when Russia refused to step in to support Armenia following Azerbaijan's aggression targeting Armenian territory, which is (virtually) covered by the collective security guarantee under Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

What about Russia's role in this evolving international system? Russia has always held a central position in the discourse on multipolarity. From the mid to late 1990s, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov was its most influential promoter, as well as one of the first to claim that we were moving towards a system of international relations that no single power could dominate.[2] Russia's quest for a multipolar order has lived on under Vladimir Putin. In 2007, during the annual Munich Security Conference, Putin harshly criticised the United States in an often-quoted speech blaming Washington for exerting a quasi-monopolistic dominance over international politics. From that point on, Russia became increasingly assertive and non-Western in a political and economic sense. The start of the Ukraine conflict is the latest step in this long journey.

In the realist vision, multipolarity is a "constellation of self-sufficient power centers that possess vast material resources and that can either balance or clash with each other".[3] From this point of view, while it is true that Russia is one of the main contributors to the emerging multipolarity, it is equally true that its role in it might fall short of expectations. Although many significant actors in the global arena seem to be embracing multipolarity, it is unlikely that Russia will be able to play a primary role in it. Even if Russia's assertiveness remains unchanged, it will be hard for the Kremlin's material capabilities to match other poles of power (i.e., China and the US), especially in light of the stagnation of its economy that preceded the war. This could increase Moscow's dependence on Beijing.

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[2] For further reference see A. Kortunov, *Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity*, Russia in Global Affairs, 26 January 2019.

[3] A. Makarychev, "Russia in a multipolar world: Role identities and 'cognitive maps'", *Revista CIDOB d'afers internacionals*, no. 96, December 2011, p. 2.

Although it is likely that great power competition will be a direct contest between the US and China, Russia's actions might have affected the "post-Ukraine" world in yet another way. In response to the war, the West imposed unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia. Even though the political and economic weight of the sanctioning countries is undeniable, in numerical terms they represent but a small fraction of the global community. If the West was quick to jointly condemn Russian aggression, the same degree of decisiveness was not shown anywhere else. In fact, the countries that have decided not to follow the retaliatory measures far outnumber their Western counterparts: some of these countries have remained neutral; others, while denouncing the invasion in words, have actually bolstered economic ties with Moscow. Despite Western threats of economic retaliation, China, India, practically all of Asia (except Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), all of Africa and all of Latin America continue to trade (directly or through intermediaries) with Russia. Even though these players decided to do so knowing that they would be able to maximise their leverage over Moscow, now in desperate need of new safe harbours for its exports, their attitude towards the war cannot be reduced to purely pragmatic economic interests. There are also political reasons why these countries are reluctant to condemn Moscow and to show concrete support for Ukraine. For example, Latin American leaders' rejection of Western requests that they send weapons to Ukraine speaks of their longstanding tradition of non-interventionism.[4] Westerners perceive – or at least define in their political discourse – the Ukraine war as a conflict with global connotations and an assault on the inviolable values of democracy, freedom and self-determination. However, the diversity of political stances and reactions that came in the wake of the war reveals that such a vision is not shared by all the peoples and governments around

[4] M. Stott, C. Murray, L. Elliott, C. Ingizza, and G. Chazan, "'We are for peace': Latin America rejects pleas to send weapons to Ukraine", *Financial Times*, 15 February 2023.

the world, some of which regard the conflict as a "European war" at best or as an example of Western double standards at worst.

The sharp downsizing of Russia caused by the war is not likely to interrupt the consolidation of a scenario defined by Richard Sakwa in this volume as "a highly uneven multipolarity accompanied by a broader ideological, even civilisational, contest between the political West and the nascent political East". This is because the call for multipolarity comes from an increasingly large and powerful group of countries that demands more representation and sees their interests damaged by a world order configuration still largely prey to traditional Western global hegemony. Hence, as observed by Zachary Paikin in this volume, perhaps 2022 will be remembered as "the year when multipolarity definitively became a reality" – even in the event of a Russian military defeat.

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