

Evaluation of the Global Environment: Rise of China; Russia-West Confrontation; and Emerging Threats - Şener Aktürk

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Is the rivalry between China and the United States the primary fault line and the organising principle of the new world order?

By late 2021, the new organising principle of the emerging world order indeed

seemed to be the rivalry between China and the United States. From the very beginning until the very end of his tenure, U.S. President Donald Trump (2016-2020) clearly targeted China as the main threat to US security while seeking unusually close relations with Russia. Those focusing on and perhaps exaggerating the idiosyncratic features of the Trump presidency were overlooking that his predecessor, Barack Obama, also sought “reset” with Russia *and* “pivot to Asia.” Moreover, Trump’s successor, Joe Biden, established AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) as a new security formation to contain China in September 2021, which, unsurprisingly, infuriated the Chinese leadership (Ward and McLeary 2021).

Similarly, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), also known as “the Quad,” which brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, includes joint military exercises among its participants and issued a statement on the spirit of the Quad in March 2021 (White House 2021), and held its first Quad Plus meeting with South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam. Initially, Biden also sought a rapprochement with Russia when under his presidency U.S. waived the sanctions on Russia’s Nord Stream 2 pipeline (BBC 2021). In short, instead of a radical break during the Trump presidency, it is very much possible to observe many efforts at rapprochement with Russia and containment against China throughout Obama, Trump, and Biden’s administrations, which arguably failed. Encircling and containing China as the priority and enlisting Russia’s assistance in such a strategy was the course of action leading Realist scholars to recommend to the United States for more than two decades (Mearsheimer 2001;

2016). Symbolically, too, 2021 was the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, since the Belavezha Accords that legally dissolved the Soviet Union were signed between the Russian president Boris Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and the Belarusian president Stanislav Shushkevich on December 8, 2021, which in many ways laid the foundation for the post-Cold War order (Rutland 2016). At least many observers thought so until only two and a half months after this anniversary, when Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Did Russia's invasion

of Ukraine refocus the United States and the Western alliance on containing

Russia as the primary threat instead of China? If Russia's invasion of Ukraine results in

refocusing the United States and the Western alliance on containing Russia as the primary threat to global security, a significant realignment of world politics around the Chinese threat may have been averted or at least postponed. Since much of the media coverage of international events since February 2022 is overwhelmingly focused on Ukraine, one might think that Russia indeed reclaimed

its status as the primary threat in the eyes of the Western alliance. On the other hand, while the United States and the Western allies did not militarily intervene, and they did not even threaten or suggest that they may militarily intervene to stop Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Biden unequivocally stated that the "U.S. would intervene militarily if China invaded Taiwan." (Restuccia, Thomas, Chin 2022) Thus, it is possible to conclude that despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US is still focused on China to the point of threatening to intervene if China attempts to invade Taiwan, whereas it refused to intervene during Russia's invasion of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014 or the Russian invasion of the rest of Ukraine that began in February 2022. It is an open question whether there is a red line for the United States or the rest of the Western alliance regarding Russian expansionism in Europe, within or beyond Ukraine. Of immediate concern is the status of Moldova, where the breakaway region of Transnistria has been under Russian military protection for almost three decades. Numerous observers, such as the Director of U.S. National Intelligence Avril Haines, among others, suggest that Russia is seeking to link Russian-occupied Crimea and Transnistria by occupying the remainder of Ukraine's Black Sea coast, including the regions of Kherson, Mykolaiv, and the critical port city of Odesa (O'Brien 2022). Almost the entire area (oblast) of Kherson has been occupied by Russia by the end of May 2022, with incursions into the Mykolaiv region and sporadic missile attacks combined with a naval blockade on Odesa lending credence to this speculation. The Russian occupation of the entire Black Sea coast of Ukraine, followed by an incursion into Moldova, would have dire consequences for the European and global security environment.

One might also ask why Russia does not prioritise (or at least publicly does not seem to care much about) the Chinese threat to its east, in Siberia in particular, and instead overwhelmingly focuses on the threat from the West. Russia's self-perception as a European great power and Russia's recurrent fear of "falling behind" European and Western competitors, which arguably contributed to the Bolshevik Revolution, among other significant outcomes in Russian history, maybe one of the reasons for Russia's overwhelming focus on the Western threat, which then has more to do with self-perception and identity rather than the actual balance of power in Russia's immediate neighbourhood. What will happen to Russia in the wake of a possible defeat in Ukraine is an intriguing question, and one may surmise that it will become more of an Asian power with the loss of its influence over Ukraine.

Linking the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the emerging threat from the rise of China, the U.S. "Secretary of State Antony Blinken said" that "the Biden administration aims to lead the international bloc opposed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine into a broader coalition to counter what it sees as a more serious, long-term threat to global order from China." (Lee 2022) This prioritisation

was based on the assessment of not just intent but also capabilities, as Blinken stated in the same speech very recently: "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order -and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." (Lee 2022) The strategy of countering China and Russia simultaneously, as stated most recently by Blinken, raises several further questions: ***Does China benefit from and/or support Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Does China intend to occupy Taiwan soon? Does China see the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a positive precedent for its goal of "reunification" by annexing Taiwan? Summing up all these questions, is Russia a long-term ally or adversary of China, given their implicit competition in Siberia, Central Asia, and elsewhere?***

It is reasonable to suggest that China benefits from Russia's invasion

and Ukrainian resistance in the short term for various reasons. First, the centre of attention for the security concerns of the Western alliance moves away from China and the Asia-Pacific and towards Eastern Europe, where it has historically been. Second, Russia becomes more dependent on China as international sanctions further isolate Russia from the global economy. For example, China can buy an even larger share of Russia's oil, natural gas, and grain, probably at much lower prices than would have been the case in the absence of Western economic sanctions on Russia. Third and relatedly, many Russian oligarchs and others with transferable wealth can move their investments to China instead of Western countries to evade imminent or potential sanctions. Fourth, as the Russian military is increasingly weakened in a war of attrition on the Ukrainian front, Chinese military strength relative to Russia will continue to improve. China was already unrivalled economically among all its neighbours and nearby polities in Asia, but as late as 2019, Russia's military strength was ranked second in the world after the United States but ahead of China (Aktürk 2020, Table 3). However, with the rapid decline in Russia's economic and military power due to the war in Ukraine, Chinese military power will most likely surpass Russia's and will soon become unrivalled across Asia. Such a development will have vast consequences for the global security environment. China is very likely to attempt to annex Taiwan

within the next quarter-century at the latest since the current leader of China, Xi Jinping, explicitly stated that "'China's complete reunification' by 'resolving the Taiwan question' will be achieved by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China." (Erickson 2019, 74) Since Russia is extremely unlikely to clash with China over the latter's attempt at annexing Taiwan, it is possible for the US-led Western alliance to simultaneously face a revisionist Russia seeking to annex parts or all of Ukraine in Eastern Europe and a revisionist China seeking to annex Taiwan in East Asia.

Some may critically note that China's population did not increase but rather declined for the first time in 60 years (Peng 2022). However, China still accounts for over one-sixth of the world's population. If population *decline* becomes a problem, the government may adopt various pro-natalist policies just as many West and East European countries, including Russia, have done. I would also note that there

have

been alarmist reports and predictions about an imminent and drastic decline in Germany's population since the 1970s (at least). Yet, more than 40 years later, Germany reached and surpassed 80 million people and remains the most populous

nation within the European Union by a large margin. In short, alarmist predictions about "population decline" in advanced industrial great powers have been widespread and somewhat exaggerated.

Much more than the differing views on China, the invasion of Ukraine exposed the radical differences in various Western states' attitudes vis-à-vis Russia and thus, led many to question the existence of a Western alliance altogether: ***Is there a Western***

alliance as of 2022? More specifically, are France and Germany primarily interested

in containing and rolling back Russia's military-political interventions beyond

its borders, or are they seeking a rapprochement with Russia even in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Very different

attitudes vis-à-vis Russia prevailed already well before the latter invaded Ukraine: For example, both France and Russia supported the Libyan warlord Haftar against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, and Germany continued to deepen its energy dependence on Russia with new pipelines, and both countries opposed plans to offer a Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine's NATO membership as far back as in the Bucharest Summit of 2008. Even months after the invasion began, French president Macron "said that the West should not 'humiliate' Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ukraine" and suggested "that Ukraine cede some of its territories to Russia to help Putin save face." (Galindo 2022) Both Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have been accused of timidity in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

European and broader Western disunity in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine brings back another concern that predated 2022 and was expressed with a

catchy neologism coined during the Munich Security Conference in February 2020:

Westlessness (Munich Security

Conference 2020). At the conference, while European leaders were much more concerned about “the state of Western unity,” in line with the grand strategic shift discussed above in this discussion paper, “the size of the Chinese threat to the Western community was perceived as much more pronounced by US representatives than their European peers.” (Munich Security Conference 2020) The transatlantic divide in interpreting the global environment and the emerging threats is captured in great part in this contrast: “Western disunity”, especially in the aftermath of the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, the so-called “Brexit,” haunts European policymakers, whereas the US still perceives the world locked in a contest between the West and the Rest. As a major development symptomatic of fundamental disagreements within broader Europe, Brexit alone should have been sufficient to challenge the existence of a unified West.

What are the

preferences and the role of the United Kingdom in the aftermath of Brexit? A very influential report formulated and

endorsed by a commission after Brexit that included leading policymakers from Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, and the United States suggested “a new UK

strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region,” titled, “A Very British Tilt.” (Policy Exchange 2020) The Commission was chaired by the former Prime Minister of Canada,

Stephen Harper, and the report’s foreword was written by the former Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe. The report can be interpreted as an attempt to create a broadly liberal democratic bloc of countries to contain possible Chinese expansionist threats. The reports emphasise that the UK’s “critically-important special relationship with the United

States is increasingly affected by American grand strategic decisions and concerns related to China, whether directly as with the Huawei case, or indirectly as a consequence of new US military-economic policies that focus on a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’” (emphasis in the original, Policy Exchange

2020, 20). In short, post-Brexit, Britain appears to be on board with a new US grand strategy aimed at containing China, as the initiatives such as AUKUS and high-level strategic formulations such as the *Policy Exchange* report suggest.

If Russia, which used

to be considered the second or the third military power globally, is being significantly weakened due to its invasion of Ukraine, which country or countries are likely to rise as the other major powers following China and the

United States soon? France and the United

Kingdom, the other two members of the United States Security Council (UNSC), are unlikely to become the third and fourth major powers in what appears to be an increasingly multipolar world, primarily due to the limited size of their core states with a relatively small territory (between quarter-million and half a million square kilometres) in comparative perspective and their current populations around 67 million each. On the other hand, despite these limitations of their size (demographic, territorial, and other), France and the United Kingdom are still able to project military power worldwide across numerous seas and oceans, in part due to their overseas territories, a concrete legacy of their recent imperial past. As for new great powers that have the potential to eclipse the old European great powers, Brazil, with a territory larger than eight million square kilometres of territory and a population exceeding 200 million, and India, with a territory larger than three million square kilometres and a population exceeding 1.3 billion, are more likely candidates

to be new great powers and potential regional hegemonies in South America and South Asia, respectively. Power, however, is always relational, and the existence of the United States in North America and the existence of China north of the Himalayas might suffice to stymie any hegemonic aspirations Brazil and India might have or develop over time, respectively. It is also essential to bear in mind that many states around the world (perhaps even the majority) are neither formally allied with the United States nor with China or Russia, an important fact that we may lose sight of in analyses that excessively focus on Europe, East Asia, or the Middle East, three regions of supreme significance for the U.S.-Russia and U.S.-Chinese rivalry.

Another

major puzzle with regards to the global environment in the near future is whether Russia's invasion of Ukraine will result in a negotiated settlement that includes recognition of any border changes in favour of Russia or not. If, for example, any territory such as Crimea that Russia militarily occupied and annexed is internationally recognised as part of Russia in a peace settlement, this may serve as a precedent for many other attempts at annexation through occupation elsewhere around the world. In a nutshell, the proverbial Pandora's Box may be opened to break the taboo of border changes through annexations if Crimea (or any other Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory) is legally recognised and accepted as Russia's territory in a postwar settlement. In short, if the Russian invasion of Ukraine ends with a settlement that internationally recognises Crimea (and perhaps even other Ukrainian territories) as part of Russia, this would likely open the gate for other annexations elsewhere.

The questions regarding the future status of annexed territories and de facto states constitute only one dimension of the heated debates and discussions about the crisis of the liberal international order (Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2018). According to leading Neorealist critics, the liberal international order was "bound to fail," in part because the unipolarity in the global distribution of power that it relied on ended around 2016: "the world became multipolar in or close to 2016, and... the shift away from unipolarity is a death sentence for the liberal international order, which is in the process of collapsing and will be replaced by realist orders." (Mearsheimer 2019, 8-9) From such a perspective, it may be no coincidence that the UK's exit from the European Union and Trump's election to the US presidency both took place in 2016, a critical turning point in world history after which the collapse of the US-led liberal international order accelerated.

A central element in the crisis and collapse of the liberal international order has been the deep disagreements on "first principles", the *a priori* values which different actors at every level of the international system (states, societies, groups, individuals, organisations, etc.) hold (Mearsheimer 2018). From the definition

and structure of the family to the notions of religion and permissible religious rituals, there are profound and seemingly insurmountable differences in the values held dear by different segments of humanity. Any effort to impose a particular understanding of “the good life” by any actor, be it the United States, European Union, China, or Russia, is indeed “bound to fail” (Mearsheimer 2019) and has repeatedly failed.

Deep disagreements over different conceptions of the “good life” are also reflected in differences over different concepts of democracy. The most acute, consequential, and world-historical event where these differences became relevant has been the Arab Spring, a series of anti-authoritarian uprisings that shook Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq, among others. For example, Turkey, the oldest competitive multiparty democracy in the Muslim world, had a radically different attitude vis-à-vis the Arab Spring than the Western and especially European powers. “Against the background of the EU’s unwillingness to continue membership negotiations after 2005, the Arab Spring provided Turkey with an opportunity to reaffirm its newly-found democratic identity and to become the leading advocate of democracy across the Middle East.” (Aktürk 2017,

88) While the US and other Western powers supported democratisation in the Middle East at least rhetorically in the first year or two of the Arab Spring, they eventually embraced the old and new dictatorships in the Arab Middle East, with the 2013 military coup in Egypt serving as a turning point. Turkey, in contrast, doubled down on its opposition to the Egyptian and Syrian military dictatorships led by el-Sisi and al-Assad, respectively.

Radical changes in interstate military threats are not the only emerging or potential threats in the current global environment. New pandemics, food and water shortages that may lead to famines, terrorism, demographic imbalances and mass population movements, and the shrinkage of habitable land due to climate crises, including global warming, may be counted among many non-military and unconventional potential threats at present. The coronavirus pandemic was a global stress test in many

ways. Many international academic journals in the social sciences devoted entire special issues to examining the cross-national impact of the pandemic, in part inquiring as to which states and societies survived the pandemic with the least damage and why (*International Organization* 2020; *Nationalities Papers* 2022; *Problems of Post-Communism* 2022). Simple binaries such as democracies versus autocracies, conservatives versus liberals, religious versus secular, and advanced industrial versus developing countries, do not seem to correlate with and explain the relative success and failure of different countries in tackling the pandemic challenges.

What might be the next

most significant unconventional security threat? Food

shortages and potential famines might be the next significant unconventional security threat, as numerous publications have recently pointed out. As in the case of the coronavirus pandemic, China is singled out as the main culprit for such a global food shortage. Thus, such a disaster may also have geopolitical repercussions for the emerging Sino-American competition worldwide. In late December 2021, *Nikkei Asia* reported that “China hoards over half the world’s grain, pushing up global prices” and speculated that “testy ties with U.S. and Australia could be prodding China to boost food reserves” (Watanabe and Munakata 2021). As such, the Chinese hoarding and the consequent hikes in food prices that are pushing some countries to the brink of famines have geopolitical origins since China fears that its new geopolitical adversaries -Australia and the United States- which are also two of the largest agricultural producers and exporters in the world, might use food supplies to punish China in the near future. Two weeks later, *Bloomberg* reported that Chinese hoarding is partly responsible for the rising food prices worldwide, reaching their highest level in a decade (Minter 2022). These concerns were voiced, and decade-long price peaks were reached already *before* Russia invaded Ukraine, which is particularly concerning since Russia has been the leading exporter of grain worldwide, and Ukraine has also been a significant source of grain for Europe and the world. In April 2022, the *Economist* also emphasised

that geopolitical concerns such as the “rows with Australia and Canada have made Chinese officials worry that copious amounts of grain the two countries supply might one day be cut off.” (*Economist* 2022a) Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been particularly threatening not only for Europe but for the world as it worsened these already worrying trends in the global food supply. “Together, the two countries supply 12% of traded calories” and “India said it would suspend exports because of an alarming heatwave”, prompting the *Economist* to warn of “the coming food catastrophe” in its cover story in May 2022 (*Economist* 2022b). With almost 250 million people “on the brink of famine” (*Economist* 2022b) and following shortly after a 2-year-long pandemic, the next most significant unconventional global security threat may indeed be a food catastrophe. This would also follow the pattern of unconventional conflicts between major powers short of interstate war and somewhat akin to proxy wars, whereby the relative resolve and resilience of competing for superpowers such as China and the United States are tested in the face of adversity. Such a competition over food supplies would also favour emerging powers with large arable land, fertile soil, high agricultural-industrial capacity, and large populations, such as Brazil and India, as some of the traditional or historic great powers of the European core, such as France and Russia, continue to decline in relative terms.

Domestic conflicts

concerning ethnoreligious minorities, including within some of the largest and rising great powers, are likely to play a greater role in shaping the global political and security environment as well as international relations in the near future. Two of the

most apparent domestic conflicts involving millions of people with vast humanitarian and security risks within great powers are the persecution of Uyghurs in China and Muslims in India. The mass internment of more than a million Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim ethnoreligious group indigenous to the Xinjiang region of China, also known as Eastern Turkestan, attracted significant international coverage and scrutiny, although with minimal access to the region itself due to the totalitarian control of the Communist party-state

that effectively isolated the region from the world. China's very well-documented "war on the Uyghurs" (Roberts 2020) led many scholars to justifiably "fear an Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang" (Finley 2021). It is very unlikely that any outside power, including a relatively small middle power such as Turkey with ethnolinguistic and religious ties to the Uyghurs, can convince, let alone coerce the Chinese government to change its policies vis-à-vis Uyghurs. Probably the only country that may have some leverage over China in the current world system is undoubtedly the United States, and it remains to be seen whether the United States will use that leverage in a tangible way to convince or coerce the Chinese government to substantially change its policies toward the Uyghurs.

Further south in India, often referred to as the largest democracy in the world, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Hindu nationalist government has cast two hundred million Muslims as internal enemies" (Filkins 2019). After becoming Prime Minister in 2014, Modi won a landslide victory in 2019, giving him another five years in power to pursue his Hindu religious nationalist agenda (Chotiner 2019). This was followed by sporadic anti-Muslim violence for many years, with at least 34 Muslims killed in Delhi in a single episode in 2020 (*Democracy Now* 2020). According to some accounts, "the Hinduization of India is nearly complete" by May 2022 poses tremendous risks for the roughly 200 million Muslims and millions of Christians who are marginalised and persecuted in this process (Serhan 2022). The persecution of ethnoreligious minorities, particularly Muslims, and the corresponding humanitarian, societal, and security risks are not limited to Asian great powers. When we turn to the major Western powers, France is usually singled out as the Western great power where the Muslim minority is systematically discriminated against. The vast discrimination against French Muslims is very much observable in the labour market (Adida, Laitin, Valfort 2010), and French Muslims are the most underrepresented politically across 26 European countries (Aktürk and Katliarou 2021).

Moreover, French "prisons [are] filled with Muslims" (Moore 2008), and according to many critics, "'Secular' is a French word for 'Anti-Muslim'" (Gobry 2018). These factors explain "why France sparks such anger in the Muslim

world” (Charlton 2020) compared to other Western states. As the incarceration rates of French Muslims and the endemic protests demonstrate, the marginalisation of French Muslims, the largest Muslim minority in the Western world, will likely continue to be a political and societal soft underbelly and a security risk in the future.

In conclusion, there is a near-consensus that the global environment in the 21st century, and perhaps even beyond, will be characterised by the competition between rising China and the United States. Apart from the high risks of a conventional military conflict between the two superpowers over China’s possible attempt to annex Taiwan, probably sometime before 2049, there are other unconventional risks of global proportions concerning a food catastrophe and famines worldwide because China hoarded grain and other essential foodstuffs. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is exacting a heavy toll on the Russian military and the economy, which was already under stress for the last eight years due to the international sanctions on Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea in early 2014. Western disunity, as evidenced by the remarkably different attitudes toward Russia among some EU member states, combined with the UK’s new global strategy after Brexit, which includes the “Indo-Pacific with a British tilt” in synch with the US strategy of containing China, are important elements of the current global environment. New powers from the Global South with large arable and fertile lands, agricultural and industrial capacity, and very sizeable populations, such as Brazil and India, will likely play a more significant role in the future. Rising food prices due to increasing demand from China lead to risks of famines worldwide, and the discrimination and marginalisation of very sizeable ethnoreligious minorities in several great powers, including China, France, and India, also pose seemingly domestic risks that may nonetheless have international spillover effects.

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