

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Western Options in a Multipolar World

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Not so many years ago, US policy makers talked about the need for China to be a “responsible stakeholder”<sup>1</sup> in what most still saw as a predominately Western world. Today, the whole concept of the “West” is under threat and China is making its own waves. Instead of China or Russia conforming to the West, it looks like the West may need to adapt to an increasingly non-Western-driven world. The reshuffling of the geopolitical cards has China transforming geopolitics with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at a time when the Western alliance is under internal pressures from Brexit and the US president is questioning the United States’ traditional internationalist stance.

No one can know the future. China and Russia—who are currently challenging, albeit in different ways, the Western liberal order—face difficulties at home and could become inward-focused and disengaged. Nonetheless, almost thirty years after the end of the Cold War, geopolitics looks like it is poised for another turn of the wheel that may not be as favorable to Western interests. This paper examines both the possible scenarios for how the emerging multipolar world order could evolve and transatlantic options. It makes the case that, depending on how the West plays its cards, traditional Western values could end up enduring even if an exclusively Western-led order does not.

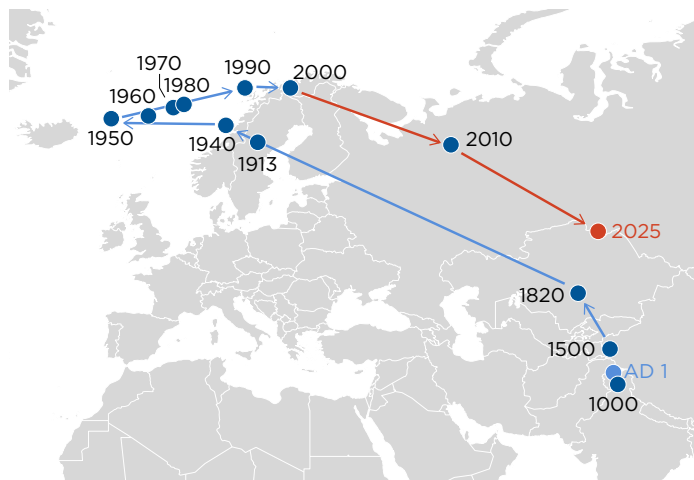
## The World Turned Upside Down

There is little doubt about the “rise of the rest.”<sup>2</sup> Speaking at a Washington think tank event in July 2017, International Monetary Fund (IMF) head Christine Lagarde said that “if we have this conversation in 10 years’ time ... we might not be sitting in Washington, D.C. ... We’ll do it in our Beijing head office.”<sup>3</sup> IMF bylaws require the organization to be

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- 1 In 2005, Robert Zoellick, then deputy secretary of state, first publicly urged China to become a “responsible stakeholder.” Zoellick’s much-celebrated term caused great consternation among Chinese interpreters (who, interestingly, had significant difficulty coming up with a nuanced translation of “stakeholder”). See National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, “Robert Zoellick’s Responsible Stakeholder Speech,” <https://www.ncuscr.org/content/robert-zoellicks-responsible-stakeholder-speech>.
- 2 Fareed Zakaria coined the term with his 2008 book *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest* (Penguin Books), <https://fareedzakaria.com/2008/05/12/the-rise-of-the-rest/>.
- 3 Alex Newman, “IMF Boss Threatens to Ditch U.S. for Communist China, Again,” *The New American*, August 10, 2017, <https://www.thenewamerican.com/economy/economics/item/26681-imf-boss-threatens-to-ditch-us-for-communist-china-again>.

Figure 1. Economic center of gravity of the world, AD 1 to 2025



Source: McKinsey Global Institute.

headquartered in the largest member economy. Many economists believe that China's economy is already bigger than the United States' in terms of purchasing power parity and could surpass the United States in market terms in the next five to ten years.

It is not just China. The developing world collectively is "projected to enjoy almost two times the absolute growth in GDP [gross domestic product] as compared to developed markets by 2021, and account for 65% of global growth within the next five years."<sup>4</sup>

China's newfound wealth—along with that of other Asian powers—is dramatically reshaping world politics. The world's center of economic activity shifted westward for centuries, forming the basis for the rise of the West. It has been only since 2000 that the center has again been pulling eastwards. As with the rise of the West in the eighteenth century that brought the rest of the world under its sway, the eastward movement cannot have but momentous geopolitical consequences too.

China's Belt and Road Initiative connecting Europe and Asia with a crisscrossing set of rail, road, and maritime linkages has been compared to the United States' post-World War II Marshall Plan, which economically revived Europe and pushed it along a path of greater integration. A stronger Eurasian bloc would accentuate the West-

4 PwC, "PwC Reaffirms the Role of Emerging Markets in Driving Global Economic Growth," March 23, 2017, <https://www.pwc.com/ml/en/media-centre/2017/pwc-reaffirms-role-of-emerging-markets-driving-global-economic-growth.html>.

to-East shift of geopolitical power, potentially realizing the vision that Sir Halford Mackinder—the famous British geographer—saw at the start of the twentieth century: "Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the World."<sup>5</sup> For Mackinder, the heartland was Eurasia, a continent that has been historically so expansive that few in history have been able to unify it.

BRI is an ambitious project. The big questions are whether China can carry it out and over what time scale. Physically linking East and West—Europe and Asia—may potentially bring together China, Russia, India, and Europe, increasing their interdependencies and shared interests. To make it work, China will need to forge closer political ties with Russia and Europe as well as India and Central Asian states. To the extent that it succeeds, China could make Mackinder's vision come true, cementing China's rise and also that of the rest of Asia.

### No Going Back to the Post-Cold War Order

Russia broke definitively with the post-Cold War, Western-driven order with its 2014 annexation of Crimea. For years it acquiesced more than adhered to Western principles. Experts such as Dmitri Trenin at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace believe that "since February 2014, the Kremlin has been de facto operating in a war mode, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has been acting as a wartime leader."<sup>6</sup> China's break with the West has been more gradual and low key. Nevertheless, its flagrant disregard for The Hague International Court of Justice's 2016 ruling against Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea was a key turning point. China is far from adhering to former leader Deng Xiaoping's "hiding one's light under a bushel" philosophy with President Xi Jinping talking of China having to act as a great power.<sup>7</sup>

Re-creation of a Western-led order looks increasingly out of the question. Indeed, developments in Europe and the United States in 2016-2017 raise questions

5 H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no.4, (April 1904): 421-437.

6 Dmitri Trenin, "A Five-Year Outlook for Russian Foreign Policy: Demands, Drivers, and Influences," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Trenin\\_Russian\\_FP\\_TF\\_clean.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Trenin_Russian_FP_TF_clean.pdf).

7 Jane Perlez, "Leader Asserts China's Growing Importance on Global Stage," *New York Times*, November 30, 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/world/asia/leader-asserts-chinas-growing-role-on-global-stage.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/world/asia/leader-asserts-chinas-growing-role-on-global-stage.html?_r=0).



# 二十国集团领导人杭州峰会

## G20 HANGZHOU SUMMIT

中国·杭州 2016年9月4-5日

HANGZHOU, CHINA 4-5 SEPTEMBER 2016



Leaders from the G20 meet in Hangzhou, China for the 2016 G20 summit. Any new global system would have to be broadly based and widely embraced. The G20 would be one template, particularly if its decision-making powers were extended. *Photo credit: Casa Rosada/Wikimedia.*

about whether Western publics are even interested in asserting Western hegemony. Brexit has not led to the fragmentation of the European Union as originally feared, but the European Union will lose substantial economic and military power when Britain leaves. Newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron wants a bigger role for Europe in regional and global affairs, but will need to succeed in his economic reforms as well as encourage other member states to share his vision. German Chancellor Angela Merkel—who has bemoaned US unreliability—shares Macron’s desire for a more integrated Europe, but many southern member states have not yet recovered from the 2008 financial crisis, making integration harder to achieve. Publics are understandably more focused on domestic matters, such as unemployment and environmental protection. The one exception is terrorism, which has an international as well as domestic component.<sup>8</sup>

8 Eurobarometer, “Belonging to the EU Is a Good Thing, Say a Growing Number of Citizens,” Press Release, April 28, 2017, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170427IPR72790/belonging-to-the-eu-is-a-good-thing-say-a-growing-number-of-citizens)

Donald Trump’s election came as a brutal surprise to the US foreign policy elite. It is unclear whether his inward focus and disregard for the United States’ traditional internationalist stance will outlast his presidency, but his election suggests that a substantial portion of the US electorate is attuned to his America First message. For a couple decades, surveys have shown Republican and some Democratic Party voters are increasingly disenchanted with global institutions such as the United Nations, despite their US origins. Growing inequality and an uneven recovery from the 2008 financial crisis have undercut public support for a big global role for the United States. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, it is unclear whether the United States wants to lead beyond looking after its own interests.

The United States’ allies in Asia, such as India, Japan, and Australia, would like to see stronger US balancing

[room/20170427IPR72790/belonging-to-the-eu-is-a-good-thing-say-a-growing-number-of-citizens.](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170427IPR72790/belonging-to-the-eu-is-a-good-thing-say-a-growing-number-of-citizens)

against China, but have worried for some time about US staying power. China is a lot closer to them and increasingly their biggest trading partner. Even Sino-Indian trade has grown in recent years. Most forecasts see the rest of Asia becoming even more dependent economically on China. However, Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) confirmed their worst fears about an unreliable United States.

India, the biggest democracy in the world, has the potential to become one of the world's top powers. As China's power grows, Delhi increasingly sees its interests lying more with the West, but economic development will remain its prime focus. An escalation of the on-and-off-again skirmishing with China in the Himalayas could push India, however, to pursue closer cooperation, including military, with the United States and assume a more hostile stance against China.

### Alternative Futures

Multipolarity has historically been less stable than when there has been a strong hegemon or even a bipolar distribution of power. Today's world is not just characterized by a growing number of state actors in the world—symbolized by displacement of the Group of Seven (G7) with the Group of Twenty (G20) leading industrialized and emerging economies—but also by a diffusion of power to non-state actors, some of whom have the means for inflicting violence on a level that used to be the monopoly of states. With robotics and biotechnology, the trend of growing non-state lethality will only grow. Terrorists and insurgents have already gained access to precision-strike capabilities and cyber instruments. The Middle East is where the better-armed, non-state actors are concentrated, but terrorism has a long arm and many groups are routinely hitting European and US targets.

Major state conflict—which has not occurred on a large scale since the Korean War—has historically occurred more often in less-stable multipolar worlds. Recent work by Harvard University's Graham Allison points to the likelihood of challengers to any global system ending up in a fight with the declining hegemon.<sup>9</sup> There are only a couple instances of a peaceful transition—such as happened after the Second World War—when the declining hegemon—Britain—handed off its global

“While going back to a Western-led status quo ante is highly unlikely, the type of non-Western order that takes shape is one of the big unknowns.”

role to the rising star—the United States. In cases where there is not a peaceful arrangement, mounting tensions between challenger and hegemon easily tip over into open conflict.

Nuclear weapons acted to limit the scope of US-Soviet Union conflicts but the worry today is that certain nuclear-capable states—India, Pakistan, and North Korea—do not have the same built-in inhibitions that developed during the early phase of the Cold War. If the North Korean regime faced a threat to its survival, it would most likely use nuclear weapons. While the Soviet Union had a “no first use” policy, Russia has recently developed a new military doctrine that justifies a limited nuclear strike if faced with a large-scale conventional attack that exceeded its ability to reverse. To Russian thinking, the limited nuclear strike would de-escalate a conflict, but it could do the opposite.

Competing visions of how the international order should be run are a feature of the current multipolarity. Rising powers, led by Russia and China, in particular dispute Western norms and policies that undercut national sovereignty. They decry Western democracy-promotion efforts, citing the instability that has resulted from regime changes in Iraq and Libya and comparing Western unseating of rulers to the colonialism of the nineteenth century. Hence, there has been no agreement by the five permanent members (P5<sup>10</sup>) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on ending the Syrian civil war—one of the largest humanitarian disasters in modern history—because of Russian and Chinese worries that it would set another precedent for deposing an authoritarian leader.

With so many factors in play in the current multipolar order, it is necessary to consider a range of potential

9 Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap,” *Foreign Policy*, June 9, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/the-thucydides-trap/>.

10 P5 is composed of the United States, People's Republic of China, Russia, United Kingdom, and France.



alternative futures. While going back to a Western-led status quo ante is highly unlikely, the type of non-Western order that takes shape is one of the big unknowns.

We could be in for a long transition (Scenario I) in which new rules of the road are unclear and the potential for conflicts between the United States and China and NATO and Russia would be higher. Ironically, a Chinese recession—that would prolong the transition—could increase the likelihood of conflict if Chinese leaders use nationalism to divert attention from economic woes.

Scenario II would involve the elaboration of a new consensus based on shared interests, not values. Historically, such an order is more transactional, and not as stable. But there is little way in the immediate future that Russia and China, let alone other rising states, would defer to Western leadership and values. Over time, as middle classes grow in emerging states, more Western values might take hold.

Scenario III is the devolution of the current multipolarity back into bipolarity. There is no equivalent to a Soviet bloc yet: Russia and China are close, but there is little likelihood of an ironclad alliance. Increased tensions between the West and Russia and China could tip the balance and drive them into a closer embrace. China's economy depends on trade with Western countries, making Beijing cautious about an open break with the West. A more aggressive US effort to roll back China's control of the South China Sea or an accidental collision that leads to conflict could move China closer to Russia, ending cooperation with the West. The world order would split.

World Scenarios I and III could be linked. A more nationalist China leading to greater collision as described in Scenario I would enhance the chances of a non-Western bloc, particularly if Russia's ties with the West continue to deteriorate.

### Scenario I: A More Nationalist China

China's economic ascent occurred almost overnight. But an economic fall—even momentary—could cast doubt on its ability to reach its twin goals of attaining Western living standards for its huge population and becoming a global power equal to the United States. A deep, extended recession is not out of the question, postponing for some time China's ability to resume its rise. Economists worry about China's ability to sustain growth due to large corporate and personal debt. The

West has had its own experience with long recoveries after bubbles had been pricked.

Chinese leaders are aware of the pitfalls that could result from challenging the United States too soon, but the public has grown more nationalistic. Party leaders must contend with a crippling backlash if they concede too much to the United States. Vigorously pressing China's interests could lead, however, to a dangerous escalation. The government must navigate a narrow pathway between concession and provocation. So far, Chinese leaders have successfully bobbed and weaved, but it would become harder if the leadership stokes nationalism (a likely possibility) to divert public attention from any economic downturn.

Russia under Putin is more aggressive, challenging the West despite the economic costs and benefits. Chinese leaders have been cautious—perhaps because China is more dependent on external trade—but could someday take a leaf out of Putin's book. Without economic means, though, the Chinese do not have the wherewithal to realize their dreams for the Belt and Road Initiative. China's standing in the developing world would also suffer if the Chinese economic model begins to fail.

A renewed Western-led order in the event of a Chinese economic fall is not a sure thing. Conflict could result from increased Chinese nationalism and growing Western defensiveness, engendering more chaos and less order in the international system.

### Scenario II: Shared Interests, Not Values

China and Russia are not the only powers undergoing great change. Americans and Europeans are wary of global enlargement. For many Americans, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were a mistake; much better to have spent the money at home. For many Europeans, European Union (EU) enlargement should be halted. The EU is at its limits.

Most Americans and Europeans are wary of China, Russia, or other rising powers at the helm. Despite the discontent, there is solid belief in Western values—rule of law and democracy—even if there is less confidence in their exportability to others. That said, there is recognition that other countries—led by China—are growing in importance and cannot be ignored. The EU is interested in making trade deals with Asian countries. Europeans welcome China's Belt and Road Initiative as well as increasing Chinese investment in



NATO headquarters is located in Brussels. US and NATO efforts to roll back what Russia and China regard as areas of vital interest are already a source of serious competition with the potential to end in conflict.  
*Photo credit: UD/Frode Overland Andersen/Flickr.*

and acquisition of EU firms despite growing concern about China's disregard for standards of intellectual property.

Given the shared interests on such global challenges as nonproliferation, counterterrorism, state failure, migration, and climate change, there is a basis for a new global order that is not values-based. What China, Russia, and other rising powers dislike the most is the West judging others and setting the rules it does not itself follow. In this scenario, those values-based differences would be largely set aside in the interest of framing ways to cooperate on shared problems. Remaining differences would not impede cooperation on vital shared interests.

International relations may already have set off down this path. The P5 plus Germany—despite differences within the group—negotiated an agreement with Iran on ending its nuclear weapons development. The Paris climate change agreement is also an example, although the Trump administration has removed the United States (at least for now) from it. Many of the

signatories had different motives and objectives, but share an overall interest in diminishing the risks of climate change.

Pursuing shared interests together in a non-Western-labelled order would put pressure on China to be more helpful, using its economic power to help resolve global challenges in North Korea and the Middle East. China has traditionally wanted the United States to assume the global burden for resolving regional crises, such as those in the Middle East. For this order to work, China would have to assume more responsibility. Equally, the United States would have to come to terms with others resolving crises in ways not necessarily aligned with Western preferences.

### Scenario III: Back to the Future—From Multipolarity to Bipolarity

It is an understatement to say that China and Russia—the two biggest Eurasian powers—have not always seen eye to eye. While they have grown closer, differences remain. Russia wanted India and Pakistan to join the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization to dilute China's influence in the group. Russia wants to hold on to its influence in Central Asian states despite China's economic pull. Frustrated by its failure to split Europe from the United States and persuade the Europeans to weaken their sanctions, Moscow has fallen back on its ties with China even if its expectations for greater Chinese economic help have not fully materialized.

For one eminent Russian scholar, "the bear hug is real."<sup>11</sup> China, unlike the West, does not require Russia to change its internal workings. Russia and China, in fact, share a preference for authoritarianism. Eurasia is a region that, unlike others, is more authoritarian than democratic and that is its attraction for Beijing and Moscow.

Russia goes along despite being a junior partner. Moscow and Beijing share a distrust of Western motives. For both, there is a fear of Western intervention. Russia's military support for Bashar al-Assad is in part to ensure that Washington and any European countries do not get in their way and remove him. Sovereignty of major powers should be respected. China and Russia believe they should have veto power over any Western actions on the broader world stage.

Today, Moscow and Beijing are less hesitant about laying down markers. Since the 2008 financial crisis, Beijing has believed the United States is in a long-term decline. Putin has at times sought a stronger relationship with Washington, reminiscent of how the United States treated the Soviet Union in the Cold War. But, since his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference,<sup>12</sup> Putin has believed the West is waging war against Russia, hemming it in through NATO enlargement and intervening in Russian domestic affairs through its support of Russian democracy-promoting nongovernmental organizations.

Though the Russo-Chinese bond is strong, it is not unbreakable. Most Russians still consider themselves Europeans. Greater Chinese inroads into Russia's fiefdoms in Central Asia could raise Moscow's hackles.

The Russian military is reportedly less enamored with the political leaders' embrace of China and is wary of its growing military power. But, stronger Russo-Chinese ties cannot be ruled out: a deterioration in US-Chinese ties could throw Beijing in the arms of Moscow, united against US aggression. Putin is popular among the Chinese and China is highly respected by the Russian public.

None of today's great powers—most of whom suffered enormously in the recent past during the two world wars—want to repeat the post-war experience. But Russian military actions in the Black and Baltic Seas have increased the risk of armed conflict. China's remorseless building of islands and equipping them militarily could also sap US patience. US and NATO efforts to roll back what Russia and China regard as areas of vital interest are already a source of serious competition with the potential to end in conflict.

### Transatlantic Options

Compared with during the Cold War, the world is now much more economically interdependent because of globalization. The West's options are also more limited than during the Cold War. China in particular cannot be isolated—as the Soviet Union was—without major economic blowback on Western countries. Conflict would undermine prosperity everywhere.

The West can choose to operate in this multipolar world in several ways, and the principal ones are sketched out below. The optimal approach would depend on the type of multipolarity that develops, as outlined above, since the West's options have varying levels of compatibility with the alternative worlds. Some of the Western options could enhance positive tendencies or mitigate negative ones in the broader global trajectories.

### Playing a Waiting Game

American diplomat George Kennan designed Cold War containment with the idea that sooner or later the Soviet Union would collapse on its own. In his opinion, Soviet communism was a bundle of contradictions that could not sustain itself over time. He opposed the more muscular version of containment that became more popular under Secretaries of State John Foster Dulles and Dean Acheson for fear the external threats to the Soviets would bolster communism.

11 Eugene Rumer, "Russia's China Policy: This Bear Hug Is Real," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 25, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/07/25/russia-s-china-policy-this-bear-hug-is-real-pub-72671>.

12 "Transcript: Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>.



In an updated version of the George Kennan doctrine, the West today would wait for more democratic forces in China, Russia, and other developing states to emerge. It would avoid too much antagonism for fear of igniting popular nationalistic sentiment, which has become a tool for the Chinese and Russian elites. While a strong democratic opposition is lacking in China and Russia, there are signs of popular frustration with widespread corruption and the absence of open and fair opportunities for economic advancement by the middle classes.

A Western waiting game would focus on building up people-to-people and educational exchanges to show the benefits of democracy and rule of law. It would also concentrate on making reforms at home. In the eyes of many—including the public—the Western model is tarnished. It does not provide enough middle class jobs. There is too much inequality, and self-serving elites control politics. Over time, with reforms at home, the Western model would regain its stature at home and abroad. There is little doubt that a larger number of fully democratic countries would be in the Western interest. But past Western efforts at democracy promotion have largely backfired. This strategy would require patience, but may be a better fit with current public preferences for less engagement overseas.

The West would not be passive. Just as in the Cold War, it would strongly rebuff fake news and disinformation. It would push back when Russian or Chinese defiance of international norms became intolerable, imposing economic sanctions. NATO military power would be strengthened as a deterrent to aggression. However, every effort would be made to avoid conflict, which would trigger an outpouring of nationalistic sentiment. The West would look out for opportunities to foster cooperation on shared interests. It would put its trust in the fact—just as happened at the end of the Soviet Union—that democracy and rule of law would win out, basing such optimism on the recent growth of middle classes and their interest in more participatory government and an end to corruption.

**Pros and Cons:** This strategy would strengthen global bonds, potentially erasing historic divides between developed and developing; Western and non-Western; ex-colonizer and former colonials. By favoring people-to-people exchanges, particularly educational ones, the strategy could help developing economies build up their skill bases. Over the long term, fewer geopolitical divisions could bolster more global cooperation. Western leaders adopting such a strategy, however,

would likely be accused of being too soft on China and Russia and giving something away to China or Russia.

This approach might be the surest way to pass the baton while avoiding the Thucydides Trap of increased nationalism and violent conflict. It might get the West closer to perpetuating Western values, although with non-Western actors playing increased roles in the process. It would be a good complement to the future worlds described in Scenarios I and II. If China stumbles (Scenario I), trying to build bridges—and not feeding the likely increase in nationalism—would help ensure longer-term security. Looking for opportunities for cooperation (Scenario II) could lay the groundwork for public support for Western ways of doing business. However, such an approach of patience and perseverance requires deft leadership on the part of Western and emerging powers, all of whom might be tempted to yield to their own nationalistic and populist tendencies.

### Divide and Conquer

This is an old strategy dating to the Romans and is sometimes successful, mainly in the short- to medium-term. The main idea is that the West would play off China against Russia or India and Japan against China to keep the emerging powers off balance. It would require that Western countries decide who between Russia and China was the greater threat. President Barack Obama broached creating a Group of Two (G2) arrangement with China, but never pursued one because the Chinese were not very receptive. Most Americans see China as the United States' most powerful long-term peer competitor so there would be popular opposition to cozying up to China. Hence the decision by the Obama administration to opt for the pivot toward Asia, which was widely interpreted as an effort to balance against China. Obama also sought a reset with Russia, which eventually failed.

For many Europeans, Russia is the bigger threat. Hence the dilemma for the West. Targeting both has the potential to draw Russia and China closer together and push everybody towards a more bipolar world. Concentrating on good relations with China has economic payoffs. Many European countries need Chinese investment, but it sometimes comes with strings attached. Increasingly, Western businesses and governments see China using the investment and buyouts of Western firms as a way to transfer intellectual property, boosting China's long-term competitiveness.



“The emerging powers believe the current system overly favors Western interests. Any new global system would have to be broadly based and widely embraced.”

**Pros and Cons:** A “divide and conquer” strategy could help prevent “overreach” if it concentrates Western action on one target, but the strategy would be difficult to implement. China would be hard to isolate in view of its economic power. Asian countries worry about China’s growing dominance and hesitate to directly challenge it, particularly as doubts about US staying power have grown among Asian allies, with the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from the TPP. Playing Russia off against China would be difficult while Western sanctions are in place. However, newly elected French President Macron has talked about encouraging Russia not to turn more eastwards. At some point, Russia will need to undertake massive economic reforms—potentially under a new leader who would have to turn to the West for economic help. At that point, the West would have leverage and could draw Russia away from China.

Success of the divide and conquer strategy could stop any drift to a bipolar world (Scenario III), but a failure could accelerate the very thing—a Russo-Chinese alliance—it seeks to avoid. This approach is high risk. All the approaches discussed herein can be said to require strong leadership skills, but this one in particular would be a high-wire act.

### Creating a New Global Order

The emerging powers believe the current system overly favors Western interests. Any new global system would have to be broadly based and widely embraced. The G20 would be one template, particularly if its decision-making powers were extended. Introducing more permanent members into the UNSC has shown to be difficult. P5 members do not want to lose any of their privileges, including their right to veto. Regional rivalries have impeded a decision on expansions—Argentina, for example, does not want to see Brazil as a permanent regional representative on the UNSC. But, over time, no expansion risks a loss of legitimacy for the

Security Council in the eyes of many in the developing world. For example, Africa—which has no permanent member—currently constitutes about 13 percent of the world’s population and close to a quarter of it by 2050.

It is well to remember that countries have been able to come together on a slew of issues. Everything from environmental protection, communications standards, pandemic response, foreign investment, and trade preferences have been negotiated and agreed to by most countries. Although protectionism has been creeping in (and not just from developing states), most countries agree in principle on the need for an open trading system. While China is accused of protecting certain sectors from outside investment, President Xi nevertheless rode to the defense of globalization at the 2017 World Economic Forum meeting in Davos.

However, several closely held Western values could fall by the wayside if the global system were recreated to meet the approval of China, Russia, and other developing states. The “responsibility to protect” doctrine justifying humanitarian intervention is anathema to Beijing, Moscow, and other countries. Respect for sovereignty would end up being enlarged. Russia, China, and many other countries want greater governmental control over the internet, and a compromise with Western preferences for a more open internet would need to be crafted.

**Pros and Cons:** The big advantage of this strategy is that China and Russia would have more invested in a renegotiated global system. However, it would not be a panacea and re-establish a liberal order. The West would also have to adhere to the rules even if they departed from Western preferences. Ensuring adequate protections for smaller countries might be a sticking point. China and Russia want sway over their neighborhoods; the United States has also invaded other countries, trampling on others’ sovereignty. On the plus side, a new global order could lead to more worldwide cooperation on the big challenges facing the planet, such as nonproliferation, counterterrorism, failed states, and resource scarcity. One of the biggest obstacles would be determining how to get there from here in view of widespread distrust and Western worries about decline. Most new global systems are the products of war when the slate is wiped clean and the victor can unilaterally determine the new rules. Development of a wholly new global system is likely to be resisted, but starting to build up the G20 or reforming the UNSC could help lessen the emerging

Table 1. Overview of Alternative Futures and Transatlantic Options

	Playing the Waiting Game	Divide and Conquer	Creating a New Global Order
<b>A More Nationalist China</b> Scenario I	It would be hard for the West not to respond to growing Chinese aggression, which could easily spiral into full-scale conflict.	The West might be able to wean Russia from closer relations with China by helping Russia with economic reform.	It would be difficult to create a new order if tensions rise with China. A growing China problem could forge closer transatlantic ties.
<b>Shared Interests, Not Values</b> Scenario II	Not imposing Western values would be required if a world order based on shared interests is to be constructed.	The tactics of divide and conquer are incompatible with trying to bolster shared interests across all global players.	Expanding shared interests could lay the basis for a new global system.
<b>Back to the Future—From Multipolarity to Bipolarity</b> Scenario III	Russia and China have different interests so avoiding unduly escalating tensions and instead playing the waiting game could encourage a growing Russo-Chinese separation over time.	Divide and conquer would seek to avoid creating a non-Western bloc, but ill-played it could unite others and undermine trust of the West.	Creating a new global order would be an effort to avoid the slide into bipolarity. It would be hard to accomplish once the world is split up.

countries' distrust and lay the groundwork for more global cooperation.

The global trends in Scenario II are compatible with creating a new global order while a more aggressive Russia and China in Scenario I and a bipolar world in Scenario III would each make it harder. To be successful, leadership skills would be key to implementing the other approaches. A failed attempt would sow distrust and delay new efforts.

### Need for Transatlantic Solidarity

Whatever the pros and cons of the strategies, strong transatlantic ties are a distinct plus. During the past three decades, the West has enjoyed unrivalled primacy. With the rise of many new powers—which have benefitted greatly from the open Western system—a Western monopoly on leadership is no longer possible. The bigger question is the future for traditional Western values—democracy, liberal market economics, and rule of law. The jury is out on whether these values will prevail in the increasing non-Western world. From past experiences, it is evident that imposing those values will not work, but creating conditions where others can see the benefits would be advantageous. Despite the recent backsliding, the world remains more democratic

and oriented towards liberal markets than at any time before. There is no reason not to be optimistic for the long run so long as conflict and increased nationalism do not undermine those chances. Keeping the close transatlantic ties and reviving Western values at home are necessities for seeing them prevail in the future.

**Mathew J. Burrows** is director of the Atlantic Council's Foresight, Strategy, and Risks Initiative.

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The Transatlantic Partnership for the Global Future brings together experts from government, business, academia, and the science and technology communities to address critical global challenges and assess their effects on the future of transatlantic relations. The Partnership is a collaboration between the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security's Foresight, Strategy, and Risks Initiative and the Government of Sweden. Together, we seek to make foresight actionable by connecting long-term trends to current challenges to inform policy and strategy choices.



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