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IS THE WEST DECLINING OR IS THE EAST RISING?

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The turn of the 21st century witnessed a hegemony by the West, whose failed public policy decisions and unreasonable responses to national security threats, for instance Islamic extremism in the middle east, domestic wealth inequality, unchecked muscle flexing of powers, among others, led to a misinterpretation of priorities and failed to address matters of long-term strategic interests. The West's inability to rationalise decision making, has been led by its response to the 9/11 attacks, which were, if anything, fuelled by paranoia. The decision to invade Iraq, establish black sites, extraordinary rendition programs, and enhanced interrogation techniques, have resulted in a largely irreparable erosion of faith in Western democracies.¹ After the fall of the iron curtain, we have witnessed a change in the power dynamics of the world order. With the rise of China and an increasing power imbalance through Asia, uncertainty has been caused in the world.

China's rise, particularly, has set the Asia-Pacific region as one of military and strategic importance. Not to say it wasn't earlier, but China's expansionist policies in regions such as that of South China Sea, makes it even more so. Unlike the rise of Japan that had been mostly peaceful, and far from 'militaristic', China's rise brings new challenges, as it competes with Western hegemony in domains beyond geopolitics and socioeconomics.² Also noticeable is a pattern to undermine Western hegemony, which arises when we examine Russia's alleged political interventions in countries such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, among others. The United States is a very compelling case study, since the notorious 2016 and 2020 elections were met with severe contention and have created instability not seen since the Watergate scandal in the 1970s.³ This paper would further examine and explore these patterns, assessing and identifying the probability of a potential Russia-China alliance.

The Great Recession and the Fall of Unipolarity

Often political mismanagement and economic crises come hand-in-hand; take, for example, the Great Recession. We can trace this crisis's roots to the rightward shift in American

¹ McTague, Tom. "Remember the '90s, Don't Long for a Return." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, August 20, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/brexit-trump-china-90s-golden-era/615406/>

² Hughes, Christopher W. "Japan's 'resentful realism' and balancing China's rise." The Chinese Journal of International Politics 9, no. 2 (2016): 109-150.

³ Board, Post Editorial. "Not (Yet) 'Worse than Watergate' and Other Commentary." New York Post. New York Post, February 16, 2022. <https://nypost.com/2022/02/16/not-yet-worse-than-watergate-and-other-commentary/>

economic policy since after Reagan took office in 1980, the United States witnessed a boom in the financial sector. Several financial regulatory instruments were introduced, such as the Garn-St. Germain Depository Institutions Act,⁴ aimed at deregulating the market in hopes of creating a ‘freer society’. Unfortunately, these policies became a catalyst for abuse of, and by, financial institutions that eventually facilitated what has come to be known as the ‘Great Recession’.⁵ The economic downturn that followed has heightened social and economic disparities among communities as shown in the Gini Coefficient figures.⁶ The problem is exacerbated with the repercussions of growing inequality, i.e., a rise in crime, instability, and polarisation which, once rampant, are difficult to control. The ‘Great Recession’ and its ripple effects, particularly the Euro debt-crisis, have been damaging for long-term economic and financial dominance of the USD and the EUR. This, accompanied by a mistrust in the financial system, as firms such as Bear Sterns, Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch collapsed, dissolved the faith in capitalism. The forces of globalisation that were once touted as the proponents of economic integration and growth, backfired. As the effects of the recession were felt across the Eurozone, far-right political movements, such as Euroscepticism gained momentum.⁷

The Russians and Chinese have displayed a sense of opportunism, by feeding off of this slump in Western ability to hold on to competence. We can notice several attempts made to influence Western elections, and even counter their interests abroad in conflicts/civil wars. In the Middle East for instance, Syria is a great example. Syria and Iran have been allies for both Russia and China, being key advocates for their interests in the region. Support to the Assad regime during the conflict was a classic example of why might is not always right, and how Western influence could be countered with simple strategic efficiency.⁸

⁴ Garcia, Gillian, Herbert Baer, Elijeih Brewer, Datici R. Allardice, T. F. Cargill, John Dobra, G. G. Kaufman, Anne Marie L. Gonczy, R. D. Layrent, and Larry R. Mote. "The Garn-St Germain Depository Institutions Act of 1982." *Economic Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (1983): 3-31.

⁵ Gershon, Livia. "Why Ronald Reagan Became the Great Deregulator - JSTOR DAILY." *JSTOR Daily*, February 9, 2017. <https://daily.jstor.org/why-reagan-became-the-great-deregulator/>.

⁶ "Gini Index - United States." Data. Accessed May 4, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=US>.

⁷ Pirro, Andrea LP, Paul Taggart, and Stijn Van Kessel. "The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: Comparative conclusions." *Politics* 38, no. 3 (2018): 378-390.

⁸ "Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy." *Lawfare*, January 23, 2022. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/russias-strategic-success-syria-and-future-moscows-middle-east-policy>

2010s: A Period of Western Disunity?

The effects of the ‘Great Recession’, as discussed above, created the perfect environment for political storms to sweep through North America and Europe. The stark rise in wealth inequality worsened political polarisation. It was around this time that what we now know as the ‘far-right’ began gaining momentum. Agendas like ‘Brexit’ in the United Kingdom, ‘Frexit’ in France (with Marine Le Pen as its torchbearer), Trumpism and other forces came into being. The mistrust that ensued the ‘Great Recession’, raised scepticism among nation states, threatening the foundations of Transatlantic relations.

The 2016 U.S. election which was (allegedly) plagued with foreign interference, triggered these forces of polarisation, causing a peak in far-right rhetoric, not just in the United States but in other states as well such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, France, Poland, Brazil, etc. The 2016 election has been extremely consequential in determining the Western domestic policies, as it brought Trump and Trumpism in the centre-stage. Trumpism is a term for the political ideologies, social emotions, style of governance, political movement, and set of mechanisms for acquiring and keeping control of power associated with Donald Trump and his political base. The United States underwent an extraordinary transformation in both domestic and foreign policies. Domestically, in the Supreme Court, for instance when incumbents retired, they were replaced by conservative judges and considering that they would serve the Court for decades to come, it sounds alarming. Because it would institutionalise the harm of far rightism, making it irreparable in the long run,⁹ Additionally, the politicisation of issues like gun violence, healthcare, infrastructure, and even debt ceiling have handicapped the governing institutions.

Out of the United States, we observe similar political patterns in Europe, as mentioned earlier. The rise of Euroscepticism is a result of such changing political momentum. After Trump’s White House, the United States has no longer led the West, and hence, its priorities have weakened. It no longer considered the loss of sovereignty over integration an obvious answer to militarism and expansionism. Since then, the East has had the perfect opportunity to make a comeback and challenge the West once again as it did before the collapse of the Iron Curtain.¹⁰

⁹ Jones, Brian Christopher. "How Far Out of Step is SCOTUS?." *International Journal of Constitutional Law Blog* (2015).

¹⁰ Ziegler, Charles E. "International dimensions of electoral processes: Russia, the USA, and the 2016 elections." *International Politics* 55, no. 5 (2018): 557-574.

Reorganisation of the World Order

The ‘World Order’, particularly the ‘Liberal World Order’, as it was established after the end of the 2nd World War, and solidified after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is dead. We now observe the exercise of more realist tendencies. Realism in the 21st century is frightening. The presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) drastically increases volatility despite creating stability in the name of deterrence. The patterns mentioned above are testaments to the change and transition in authority or hegemony. The transition to multipolarity is one that’ll be met with tremendous challenges. One of the risks is the Thucydides Trap which claims that when one great power threatens to displace another, war is almost always the result.¹¹ Fortunately, the ‘power transition theory’ of the ‘realist school of international relations’ has failed to materialise. However, if it were to take place, the consequences are certainly thought provoking.

The Russian and Chinese, have both been in a struggle for grabbing power and influence across Eurasia. Though the latter has been more successful than the former, there is no doubt that if they form a collective alliance or attempt to rebirth the former ‘Eastern bloc’, they will create a formidable force to reckon with. An alliance with a powerful actor is never safe. Russia and China may no longer share a common philosophy, but the invisible hand of geopolitics is driving the two together, nonetheless. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are playing a game of brinkmanship that has the scale to topple the American unipolarity. According to the worldwide threat assessment, Russia and China are more aligned than at any point since the mid 1950s.¹² Commercial ties have strengthened significantly, and there is growing talks of formally institutionalising military cooperation.¹³ If an alliance is brought forth, their common priorities and interests could signal the beginning of a ‘Cold War 2.0’, in the extreme scenario.¹⁴

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the power dynamics have been shifted and questioned more significantly than ever, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall. Many believe the invasion to be a severe miscalculation,

¹¹ Allison, Graham. "The thucydides trap." *Foreign Policy* 9 (2017).

¹² Zhao, Suisheng. "The US–China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance." *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 169-185.

¹³ Wright, Robin. "Russia and China Unveil a Pact against America and the West." *The New Yorker*, February 7, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/russia-and-china-unveil-a-pact-against-america-and-the-west>.

¹⁴ Xing, Li, and Raúl Bernal-Meza. "China-US rivalry: a new Cold War or capitalism’s intra-core competition?." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 64 (2022).

which would stain the legacy of Putin and his government. What this analysis fails to understand and depict, is the pattern of Western decline, and the East's role in it. It seems as though this sudden urge for expansion is not so "sudden". Ukraine's invasion was a long time coming. We witnessed this in the annexation of Crimea, where if one could recall, the West did little to condemn. The West has been its weakest since the early 2000s.¹⁵ It could, therefore, perhaps be understood that this was the best time for military advancement, and acting on the urges of expansionist imperialism; that had been unsustainably delayed by 'rationality'.

Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most well entrenched proof of China's large ambitions. It is extraordinary strategic geoeconomics. What makes the Belt and Road Initiative special is the way it integrates China with the Eurasian economic belt. It can be seen as a way of deepening economic cooperation among the two greatest powers in the region, China and Russia. Lately, the Belt and Road Initiative has been perceived with fury and increased caution by the West, as it grapples with the possibility of losing economic might. The West, in turn, introduced Build Back Better World (B3W), Blue Dot Network, Clean Network, and other projects, aimed at ensuring a strong collective of democracies in Asia-Pacific, and that their hegemonic stability remains intact. However, despite having announced these plans, little progress has been made with virtually no updates since the last G7 summit in 2021.¹⁶ There is a lot the West can and must do, to ensure it does not succumb to new competition.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that there is a probability of severe polarisation, tensions and divisions in the international community. The worst-case scenario, henceforth, is also the best case scenario, i.e. a 'Cold War 2.0'. Although controversial in a sense, bipolarity is better than multipolarity. Multipolarity can backfire since too many stakeholders on the table make collaboration difficult. As the U.N. Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, said, the current world is "much more chaotic, much less predictable" than during the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the United States and it is dangerous

¹⁵ "Western Weakness Is Enabling Russian War Crimes in Ukraine." Atlantic Council, March 8, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/western-weakness-is-enabling-russian-war-crimes-in-ukraine/>

¹⁶ "The G7's B3W Infrastructure Plan Can't Compete with China. That's Not the Point." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/g7s-b3w-infrastructure-plan-cant-compete-china-thats-not-point>.

because there are no “instruments” to deal with crises.¹⁷ A Russia-China Alliance, though scary, is perhaps the best thing that can happen to the international community. It would be a cause that would unite the West after a decade of fracturing. It could repair and aid in setting public policy priorities right, and lead to an economic race to develop the developing world.

Russia-China Alliance, a Flawed Proposition?

Despite promising potential, there are several shortcomings that Russia and China would have to grapple with before even considering forming an alliance. Although military peers at the moment, Russia’s military spending has fallen behind, while China has made the largest absolute increase in military spending globally. Military spending-wise, China dwarfs Russia by more than 52 billion USD. At the same time, Chinese scientists are reverse engineering Russian high-tech weaponry at an astonishing rate. In some military domains, the Chinese have even surpassed their Russian counterparts. It is clear that in time, the Russian military will get subordinate to China. Looking past the military dimension, the Chinese GDP stands around 8 times the Russian GDP and is growing. After the Ukrainian invasion, the numbers are certainly to be worse for the economy drowning in sanctions. And so, considering the military and economic disparities, a binding security treaty between Russia and China would render Beijing the ‘senior partner’. Taking a back seat is not what policy makers in Russia mean when they attempt to restore a multipolar global order. Seeing in this light, the Russia-China alliance is more trouble than it is worth. The mentioned disparities are only the beginning. The striking inconsistency in foreign policy priorities also misplace their potential for coming together. The Chinese economy, unlike that of Russia’s, is a lot more integrated with the West. Therefore, it is in the Chinese best interests to maintain ‘decent’ if not ‘great’ ties with the West. The invasion of Ukraine has changed everything. Hereafter, any attempts by the Chinese, that are encouraging or worse, participatory in Russia’s recent push for influence, would be seen as a threat that must be dealt with at all costs. Hurting China would lead to short term loss for the West, however, if they are able to prevent a plunge in larger trade deficits and dependence on the Chinese economy, there is nothing preventing them from taking action.

¹⁷ PTI. “UN Chief World More Unpredictable than during the Cold War.” The Week. The Week, December 15, 2020. <https://www.theweek.in/wire-updates/international/2022/01/22/fgn2-un-guterres-global-dangers.html>.

Conclusion

We have witnessed the establishment and growth of Western hegemony as it was created after the Second World War, and its gradual decline, which is now at the brink of dissolution. It has been challenged by many actors, mainly Russia and China, who if join hands have the potential of toppling the hegemony, as it has been since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A lack of clarity on policy priorities fuelled by foreign intervention has caused transatlantic nations to weaken and come down to an extent that multipolarity seemed certain. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has completely altered the thinking on what is possible and what is not. The West is more united than ever as it has now been a witness to what could happen if the muscle flexing of powers goes unchecked.¹⁸ Putin's plans have backfired, the European Union is stronger than ever. Neutral nations such as Finland and Sweden are considering joining NATO.¹⁹ Even Switzerland has joined the list of nations sanctioning Russia. The West has attempted to counter large infrastructure initiatives of strategic geo-economic importance, by its own; the success of which can only be determined by time. There is potential for a new 'Cold War', however that can be questioned with the true applicability, nature and reach of the use of the 'realist' school of thought in the 21st century. An alliance between Russia and China can be considered wishful thinking but the possibility must never be eliminated. The West needs to ensure that they are not gifted a chance to do so. It must calculate its public policy decisions rationally. This is a 'make or break' moment for hegemonic stability. This is an unprecedented opportunity it cannot let go of. If it manages to calibrate well, it may prevent the 'World Order' from crashing in shambles and spiking volatility, which is unaffordable today.

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¹⁸ Maizière, Thomas de, and A. Wess Mitchell. "Putin United the West-but Now Comes the Hard Part." Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy, March 11, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/11/putin-war-ukraine-russia-nato-west-defense/>.

¹⁹ "Will Finland and Sweden Join NATO Now?" Atlantic Council, March 4, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/will-finland-and-sweden-join-nato-now/>.

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