

# CHINA AND THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER STRATEGIC COMPETITION

BRUCE JONES

FEBRUARY 2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's rise — to the position of the world's second-largest economy, its largest energy consumer, and its number two defense spender — has unsettled global affairs. Beijing's shift in strategy towards a more assertive posture towards the West is amplifying a change in international dynamics from patterns of multilateral cooperation towards a pattern of competition. We are entering, or have entered, a phase of rivalry between the great and major powers.

While several actors have agency in this unfolding dynamic, the choices made by China and the United States will matter more than those of others. The interplay between those two countries' choices will shape the prospects for peace, especially in East Asia; for prosperity, globally; for the way technology plays into the next phase of social and economic dynamics; and for the role and space accorded to democracy and human rights in international affairs. The obvious American response should be to bolster its alliances and defend the core precepts of the multilateral order. Instead, America has turned to unilateralism (and Britain, handmaiden to much of American foreign policy, has withdrawn from the European Union and must renegotiate its place in the world.)

On American and Chinese choices hinge three scenarios. We could face the "return of the jungle" — a period of increasingly unchecked rivalry between the world's top powers, with risk of military conflict growing apace. In a more ideal scenario, all powers could exercise a degree of respect for the key treaties and provisions of the multilateral system, and the existing

order could hold. Or we could see the emergence of a sharply competitive period, one in which the risk of conflict is present but not dominant, and in which the main liberal powers work together in new arrangements to defend key interests and key values.

Chinese leaders exude optimism while American politics is in disarray. But this is misleading. While in the short term, the dynamics of great power competition afford China (and Russia) some opportunities, the United States still has a better balance of risk and opportunity to shape international affairs in the period that lies ahead. What's more, there's continued strength and some emerging vitality among America's most powerful allies — Japan, Germany, even Britain — and putative partners like India. Mobilizing that strength to confront the new realities of great power rivalry is *the* challenge for American statecraft in the period ahead.

## THE CLOSING OF A CHAPTER

When foreign guests have met with Chinese political leaders in recent years, it rarely takes long for their hosts to invoke the "Unequal Treaties" — the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 and the Treaty of the Bogue in 1843 that ended the first Opium Wars and set the terms of international trade with China — and what followed, i.e. the "century of humiliation." Chinese strategists have always referenced this long period of Chinese subjugation to Western dominance but during the period when China focused on market reforms, it receded as a leitmotif of their diplomacy. Now the end of the humiliation is front and center in Beijing's communications.

This is propaganda, of course, and for the Chinese leadership it has two purposes. Internally, it is part of a deliberate effort to replace the legitimating narrative of continuing Chinese Communist Party rule, switching from an emphasis on fast economic growth to a narrative of ambitious nationalism. This is a necessary shift as Chinese growth slows from the stratospheric highs of the 1990s and 2000s to its current modest levels. But internationally, Chinese leaders are also expressing their ambition to play the game of international order from pole position. The international order has been in constant evolution, including in the post-Cold War era; now China wants to drive a new set of changes.

While China under Xi Jinping expresses a sense of confidence, even hubris, about its capacity to reshape the rules of the game, and the United States under Donald Trump is engaged in a kind of denialist narrative about its ability to impose order without allies and suppress Chinese ambitions without costs, the reality is that both the United States and China confront a set of uncomfortable and consequential choices. The now very real power gap between these two top powers and everyone else is a central reality of international order. The other powers must worry about Washington's preferences, Beijing's preferences, and the tensions between them. But the power gap between the United States and China is still very real, too — especially if American leaders reverse the erosion of political ties to the allies.

## BACKDROP: AN EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL ORDER

It is commonplace to hear American pundits and policymakers talk about a 75-year tradition of American foreign policy premised on defense of a “liberal international order.” In point of fact, both the nature of international order and America's role in it has evolved considerably during the period since the surrender of Germany and Japan ended World War II. Both have evolved through several decades, marked by key changes in the structure of power.

The first phase was brief and more aspirational than actual. In the design of the Bretton Woods institutions and in U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's image of postwar life, the central pillar of order was to be the concept of the “four policemen” — the

notion that America, Russia, Britain, and China would each work to provide security in their own sphere of influence.<sup>1</sup> That concept ended up embedded in the structure of the veto-wielding members of the U.N. Security Council (British Prime Minister Winston Churchill insisted that the French get a veto as well) but did not survive its first test with reality, to wit the U.N. effort at reconstruction of Eastern Europe, nor Roosevelt's death.<sup>2</sup> The differences in U.S. and Soviet perspectives on postwar Europe and Harry Truman's deep distrust of Joseph Stalin quickly put paid to the “four policemen” moment.

What followed was the Marshall Plan and the start of the Cold War. And that did set some essential patterns: a mutual self-defense pact with Western Europe against the Soviet Union; the forward deployment of American troops and airpower in Europe and Asia; and the restoration of substantial economic ties between the United States and Europe (and later, with the Asian partners.) The patterns and concepts of what we now refer to as American leadership of the free world were born in this period. The titanic struggle against the Soviet Union provided an existential rationale for this order and America's vital role within it. America also took on the role of guaranteeing the free flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf, giving it a sustained rationale for political and military engagement in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, there was much that was hardly liberal in this phase, especially in America's foreign policy in the “Third World”; in some regions, that legacy still tarnishes the West's efforts to defend a “liberal order.”

Much of the rhetoric and some of the patterns of the Cold War period continued into the post-Cold War era; but in reality, the basic structure of international relations changed. Dramatically so: the collapse of the Soviet Union opened a moment of international affairs in which there was only one, dominant great power, the United States, which stood alone astride international affairs with no peer competitors and few intrinsic constraints.<sup>4</sup>

The first decade of this third phase of the order saw the U.S. behave in a very unusual way: it chose to exercise its hegemonic power in large part by advancing multilateral institutions for trade and security, and inviting formal rivals to join those institutions.<sup>5</sup> It was a period of shared prosperity and relative comity in

great power relations — not totally free of tensions but largely free of a risk of military clashes among the top powers.<sup>6</sup> In parts of the developing world, the first part of the post-Cold War era saw a surge in civil wars; but as the era continued, dedicated conflict management efforts saw wars decline steadily, in all regions.<sup>7</sup> Wider concepts of liberalism — connected to the spread of democracy and the advance of human rights — began to appear more centrally in the rhetoric of the West, and sometimes in its actions.<sup>8</sup>

This post-Soviet strategy was sharply interrupted by the al-Qaida attacks of September 11, 2001 and the start of what would become nearly two decades of sustained American warfare in the wider Middle East. Briefly, it seemed as if this strategy would actually deepen American leadership and bring even more countries into its sphere or into active security cooperation with the United States, as wide coalitions joined forces with the U.S. in Afghanistan to tackle al-Qaida. The Iraq War, though, strained this wider coalition and began to erode fulsome support for American leadership. Still, the scale of American power and the absence of alternative economic or security powers left the United States broadly in command of the dynamics of international order.

The Arab Spring, the global financial crisis, and the growth of the “rising powers” conspired to bring this phase of American unipolarity to a close and move us into a fourth phase of the order. The overthrow of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt and the subsequent descent of the wider Middle East and North Africa into a sustained dynamic of internal and regional strife drew the United States further into the turbulent region and created wider fissures between Washington and its allies and partners, both European and Middle Eastern. And this came after the global financial crisis bled the American treasury and strained international confidence in the competence of Washington to manage international economic affairs (although Washington did also lead the G-20 response to the crisis).<sup>9</sup> These events came at a point in international affairs when the “rising powers” — most importantly China, but also India, a recovered Russia, Brazil, Turkey, and others — had reached a point in their own growth that they had the economic muscle and diplomatic clout needed to start to push back on Western dominance of international institutions and the rules

of globalization.<sup>10</sup> Yet during this period the Western powers extended their engagement in international order and expanded the scope of the normative reach of it — incorporating concepts like “the Responsibility to Protect” and humanitarian intervention into some elements of strategy. The gap between the reach of the Western powers and the ambition of the order grew.



**What followed was a confused and turbulent decade, leavened by widespread international support for President Barack Obama but in fact laying the groundwork for present tensions.**

What followed was a confused and turbulent decade, leavened by widespread international support for President Barack Obama but in fact laying the groundwork for present tensions. Key markers of the uncertainty of the times came in Russia’s seizure and annexation of Crimea from Ukraine; in U.S.-U.K. dithering over Syria, and Russia’s decision to deploy forces there (returning significant Russian military power to the Middle East for the first time since the fall of the Berlin Wall); in China’s decision to install military facilities initially on Woody Island in the South China Sea and more broadly to expand its coercive posture in the South and East China Seas; and in the failure of the so-called “developing world round” of the World Trade Organization (WTO) talks. These dynamics of deterioration were alleviated by episodes of successful cooperation — for example in the negotiation of a global climate agreement in Paris in 2015, in the robust international response to the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and in the 2015 conclusion of the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran — but they were not reversed by these more positive developments.

And all that was before the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump brought skeptics of integration to power in London and Washington — the two key architects of the international system. It remains to be seen whether Brexit and Trump’s victory mark the end of U.S. and U.K. commitment to multilateral order, or merely significant bumps in the road. But even if



new elections or changing political views pull London and Washington back to an internationalist worldview, the West now confronts new realities in the shaping of international order.

## WHAT WORLD DO THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA CONFRONT?

This brings us to a world in which the choices that Washington and Beijing make will be the most consequential factors shaping international order and great power competition. They will not make those choices in an empty space, though. Rather they both confront an international arena with a number of complicated features. It's become commonplace to refer to this moment (2016 onwards) as marked by a return to great power competition. But what are the contours and elements of that? Six features of the landscape shape the choices available to Washington and Beijing.

The first is the continued scale and weight of the United States. For all the talk of decline and all the retreat to semi-isolationist instincts, the United States remains the world's largest individual market, has the largest and most powerful armed capacity in the world, and has a network of global bases and relationships that is eroded but far from eclipsed. It's the largest energy exporter in the world (though still a very large importer), hosts the most powerful technology firms, and its research universities remain in a league of their own. Notwithstanding the utter failure of the political class in Washington to protect let alone buttress these assets, they will endure for period to come — how quickly they erode will primarily be a function of U.S. domestic policy. China's propaganda and international posture (like Russia's) aim to highlight Western weakness for the purpose of eroding Western self-confidence; but the reality of continued American and European material strength and strengths in the Western model limits the effectiveness of Chinese diplomacy — especially as China increasingly shows its cards in its international dealings.

The second is the new position and evolving strategy of China. The position is unquestionable: China is now a clear number two in the international system, with

the second-largest economy in the world (in nominal GDP terms), the second-largest defense budget, and the second-most-important technology sector. It is number one in population, and the largest energy importer and largest carbon emitter in the world. More debatable is the new strategy, but few would query the notion that China under Xi Jinping has shed its old strategy of “peaceful rise” (together with the more subtle “hide and bide”) in favor of a more assertive, more nationalist, and more ideological approach.<sup>11</sup> Whether that strategy is also confrontational is a question we'll return to.

The third feature of the present order is not a third player — it's the sizeable gap between the power of the top two players and all the rest. Several other players have a world-leading capacity in one issue space; but only the United States and China now have genuinely global economic and political influence, with the United States also having global military capacity — and China potentially catching up on that score. What's more, the first mover advantages of technological prowess, especially in artificial intelligence (AI), is increasing the power gap between the top two players and the rest.

The alliance dynamic thus becomes — or more accurately, has returned to being — a central dynamic in the balance of power. The U.S.-led system of alliances encompasses 15 of the top 20 militaries in the world. That system has been frayed by a lack of focus in the second term of the Obama administration and by outright contempt from President Trump (though not from his administration), but it is not yet broken and still constitutes a weighty fact in international affairs. The challenge of the alliance system is this: the most coherent part, NATO, lacks a clear strategic focus, while the most geographically relevant part, the network of bilateral alliances in Asia, lacks an effective operational structure. The alliance structure is a powerful latent geopolitical fact; mobilizing it to confront the dynamics of a changing order is the key challenge for American statecraft.

The fourth feature of the contemporary order is a layer of major powers vying for space and security. These are the European Union (and within that body Germany, and to a lesser degree France, enjoying both clout within the European institutions and outside them), Britain (now formally out of the EU and engaged in

renegotiating trading relationships), Russia, India, and Japan. Each of these countries or entities has a major population, substantial economic weight, or military heft — but none have all of them. The rest of the G-20, countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Korea, Brazil, Indonesia, and the smaller Western economies, all have some degree of economic or diplomatic clout within the system, but not at the same level as the major powers — all of which wield a population of 65 million or more and a top 10 economy. Collectively, though, they are a consequential fact of international affairs — and it was only with Brexit last month that the Chinese economy surpassed that of the EU in nominal terms.

While these players are similar in the weight they carry in international affairs, their strategies are radically different. Russia, as an economic welterweight and an energy heavyweight, has thrown a hugely disproportionate amount of its GDP into retaining/regaining a globally competitive nuclear/conventional military capacity. It has adopted a strategy of probing, risk-taking, and provoking designed to weaken the unity of NATO — with some success. Europe, for its part, is meeting the rise of China, the aggression of Russia, and the unilateralism of the United States with a combination of bewilderment, nostalgia, and hesitant exploration of self-help approaches that so far fall well short of a credible strategic response. India — which perhaps has the greatest intrinsic capacity to re-weight the options facing China and the United States — seems content to play a role of suitor to many, bride to none, eschewing an ordering role despite rhetoric to the contrary. Japan, militarily weakest and most vulnerable of these second-tier players, is unique in having adopted a credible strategy of buttressing economic multilateralism and pressuring both Beijing and Washington to moderate their escalatory dynamic — with some success.<sup>12</sup>

The Leninist nature of the Chinese system and its foreign policy means that it has no such alliance option available to it — but there is a growing degree of policy coordination with Russia, approaching the features of a “concert” arrangement. Moscow and Beijing share an overarching interest in further weakening the West’s hold on the key dynamics of international order. And if American policy continues in its present

course it may soon find allies and partners like South Korea, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates forging very different kinds of relationships with Beijing and Moscow. China’s relations with India remain a complex mix of competition, outright rivalry, occasional limited hostility, and important collaboration.<sup>13</sup>

A fifth feature is the continued existence of a wide and deep network of multilateral institutions, commitments and mechanisms that bind together large parts of the rest of the world, and in which deep habits of cooperation have been forged — especially in the issue spaces of development, infrastructure, climate, and health. China is taking active advantage of America’s myopic under-attention to multilateralism to penetrate and attempt to reshape that system to its advantage, or at least to limit the West’s continued ability to use that system as a force multiplier for its own interests and values. The major multilateral mechanisms are frayed and fragile, but not yet abandoned or broken.<sup>14</sup> And they enjoy something that the strategic elites of the great powers do not: widespread corporate, civic, and youth support.



**China is taking active advantage of America’s myopic under-attention to multilateralism to penetrate and attempt to reshape that system to its advantage.**

And that constitutes a sixth feature of the contemporary system — the presence of an informed and active, increasingly activist, network of civic organizations, private sector companies, and publics. Those dynamics — different from but overlapping with the populist politics that have generated both left and right disruptions in Europe and Latin America, to say nothing of the United States and Britain — constitute a feature of international politics easily overlooked in strategic assessments. They are not likely to be a powerful enough force to prevent the United States and China from locking into strategic hostility, and in some issue spaces like human rights may amplify that escalatory dynamic. But in other domains, like climate change, they may constitute a check on a rush to rivalry.

Less certain is the role that will be played by the technology giants of the West Coast of the United States and China's dynamic cities. For all the technology nationalism of "Made in China 2025" and "America First," the fact remains that tech giants on both sides of the Pacific remain deeply intertwined. It is a remarkable feature of the moment that one of America's most influential artificial intelligence companies, Microsoft, could announce within months the following two decisions: winning the Pentagon's \$10 billion tender for cloud computing services, and a large-scale expansion of its AI research hub in Shanghai.

Taken together, these features of the contemporary international system will shape and constrain the dynamics of great power competition. And all of it confronts strategists in Washington and Beijing with complex, and mostly uncomfortable, choices.

## WHAT CHOICES DO THE GREAT POWERS HAVE?

It's indicative of the continuing power of the United States that the most important question regarding the next phase of great power relations and international order is a question about American policy: will Washington recommit to the alliance system, and perhaps to a wider sense of multilateral order, or will it allow those commitments to continue to fray?

If the United States more deeply abandons its alliance commitments or more fully alienates its core allies, the first effect of this will be to make the world safer for Russian adventurism and Chinese ambition. Some have argued differently, making the case that it is the very fact of the alliance structure that is provoking Chinese and Russian behavior and that a retreat from its forward posture in Asia and Europe will lead to more stable self-help arrangements among our former allies.<sup>15</sup> While the point needs to be argued country by country, the early evidence is not encouraging. Turkey could have taken diminished U.S. interest in the Middle East as an opportunity to deepen ties with Berlin and Brussels; instead it has turned towards Moscow. Japan and South Korea could have taken their growing concern about the credibility of America's commitment in Asia as an opportunity to bury the hatchet and join hands in blunting the effect of Chinese pressure; instead their relationship is in its worst state in decades. Europe could be treating an inward turn in America as grounds

for deeper cooperation in fiscal and military affairs: instead we see Brexit and the resurgence of far-right parties across the European landscape. Each of these dynamics is adding to disorder and the risk of conflict.

However, even if the United States renews its focus on the alliance structure and multilateralism, it will confront some uncomfortable realities. First among them is the simple fact that the economic and technological weight of China — now, not in the future — means that China will be able to claim a full seat at the table in the writing of the next phase of the rules of the international trade, financial, and technological order. Will the United States accede? It would mark the first time in nearly two centuries that an illiberal power has had a major voice in the shaping of the rules of international commerce. (The Soviet Union never sought to play this role in more than an episodic, blocking way.) That would mean ceding some degree of control to a country whose political system is moving in the opposite direction of the West's — away from market reform and incremental advances of the rule of law, towards fuller social control and an increased role of the state in the economic sphere. Combined with aggressive human rights suppression in Xinjiang and deepening political control through social monitoring, the Chinese approach may simply be too unpalatable for the West to accede to a sharing of power. If so, we are likely to see some areas of economic decoupling accelerate (at substantial cost to both), and perhaps the emergence of two zones of globalization. Global economics would go from being a source of perceived stability in U.S.-China relations to a zone of contestation and systemic competition. (The echoes of the 1880s would reverberate particularly loudly in this scenario.)

China confronts uncomfortable realities as well. Although Xi Jinping conveys a sense of exuberance about China's new status, the fact is that he confronts a degree of elite discontent at home, and a deteriorating reputation in the West (and in some parts of the developing world; though in others, China has adapted its tactics and improved its standing.) For all of the displeasure of European elites and publics about American political unilateralism, few are so gullible as to confuse their unhappiness about contemporary American policy with sympathy for China's own brand of increasingly assertive unilateralism, let alone Russia's recklessness (which China not only tolerates but indirectly enables). A

small number of countries where public opinion carries little sway may feel forced or tempted to move towards the Chinese camp, but Chinese behavior, at home and abroad, is starting to increase the costs to its diplomacy.

What's more, China confronts an unenviable international structure, most notably in the form of the immediate presence on its eastern borders of a network of U.S. allies. It may, overtime, succeed in weakening the alignment of some of those allies, like the Philippines or South Korea. But not others — there are few historically credible scenarios that sees Japan or Australia fall into the Chinese camp. It also confronts a United States that even in a moment of deep internal division has forged a growing elite and social consensus about the problem of China — though, not yet a fleshed-out strategy for wide-spectrum containment. And it confronts an international system that has grown accustomed to the more liberal tendencies of the United States — including its stated policy, more honored than ignored in the post-Cold War period, of allowing even small countries to choose their own alliances and governance. None of this makes it easy for China to translate its new weight into actual clout.

An obvious strategy for China is not to confront the United States, but to erode its influence. This could be accomplished by persistent application of the following policy measures: Supplanting the United States in the developing world by providing a combination of loans on attractive terms, technological and financial know-how, non-interference on policy and support in multilateral institutions; fill gaps left by U.S. myopia in shaping the work of multilateral institutions; deepen financial and strategic ties with other countries that feel threatened by the United States or the West, including Russia and Iran; and impose substantial financial and political costs on countries in its own neighborhood or with whom it has advanced ties if they align with the United States. Washington manages to score repeated own goals here, so poorly crafted are U.S. development policy and multilateral engagement (beyond NATO). But Beijing confronts a more formidable challenge from a combination of Brussels, London, Berlin, and above all Tokyo, all of which have substantial assets to offer developing countries and multilateral institutions, including in Asia, without the downstream risk of coercive pressure.

If China wants to pursue a more robust strategy, with a greater focus on coercive instruments, it also has a steep hill to climb. Let us presume for a moment — and the preponderance of evidence suggest that this is so — that China wants to have what the United States has enjoyed: the ability to project hard power, in addition to the political and economic influence it can already wield, at a global level. That is a necessary feature of true great power status, and a necessary feature of effective competition with the United States — at least in classical terms. To develop the most important feature of global power projection, a global blue water navy, China has to overcome the following obstacles: a highly sophisticated American global navy that shows no signs of giving ground; Japan's not inconsiderable naval capacity right off its eastern shore; a further chain of islands from its northeast to its southeast that can hem in its naval power projection; Europe's residual global naval capacity which, while modest, usefully amplifies U.S. capacity; and India's extremely inconvenient geography and growing appetite for power projection in the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup> That is to say nothing of significant technological-bureaucratic obstacles to the kind of sea-space-land linkages required to operationalize a global navy in times of pressure.



**A strategy of direct confrontation with the United States and its allies will be difficult, risky, and expensive for China. This does not mean it is not possible.**

In short: a strategy of direct confrontation with the United States and its allies will be difficult, risky, and expensive for China. This does not mean it is not possible. A number of Chinese investments in military systems, bases, and relationships can best be explained as Beijing's effort to lay the ground-work for global power projection, even with the attendant risk of confrontation with the United States. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that at least some Chinese strategists and planners have reached the conclusion that they have no option but to take this pathway. This faction of Chinese strategists read of the evidence about U.S. behavior from 2009 onwards as indicating



both a growing unwillingness to tolerate China's rise and substantial weakness in the coherence and effectiveness of the West — both factors make it more tempting to pursue a confrontational or potentially confrontational strategy. But none of this makes such a strategy any easier.

One variable given too little focus in the United States is the possibility that Russia could help China out of this particularly thorny challenge. When American analysts debate the prospect for an “alliance” between Russia and China, many of them are quick to dismiss such an idea, pointing to a difficult history, lack of trust, and substantial racism each to the other — and the fact that Moscow would chafe at the role of junior partner. But this may be imposing too much of a Western sensibility on the framework that Moscow and Beijing would use to assess their options, which is more likely to focus narrowly on core interests than on concepts like “shared values.” We could see the emergence of a “concert” between Russia and China — two rivals who set aside some of their differences for the greater gain of weakening the top power. Indeed, we are already seeing something of this behavior in Central Asia, in the Middle East, and at the United Nations. A major step up in this concert could see Russia increasing Chinese access to its wider global network of naval bases and assets, and deepening energy ties between the two — as it is doing with its massive natural gas fields in the Arctic.

## WHAT LIES AHEAD?

If China and Russia were to reach a concert arrangement of this sort, and if American unilateralism drives a deeper wedge between itself and its allies, we could rapidly find ourselves in a world characterized by two more equal blocks of military competitors and a situation brimming with risks of direct military confrontation between the two. This scenario, and variants on it, is now solidly within the world of the feasible. Fortunately, it is not as yet either baked into the dynamics of what lies ahead, or even necessarily the most likely scenario.

The more likely scenario is that both Washington and Beijing, pushed by their allies/partners and aware of the substantial costs to themselves of direct confrontation, instead pursue a strategy of strategic

competition. This would still entail substantial risk, but less quickly and less directly. It would involve a military focus on deterrence, and an arms race, but combined with a willingness to invest in arms control mechanisms or deconfliction and de-escalation arrangements. It would involve some degree of continued economic engagement, although it would also be compatible with the emergence over time of a kind of bifurcated globalization — the emergence of two zones of technological, infrastructure, and commercial integration, one that has Beijing as its hub and for which Beijing sets the rules of the game, and other revolving around Washington and its core allies. (Europe and Japan will work hard to avoid such an outcome, while Russia would welcome it; Singapore, India, and some the Gulf monarchies will try a “have your cake and eat it too” approach of sustaining ties with both spheres.) And it would involve substantial efforts by each side to win coalitions of influence in multilateral arena. This could lead to stalemate in some domains, but potentially also to a race-to-the-top competition in others.

And then there's climate change. For the past century or more, any assessment of great power relations or international order had to account for military power, economic clout, energy dynamics, and technology — as well as more unmeasurable features like history, culture, religion, and values. Now, any such assessment must also incorporate both the real dynamics and the real politics of climate change. Climate change is already solidly established as the most important issue for youth movements across the West. If America elects a Democrat as president in November, climate change will vault to the top tier of American priorities. As India confronts a serious and soon to be acute challenge of access to fresh water, Japan confronts a serious and rising challenge of increasingly intensive storms, the United States confronts a mounting challenge of storms, sea level rise, and loss of groundwater in its agricultural heartland, the pressure to get far more serious about climate change will grow. The obvious point is that real policy on climate change would require profound shifts in America's infrastructure, China's economic consumption patterns, India's industrialization pathway, and Russia's base economic activity, as well as changes to carbon-intensive patterns of global supply chain production. All of this could throw a serious wrench into the relationships between



the world's most influential countries. Of course it is also possible that each of these markets will find ways to cooperate deeply on energy and climate policy while competing with or confronting one another in other issue domains.

Then, there is still a scenario where decision by the political leaderships of both Beijing and Washington (supported by wider sets of elites and publics) to walk back from the brink of strategic rivalry could enable a less zero-sum dynamic of competition within a retooled multilateral order. This would require tough decisions on the part of both the United States and China, and a great deal of clear-eyed policy change from the leading second-tier powers, especially Germany, Japan, and India. Restoring the multilateral order in this sense would require at least three hard things: a willingness by the major and middle powers to put serious military muscle into conflict management and non-proliferation, a willingness that has so far been quite absent from all but British policy; a deep retooling of the WTO, both by restoring some capacity for small group decision-making, upgrading its representation, and most importantly by improving its capacity to shape technology policy; and the articulation of a more credible industrial policy for a rapid shift towards low carbon technologies.

None of this is particularly likely. The weight of history lies against it, as do the trends of contemporary politics. Left unchecked, these point us to a darker scenario of more systemic conflict. China's behavior under Xi Jinping gives less and less ammunition for American restraint, while America's current behavior gives more and more ammunition to the allies' America-skeptics, and the allies adopt policies that give more and more ammunition to the skeptics of multilateral order — in a vicious and intensifying cycle.

## AMERICA'S OPPORTUNITY

Between the poles of a "return of the jungle" and a "status quo ante multilateralism" is a more realistic pathway that the United States could still construct. This would involve pulling the major economies of Asia and Europe together into a wider "partnership" — a kind of wider-than-the-West concert of free societies (or largely free societies) who would work together to deter China, Russia, and others that would erode

the core structures of stability and trade. This would require important shifts in the global supply chain, but not unmanageable ones. It might result in two globalizations — one Chinese-led, one American-led — but not to the breakdown of globalization itself. It would constrict China, and occasionally confront China — a willingness to use coercive power to deter the worst of Chinese and Russian behavior would have to be an essential feature of such an arrangement — but it would not be organized in the first instance to engage in conflict with China. It would not obviate cooperation with China on issues like poverty reduction, infectious disease and public health, ocean science and ocean pollution, and climate change.

This would require the United States to shed both the unilateralist instinct of President Trump and President Obama's aversion to the use of coercive power as a tool of diplomacy. It would require American strategic elites to restore political ties with NATO but at the same time re-orient American strategic policy away from its trans-Atlantic habits towards a wider set of partnerships. And it would require subtlety in our approaches to Germany, Japan, and India (admittedly not exactly America's strong suit.) Still, it is well within both the capacity of the United States and its most effective foreign policy traditions to craft this strategy. China's options are much poorer.

The return of geopolitical competition to the center stage of international affairs is a worrisome development and does afford China some opportunities — but for now, if the United States returns to an alliance-oriented multilateralism, it affords the United States a better balance of risk and opportunity to shape great power politics for the purposes of defending the key democracies, protecting at least some of the advances of liberalism, and limiting the risk of unwarranted conflict and escalation.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Steward Patrick, *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).
- 2 Bruce Jones, ed., with Strobe Talbott and Will Moreland, *The Marshall Plan and the Shaping of American Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017).
- 3 For an account of the roots of this strategy, see Bruce Reidel, *Beirut 1958: How America's Wars in the Middle East Began* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).
- 4 For different accounts of this moment, see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- 5 See G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- 6 Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
- 7 "2011 World Development Report: Conflict, Security, and Development," (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2011), [https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf).
- 8 Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 9 Daniel Drezner, *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 10 Bruce Jones, *Still Ours to Lead: America, Rising Powers, and the Tension between Rivalry and Restraint* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).
- 11 See inter alia Alexander Sullivan, Andrew Erickson, Elbridge Colby, Ely Ratner, and Zachary Hosford, "More Willing and More Able: Charting China's International Security Activism," (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, May 19, 2015), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/more-willing-and-able-charting-chinas-international-security-activism>.
- 12 Mireya Solís, "Follower No More?: Japan's Leadership Role as a Champion of the Liberal Trading Order," in *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order*, eds. Yoichi Funabashi and G. John Ikenberry (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 79-106.
- 13 Kanti Bajpai, Huang Jing, and Kishore Mahbubani, ed., *China-India Relations: Cooperation and conflict* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015).
- 14 Bruce Jones, Jeffrey Feltman, and Will Moreland, "Competitive multilateralism: Adapting institutions to meet the new geopolitical environment," (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, September 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/competitive-multilateralism/>.
- 15 See inter alia Chris Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).
- 16 For a comprehensive account of Chinese naval tradition and ambition, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Bruce Jones** is director and a senior fellow in the Project on International Order and Strategy of the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution; he also works with the Security and Strategy team and the Center for East Asia Policy Studies. Jones previously served as the vice president and director for the Foreign Policy program for the past five years. His research expertise and policy experience is in international security. His current research focus is on U.S. strategy, international order, and great power relations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm grateful to Mireya Solís, Michael O'Hanlon, Rush Doshi, Ryan Hass, Tarun Chhabra, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft. Ted Reinert edited this paper, and Rachel Slattery provided layout.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.