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FLUID DYNAMICS

GLOBAL GREAT POWERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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SUMMARY

The great power dynamics of the 21st century is often envisioned as an emerging multipolar world in which US power is declining and that of others is rising. Yet while US power and influence may indeed be in decline, this does not necessarily mean that the power and influence of others is on the rise. This study examines the strengths and weaknesses of what are currently the actual or potential global great powers: the United States, China, India, Russia, and the European Union. Each of these has impressive abilities, but also significant limitations. None appears to have the capacity to be “primus inter pares”. Thus, something of a multipolar world order is indeed emerging. But what will this actually be like? It is argued here that there are several possible great power configurations in which some great powers ally with each other to counter one or more other great powers. The least likely of these is Putin’s vision of a multipolar order in which the “others” all work together to contain the US. There are simply too many differences among these others for this to occur. Other unlikely possibilities are a cohesive alliance of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) or a “G-2” bipolar arrangement between the US and China. More likely, it is argued here, is a great power configuration involving a Sino-Russian alliance on the one hand, and EU-US as well as India-US alliances, on the other. Such a configuration is not inevitable, however.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the discussion about great powers in the 21st century centers on the notion that US power is in decline, while that of other great powers is on the rise. President Vladimir Putin has often talked about how the US-dominated “unipolar” world is being replaced by what he claims is a more desirable multipolar world.¹ But apart from Russia being one of the poles, he has not elucidated how this would function. Some scholars see the combination of declining US power and rising Chinese power as possibly leading to conflict between them.²

A strong case can indeed be made that US power is on the decline, and an even stronger one that the US is not as powerful now as it was at the end of the Cold War, when a unipolar world order led by Washington appeared to be within its grasp. Yet even if US power is on the wane, this does not mean that the power of others is necessarily on the rise. While other actual or potential global great powers (China, Russia, India, and the EU) have many strengths, they also have many weaknesses that will not disappear if US power declines. Further, even if the US is no longer *the* great power that predominates over all others, it certainly remains *a* great power with considerable ability to pursue its own ambitions, as well as frustrate those of others.

At present, then, there is great uncertainty about the relative strength of each of the current group of actual and potential global great powers vis-à-vis one another. Statements about how US power is declining while that of others is rising may be more reflective of the hopes or fears of those who make them rather than of objective reality. But this situation is hardly new. Predictions about the imminent decline of US power have been made repeatedly since the very beginning of the Cold War. On the other hand, assertions at the end of the Cold War and afterward that the US had become the only superpower were, in essence, assessments that others could no longer play this role. When Paul Kennedy published *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* in 1987, his discussion of how US power might decline received widespread publicity. In actual fact, however, he also discussed the prospects for Russian, European, Chinese, and Japanese power declining.³ Of these, only Japan seems to have definitively lost any claim to being a global great power, while all the others have either remained or re-emerged as ones. And one possibility that Kennedy did not discuss – India – has emerged as a potential global great power in its own right.

1 For a representative statement by Putin on this subject, see “Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 13--th Annual Meeting”. Valdai Discussion Club, 27 October 2016, <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-took-part-in-the-valdai-discussion-club-s-plenary-session/>, accessed 8 September 2017.

2 John Mearsheimer sees this as more likely than not, while T.V. Paul suggests that such a conflict could be avoided if a declining US accommodates a rising China. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition, W.W. Norton, New York, 2014, chapter 10; and T.V. Paul, “The Accommodation of Rising Powers in World Politics”, in T.V. Paul, ed., *Accommodating Rising Powers: Past, Present, and Future*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, chapter 1.

3 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1987 [1988], pp. 438–535.

This working paper will not attempt to determine how the ongoing great power contest will play out, but will first examine the strengths and weaknesses of each of today's actual or potential global great powers (the US, China, India, Russia, and the EU). It will then argue that since no great power by itself is likely to be able (even if willing) to predominate over all the others, some global great powers are likely to align with each other against rivals endeavoring to form similar alliances. There are, however, several possible configurations. The paper will conclude with a discussion of what these possibilities might be as well as their likelihood.

GLOBAL GREAT POWERS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Great powers, by definition, differ from other states by being more powerful. But great powers differ from each other as well. The most powerful may be stronger than others militarily and economically, but not strong enough to prevent other great powers from rising. Some may be strong militarily while at the same time being less strong economically – and vice versa. There are also gradations of great power. Regional great powers may be the most powerful states in their region, but unable to dominate it due to external global great powers acting in conjunction with their smaller neighbors to prevent this. Although somewhat tautological, a prerequisite for being a global great power – the focus of concern here – requires both the will and the ability to advance and defend one’s interests on a worldwide basis, including in different regions besides the one in which they are located. Regional great powers may have some ability to play a role beyond their immediate vicinity, but their attention is usually devoted to affairs within their particular region.

While global great powers can operate in more than one region, they cannot necessarily operate in all of them to the same extent. There is also the possibility that regional powers can become strong enough to be global powers, and that global powers can lose strength and become regional powers – or even break up into two or more smaller states, as the Soviet Union did. Involvement in long, drawn-out military conflicts can weaken a great power, as can a decline in internal cohesion. Indeed, the former can promote the latter. As a result, the relative strength of great powers vis-à-vis one another, and sometimes even their very status as global great powers, is constantly fluctuating and uncertain.

With this in mind, what follows is an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the current actual or potential global great powers: the US, China, India, Russia, and the EU.

United States of America

After playing a crucial role in defeating Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War II and containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the US appeared to be the sole remaining superpower after the collapse of both communism and the USSR. Among its strengths are its defense budget, which has long been (at least up until recently) the largest in the world by far (\$611 billion in 2016).⁴ This has been underwritten by what has been the largest economy in the world. The combination of its democratic political system, successful economy, and its willingness to offer protection or even fight to defend its allies have all attracted many other countries to the USA’s worldwide alliance network both during the Cold War and after it. This alliance network includes multilateral defense treaties (such as NATO, the Rio Treaty, and ANZUS), bilateral defense treaties (such as those with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines), and

4 Nan Tian et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016”. SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2017, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf>, accessed 8 September 2017.

various other forms of defense cooperation with many more countries all around the world.⁵

One US shortcoming, however, is its propensity for getting involved in long, drawn-out military ventures in defense of pro-US authoritarian regimes or new regimes that it is attempting to set up after overthrowing anti-US ones. These interventions have generated opposition both in the countries in which they occur, and with public opinion in both the US and among its democratic allies. Thus, despite its military strength, the US was unable to prevail in Indochina during the Cold War, and in both Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 21st century. One result of experiences such as these has been to undermine confidence in the US's willingness and ability to defend its other allies. The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 has also raised doubts about his willingness to defend the US's NATO allies and to engage internationally as previous US presidents have done since World War II.⁶

It is not yet clear whether President Trump will reorient US foreign policy in a more narrowly nationalist direction that alienates its allies, or whether the USA's post-World War II internationalism will reassert itself after or even during his presidency. Even if the latter materializes, the expected outpacing of the US by China and India economically⁷ (enabling them to greatly increase their own defense expenditures) suggests that either or both could equal or exceed the USA's great power capacity during the 21st century. The fear of a rising authoritarian China in particular, however, may well serve to heighten the demand on the part of smaller states for US protection. And with continued economic as well as demographic growth (the US population is expected to rise from about 325 million now to about 390 million by 2050, and 447 million by 2100),⁸ the US could remain a (if not the) global great power throughout the 21st century. But this will only occur if it can successfully manage its impending transition from a majority white to a majority non-white nation, which is expected by 2050.⁹ Trump's campaign for and subsequent election as president has emboldened white nationalist forces opposed to this

5 Adam Taylor, "Map: The US Is Bound by Treaties to Defend a Quarter of Humanity". *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/30/map-the-u-s-is-bound-by-treaties-to-defend-a-quarter-of-humanity/?utm_term=.351ebfb5fcaf, accessed 13 September 2017.

6 Sabrina Siddiqui and Lauren Gambino, "How Trump's Actions and Tone Affect US Alliances and Perception on Global Stage". *The Guardian*, 11 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/11/donald-trump-foreign-policy-approach-qatar>, accessed 8 September 2017.

7 "The World in 2050: Will the Shift in Global Economic Power Continue?" PricewaterhouseCoopers, February 2015, pp. 1-4, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/the-economy/assets/world-in-2050-february-2015.pdf>, accessed 8 September 2017.

8 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision". ESA/P/WP/248, 2017, p. 28, https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2017_KeyFindings.pdf, accessed 8 September 2017.

9 Philip Bump, "What America Will Look like in 2050, in 4 Charts". *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/04/03/what-america-will-look-like-in-2050-less-christian-less-white-more-gray/?utm_term=.9d640703c476, accessed 8 September 2017.

transition and revealed that they may be far stronger than previously believed.¹⁰ To the extent that the US becomes consumed by conflict between white nationalists and others internally, not only will its ability to act as a global great power externally be reduced, but so will its appeal as an ally for many other states.

China

The rapid transformation of China from a poor, war-ravaged country at the end of World War II into a modern-day global great power challenging the US has been nothing short of phenomenal. China has made considerable progress in growing its economy, which has enabled it to modernize militarily as well – two trends that are expected to continue indefinitely. While estimates vary on whether the US or the Chinese economy is now bigger than the other, there appears to be no doubt that China's will grow increasingly larger than that of the USA over the coming decades.¹¹ Already second only to the US in military expenditure (\$215 billion in 2016),¹² China's growing economy may well enable it to spend as much or more than the US on defense at some point in the future.

One way in which China exercises influence internationally is through its large-scale trade with and investment in so many other countries, giving them powerful incentives to continue cooperating with Beijing.¹³ Still, China's increasingly assertive behavior – especially in both the South China and East China Seas as well as along the Sino-Indian border – has led some Asian states to become more wary of it, despite their strong trade relations with Beijing.¹⁴ In addition to being more assertive in its immediate vicinity, China has recently become more active in the Middle East.¹⁵ Its participation in joint naval exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean in 2015 and the Baltic in 2017, as well as its 2017 acquisition of naval facilities in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, may presage

10 “White Supremacy: Are US Right-wing Groups on the Rise?”. BBC News, 3 August 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40915356>, accessed 8 September 2017.

11 “List of Countries by Projected GDP”. *Statistics Times*, 23 April 2017, <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/countries-by-projected-gdp.php>, accessed 8 September 2017; and “The World in 2050”. PricewaterhouseCoopers, February 2015, pp. 1-4, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/the-economy/assets/world-in-2050-february-2015.pdf>, accessed 8 September 2017.

12 Tian, “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016”. SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2017, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf>, accessed 8 September 2017.

13 Clifford Krauss and Keith Bradsher, “China's Global Ambitions, Cash and Strings Attached”. *The New York Times*, 24 July 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/business/international/chinas-global-ambitions-with-loans-and-strings-attached.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=a-lede-package-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&r=0>, accessed 8 September 2017.

14 Ishaan Thahroor, “MAP: How Asia Is Scared of China”. *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/07/14/map-how-asia-is-scared-of-china/?utm_term=.240025c90fa1, accessed 8 September 2017.

15 Lily Hindy, “A Rising China Eyes the Middle East”. The Century Foundation, 6 April 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/rising-china-eyes-middle-east/>, accessed 8 September 2017.

a greater Chinese military presence beyond East and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ But while China has many economic partners, it does not have any formal military alliances.¹⁷ It does, however, cooperate militarily with some states, especially Russia and Pakistan.

Notwithstanding its strengths, however, there are already indications of the limits China may face in playing the role of a global great power. Its very large population is rapidly aging. Currently standing at just over 1.4 billion, its population is projected to be just under this number in 2050 and to shrink to just over one billion by 2100.¹⁸ India's population will catch up to China's by 2030, and exceed it by 2050.¹⁹ China will undoubtedly be a global great power throughout the 21st century, but will probably be unable to become the predominant great power if many of its neighbors align with the US in particular to contain it. Further, while ethnic minorities in China such as the Tibetans and Uighurs may simply be too small compared to the ethnic Han Chinese majority to achieve secession, dealing with them as well as protests among the latter about specific government policies will distract the Chinese Communist Party from external affairs.²⁰

India

With a current population of over 1.3 billion, India is expected to replace China as the world's most populous country during the first half of the 21st century and grow to over 1.6 billion by 2050, but then to pull back to 1.5 billion by 2100.²¹ India already has the fourth largest economy (after China, the EU, and the US), and it is expected to surpass

16 Charlotte Gao, "China Officially Sets Up Its First Overseas Base in Djibouti". *The Diplomat*, 12 July 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-officially-sets-up-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti/>, accessed 8 September 2017; and Andrew Higgins, "China and Russia Hold First Joint Naval Drill in the Baltic Sea". *The New York Times*, 25 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/europe/china-russia-baltic-navy-exercises.html?mcubz=3>, accessed 8 September 2017.

17 Zhou Bo, "The US Is Right that China Has No Allies – Because It Doesn't Need Them". *South China Morning Post*, 13 June 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1974414/us-right-china-has-no-allies-because-it-doesnt-need-them>, accessed 13 September 2017.

18 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, "World Population Prospects". ESA/P/WP/248, 2017, p. 24, https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2017_KeyFindings.pdf, accessed 8 September 2017.

19 Ibid., pp. 24–25.

20 "In response to rising unrest and the possibility of popular protests similar to the Arab Spring, in 2011 China started to spend more on internal security than on national defense." Nadège Rolland, "China's National Power: A Colossus with Iron or Clay Feet?", in Ashley J. Tellis et al., eds., *Strategic Asia 2015–16: Foundations of National Power in the Asia-Pacific*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle and Washington, DC, 2015, p. 39.

21 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, "World Population Prospects". ESA/P/WP/248, 2017, p. 25, https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2017_KeyFindings.pdf, accessed 9 September 2017.

the US (but not China) in this respect over the course of the 21st century.²² By far the predominant regional power in South Asia, the size of India's population and economy also make it a potential global great power. Yet while India's military expenditure (\$56 billion in 2016) is large, it is much smaller than that of the USA or China.²³ Hemmed in as it is by its two main adversaries (Pakistan to the northwest and China to the northeast), India's ability to act beyond its immediate neighborhood is definitely constrained. Nor does India have any allies it is committed to defending or that are committed to its defense (although it does engage in defense cooperation with several "strategic partners", including Russia, the US, Japan, and Israel).²⁴

Unlike China, which is overwhelmingly Han Chinese, India contains a diversity of ethnicities and religious minorities, some of which are majorities in their particular region and for whom the prospect of secession is often appealing. While India may be strong enough to forcibly prevent secession (as it has done with several secessionist efforts, including the ongoing one in Muslim-majority Kashmir, which Pakistan has backed), this effort also detracts from its ability to act internationally.²⁵ At this point, then, India is more of a potential global great power than an actual one. But its potential – especially in the form of a growing economy's ability to support greatly increased defense expenditure – is quite significant.

Russia

Russia's current leader, President Vladimir Putin, has been doggedly determined to reassert Russia's role as a global great power (which had declined dramatically at the end of the Cold War) ever since he first came to power at the end of 1999, and has undeniably succeeded in this endeavor to a remarkable extent. While his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, failed to suppress the Chechen secessionist struggle inside Russia's borders during the mid-1990s, under Putin's leadership Moscow largely succeeded in doing this in the early 2000s. Russia then went on to take Abkhazia and South Ossetia away from Georgia in 2008, and first Crimea and later Donetsk and Luhansk away from Ukraine in 2014. Beginning in 2015, Russia intervened militarily in Syria, where it has succeeded in propping up the Assad regime against its opponents. Under President Putin, Moscow has also undertaken a large-scale military buildup and has actively undermined what

22 "The World in 2050". PricewaterhouseCoopers, February 2015, pp. 1–4, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/the-economy/assets/world-in-2050-february-2015.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2017.

23 Tian, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016". SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2017, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2017.

24 Ankit Panda "Why Does India Have So Many 'Strategic Partners' and No Allies?". *The Diplomat*, 23 November 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/why-does-india-have-so-many-strategic-partners-and-no-allies/>, accessed 13 September 2017.

25 Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Unrealized Power", in Ashley J. Tellis et al., eds., *Strategic Asia 2015–16: Foundations of National Power in the Asia-Pacific*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle and Washington, DC, 2015, pp. 170–174.

it considers unfriendly politicians in many Western countries (including the United States).²⁶

Yet despite Putin's undeniable success in restoring the country as a global great power, Russia suffers from several significant weaknesses. Although it sells weapons to many countries and engages in military cooperation with China in particular, its only real military alliance is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), currently consisting of six former Soviet republics: Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Unlike NATO, however, the CSTO does not entail a mutual defense commitment.²⁷ Its economy is one-fifth or less the size of either the USA's, China's, or the EU's.²⁸ Further, the Russian economy remains largely dependent on petroleum exports since Putin's plans to develop other sectors of the economy have not worked out. What is more, the low petroleum price environment prevailing in recent years resulting from increased supplies elsewhere (particularly US shale) and weak demand, plus the Western sanctions imposed in response to Moscow's actions vis-à-vis Ukraine, have put severe constraints on what Russia can spend on defense.²⁹ In 2016, Moscow's military expenditure amounted to \$69.9 billion – one-third the size of China's and less than an eighth the size of the USA's.³⁰ In addition, Russia's population of just under 144 million in 2017 is projected to shrink to 133 million by 2050 and further still to 124 million by 2100.³¹ At the same time, the Muslim portion of the Russian population

26 For an overview of current Russian military policy, see Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, D.C., June 2017), <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2017.

27 Albert Hayrapetyan, "Why the Collective Security Treaty Organization is a Pale Replica of NATO". *Russia Direct*, 8 September 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/why-collective-security-treaty-organization-just-pale-replica-nato>, accessed 13 September 2017.

28 Central Intelligence Agency, "Country Comparison: GDP". *The World Factbook 2016*, 4 January 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html>, accessed 9 September 2017.

29 Andrew C. Kuchins, "Russian Power Rising and Falling Simultaneously," in Ashley J. Tellis et al., eds., *Strategic Asia 2015–16: Foundations of National Power in the Asia-Pacific*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle and Washington, DC, 2015, pp. 127–130.

30 Tian, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016". SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2017, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2017.

31 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, "World Population Prospects". ESA/P/WP/248, 2017, p. 26, https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2017_KeyFindings.pdf, accessed 9 September 2017.

will rise³² – which would not be significant if it was well integrated into Russian society, but it is not.³³ For all Putin’s reassertion of Russia as a great power externally in recent years, Russia’s demographic, sectarian, and economic challenges suggest that Moscow is going to have to devote more and more of its resources to maintaining internal cohesion, and will have fewer available for playing the role of a global great power. Russia, of course, is likely to continue to maintain its large nuclear arsenal – one of its chief claims to being a global great power on a par with the US. But just as the possession of a large nuclear arsenal did not prevent the USSR from breaking up in 1991, it will not be useful in stopping Moscow’s many Muslim groups from seeking secession from the Russian Federation, or Russians themselves from seeking political change.

The European Union

Unlike the four others discussed here, the EU is not a single state but an integrated regional international organization currently consisting of 28 independent states, including some that were regional or even global great powers at different periods up until the end of World War II. Indeed, three of them in particular – Germany, France, and the UK – still play great power roles within Europe and beyond. Most of Europe, however, is now united in the EU, to which member states have yielded considerable authority. With an economy rivaling those of the US and China, the EU is very much a global great power in the economic sphere.³⁴ Moreover, since long before the EU (previously the European Economic Community, and then the European Community) grew to its present size, it has possessed a quality that none of the other four global great powers discussed here have: its democratic politics, market economy, and social welfare orientation have been so attractive that not only have many states sought to join it, but they have been willing to alter their own policies considerably to meet the EU’s standards for membership.

While it is active diplomatically and economically on the world stage, the EU has not exercised independent military power. The EU is not a mutual defense pact, and nor has

32 “As evidenced by recent studies, depopulation processes primarily affect ethnic Russians, the people who form the core of Russian statehood. Some experts believe that the depopulation predicted by 2025 will concern 85–90 per cent of ethnic Russians, whose overall share of the population will decrease to 60–70 per cent. Some are also forecasting that by 2050, the share of ethnic Russians in Russia will drop to 46.5 per cent.” Abdullah Rinat Mukhametov, “Russian Muslims Face Challenges of Demography and Migration”. *New Eastern Europe*, 14 August 2015, <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1690-russian-muslims-face-challenges-of-demography-and-migration>, accessed 9 September 2017.

33 Denis Sokolov, “Russia’s other Pipeline: Migration and Radicalization in the North Caucasus”. Kennan Cable, no. 17, Kennan Institute, 15 August 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no17-russias-other-pipeline-migration-and-radicalization-the-north-caucasus>, accessed 9 September 2017.

34 Andrew Moravcsik, “Europe Is Still a Superpower”. *Foreign Policy*, 13 April 2017, http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:0053ZhoD-_MJ:foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=fi, accessed 9 September 2017.

it agreed to defend non-member states.³⁵ For those who see pursuing an active military policy as being the defining feature of a great power (global or otherwise), the EU's neglect of this means that it cannot be regarded as one. Nonetheless, the EU spends at least twice as much on defense as Russia does.³⁶ This makes the Union a potential military great power in its own right, even if it has not yet chosen to exercise its military might independently.

Three states – Germany, France, and the UK – currently pay 60% of all EU defense spending.³⁷ The impending departure of the UK (whose military expenditure exceeded \$48 billion in 2016),³⁸ would therefore appear to considerably diminish the EU's ability to act as a great power militarily. But this is not really true since while Britain is leaving the EU, it remains part of NATO.³⁹ Indeed, the fact that so many EU members are also NATO members is an indication that the EU, by and large, has chosen to exercise its military power in conjunction with the United States through NATO.

Yet while the EU has many strengths, it also suffers from certain weaknesses. One is the chronic economic difficulties of certain southern EU member states in particular, which is exacerbated by their being part of the Eurozone and thus unable to boost exports by devaluing their national currency, as they could before joining. This has resulted in the need for expensive bailouts that are resented both by the wealthier EU members, which the financial burden of funding these bailouts falls upon, and also by the poorer EU members for having harsh economic conditions imposed upon them that

35 Ryan Heath and Quentin Ariès, "Today at Commission, 'the EU Is Not a Military Alliance'". Politico.eu, 6 July 2017, <http://www.politico.eu/blogs/playbook-plus/2017/06/today-at-commission-the-eu-is-not-a-military-alliance/>, accessed 13 September 2017.

36 Ibid. According to the European Union Institute for Security Studies, the EU-28 is spending four times as much as Russia on defense. Zoe Stanley-Lockman, "European Union Defence 2016". EUISS, March 2017, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/SMS_1_European_Defence.pdf, accessed 9 September 2017.

37 Alix Culbertson, "Revealed: UK Among Three Nations Paying 60 Per Cent of ALL EU Defence Spending". Express, 2 March 2017, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/774076/UK-France-Germany-60-per-cent-European-Union-defence-spending>, accessed 9 September 2017.

38 Tian, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016". SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2017, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2017.

39 With the UK remaining a member of NATO, it makes sense to discuss EU population size in terms of the current EU-28 going forward (keeping in mind that other states may join or leave). According to Eurostat, the EU-28 population was almost 512 million in 2017, is projected to grow to over 528 million by 2050 and decline to under 519 million by 2080 (the latest year Eurostat currently makes projections for). "EU Population Up to Almost 512 Million at 1 January 2017". Eurostat, 10 July 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8102195/3-10072017-AP-EN.pdf/a61ce1ca-1efd-41df-86a2-bb495daabdab>, accessed 10 September 2017; and "Population on 1st January by Age, Sex and Type of Projection: Total". Eurostat, 19 June 2017, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=proj_15npms&lang=en, accessed 10 September 2017.

do not necessarily resolve their problems.⁴⁰ In addition, the flood of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya have strained EU financial resources, caused a rift among EU member states over burden sharing, and led to the rise of xenophobic forces.⁴¹ Perhaps most damaging has been the increasing authoritarian trend in certain EU member states – particularly Poland and Hungary – that the democratic EU members, and the EU itself, seem unable to prevent or reverse.⁴² Russian efforts to promote anti-democratic parties and politicians in many EU states have exacerbated this problem.⁴³ The continued dependence of many EU countries on energy imports from Russia has also complicated the EU’s ability to respond to the challenge posed by Moscow.⁴⁴

Thus, while the EU already acts as a global great power economically and has the potential to do so militarily, it also suffers from several problems internally, as well as with regard to its immediate south and east, which calls into question its capacity for doing so.

Others?

It might be argued that all the current global great powers are either already in decline or heading in that direction, and will consequently be joined or even replaced by what are now regional powers. In terms of the potential to do this in terms of projected population and economic size, Indonesia in particular stands out as a possibility (projected to have a population of 321.6 million and the fourth largest individual country economy by 2050).⁴⁵ But as large as Indonesia is, its resources are far smaller compared

40 Joseph Stiglitz, “The Real Issues Of The Eurozone And How To Solve Them”. *Social Europe*, 8 September 2016, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-real-issues-of-the-eurozone-and-how-to-solve-them>, accessed 9 September 2017.

41 “Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts”. BBC News, 4 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>, last accessed 9 September 2017; and “Hungary Is Making Europe’s Migrant Crisis Worse”. *The New York Times*, 8 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/opinion/hungary-is-making-europes-migrant-crisis-worse.html>, accessed 9 September 2017.

42 “Nations in Transition 2017: The False Promise of Populism.” Freedom House, April 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017>, accessed 10 September 2017.

43 Nicolas Bouchet, “Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe”. German Marshall Fund of the United States, Policy Brief, vol. 2, no.2, May 2015.

44 For a discussion on this issue by several experts, see “Judy Asks: Is Europe Too Dependent on Russian Energy?” Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, 12 July 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/71507>, accessed 10 September 2017.

45 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, “World Population Prospects”. ESA/P/WP/248, pp. 23–28, https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2017_KeyFindings.pdf, accessed 13 September 2017; and “The World in 2050”. PricewaterhouseCoopers, February 2015, pp. 3, 14, accessed <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/the-economy/assets/world-in-2050-february-2015.pdf>, accessed 13 September 2017.

to the giants of the region, China and India, and hence it is not really in a position to be the leading regional great power, much less a global one. The same is true of every other Asian country in the vicinity of China and India from Pakistan to Japan. Brazil is also mooted to be a potential great power (with a projected population of 232.7 million and the 5th largest individual country economy by 2050),⁴⁶ but if it cannot replace the US as the predominant regional power in Latin America, it is not going to be able to play the role of a global great power outside of it. Perhaps because of its membership in the BRICS, South Africa is sometimes seen as a rising great power. Yet while it is certainly the predominant one in southern Africa, it now has a smaller population than several other African countries (including Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and the disparity is only likely to grow.⁴⁷ Indeed, with several possible regional great powers emerging in Africa, none of them may be in a position to dominate that continent, much less anything beyond. Similarly, the Middle East has several regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia) that, with the help of certain global great powers in some cases, prevent each other from dominating the region. Further, like the global great powers, many of today's regional great powers suffer from problems of internal cohesion, which dealing with will take priority over any ambitions to play a larger role on the global stage. What these regional great powers can do, however, is decide whether to align themselves with one or more global great powers contending with other ones, or seek to avoid doing so.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

POSSIBLE GREAT POWER CONFIGURATIONS

After examining the strengths and weaknesses of today's actual or potential global great powers, it appears that all of them – not just the US – face long-term internal and external challenges that will prevent any of them from acting as “primus inter pares”. Indeed, for any of them just to maintain their position vis-à-vis (much less prevail over) adversarial global great powers may require close cooperation with others. The choice of whom to cooperate with, of course, extends well beyond other great powers and includes regional great powers and smaller nations as well. Nevertheless, while these states may seek to ally with a global great power for protection vis-à-vis another one and its regional allies, they are usually not in a position to protect the great power they are allied with against another great power. Hence, in addition to allying with regional great powers and smaller states, global great powers cooperate with other global great powers against entities that both are concerned about.

In this regard, Putin's own proposal for replacing US unipolar hegemony (assuming that really exists) with a multipolar system appears to be an acknowledgement that no other global great power is likely to acquire unipolar hegemony. Instead, his multipolar system appears to be one in which the other great powers work together both to prevent the US from acting unilaterally and to bargain with it once Washington comes to the realization that it cannot do so successfully.

But his call for a multipolar world has two drawbacks. First, with Russian power in particular likely to shrink and Chinese power likely to expand over the course of the 21st century, it seems highly unlikely that China will regard Russia as a senior partner, or even treat it as an equal one for long. Second, the continuation of tense relations between China and India due to their ongoing border dispute (which began with the brief war they fought in 1962, and which the 2017 border tensions are a result of) and due to increased Chinese support for India's regional rival, Pakistan, suggests that Sino-Indian relations going forward are more likely to be conflictual rather than cooperative.⁴⁸

Similarly, while Putin in particular sees the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a grouping intended to constrain the US and its Western allies, persistent Sino-Indian hostility is certainly going to serve as a distraction from this focus. Nor is India likely to forego cooperation with the US (which has already begun) as long as it fears China – especially since the increased Russian dependence on China resulting from Russian-Western hostility means that Moscow is not in a position to offer New Delhi support against Beijing.⁴⁹

48 Louise Watt, “China, India Rivalry Looms over BRICS Summit”. ABC News, 30 August 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/china-india-rivalry-looms-brics-summit-49505563>, accessed 10 September 2017.

49 For an Indian discussion on the changing dynamics in Indian-Chinese-Russian-US relations, see C. Raja Mohan, “Raja Mandala: Rearranging the BRICS”. *The Indian Express*, 5 September 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/raja-mandala-rearranging-the-brics-rics-summit-2017-brics-xiamen-narendra-modi-india-china-4828862/>, accessed 10 September 2017. See also Kevin Knodell, “China's Worst Nightmare: Is a US-India Military Alliance Brewing?”. *The National Interest*, 20 May 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinas-worst-nightmare-us-india-military-alliance-brewing-16301>, accessed 10 September 2017.

This is especially the case since, as some have observed, Russian and Chinese strategic cooperation has already advanced to the level of being a de facto alliance in which Moscow is willing to play the role of junior partner. This is because Moscow's principal foreign policy aim is protecting the Putin elite, whose main fear is being overthrown in a democratic "color revolution". Whether accurately or inaccurately, Moscow sees the US and the West more broadly as trying to promote this while authoritarian China is not, and so Beijing is a useful ally despite whatever qualms Moscow has about its becoming increasingly more powerful than Russia.⁵⁰

One advantage of this de facto Sino-Russian alliance for both countries is that aggressive behavior on the part of one (such as Russia in Ukraine) increases the freedom of maneuver for the other (such as China in the South China Sea), and vice versa – especially since it would be very difficult for the US and others to take concerted action to counter both simultaneously. Thus, while many Westerners see China as a common threat to both Russia and the West, the advantages to Putin of his de facto alliance with Beijing contributed to his being unwilling to forego anything in Russia's ties with China (or Iran) for the sake of improved ties with the US, which the Trump Administration initially hoped Moscow would do.⁵¹

Some have talked about a so-called "G-2" in which the US and China decide on how to resolve all conflicts between themselves and their allies.⁵² However, with the Sino-US relationship likely to remain inherently competitive, Beijing is unlikely to forego the advantages of a de facto alliance with Russia, as is Washington with either its actual alliance with Europe via NATO or its growing one with India.

As long as the de facto Sino-Russian authoritarian great power alliance continues, the counterbalancing global great power combinations that make sense are the continuation of the democratic alliance between the US and the EU vis-à-vis Russia, and the furtherance of the democratic alliance between the US and India (along with other Asian partners) vis-à-vis China. Unfortunately, the forces of undemocratic nationalisms of various sorts have grown in the US, the EU, and India. Their coming to dominate in either the US on the one hand, or the EU or India on the other, would probably make a continued alliance highly problematic for the remaining democratic party. On the other hand, the coming to power of nationalist forces in both the US and the EU, or both the US and India, would not necessarily further alliance relations between them as such groups are often hostile to nationalist forces elsewhere. (In this regard, Putin's efforts to promote nationalist parties and politicians in the West does not seem to anticipate that their coming to power could actually have negative consequences for Russia.)

50 Eugene B. Rumer, "Russia's China Policy: This Bear Hug Is Real", in "Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines", National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report, no. 66, July 2017, p. 21.

51 "What America Might Want from Russia, but is Unlikely to Get". *The Economist*, 11 February 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21716612-vladimir-putin-could-do-very-well-out-donald-trump-what-america-might-want-russia>, accessed 14 September 2017.

52 Richard C. Bush, "The United States and China: A G-2 in the Making?". The Brookings Institution, 11 October 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-and-china-a-g-2-in-the-making/>, accessed 10 September 2017.

But while the possibility of anti-democratic nationalist forces prevailing in the US, the EU, or India cannot be ruled out, nor can the possibility that democratic ones might come to power one day in Russia and China. If they ever do, and democracy prevails in the US, the EU, and India (as it hopefully will), then Putin's vision of a multipolar world order in which the great powers confer with one another in order to prevent, resolve, or ameliorate the world's many conflicts could come into being.