

## Inter-Imperial Relations

Rebuilding global governance in the new geopolitical world order

Parag Khanna | **The current multipolar world resembles a three-legged stool with the United States, the European Union, and China being the dominant “imperial” powers. But only when there exists a viable balance of power can the stool be stable—and a new global order emerge.**

These days it is not fashionable to speak of empires, which are considered to be aggressive, mercantilist relics supposedly consigned to the dustbin of history with post-World War II decolonization and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many then predicted that ethnic self-determination would drag the world into a new era of political fragmentation as the number of countries proliferated from fewer than fifty at the end of World War II to, potentially, hundreds in the 21st century, with every minority getting its own state, currency, and seat in the United Nations.

But for thousands of years, empires have been the world’s most powerful political entities, fulfilling people’s eternal desire for order—the prerequisite for stability and meaningful democracy. Rome, Istanbul, Venice, and London ruled over thousands of distinct political communities until the advent of the nation state in the 17th century. By World War II, global power had consolidated into just a half dozen empires, almost all of them European. Decolonization put an end to small nations ruling by force over foreign colonies—but it did not end empire itself. Empires may not be the most desirable form of governance, given the regular occurrence of hugely destructive wars between them, but mankind’s psychological limitations still prevent us from doing better. In the 21st century, will we do better than empire?

It is inter-imperial relations—not international or inter-civilizational—that shape the world. America, Europe, and China are not only unique empires, they are exceptional in their expansionism. These three powers together increas-

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ingly command the world economy, form the largest trading blocks, and set rules for the rest of the world to follow. They lead by example, and by treaty. Each represents its own mode of diplomacy—For America it is coalition; Europe touts consensus; and China’s style is consultative. The United States offers military and regime protection and aid; Europe offers deep reform and economic association with its union, and China offers full-service, conditionality-free relationships.

But at the same time, it is hard to overestimate the fluidity of the early 21st-century landscape: America vacillates between shunning and embracing the international community, the Chinese politburo remains a black box, and the European Union cautiously exercises strategic leverage. But we must also consider that America may not be able to afford its excessive consumption, nor Europe its expansion, nor China its environmental and social burdens. All three superpowers might retrench if they are unable to maintain present commitments or if blending with their peripheries proves too cumbersome.

Then there are the many balancing swing states of the “second world” that complicate the picture drastically: energy-giant Russia, aspiring India, and technological juggernaut Japan. Beyond these three major players who demand a seat at the table, there are those with a strong anti-imperial mindset. In a world of alignments, not alliances, their imperial networks or spheres of influence increasingly overlap, with other countries multi-aligning: balancing and bandwagoning in order to gain economic assistance from one power, military aid from another, and trade ties with the third. In addition to

playing the dominant powers off one another, countries like Venezuela, Iran, Kazakhstan, Libya, and Malaysia will continue to focus as much on building ties among themselves as with Washington, Brussels, or Beijing. Not only will these countries take the best of what each superpower offers to

achieve their own vision of success, they will also partner directly with one another in order to extract oil reserves, share intelligence, combat terrorism, reduce poverty, implement capital controls, and build modern infrastructure. They will use their sovereign wealth to buy Western banks, ports, and other strategic assets. Their regional groups will continue to construct their own economic zones, development banks, peacekeeping forces, and criminal courts. Airline connections have sprouted to connect Arabs, South Americans, and East Asians directly to one another.

How will global governance be affected by this unprecedented and complex geopolitical landscape? As America’s claims to exceptionalism wane, other powers quite rightly want their place in (or as) the sun, to be the world’s *Ordnungsmacht*. For the first time in history, there exists a multipolar and multi-civilizational world of three distinct superpowers competing on a planet of shrinking resources. For each, mere *raison d’état* has become *raison du système*: The extension of their core rationality and vision of order constitutes the highest morality. The more America considers itself exceptional, the more its rivals will seek to advance their own exceptionalism at America’s expense. China

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feels it upholds the burden of maintaining tenets of international law like sovereignty and noninterference, while Europe's approach to world order transcends the interstate system altogether. Each in its own way undermines the international architecture of global governance, eroding the fiction that laws and institutions alone can restrain imperial competition.

### A Damaged Security Architecture

Institutions of global governance must reflect the underlying geopolitical foundation in order to retain credibility and legitimacy. Other states might have continued to support the imperfect United Nations as a common forum for authoritative global diplomacy if the United States had, but its negligence of the United Nations gave others the excuse to do the same. The United States is more responsible than any other country for creating the post-World War II international architecture, but it is now doing as much as any other country to undermine it. Double standards and legal

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isolationism have undone America's exemplary record of promoting human rights, and unsanctioned preemptive war has undermined the authority of the UN Security Council. When superpower interests collide, the United Nations has proven to be as catastrophically irrelevant as the League of Nations.

The United Nations only has the power ascribed to it by the dominant states—and at this point that is very little. The United Nations is not viewed by any of the three superpowers as an overarching governance mechanism but as a forum in which to posture and, most importantly, block the others. It was never a central actor in geopolitical affairs, but instead has always been a stage. The United Nations is a place for consultation and joint declarations, but it is not where decisions are actually made. The United Nations operates at the mercy of the great powers and their budgets. The less they have in common in their approach to the world, the less they will use it. The United Nations has had many major humanitarian successes, from peacekeeping to providing food and medical aid around the world. It has created a democracy fund, increased its peacekeeping forces, and established a human rights council, but its standards for these will only matter where the superpowers do not bother to intervene—mostly in the third world.

As stealthy, globalized escalations continue among the great powers underterred by global governance norms, the potential for conflict grows: resource competition in the Caspian and South China seas, terrorism with nuclear weapons, an attack in the Gulf of Aden or the Straits of Malacca. The uncertain alignments of lesser but still substantial powers such as Russia, Japan, and India could also cause escalation. Furthermore, America's foreign lenders could pull the plug to undermine its grand strategy, sparking economic turmoil, political acrimony, and military tension. War brings profit to the military-industrial complex and is always supported by the large patriotic camps on all sides. Yet the notion of a Sino-US rivalry to lead the world is also premature and simplistic for in the event of their conflict, Europe would be the winner as capital

would flee to its sanctuaries.

These great tensions are being played out in the world today as each superpower strives to attain the most advantageous position for itself, while none are powerful enough to dictate the system by itself. Global stability thus rests between the bookends the French philosopher Raymond Aron identified as “peace by law” and “peace by empire,” the former toothless and the latter prone to excess.

Historically, successive iterations of balance of power and collective security doctrines have evolved from justifying war for strategic advantage into building systems to avoid it, with the post-Napoleonic Concert of Europe as the first of the modern era. Because it followed rules, it was itself something of a societal system. Even where these attempts at creating a stable world order have failed—including the League of Nations after World War I—systemic learning takes place in which states (particularly democracies) internalize the lessons of the past into their institutions to prevent history from repeating itself. The English economic historian Arnold Toynbee viewed history as progressive rather than purely cyclical, a wheel that not only turns around and around but also moves forward such that Civilization could become civilized. Yet empires and superpowers usually promise peace but bring wars.

### A Tripartite Coalition of Powers

How could the next world war be averted? There does exist a tripartite coalition that could engineer the triumph of globalization over geopolitics: The American working class supports Chinese workers by shopping at Wal-Mart, while its upper class spends on European cars and luxury items; both Europe and China buy American technology; and America’s General Motors and Boeing and Europe’s Airbus can attribute much of their profits to reduced costs derived from production in—and sales to—China. Capital markets allow for endless profit for all rather than a zero-sum competition. Furthermore, the “cult of the offensive” does not dominate military strategy today. In an age of nuclear weaponry, few believe that initiating conflict entails quick victory with minimal loss. Never has historian A.J.P. Taylor’s adage been more true: If the goal of being a great power is to be able to fight a great war, the only way to remain a great power is not to fight one. The damage done to oneself through conflict has never been higher than in today’s integrated world.

One approach to a solution is to think of the tripolar world as a stool. With two legs it cannot stand long; with three it can be stable. The three-legged US-EU-China stool is currently wobbling, and the new global strategy for the current turn of the geopolitical wheel is “equilibrium.” Equilibrium is dynamic, hence more difficult to keep in balance than the unchallenged hegemony of a single hegemon, but it nonetheless represents the next evolutionary stage beyond the laws of anarchy and balance of power. Equilibrium also inspires a more progressive psychology and vocabulary: The “multipolar” order rising powers seek is not the same as the “multilateral” order that is required to man-

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age it in practice. Similarly, the idea of “checks and balances” connotes cautious reaction, while “division of labor” implies positive action toward common ends; “prudence” alone does not fulfill blithely made commitments, but “burden-sharing” could. Peace, justice, and order will only follow from equilibrium.

There is as yet no clear vision for such a global concert of powers or a legitimate global division of labor among the three superpowers—but such multilateralism will be more a matter of imperial coordination than of channeling resources through common institutions. A global strategy of equilibrium would transform the current power transition from a wrestling match of suspicious powers into a team cycling race in which the lead is alternately shared toward the same finish line.

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Yet at present the term “international community” is little more than a euphemism for Western dominance. The West can expect no allegiance to a Western order masquerading as representative of global values decreed without global input. America has called on China to be a “responsible stakeholder” in the global system, but because it is implicitly an American order China is naturally resistant to it. China will not exercise its enormous economic weight in the interests of antiquated and unrepresentative clubs like the G-8 that will not even let it in. Similarly, much as the efficacy of the UN Security Council today depends on the United States, the same is becoming true of China, which can also bribe the rotating Security Council members to vote its way. Without a new division of labor, Western institutions will diminish with America’s power, leaving only classic geopolitical competition without even the veneer of diplomatic coordination.

### Dynamic Equilibrium

Equilibrium requires that the United States, the European Union, and China determine the rules of the geopolitical game together. Much as in a family, equilibrium entails a complex set of codes to domesticate international relations, with compromise a similarly crucial value. The incentives in favor of creating institutions that intentionally diminish one’s own power and elevate others are admittedly elusive; egotistical states need to be convinced that they would save costs through collaborations that serve their interests. But America could actually increase its influence if it tempers its power. The path between dominance and retrenchment is the active creation of an “international constitution” with broad allegiance.

Rather than the U.S.-Soviet-Chinese “strategic triangle” of the 1960s and 1970s, a G-3 institution of the United States, the European Union, and China would be the most appropriate forum to establish deeper working relations among the superpowers. By openly discussing specific countries where spheres of influence overlap and contradict one another such as Sudan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Burma, their differences could be reduced from the strategic to the merely tactical. A broad agenda requiring active Chinese participation could go

a long way toward softening Chinese suspicion of the United States and could commit China to pooling resources with its peers. The further down the road one looks, the more global problems revolve around energy resources and fresh water rather than calculations of military power imbalances and territorial rivalry. Yet China's present exclusion from the deliberations of the International Energy Agency fuels its suspicion that there is an "invisible Western hand" keeping global oil prices high. Instead, key energy consumers can focus on bringing more oil to a free market, hence reducing prices, rather than locking in oil contracts with state-owned companies to secure it from others' reach.

America must not only push for a G-3 forum, but must also refashion its own diplomacy from one that speaks only of its own interests to one that genuinely addresses global interests. It cannot convince the world that American-style democracy or democratization are ends in themselves, but it can provide bigger carrots for good and accountable governance. It can resist protectionist pressures and instead strengthen emerging markets that are increasingly America's main sources of corporate profits as well. Rather than lecture about human rights, labor, and environmental standards, it can provide more of the necessary technical assistance developing societies need in order to achieve stability and prosperity.

None of this will happen automatically. Globalization alone will not trump the geopolitical cycles of world war—this task requires more than a blind belief in rationality. Indeed, history proves that mankind is often anything but rational, and often precisely when the world needs rationality most. Instead, altering our future course demands a mutual understanding among the superpowers and proactive and flexible statecraft to create and maintain stability. A century ago, globalization was defeated by geopolitics, unleashing World War I. The question is whether history will repeat itself a century later. The answer remains unknown, for as the second world shapes both geopolitics and globalization, diplomacy becomes ever more an art.

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