

WINTER 2018 / ISSUE NO.10

\$ 12.00 | € 8.50 | 1000 RSD



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JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
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# GREAT POWERS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Mark N. Katz

**M**UCH OF the discussion about great powers in the twenty-first century centers on the notion that American power is in decline while other great powers are on the rise. Vladimir Putin has often spoken about how the American-dominated “unipolar” world is being replaced by what he claims is a more desirable multipolar world. But, apart from Russia being one of the poles, he has not clearly explained how this would function. Some scholars see the combination of declining American power and rising Chinese power as possibly leading to conflict between them.

A strong case can indeed be made to suggest that American power is in decline, and an even stronger one that America is not as powerful today 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 American power is in decline, 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 Europe) have many strengths, they also have many weaknesses, which will not disappear if American power declines. Furthermore, even if America is no longer the great power that dominates over all others, it certainly remains a great power, with a considerable ability to pursue its own ambitions and frustrate those of others.

**A**t 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 American 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.

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*Incriminating looks in the UN Security Council chamber as member states take another contested vote on Syria*

Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

This situation is hardly new. Predictions about the imminent decline of American power have been made repeatedly since the very beginning of the Cold War. On the other hand, assertions made at the end of the Cold War and afterward that America 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 American power might decline received widespread publicity. In fact, he also discussed the prospects for Russian, European, Chinese, and Japanese power declining. Of the aforementioned

examples, only Japan seems to have definitely lost any claim to being a global great power, while all the others have either remained or re-emerged as ones. And a possibility that Kennedy did not discuss, India, has emerged as a potential global great power.

**T**his article, however, will not attempt to determine how the ongoing great power competition will play out. Instead, it will begin by examining the strengths and weaknesses of each of today’s actual or potential global great powers (America, Europe, Russia, China, and India). It will then argue that since no one great power by

itself is likely to be able (even if willing) to dominate over all the others, some global great powers are likely to align with each other against others doing likewise. There are several possibilities, though, for these configurations. The article will thus conclude with a discussion of what these possibilities might be, as well as the likelihood of them occurring.

**STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES**

Great powers, by definition, differ from other countries by being more powerful. But great powers differ from each other as well. The most powerful may be stronger than others militarily and economically, though not strong enough to prevent other great powers from rising. Some may be strong militarily, while at the same time not being as strong economically—and vice versa.

There are also gradations of great power. Regional great powers may be the most powerful countries in their respective region, but unable to dominate it due to external global great powers acting in conjunction with their smaller neighbors to prevent this. Though somewhat tautological, a requirement for being a global great power—the focus of concern here—is having both the will and the ability to advance and

defend one’s interests on a worldwide basis, including in different regions to 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.

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While global great powers can operate in more than one region, they cannot necessarily operate in all of them to the same extent that they can in others. 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 did the Soviet Union. Involvement in long, drawn-out military conflicts can weaken a great power, as can declining 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, I now turn to an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current global great powers (whether actual or potential): America, China, India, Russia, and Europe.

**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 United States appeared to become the sole remaining superpower after the collapse of both communism and the USSR. Among its strengths is the fact that its defense budget has long been the largest in the world by far (\$611 billion in 2016). This has been underwritten by what has been the largest economy in the world. The combination of its democratic political system, successful economy, and willingness to offer protection or even fight to defend its allies has attracted many other countries to America’s worldwide alliance network—both during the Cold War and afterward.

One of America’s shortcomings, though, is its propensity to get involved in long, drawn-out military ventures in defense of either pro-American authoritarian regimes or democratic ones it is attempting to set up after overthrowing anti-American authoritarian regimes. Such interventions have generated opposition in the countries in which they occur and with public opinion in both America and its democratic allies.

Thus, despite its military strength, the United States was unable to prevail in Indochina during the Cold War, and in both Afghanistan and Iraq in the early twenty-first century.

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One result of experiences such as these has been to undermine confidence in the willingness and ability of the United States to defend its other allies. The 2016 election of Donald Trump as American president has also raised doubts about his willingness to defend America’s

NATO allies and engage internationally in the way previous presidents have done since World War II.

It is not yet clear whether Trump will reorient American foreign policy in a more narrowly nationalist direction that alienates its allies, or whether America’s post-World War II internationalism reasserts itself after, or even during, his presidency. Even if the latter occurs, the expected outpacing of America by China and India economically (enabling them to greatly increase their own defense expenditures) suggests that either or both of them could equal or surpass America’s great power capacity during the twenty-first century. The fear of a rising authoritarian China in particular, though, may well serve to heighten

demand for American protection on the part of smaller states. And with continued economic as well as demographic growth (the population of the United States is expected to rise from about 325 million now to about 390 million in 2050 and 447 million in 2100), America could remain a (if not the) global great power throughout the twenty-first century.

But this will only occur if it can successfully manage its impending transition from a majority white to a majority non-white nation—an event that is expected to take place by 2050.

Trump's campaign for president and subsequent election has emboldened white nationalist forces opposed to this, and has also revealed that they may be far stronger than previously believed. To the extent that America 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 countries.

**CHINA**

The rapid growth of China from a poor, war-ravaged country at the end of World War II to a global great

power challenging the United States 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 expected to continue indefinitely.

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While different measures disagree on whether the American or the Chinese economy is now larger, there appears to be no doubt that China's will grow larger and larger in comparison to that of the United States over the coming decades. Already second only to America in military expenditure (\$215 billion in 2016), its growing economy may well enable it to spend as

much or more as America on defense at some point in the future.

One way in which China exercises influence internationally is through its large-scale bilateral and multilateral trade and investment regimes with countries throughout the world. This gives a growing number of states powerful incentives to continue cooperating with Beijing. Still, China's increasingly assertive behavior—especially in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea—has led some Asian states to become warier of it, despite their strong trade relations with Beijing. In addition to assertiveness in its immediate vicin-

ity, China has recently become more actively involved in the Middle East. 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 a greater Chinese military presence beyond East and Southeast Asia.

In addition to its strengths, though, there are already indications about the limits China may face in playing the role of a global great power. Although it has many economic partners, it has very few politico-

military allies. The most important of these are Russia and Pakistan. In addition, its very large population is rapidly aging. Currently at just over 1.4 billion, China's population is projected to be just under this amount in 2050, and to shrink to just over one billion by 2100. India's population is projected to catch up to China's by 2030, and surpass it by 2050.

China will undoubtedly be a global great power throughout the twenty-first century, but will probably be unable to become the predominant great power if many of its neighbors combine, with America in particular, to contain it. Further, while ethnic minorities in China like 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, could distract the Chinese Communist Party from external affairs.

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**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 twenty-first century, and to grow to over 1.6 billion by 2050, but then to pull back to 1.5 billion by 2100. India

already has the fourth largest economy (after China, the EU, and the United States), and is expected to surpass that of America (but not that of China) over the course of the twenty-first century. The predominant regional power in South Asia by far, the size of India's population and economy also make it a potential global great power.

Yet while India's military expenditures (\$56 billion in 2016) are large, they are much smaller than America's or China's. But 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. And 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, for whom the prospect of secession is often appealing.

While India may be strong enough to forcibly prevent this (as it has done with several secessionist efforts, including the ongoing one in Muslim majority Kashmir, which Pakistan has backed), this effort also distracts from its ability to act internationally. At this point, then, India is more a potential global great power than an actual one. But its potential—especially in the form of a growing economy’s ability to greatly increase its defense expenditure—is quite significant.

**RUSSIA**

The current leader of the Russian Federation, 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 beginning of the twenty-first century. And he has succeeded in this to a remarkable extent.

While his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, failed to suppress the Chechen seces-

sionist struggle inside Russia’s borders during the mid-1990s, under Putin’s leadership Moscow largely succeeded in doing so in the early 2000s. Russia then went on to take Abkhazia and South Ossetia away from Georgia in 2008, and

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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 Putin,

Moscow has also undertaken a large-scale military buildup, and has actively undermined politicians it considers unfriendly in many Western countries (including the United States).

Yet despite Putin’s undeniable success in restoring it as a global great power, Russia suffers from several significant weaknesses. Its economy is one fifth, or less, the size of that of the United States, China, and the EU. Moreover, the Russian economy remains largely dependent on petroleum exports, since Putin’s plans to develop other sectors of the economy have not worked out. And the low petroleum price environment prevailing in recent years, resulting from increased supplies elsewhere (particularly American shale) and weak demand—plus the Western sanctions imposed in re-

sponse to Moscow’s actions vis-à-vis Ukraine—have put severe constraints on what Russia can spend on defense. In 2016, Moscow’s military expenditure was a mere \$69.9 billion—one third the size of China’s and less than an eighth the size of America’s. 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. At the same time, the Muslim portion of the Russian population will rise—which would not be significant if it was well integrated into Russian society, but it is not.

For all Putin’s reassertion of Russia as a great power externally in recent years, Russia’s demographic, economic, and sectarian challenges suggest that Moscow is going to have to devote more and more of its resources to maintaining internal cohesion, and that it will therefore have fewer available to play 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 United States. But just as the posses-

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sion of one of the two largest nuclear arsenals did not prevent the USSR from breaking up in 1991, it will not be useful in stopping the country’s many Muslim groups from seeking secession from the Russian Federation, or Russians themselves from seeking political change.

**EUROPE**

Unlike the four others discussed here, Europe is not a single country, rather a continent containing many states, including some that were regional or even global great powers during different periods prior to the end of World War II. Indeed, three of them in particular—Germany, France, and the UK—are great powers within Europe and beyond. Most of Europe, though, is now united in a regional international organization, the European Union, to which member states have yielded considerable authority.

With an economy rivaling those of America and China, the EU is very much a global great power in the economic sphere. And long before the EU (which had different names in the past) grew to its present size, it has pos-

essed 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 in order to do so they have been willing to alter their own policies considerably to meet the EU's standards.

Yet while it is active diplomatically and economically on the world stage, the EU has not exercised independent military power. For those who see pursuing an active military policy as being the defining feature of a great power (global or otherwise), the EU's having not done this means that it must not be one. The EU, though, spends at least twice as much as Russia on defense. This makes the EU a potential military great power in its own right, even if it has not yet chosen to exercise that power independently.

Three states—Germany, France, and the UK—currently pay 60 percent of EU defense spending. The impending departure of the UK (whose military expenditure exceeded \$48 billion in 2016), then, would appear to considerably diminish Europe's ability to act as a great power militarily. But this is really not true, since Britain remains part of

NATO, despite leaving the EU. 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 the Atlantic Alliance.

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But while the EU has many strengths, it also suffers from certain weaknesses. One is the chronic economic weakness of some of its southern member states in particular, which is exacerbated by their participation in the Eurozone, and thus their inability to boost exports by devaluing their national currency, as they could do prior to joining. This has resulted in the need for expensive bailouts, which are resented both by wealthier EU members—which have had to expend significant resources to rescue the poor ones—as well as by the poorer EU states—for imposing harsh economic conditions on them that do not necessarily resolve their problems. In addition, the flood of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, which has been exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya, has strained European financial resources, caused friction among EU member states over apportioning the costs, and led to the rise of xenophobic forces.

Perhaps most damaging of all has been the increasing authoritarian trend in certain EU member states—particularly Poland and Hungary—that more democratic EU members, and the EU apparatus itself, seem unable to prevent or reverse. Russian efforts to promote anti-democratic parties and politicians in many European countries have exacerbated this problem. The continued dependence of many EU countries on energy imports from Russia has also undermined Europe's ability to respond to the challenge it faces from Moscow.

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 to its immediate south and east, that call into question its capacity to truly act as a great power.

**POSSIBLE CONFIGURATIONS**

After examining the strengths and weaknesses of today's actual and potential global great powers, it appears that all of them—not just the United States—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 hold their position vis-à-vis (much less prevail over) adversary global great powers may require close cooperation with others.

*Putin's own proposal for replacing America's unipolar hegemony (assuming that it really exists) with a multipolar system appears to be an acknowledgement that no one global great power is likely to replace the United States in that role.*

The choice of whom to cooperate with, of course, extends well beyond other great powers and includes smaller nations as well. Smaller nations usually seek alliances with one great power for protection vis-à-vis another one and its allies, although they are not in a position to protect the great power they are allied with against another great power. In addition to allying with

smaller nations, then, global great powers cooperate with other global great powers against yet others that both are concerned about.

In this regard, Putin's own proposal for replacing America's unipolar hegemony (assuming that it really exists) with a multipolar system appears to be an acknowledgement that no one global great power is likely to replace the United States in that role. Instead, his multipolar system appears to be one in which the other great powers work together, both to prevent the United States 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 suffers from two problems. First, with Russian power in particular likely to shrink over the course of the twenty-first century and Chinese power likely to rise, 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—border tensions in 2017 were a continuation of this) and 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.

Similarly, while Putin in particular sees BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a grouping intended to constrain America and its Western allies, persistent Sino-Indian hostility is certainly going to distract from this focus. Additionally, India is unlikely to forego cooperation with the United States (which has already begun) as long as it fears China—especially since increased Russian dependence on China as a result of Russian-Western hostility means that Moscow is not in a position to offer New Delhi support against Beijing.

This is especially the case since, as some have observed, Russian-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 to protect the Putin elite, whose main fear is being overthrown in a democratic "color revolution." Whether accurately or inaccurately, Moscow sees America, and the West more broadly, as trying to promote such a course of action, while authoritarian China does not. Beijing is thus a useful ally, despite whatever qualms Moscow has about its becoming increasingly more powerful than Russia.

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 America and others to take concerted action to counter both simultaneously. Thus, despite many Westerners seeing 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 United States.

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

### LIKELIHOODS & IRONIES

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 America and Europe vis-à-vis Russia and the furtherance of the democratic alliance between America and India (along with other Asian partners) vis-à-vis China.

Unfortunately, the forces of undemocratic nationalism of various sorts have grown in all three. Their emergence to dominate in either America, on the one hand, or in Europe or India, on

the other, would probably make continued alliance highly problematic for the remaining democratic party. On the other hand, the coming to power of nationalist forces in both America and Europe, or both America 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).

But while the possibility of anti-democratic nationalist forces prevailing in America, Europe, or India cannot be ruled out, the possibility that democratic ones might come to power one day in Russia and China cannot either. If they ever do, and democracy prevails in America, Europe, 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 very well come into being. ●