

Chapter 2

# Historical Insights Into Great Power Competition

## Military Alignments, Economics, and Institutions

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*This chapter observes that Great Powers historically pursue multilateral arrangements to enhance their relative power and status, in part through military alignments, their economic stature, and their dominance in the institutions and organizations that manage global interactions and transactions. The chapter first sketches the degree to which alliance and strategic partnership formation often determines the prospects for success in Great Power competition (GPC), deterrence of direct Great Power armed clash, and the propensity for Great Power victory should war occur. History informs that military alignments between the Great Powers of any era are normally temporal, shifting, and based more on shared immediate threat perceptions of another Great Power than on any long-lasting common purpose. Great Power military alignments with lesser states are most durable and reliable when they are based on conditions including a common threat perception, at least some ideological affinity, and a closely interwoven politico-military command structure than are those based upon transitory Great Power inducements or outright coercion.*

*The chapter also takes a historical look at strategic economic competition during past eras of GPC. Great Powers experience asymmetric economic growth. Those growing in wealth and power assert special privilege to alter standing economic rules and norms, while Great Powers declining in relative wealth and power cling to past procedures and institutions beneficial to their stature. Intensifying Great Power economic competition in an era of multiple rivals inevitably generates fragmentation in a globalized economic domain, as states seek greater control over markets to arrest their vulnerabilities from economic interdependence and the potential for corrosive influence such interdependence allows.*

*Finally, the chapter examines the history of Great Power strategic competition over global rules, norms, organizations, and institutions involving interstate transactions like communications, education, health, transportation, legal norms, and*

*sociocultural exchange. Great Power disagreements about the proper framework for and enforcement of standards for the conduct of international engagements demonstrate a historically resonant pattern where intensifying Great Power rivalries fragment once-collaborative interactions. The chapter sketches the intensifying Great Power struggle for control of American-established international organizations and institutions and the implications of emerging alternatives championed by China and Russia. The chapter concludes with the observation that while the globalized network of rules, norms, and institutions may survive through 2030, survival will be under conditions of extreme duress. This duress will drive fragmentation of much of the world into blocs of opposing norms, rules, and institutions arranged around emerging Great Power spheres of influence that will become increasingly isolated and impervious to outside actors and preferences—and with frictions between and among them.*

Throughout recorded history, the Great Powers—empires, kingdoms, and, most recent, nation-states—of the international order have pursued global power and influence through an array of mechanisms. They seek to acquire and then sustain relative power against their largest and most threatening rivals—other Great Powers—and to remain dominant in relation with smaller, less powerful sovereign entities in the international arena. Often, rising Great Powers accumulate relative power and influence through a sequence of independent domestic choices and foreign policy initiatives. In some cases, rising Great Powers ascend to their high-table power status while working with other sovereign powers in the pursuit of mutually beneficial outcomes. Once at the high table of global status, the dominant Great Power normally works to build scaffolding that will reinforce its views about proper interstate interactions, routinely structuring these in a manner that favors maintenance of its Great Power privilege. Dominant Great Powers thus seek multilateral arrangements and organizations to anchor a particular international order aligned with their preferences.<sup>1</sup>

Three dimensions of this frequent Great Power turn toward multilateralism in the quest to provide global order, maintain stability, and sustain dominant status stand out in the annals of geostrategic history. Military alignments, economic norms and procedures, and the structure of interstate institutions set the scaffolding for a dominant international order—one established and underwritten by the dominant Great Power(s) of that era. Great Power military alignments with peers or with lesser powers can enhance military capability to deter serious threats from other Great Powers or set improved conditions to strike at rivals. The rules, procedures, and protocols for international commercial activities including trade and finance also take on the preferences and characteristics of the dominant Great Power(s). They normally set in place the norms, processes, and organizational structure necessary for predictable patterns of commercial trade and transit for that era. Finally, dominant Great Power(s) routinely create multilateral organizations and institutions for the promulgation and enforcement of acceptable patterns of interstate behavior and conduct in activities ranging from transnational law enforcement, nonviolent conflict resolution, scientific exchange, routine information exchange, human travel and transit, and so forth. Again, these organizations and institutions most often reflect the prejudices and prefer-

ences of the dominant Great Power, coalescing and enduring to the degree that the relative power advantage of that dominant state can sustain the framework—through influence by coercion or attraction.

In the mid-2020s, Great Power competition (GPC) among the United States, China, and Russia has entered a period where long-established international patterns and preferences of the United States and its Western partners are increasingly confronted by Moscow and Beijing. These dynamics are not unfamiliar. Throughout history, rising Great Powers arrive at a point of relative power where they begin to challenge the international order underwritten by an established Great Power in relative decline. The long-dominant Great Power then confronts the challenges of how to address its rivals. The challenging Great Power(s) grapple with the choice of what tactics are best to achieve influence over the framework of the international order. There are historic patterns that inform how military alignments will matter to the reactionary instincts of the dominant Great Power and the evolutionary aims of its rival(s). History also informs the modern Great Powers about the degree to which international economic norms, rules, and procedures are likely to unfold under pressure and about how likely the globalized patterns of trade and commerce are to survive in a geostrategic environment where economic interdependence becomes increasingly perceived as more of a strategic liability than a wealth-building advantage. Finally, history is replete with examples of how globalized institutions and organizations tend to fare in eras of intensifying Great Power rivalry, where the contenders have notably different views about how these structures should be utilized to order global interstate transactions.

This chapter provides a historical analysis of the main dynamics of evolving military alignments, economic rules and norms, and institutional arrangements under the duress of intensifying Great Power rivalry. It establishes that fluid Great Power-to-Great Power military alignments dominate during periods of multistate Great Power rivalry. Normally, this fluidity preserves the autonomous status of Great Powers, but poorly chosen alignments—especially those with mismatched strategic objectives and those committing one Great Power to join in wars started by its military partners—can backfire by inciting a military clash that gravely compromises the relative dominance of that Great Power. History also demonstrates that the rules, norms, and procedural preferences for managing international economic exchange come under extreme duress when a rising Great Power converts its economic gains into international political and economic influence, rejecting certain aspects of the standing global trade and financial order and often blocking off once globalized markets in favor of state control of market forces domestically and regionally. Finally, the historic impact of Great Power transition between two or more rivals routinely challenges the global institutions and organizations established by the dominant Great Power, initially fragmenting them and ultimately reducing once stable global mediums for conflict mediation and information exchange into ones of relevance only within segregated regional blocs.

### **Military Alignments Under Conditions of Multipolar Great Power Rivalry**

The section assesses military alignments and partnership formation under conditions of historic multistate Great Power rivalry. It sketches the degree to which alliance and strategic partnership formation often determines the prospects for peaceful success in GPC, deter-

rence of direct Great Power armed clash, and the propensity for Great Power victory should war occur. The outcomes of Great Power rivalries often turn on the reliability and capabilities of allies and partners. History informs those military alignments and/or strategic partnerships—based on mutual attraction (including ideological solidarity), collaboration, and favorable treatment—are more durable and reliable than those based on coercion. Generally, there is only a modest association between ideology and strategic alignment, especially between Great Powers. There, the perception of a serious threat by a third Great Power or alignment of Great Powers is the overwhelming factor favoring reciprocal Great Power military alignment, and ideological symmetry often does not matter. Ideological symmetry is more pronounced as a factor in military alignment between Great Powers and smaller regional allies and partners, but still not great. The specific nature of the ideology is a crucial factor. Certain ideologies can prove more a source of division than of unity, even though the operative ideology explicitly prescribes close cooperation among its adherents.

### **Rationale for Great Power Military Alignment**

American political scientist John Mearsheimer often writes that Great Power rivalry is characterized by intense security competition. Great Powers look for opportunities to gain relative military power against rivals, and they seek to prevent the balance of military power from shifting against them.<sup>2</sup> This is true even though the Great Powers may cooperate on other goals and mutual interests that do not directly threaten their position in the global balance of power. In pursuit of these aims, Great Powers often balance against a more threatening rival by forming an alignment with another Great Power competitor to reduce the risks of attack and to mitigate relative power decline.<sup>3</sup> Frequent Mearsheimer collaborator and fellow political scientist Steven Walt described several vital motives underpinning the choice by any sovereign state to seek security alignment with others. His taxonomy provides important insight into why, when there are three or more, Great Powers frequently choose to align and often realign with each other over time in the pursuit of relative power and influence.<sup>4</sup> Walt observes that, in general, all sovereigns choose to align with others to *reduce the threat* they feel from another sovereign or combination of sovereigns, to *express ideological solidarity* with another sovereign viewed as similar in political or social values, or a combination of the two.<sup>5</sup>

The choice by one Great Power to align with another Great Power to reduce threat from yet another (or others) is most often a choice to reduce the relatively greater risks perceived from the coercive influence feared from a third Great Power (or combination of them) and frequently does not represent a durable alignment by attraction.<sup>6</sup> The choice to align with another Great Power as an expression of ideological solidarity is a by-product of influence by attraction. Alignment from ideological solidarity may coincide with a Great Power's aim to reduce the threat of coercion from another Great Power, but not always. The history of Great Power reciprocal defense alignments indicates that minimizing the threats from another Great Power is a more powerful motivation for security alignment than is maximizing ideological solidarity with like-minded entities.<sup>7</sup> Despite its deep commitment to solidarity with like-minded liberal democracies in its foreign policy and security strategy, the United States regularly acts in accordance with the realist insight about security alignment. A most

notable example is when Washington allied with the Soviet Union during World War II to defeat the greater threats it perceived from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.<sup>8</sup>

The most durable military alignments—and those likely to produce the tightest coupling between Great Powers in a mutual security alignment—occur when ideological attraction matches the degree of threat reduction perceived from the strategic partnership. When the threat of another Great Power subsides, the allure of ideological similarity tends to wane as the aligned Great Powers—free from the imminent dangers perceived from another—begin to see more clearly the threats they pose to each other at the high table of relative Great Power status.<sup>9</sup>

### **Nature and Implications of Great Power Military Alignments**

Great Powers choose strategic and security alignments along a continuum ranging from formal military alliances through less formal security partnerships on to the less binding transactional defense coalition. Formal military alliances, strategic partnerships, and transactional defense coalitions are often intended to enhance deterrence and reduce the risks of direct Great Power war. However, they may also be joined with the intent of waging war against a rival Great Power or coalition.<sup>10</sup> Formal military alliances often include a promise by the signatories to come to the mutual aid of another if attacked by an outside Great Power (or combination of them). Popular during the centuries of multistate Great Power rivalry across Europe and Eurasia during the reign of monarchs and autocratic sovereigns, formal military alliances involving Great Powers have fallen out of favor since World War II. In part, this is because the Great Powers fear the risks of a cataclysmic direct war between themselves triggered from actions taken—or not taken—by a formal alliance partner. In part this is because formal military alliances are viewed as often excessively restrictive to Great Power adaptation to changes in the geostrategic environment that matter more to one Great Power security partner than another.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Great Power security alignments from the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been few. Only two stand out—and these took the form of looser, nonbinding strategic partnerships. Since 2001, China and Russia have been partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Eurasian security, defense, and politico-economic multilateral pact begun in 2001 with 10 members states. SCO was organized as a counterterrorism security organization for the Eurasian region and without America due to the threat to regional dominance that Moscow and Beijing feared might accrue to the United States in its post-9/11 war on terror campaign featuring basing and transit in the center of Eurasia.<sup>12</sup>

But the chief example of Great Power security alignment in the new era of rivalrous interactions is the Sino-Russian one evolving since 2014, initially as a partnership for strategic coordination. This alignment was announced as a bilateral, “no limits” strategic partnership in early February 2022, only weeks before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>13</sup> Russia and China long had mutual interests in eroding America’s vast post-Cold War global power and influence—which both consider illegitimate international hegemony. But it was their converging view of the threats to their power and interests from Washington and its Western allies that drove Moscow and Beijing closer together. Both viewed American strategic alliances as major threats to their designs on territorial spheres of interest they believed befitting for a global Great Power—Russian primacy in Eurasia, including Ukraine,

and Chinese dominance in western Asia, including sovereignty over Taiwan and the South China Sea.<sup>14</sup>

By early 2022, America's forceful response to the Ukraine war appeared a threat to Russian power in Eurasia and a harbinger of risk to China's power in the Indo-Pacific region. Their mutual view of this common threat proved galvanizing, leading to tighter coupling of both economic and security systems. Yet their ideological symmetry remained limited.<sup>15</sup> While Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin share similar views of a hostile America and recognize the strategic advantages of closer alignment to vex Washington, they remain wary of each other. Neither wants to be responsible for or subordinate to the other.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, both remain proud Great Powers that will deviate from their partnership to one of equidistance vis-à-vis Washington should a better deal for their specific national security interests present itself with a less menacing and/or less capable United States.

This insight should not be surprising. Throughout modern history, Great Powers have forged military alliances and partnerships to expand strategic reach, enhance deterrence of Great Power rivals and their proxies, and extend power and influence by attraction.<sup>17</sup> In past multistate eras, Great Powers frequently established security partnerships among themselves in bilateral or multilateral combinations and in competition with rival Great Powers. Historic Great Power security alliances are often fluid and even fleeting, responding to threat perceptions far more than ideological affinities. Great Britain fought against France in iterative Great Power military alliances for two centuries with an interlude of military partnership against Russia during the Crimean War. Ultimately, Great Britain allied with long-time rival France and other Great Powers, including strategic rival Russia (its nemesis in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century global Great Power geostrategic rivalry known as the "Great Game"), against Germany during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> Great Power military and security alliances with lesser powers also can be fluid.

Capable military alignments with other Great Powers have been important for success in historic strategic competition, especially when they generated geostrategic advantages and bolstered security capabilities. Properly pursued, these alignments can enhance interoperability, improve operational readiness, and foster necessary trust in a manner that deters or deflects the threats from another Great Power. Additionally, military partnerships can provide the more robust defense posture necessary to prevail in a direct armed clash should deterrence fail.<sup>19</sup> Sensing the promise of Japan's rise toward Great Power status for British success in its decades-long global Great Game against Imperial Russia, the British Empire forged a strategic partnership with Tokyo in the late 1800s to menace Russian strategic interests across East Asia.<sup>20</sup> Impressed by Japan's defeat of Chinese naval assets in sea battles fought in the mid-1890s, London aligned with Tokyo and helped Japan build a modern, steel-hulled naval fleet and trained Japan's Imperial Navy in the tactics for use of that fleet in the early 1900s. This partnership helped Japan win a crushing victory over the Tsar's navy in the 1905 battle of Tsushima Strait.<sup>21</sup> In a prior era, when London's at-a-distance support for weaker European land powers failed to prevent Napoleon's continental expansion from 1803 to 1807, or to reverse Napoleon's gains in 1809, Great Britain set aside territorial disputes with Prussia over some of the Germanic states and aligned with Berlin (and Great Game rival Russia) in a pair of successful of anti-Napoleonic wartime coalitions during 1813–1814 (the Sixth Coalition) and again in 1815 (the Seventh Coalition). These coalitions

were the first that combined the strengths of the Prussian army and the British navy—along with crucial British financing and supply of Prussia's army—in a synchronized manner necessary to defeat Napoleon's France.<sup>22</sup>

But Great Power security alignments can pose risks. Alignment with a declining Great Power might tether it to a partner with different security interests and drag the partnership into unwanted proxy conflicts or ill-advised direct Great Power wars. Rising Great Power Imperial Germany's alliance with troubled Great Power Austria-Hungary in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century stands as a case in point. Germany aligned with Austria-Hungary to caution Russia against military adventurism in Eastern Europe that was threatening Germany's growing dominance there. But Austria-Hungary's own obsession with military coercion of upstart Slavic states like Serbia, which had sympathetic ties to Moscow, generated politico-military misadventures in the Balkans and triggered a martial response from Moscow and dragged Berlin prematurely into a two-front war that Berlin rightfully feared it could not win.<sup>23</sup> A Great Power military alignment also might suffer from an asymmetry in defense economic capability and/or commitment to burden-sharing. Imperial Germany's 1915 alignment with the long-decaying Great Power Ottoman Empire to secure geostrategic advantage against France and Great Britain in the eastern Mediterranean despite no prior bilateral military history with Ankara tied up Berlin in an arrangement where military cultural differences, strategic disagreements, and Ottoman economic dependence on German financial and military support generated a deep mutual mistrust that ultimately doomed both Great Powers to their World War I defeats.<sup>24</sup>

History demonstrates that wisely chosen military alignments and security partnerships among Great Powers are important to success in GPC. But this is far from true in all cases. Military alignments are most favorable to Great Power security—in deterrence or warfighting—when there is a clear consensus in strategic aims and the partnership is anchored on a joint political-military decisionmaking foundation that specifies duties and obligations in the event of armed hostilities.<sup>25</sup>

### **Great Power Military Alignment With Lesser Powers**

Great Power military alliances with smaller states demonstrate historically similar lessons with an important caveat. These martial alignments tend to be most effective to deterrence or defeat of a rivalrous Great Power when the military relationship is tightly coupled, features interoperable military equipment, demonstrates reasonably similar military doctrines, and includes a cohesive joint command structure where strategic objectives can be synchronized.<sup>26</sup>

Nazi Germany's military alignments with Romania and Bulgaria in World War II are examples of a Great Power military alignment with dubious strategic value. Romania and Bulgaria were the largest unoccupied military partners of the Germans, but both joined the Nazi war effort under duress—agreeing to partnership only after the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany threatened territories within their respective states. Both saw better opportunities to secure their coveted regional territories in alignment with Berlin rather than Moscow but did not trust the ultimate strategic aims of either Great Power. While Romania's military joined fully with Adolf Hitler's armies in the massive Eastern Front battles fought between 1941 and 1944 (before it quit the Axis in 1944), Romania's million-man military forces

were chronically inferior to those of the Germans; lacked common equipment, doctrine, or training; and despite vast numbers habitually proved a weak link in German military operations.<sup>27</sup>

Soviet military commanders repetitively targeted Romanian troops in operations to flank and surround superior Nazi armies, finding tremendous success with this tactic in the Battle of Stalingrad, where the collapse of Romanian formations on either side of the infamous city led to the encirclement and destruction of the German Sixth Army there in early 1942.<sup>28</sup> German military commanders wrote of Romanian forces as a burden to command and supply—thus, their numbers did not convey advantage to the Nazi war effort against the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front.<sup>29</sup>

Bulgaria also joined the Nazi cause for its own limited strategic reasons. Bulgarian forces participated in the spring 1941 German invasions of Yugoslavia and Greece, securing territorial concessions there, but then refused to declare war against the Soviet Union or send any of its half-million-man army to the Eastern Front.<sup>30</sup> Although a member of the Axis from March 1941, Bulgaria maintained diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> When the Red Army entered Bulgaria in 1944, it toppled the pro-Nazi government and quickly prodded the new Communist one to unleash the largely unscathed Bulgarian army on offensives against Nazi-held regions of the Balkans where Sofia had its own geostrategic territorial aspirations.<sup>32</sup> Nazi Germany's two major autonomous European military allies in World War II proved unhelpful in its conflict with the Soviet Union. Romania and Bulgaria looked the part of worthy military partners on paper but never shared the strategic objectives, military equipment and doctrine, or the battlefield acumen necessary to assist Nazi war aims in Europe. With little invested in these alignments, Nazi Germany got little in return.

Conversely, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) demonstrates a military alliance successful in efforts to deter one Great Power through the collective security action of another Great Power tightly coupled to smaller countries with well-aligned strategic motives and military arrangements. In 1949, it was the French and the British—fearful of the Soviet Union's post-World War II menacing residual military posture across Central and Eastern Europe and Moscow's aggressive actions in blockading Berlin, staging a coup in Czechoslovakia, and then testing its own nuclear weapon—that proposed a transatlantic mutual defense pact led by the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Ten European nations joined the United States and Canada that year, signing the NATO treaty. The Alliance slowly framed an integrated military command structure around permanent American, Canadian, and British forces stationed with other continental forces in a mission to deter—and if necessary, defeat—Soviet designs for greater expansion into or intimidation of Western Europe. Germany joined in 1955 and Spain in 1982. The Alliance met its aims and fulfilled its purpose of deterrence and defense of the Soviet Union by forging a collaborative political-military dialogue and cohesive military command structure, along with capable organization and doctrine, enabling the sum to become more than the collection of its members.

NATO deterred Soviet aggression during a 45-year Cold War, contributing to the Soviet Union's breakup in 1991. The Alliance then adapted to cooperative defensive activities during the 1990s and early 2000s, expanding to a membership of 32 by 2024, while bringing

aboard new members from East European states once occupied by the Soviet Union and assisting the enormous undertaking of accounting for and then safeguarding the massive nuclear weapons arsenal amassed by the Soviet Union before its collapse. NATO evolved in the wake of Soviet withdrawal with fully transparent, peer-reviewed defense plans and military activities engaging an enlarged alliance for changing security circumstances involving the war on terror. Later, the Alliance renewed and reinvigorated itself to contest a renewed Russian Great Power challenge to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Eastern European states. NATO succeeded as an American military alliance across three geostrategic eras by featuring a combination of strong military capabilities and a cohesive collective defense structure where an attack on one was an attack on all. This created a credible threat of retaliation and high costs to be paid by the Soviet Union or Russia in response to any attack against NATO members.

Evidenced in NATO and other bilateral and multilateral global military alignments since the end of World War II, the United States has a comparative advantage in forging credible security alliances and partnerships compared to its contemporary Great Power rivals. During the early 2020s, the Joseph Biden administration recognized this advantage and moved to deepen historical multilateral security alliances like NATO, expand existing bilateral alliances into multilateral ones (especially in the Indo-Pacific region), extend military partnerships as more tightly coupled alliances, and forge new military partnerships.<sup>34</sup> U.S.-endorsed multilateral security partnership initiatives across the Indo-Pacific region expanded and extended in noteworthy groupings including the multifaceted Quad arrangement with Australia, India, and Japan and the maritime security AUKUS partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

Many states, especially across the Indo-Pacific region, appeared keen to join American-led security partnerships. They not only wished to continue beneficial economic exchange with rising Great Power China, but they also sought a reliable hedge against coercive Chinese influence targeting them or their regional interests.<sup>36</sup> As the second Donald Trump administration took office in early 2025, the future of American commitment to its alliances and partnerships countering Russia and China became uncertain. The Trump team projected skepticism over NATO.<sup>37</sup> It simultaneously hailed the importance of Indo-Pacific partners to America's primary focus on Great Power competition with China, but with noteworthy unclarity about whether the United States would still guarantee the security of historical strategic partner countries involved in trade and commercial and financial relationships deemed unfavorable to U.S. economic interests.<sup>38</sup>

China has some experience with bilateral military and security alliances but far less with multilateral ones. Beijing has long-standing bilateral security partnerships with North Korea and Pakistan. Both have a narrow regional security focus and feature common military equipment and liaison interactions. China and Pakistan have recurring bilateral training exercises.<sup>39</sup> None of the three has joint combat experiences. From the early 2000s, China has conducted multilateral "Peace Mission Drills" with Russia and the Central Asian states sponsored by the Chinese-led SCO. These mainly focused on suppressing a major insurgency or popular rebellion.<sup>40</sup> Since 2023, Beijing has also conducted periodic joint naval exercises with Russia and Iran.<sup>41</sup>

China's most important security partnership—and military alignment—is its bilateral one with fellow Great Power Russia. Not a full-fledged security alliance, for neither state has formally promised to defend the other in event of an attack, the Sino-Russian defense relationship has evolved significantly from its 1990s origins. Moscow originally had exploited episodic Sino-Russian exercises to display weapons systems to potential Chinese military (the People's Liberation Army) buyers and to gain insights about evolving Chinese military capabilities. Since 2012, Russia and China have conducted recurring naval exercises on at least an annual basis.<sup>42</sup>

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war deepened the Sino-Russian security relationship. Dramatic Russian military equipment losses and stiffening Western sanctions from 2022 to 2024 forced Russia increasingly toward China to revive its armed forces. Putin's concessions to Xi during the latter's March 2023 visit to Moscow signaled Russia's ongoing slide toward junior partnership in a Chinese-dominated security alignment.<sup>43</sup> Absent some kind of rapprochement with America and/or Western Europe during the late 2020s, Russia must buy substantially more Chinese weaponry, including China's more advanced unmanned aerial vehicles and information technology systems. It also may become beholden to China's shipbuilding capacity and space infrastructure to redress shortfalls in domestic technologies. China will become the Great Power partner in this alignment using joint military drills to showcase its own advanced arms to Russian state firms. Where bilateral military drills and exercises once signaled mutual geostrategic support, they may come to represent growing Russian fealty to specific Chinese themes and strategic objectives.

While not mistakenly fearing a long-term Sino-Russian military alignment that seems unlikely given their divergent strategic views about the future of East Asia and the absence of a truly integrated or capable hierarchy for their bilateral military relationship, the United States must play close attention to this evolution, calibrating and recalibrating its treatment of Russian leadership in a manner that inhibits the great dangers that would follow from a formal Sino-Russian security alliance.<sup>44</sup>

"Not everyone in the Kremlin shares Putin's anti-Western obsession. In private, many Russian elites admit that the war in Ukraine was not only a moral crime but [also] a strategic mistake. . . . Changing the West's message to Russia is not only good preparation for the future, [but] it [also] is good policy for the present . . . [and can allow for discussion] of a more mutually beneficial form of coexistence with Russia."

—Alexander Gabuev, "The Russia that Putin Made," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025)

### **Strategic Economic Competition Under Conditions of Multipolar Great Power Rivalry**

This section takes a historical look at strategic economic competition under past eras of GPC. It describes how Great Powers have jostled throughout history over access to vital economic resources and at the same time struggled with the balance between state control of markets and the relative superiority of free market forces for catalyzing rapid and robust economic growth. Unfettered global markets are the most effective means of expanding international wealth, thus unlocking national economic growth and technological advancement. But they also challenge state control. This tension between state and market inspires

states to “bend” market forces in a manner that weakens relative economic performance over the long haul. It also demonstrates how international market forces are inherently unstable.

Uneven economic growth between states generates friction and at the same time undermines the political foundations of a globalized economic system in place. Invariably, the Great Power(s) growing in wealth and political status assert their special privilege to alter standing economic structures. At the same time, the Great Power(s) descending in relative wealth and power cling to past procedures and institutions beneficial to their stature. Intensifying Great Power economic competition in an era of multiple rivals inevitably generates fragmentation of a globalized economic environment, discouraging multinational free trade or coordinated finance while encouraging the formation of competitive trading blocs. These blocs tend to collaborate economically within their sphere of influence while contesting and confronting Great Power rivals for dominance over the resources and markets available in relatively unaligned geographic regions and economic domains.

### **States, Markets, and Uneven Economic Growth**

International relations scholars, especially those associated with the hegemonic stability theory, highlight the reciprocal and dynamic relationship among economic growth, relative power transition between Great Powers, and the status of global stability.<sup>45</sup> Among these scholars, the late Robert Gilpin of Princeton University wrote a series of books in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century exploring the logic of international economic competition between the major states of the international system—Great Powers. Gilpin reminded his readers that it is the interaction of states and markets that set the conditions for power and influence between past empires and kingdoms as well as modern states. States seek to establish power and influence over their territory and populations to control all outcomes—including economic ones. Markets seek to eliminate all barriers inhibiting the most efficient interaction between consumer demand and producer supply—a world where the price mechanism “controls” the outcome of economic activity within sovereign states and between them.<sup>46</sup>

States and markets are thus constantly competing for control of the economic factors affecting state power and influence. For the state, territorial boundaries are a necessary basis of national autonomy, political unity, and control. For the market, the elimination of all political borders and other obstacles to the operation of the price mechanism is imperative. The tension between these two fundamentally different ways of ordering human relationships and political boundaries has profoundly shaped the course of modern history and continues to influence the interactions among the Great Powers.<sup>47</sup>

Economic growth and competitiveness directly impact the power and influence of the state. Markets constitute a means for the state to exercise power, and the state can be and is used to obtain wealth. The logic of the market is to locate economic activities where they are most productive and profitable; the logic of the state is to capture and control the process of economic growth and capital accumulation.<sup>48</sup> Most important, states and markets interact to influence the distribution of power and wealth in international relations. At both the domestic and international levels, a market system tends to create a hierarchical division of wealth and political influence—the relative distribution of power.<sup>49</sup> The market drives the development of have and have-not entities: individuals and states.

On the international stage, natural market forces tend to first empower those states with a comparative advantage in the production of technologically advanced goods and services where the profit margins of production are higher and the ability for “wealth capture” by the state allows it to translate economic growth into political influence and military capabilities. But over time, global markets tend to diffuse wealth throughout the system, and this does not take place evenly. Thus, markets tend to produce new centers of wealth and growth in places where evolving technologies and the changing dynamics of comparative advantage are best captured and developed. The economic consequences of wealth diffusion and aggregate global economic growth may be beneficial and much desired in general terms. But this process simultaneously creates a relative disadvantage to the wealth interests of powerful states (and the domestic groups within them) who witness their own dominance decline. The resulting tendency, therefore, is for states to intervene in the workings of markets, seeking to make them more beneficial to themselves and to curb those market dynamics that are detrimental to their individual wealth and power.

Different states have different economic endowments and are better situated to convert these into growing wealth and positive economic activities within a market system. Markets evolve unevenly, favoring one state or another. Thus, states attempt to guide market forces to benefit their own citizens, resulting in, at least in the short run, the unequal distribution of wealth and power among the participants in the market and the stratification of societies in the international political economy.<sup>50</sup> The globalized market economy generates economic interdependence. Economic interdependence generates consequences that go beyond the growth of wealth, for market interdependence establishes a power relationship among groups and societies. A market is not politically neutral; its existence creates economic power that one actor can use against another in the form of influence, coercion, or both. Economic interdependence creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited and manipulated between interactive states. Interpenetrated markets generate the potential for outside states to interrupt commercial and financial relations—generating a power imbalance (and vulnerability) for one country over another simply through the structure of basic market relations.<sup>51</sup>

States and markets interact to create the structure of the international political economy, that is, those relatively enduring aspects of the world economy that include the international division of labor, the network of trade, the international monetary and financial system, as well as rules or regimes governing these economic activities. These structures tend to reflect both the influence of the Great Power states and the operation of market forces. Throughout history these structures have been created following direct Great Power wars, which routinely affirm the new international power hierarchy. At mid-decade, the structures of the international economic system are primarily those generated by the actions of successive, dominant Great Powers during and especially since World War II: the United Kingdom and then the United States.

For the 80 years since the end of World War II, the military and economic power of America has underpinned norms and procedures favoring liberal international market economies.<sup>52</sup> Since 1990, this arrangement has both enormously benefited American economic stature and provided opportunities for historic growth and expansion of many other national economies. As history forecasts, the passing of time and the growth of new military

and economic power centers create increasingly capable actors with the aim to significantly alter the foundations of the global economic structure either by reform or replacement of its trading, financial, and commercial systems. The dominant actor, who stands to lose from such systemic change, must either find accommodation that establishes a structure with acceptable residual benefits or choose to resist the demands for change with all means at its disposal. This recurring dynamic creates the inevitable conflict between rising and declining Great Powers that must be resolved by reformed economic structures or a resort to force. The latter course of resolution is all too often the outcome in past Great Power rivalries. Powerful nationalistic reactions are stimulated as new centers of economic growth arise and other economies decline and as state leaders attempt to gain more control over the operation of economic forces.<sup>53</sup>

### **Historic Impetus Toward Economic Fragmentation and Great Power Blocs**

The historical record of trade and finance validates theoretical insights. Intensifying Great Power rivalries frequently turn relatively benign economic interdependence into competition, confrontation, and then direct armed clash. If national leaders expect their trade relationships and access to financial markets to remain strong, they are likely to accept more dependence on outside interactions for generation of state growth. This was the situation of rising Great Power Japan from 1880 to 1930. Tokyo knew that significant economic ties with other Great Powers were vital to its access to resources and markets required to become a top member of the Great Power club. But fraying trade relationships often serve as an inducement rather than as a deterrent to Great Power war.<sup>54</sup> Trading partners turned geopolitical rivals then fear being cut off from vital goods, markets, and trade routes and seek more reliable, controllable alternatives. They increasingly seek self-reliance, leveraging state power through conditional economic aid, bribes, technology transfers, arms sales, and military force to secure less vulnerable economic lifelines.<sup>55</sup>

This became Imperial Japan's predicament in the 1930s. After four decades of growing interdependence, Japan then saw France, the United Kingdom, and the United States retreating into increasingly closed and discriminatory economic realms featuring high tariffs, restricted finance, and other barriers to trade. Japan thus found it necessary to assert much greater control over economic ties with its neighbors. Tokyo knew these moves made Japan look more aggressive, giving the United Kingdom and the United States new grounds for restricting Japanese imports of raw materials, including oil, and cascading a downward tumble into Great Power confrontation and clash—a "trade security" spiral.<sup>56</sup> But burned by the downsides of economic interdependence with rivalrous Great Powers, Japan decided it had no choice but for conquest and occupation as the remaining means for it to control its own economic destiny.

For most of the mid-1800s, dominant Great Power Great Britain and rising Great Power Germany engaged in robust commerce and trade, facilitating the transfer of advanced technology from the British Isles onto the continent and a newly forming German nation-state.<sup>57</sup> Rapid German economic growth—underwritten by many protective tariffs to energize industrialization, including the famous 1879 "iron and rye" tariff—fueled Imperial Germany's rise as a global Great Power.<sup>58</sup> In the early 1900s, Imperial Germany's enormous expansion of exports across Europe and around the world carved into Great Britain's nonimperial trading markets

and generated both British fears and movement to intensify tariffs against German goods across the Empire—a move that greatly irritated Berlin.<sup>59</sup> In reply, Germany intensified its quest to carve out its own global trading network, challenging British territorial possessions and crowding into London's global markets and transportation networks from East Africa to the Suez Canal to South Asia and into the Far East. Reciprocal trade and commercial vulnerabilities in Imperial Germany and Great Britain amplified ongoing competition for global colonies and continental supremacy, driving longtime trading partners into fragmented economic blocs and ultimately direct Great Power war.<sup>60</sup>

These early 20<sup>th</sup>-century examples demonstrate that the trade-security spiral has fueled some of history's most destructive Great Power wars. When a rising Great Power believes that trade restrictions by its rival(s) will reduce long-term market access, economic power, and therefore military power, it may come to believe that more aggressive, militaristic policies are necessary to protect access to markets and raw materials.<sup>61</sup> In turn, this intensifies the impetus for restrictive trade, the formation of trade blocs, and very often the militarized pursuit of relative economic gains by one bloc against another, simultaneously increasing the probability of Great Power war.<sup>62</sup> Scholars today see echoes of these historic Great Power patterns in the arc of the Sino-American rivalry: Deeply interdependent Great Power economies increasingly grappled with each other over the relative changes in wealth and power that global market dynamism has wrought moving to disentangle economically and confront each other vigorously.<sup>63</sup>

Historically, intensifying Great Power rivalry—including threats to use military power—does demonstrably disrupt multinational trade and drive commercial activity into increasingly insular blocs. But that does not always produce a comprehensive rupture in economic relations. Instead, the retreat of Great Powers into trade and finance blocs decreases much economic exchange, but far from all. Third-party trade, sidebar (and often illicit) work around trade, and black-market exchanges all contribute to residual permeability of the trade and finance barriers erected by exclusive trading blocs. Entrepreneurial traders—including those from the United States and even Great Britain—found a way around Napoleon's early 1800s "Continental System" and a British-imposed maritime embargo of the continent through commercial entry portals in Spain, Portugal, the Papal States, and elsewhere across Europe. These work-arounds kept a meaningful percentage of multilateral, off-continent trade alive during the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>64</sup> Later—and despite widespread embargos and trade restrictions—American mechanical and chemical manufacturers continued a robust trade in exports with Nazi Germany during the period from 1936 to 1941, first through Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and later via Norway and Sweden. American and British tariffs and nontariff trade barriers that aimed to choke off Nazi markets from key Western technology and armaments had some impact but never to the degree desired due to the permeability of the sanctions and tariff regimes.<sup>65</sup> At around

"[H]istorically, the most desperate dashes have come from powers that had been on the ascent but grew worried that their time was running short. World War I is a classic example. Germany's rising power formed the strategic backdrop to that conflict, but German fears of decline triggered the ultimate decision for war."

—Michael Beckley and Hal Brands,  
"Competition With China Could  
Be Short and Sharp," *Foreign  
Affairs*, December 17, 2020

the same historical moment, American and British firms continued a robust trade with Imperial Japan from the mid-1930s through December 1941, despite Japan's destructive wars in Manchuria and China even though Western rhetoric decried Japan as barbaric and worthy of full total diplomatic and economic isolation.<sup>66</sup>

History thus demonstrates three important historical dynamics regarding competitive economics among the Great Powers that merit consideration when evaluating contemporary GPC among the United States, China, and Russia. First, trade interdependence turns from a net positive to a strategic liability when Great Powers move into a rivalrous posture—a natural evolution throughout history. Interpenetrated, rivalrous Great Powers perceive vulnerability from free trade and unbridled global market forces. To mitigate their vulnerabilities, Great Power states seek to gain control—distorting the pricing mechanism as the major arbiter of economic exchange and fragmenting once integrated markets. Second, once begun, the process of economic fragmentation continues unabated and in a fashion that reworks once multifaceted international supply chains into increasingly insulated smaller trading blocs. Led by Great Powers, these blocs then compete for access to natural resources and markets to steel their economic grouping from threatening competition by others.

Finally, while trading blocs inevitably rupture broader trade and supply chains when Great Power rivalries intensify, they are far from impervious. Especially in eras when multiple Great Powers joust for power and influence, an array of agents and actors—both state and nonstate—will find a way to circumvent the bloc-to-bloc barriers that the Great Powers attempt to impose. Third-party trade, work-around trade, and black-market operations all frustrate Great Power efforts to fully isolate one trading bloc from another. The dynamics of Great Power economic blocs fuel competition and confrontation over resources and markets, but the tools of trade and finance available to Great Powers for the elimination of all trade and transit between blocs are historically insufficient to wall off all economic interactions. One must anticipate that the semipermeability of trading blocs to continue as they emerge and tighten.

### **Strategic Competition Over Rules, Norms, Organizations, and Institutions**

The chapter now moves beyond an assessment of global economic dynamics and the Great Powers and on to analysis of the theory and history of evolving GPC over the wider array of global rules, norms, organizations, and institutions. It describes how increasingly public Great Power disagreements about the proper framework for and enforcement of standards for the conduct of international interactions demonstrate a historically resonant pattern where intensifying Great Power rivalries fragment a once collaborative global order.

### **The Characteristics of an International Order**

The concept and construct of an international order is multifaceted. It includes a myriad of formal institutions and organizations—some with universal state membership and others with limited, criteria-based participants. It also consists of an array of often informal rules, norms, and procedures that inform the appropriate manner of state-to-state interactions and those involving state and nonstate actors. International relations scholars understand these

institutions, organizations, rules, norms, and procedures generally aimed at fostering cooperation and collaboration. Put another way, the parameters of an international order allow states to meet common goals more efficiently. International order generates predictability and reduces friction, lowering the costs of cooperation, overcoming barriers to efficient interactions, and lending prestige to collaboration under conditions of international anarchy that would otherwise condemn states to zero-sum game competitive or confrontational relationships.<sup>67</sup> Any global order incorporates an array of regime components. These include trade and finance components, transit and communications components, policing and law enforcement components, and other elements. The rules, norms, and procedures underpinning these components are not neutral. They can privilege some states while disadvantaging others—either by accident or by design. A global order may also be arranged in a discriminatory way—designed to harm some states while conveying privilege on others.

An international order is not self-generating. The rights and rules establishing acceptable interstate behavior often reflect consensus and mutual interest. Yet historically it is the dominant Great Power(s) that have enormous say over what rules, norms, and procedures get established in the organizations, institutions, and regimes overseeing global interactions.<sup>68</sup>

At the height of the Roman Empire, lasting more than four centuries, a quarter of the world's population lived under Rome's rules, laws, and norms. Rome's dominant position around the Mediterranean and Europe emerged as its power and influence grew from military victories against declining Great Power rivals including the Samnites and Etruscans and its famous victories over Great Power upstart Carthage with whom it fought three Punic Wars. Rome's most enduring Great Power rival was found in modern Iraq/Iran and then known as the Parthian and later Sasanian Empire. The Parthians (later Sasanians) fought the Romans in and around Mesopotamia, defeating the legions there before coming to an accommodation where Rome acknowledged Parthia (Sasania) as a Great Power with its own legitimate sphere of influence from the Euphrates to the East. Rome exchanged embassies, conducted trade, and even formed temporary alliances that demonstrated its mutual recognition of Parthenian (Sasanian) status. Parthia (Sasania) carved out a centuries-long role as the waypoint for east-west trade and commerce from China and India to Rome, generating riches from taxation of this trade transit, all the while maneuvering to assure that Rome and China never forged a formal partnership that would risk this privileged position.<sup>69</sup>

Once consolidated along the Mediterranean and into Europe, Pax Romana featured an order where occupied peoples were subject to Roman laws and taxes, even though they were not citizens. Rome often appointed client kings to oversee occupied territories and rule on local administrative or religious matters in accordance with local customs, so long as these did not conflict with formal Roman laws or religious conditions. Comity and stability in the Roman order rested mainly on its military might. Its client kings were ordered to keep local tribes divided and thus the Roman army as the strongest sovereign force in every region. So long as annual financial tribute was paid to Rome and limited required homage was offered to Roman gods and goddesses by rites and traditions, then Roman legions would underwrite law and order and the regions would benefit from the advanced elements of Roman engineering and administration. Should the local tribes refuse Roman tribute or

combine in a force hostile to Roman dominance, then the legions would fight to restore the status quo—normally in savage campaigns that resulted in battlefield defeats and the total eradication of the men, women, and children of the challenging tribes.<sup>70</sup> Once established, Rome's favored rules and norms in its dominant sphere of influence never confronted a serious challenge from a rising Great Power with alternative interests. Instead, the Roman Empire collapsed from within, and its construct of order and stability was overcome by an array of tribal entities that fragmented the empire into disparate pieces.

For the century from the end of the wars of Napoleon through the dawn of World War I, Great Britain oversaw a Pax Britannica that established the preponderant global norms, rules, and regime procedures for the international order. Great Britain's preferred global norms and rules were established worldwide as London emerged relatively unscathed and thus more powerful than the other Eurasian Great Power states after a decade and a half of Napoleonic Wars across the continent.<sup>71</sup> London competed with multiple Great Power rivals during its era. France, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and later the United States, Imperial Germany, and Imperial Japan all were Great Power rivals for Britain to manage through various treaties, partnerships, and shifting alliances.

British dominance was most apparent at sea where its navy operated from valuable international colonies stretching from Malta, through Egypt, South Africa, modern Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Southeast China. The British Empire played the significant role in shaping global affairs for more than a century. London's extensive trade and communications network, along with its military and naval dominance, set the standards for commerce, finance, and communications, establishing patterns and standards with enormous consequences for Britain's friends and rivals alike.

Among its means and mechanisms for controlling the international order, the British managed a set of exclusionary trade, tariff, and financial arrangements known as the Commonwealth System, where all those in the British colonies and territories had favored trade and finance status, and those outside did not.<sup>72</sup> This nationalistic, mercantilist approach to global economics allowed the British state to capture important resources and commercial markets by limiting outside competition. The Commonwealth System also aggravated other Great Powers, especially the newly arising ones in Germany, Japan, and the United States. Each rising Great Power posed unique threats to the relatively closed British system of trade, finance, and security guarantees, contributing to a decades-long GPC over colonies and leading inexorably toward two World Wars that saw England emerge victorious but with vastly depleted power compared to the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>73</sup> By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain's norms for managing the international order gave way to the preferences of the new dominant Great Power, the United States.

### **The Contemporary Liberal International Order**

The United States—with some collaboration from the United Kingdom—in the aftermath of World War II set the framework for global rules, norms, and procedures manifest in the constellation of institutions, organizations, and regimes founded in the late 1940s. The basic underpinnings of this Pax Americana international order were economic openness and access; the unfettered exchange of people, goods, and services; the peaceful resolution of disagreements; and the preeminence of the rights of the individual over the control of any

one state. This international order gained acceptance due to the overwhelming power and interests of the United States despite noteworthy initial resistance by many American World War II partners and friends. Then there was the Soviet Union. Its rulers did not accept most of this American-constructed global order, so other than agreeing to participation in the United Nations (UN), where it had a permanent seat at the high table, Moscow rejected the American framework and engineered its own parallel, alternative system with a preference toward communist norms and values.<sup>74</sup>

The Pax-Americana order was framed in accord with U.S. national imperatives, and it reflected American self-interests and preferences favoring liberal ideological values and the kind of global access that enhanced American economic and communications competitiveness.<sup>75</sup> Victorious and powerful at the end of World War II, America was steeped in the belief that rival trading blocs and illiberal, autocratic governments during the interwar years dragged the world into an unnecessary and horrible global conflagration that could have been avoided if economic openness and democratic governance were the norm. Thus, America's leaders sought to create a postwar international order that favored globalized, relatively unfettered market economies and constitutional self-governance.<sup>76</sup> From security relations to diplomatic interactions to cultural exchanges and norms for interstate communications, America generated an array of organizations, institutions, and regimes that favored these values. It fashioned the UN as a collective security organization, then the U.S.-Japan security alliance and later NATO to give primacy to multilateral security and stability. Washington underwrote the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global regional developments bank, and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs—the forerunner to the modern World Trade Organization (WTO)—in a manner designed to foster global openness and multilateralism in trade and finance along with the normative bias for democratic political processes to prevent a replay of the 1930s descent into nationalistic fervor and economic closure. It endorsed the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights and informed its British, French, and other European partners that they must divest of their colonial possessions to realize the appropriate framework for the new international order.

History demonstrates, and modern power transition theory describes, how rising Great Powers regularly emerge to challenge the dominant Great Power and the international order it established. This leads to GPC, confrontation, and often direct armed clash.<sup>77</sup> Power transition theorists argue that conflict emerges not simply as a consequence of the growing capabilities of a rising Great Power but also because of the challenger's uncomfortable relationship with aspects of the international order preferred by the established Great Power.<sup>78</sup> A rising Great Power may be dissatisfied with existing international arrangements and may seek to gain sufficient power to eventually change them. Therefore, the way the status quo power manages the international order can determine whether rivalry turns into direct armed clash.<sup>79</sup>

Often, rising Great Powers are not implacably opposed to the standing international order; indeed, most have risen precisely because of friendly aspects found within that order.<sup>80</sup> Thus, rising Great Powers tend to dislike some elements of the international system while accepting others. Rather than challenging the standing international order outright, rising Great Powers often accept many existing norms, rules, and procedures. They then

cooperate within standing arrangements, organizations, and institutions to modify or dismiss those features that they disagree with. Frequently, rising Great Powers try to avoid accusations that they aim to overthrow the existing system. They work to adapt and adopt elements of the standing international order. Great Powers can also hedge by developing parallel or shadow alternative institutions and organizations featuring norms and rules more aligned with their preferred model.

### **Intensifying GPC Over the Future International Order**

At mid-decade, the contemporary Great Powers are vigorously competing over the framework of the international order. China, Russia, and the United States disagree about many of the basic rules, norms, and institutions that regulate relations among countries and societies embedded in the liberal international order underwritten by Washington since the end of World War II.

Since at least 2007, Russia has asserted that America is in decline as a global hegemon and that, consequently, the international system is unstable and undergoing a profound transformation.<sup>81</sup> Moscow views American promotion of liberal democracy as merely a cover to force disruptive regime changes around the world—pointing to the Color Revolutions that ousted post-Soviet, pro-Russian rulers in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) that were backed by pro-democracy nongovernmental organizations and Western financial donors. Russian leaders also criticize America's role in the 2011 Arab Spring that spread instability and chaos across the Middle East and North Africa as an example of democracy promotion as a fig leaf for an American preference to incite chaotic regime change against those governments it deems as insufficiently liberal or democratic.<sup>82</sup> Russians also view American support for a rules-based order as hypocritical, observing that Washington has invoked principles of international law and unfettered commercial and financial flows when convenient, and then abandoned them to pursue American interventions into sovereign states and levied punishing financial sanctions or trade barriers when in its national interests. This is especially true of U.S.-led financial coercion through trade and financial sanctions in contradiction to the spirit of expressed American values. At the same time, Russia retains membership in many international and regional organizations to bolster its claims of respect for the rule of law and values, defends its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and lobbies for its right to maintain access to global financial systems that the United States has evicted Moscow from since 2014. Russia also has joined alternative international organizations and institutions like the Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa Association (BRICS), the SCO, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), among others, as a hedge toward a new era of global norms and rules more friendly to Russian interests.<sup>83</sup>

China too is disturbed by many aspects of the liberal international order despite the fact that the scaffolding of that order enabled China's remarkable economic and diplomatic rise on the world stage beginning in 1978.<sup>84</sup> At mid-decade, China continues to use its political and diplomatic clout to advance its influence within existing global institutions while also creating alternative ones.<sup>85</sup> On one hand, China signals that it is not trying to destroy the standing global order but intends to replace or displace key features of that order that it finds to be disturbing with ones that better feature "Chinese characteristics."

China continues to pursue leadership positions at the World Bank, Interpol, the UN Industrial Development Organization, the International Telecommunication Union, and the Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization. China also continues to send military officers to lead UN peacekeeping missions, including in South Sudan. Simultaneously, Beijing works to alter UN procedures defining and defending human rights as a universal norm and seeks to rebut the position that outside nations should interfere in the internal workings of states believed guilty of human rights violations.<sup>86</sup>

China pursues a second vector for action in pursuit of its preferences for international order. Beijing continues to advance alternative organizations to compete with existing international arrangements. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and AIIB stand out as state-led, global alternatives to the multilateral and more transparent UN development and infrastructure investment organizations like the World Bank, IMF, and the Asian Development Bank.<sup>87</sup> Beijing has pursued its vast program of global infrastructure investment and construction through its BRI program featuring mainly bilateral arrangements involving Chinese state-owned banks and construction firms renowned for opaque rules and often punishing financial loan terms and conditions. China disagrees with the U.S.-led norms for international investment and finance featuring borrower transparency and minimization of state-owned investment institutions.<sup>88</sup> Thus, while Beijing continues to value international trade and financial opportunities grounded in Pax Americana, at mid-decade it is intensifying efforts to change or replace the standing liberal international order preferences against state-subsidization of exports, for minimization of intellectual property theft, for binding arbitration of trade and financial disputes among countries, and in support of the dominant privilege of the U.S. dollar as the world's ultimate reserve currency.<sup>89</sup>

China also advocates strongly for the BRICS's rise in stature as a global international organization, supporting BRICS's growth from the original group of 5 members in the mid-2000s to 10 in 2024. Beijing touts BRICS as a growing alternative to many of the functions performed by the UN and encourages BRICS engagement in some dimensions of global norm-setting where the UN does not have a strong voice. Along with Russia, China advances the SCO as an organization to promote regional and global security that is unshackled from the United States and other Western powers. Beijing criticizes these powers for obsessively vetting security decisions through the distorted Western lens that demands openness, reciprocity, and compromise. China also seeks "cyber-sovereignty" in contradiction to the historic American-led preferences for global Internet freedom and the free transmission of ideas and activities across the cyber domain.<sup>90</sup>

"By now, Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambition to remake the world is undeniable. He wants to dissolve Washington's network of alliances and purge what he dismisses as 'Western' values from international bodies. He wants to knock the U.S. dollar off its pedestal and eliminate Washington's chokehold over critical technology. In his new multipolar order, global institutions and norms will be underpinned by Chinese notions of common security and economic development, Chinese values of state-determined political rights, and Chinese technology. China will no longer have to fight for leadership. Its centrality will be guaranteed."

—Elizabeth Economy, "China's Alternative Order," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 3 (May/June 2024)

Modern GPC thus exhibits the persistent features found in past eras of Great Power transition and intensifying competition about the framework of the international order. International order is grounded in the preferences held by the most dominant Great Power, most frequently determined at the end of a period of catastrophic Great Power war that resets the hierarchy of Great Power status. When the relative power of that dominant state declines, rising Great Powers inevitably challenge the preferences of the established Great Power. The rules, norms, procedures, institutions, and organizations established in the past times come under duress, with the rising Great Power expecting that the order will adapt to accommodate rising power preferences or be replaced by those more acceptable to the upstart. Generating such accommodation short of Great Power war is not a high probability given historical precedent—but it is not impossible. An accommodation of the major norms of the modern international order short of war would require today's Great Power leaders to compromise on deeply held principles involving political organization, economic interaction, and the approach toward individual rights and liberties.

The year 2025 might become the start of an exception to the historic record. The second Trump administration began the year demonstrating less intent to vigorously defend the standing American-led, liberal international order, while intimating that America's long-standing preference for liberal political and ideological values as the basis for global engagement, alliances, and partnerships could be substantively revised.<sup>91</sup> If sustained, could this change in the American leadership's attitude toward liberal internationalism jump-start a process of reconciliation among the Great Powers and a reshaping of global norms and institutions for the first time in 80 years?<sup>92</sup> Or might the adaptation of American foreign policy preferences instead signal a devolution of global norms and institutions into fragmented, Great Power-led blocs where divergent rules and organizations are accepted and applied within them and where they spur confrontation along boundaries and over control of autonomous states?<sup>93</sup> Neither one of these outcomes can be ruled out during the remaining half of the 2020s.

At the same time, the historical record makes clear that the standing liberal international order was unlikely to remain in its post-1945 form by the end of the 2020s regardless of which U.S. President occupied the White House. The historical dynamics of relative Great Power transition all but assure that standing rules and procedures will lose international resonance and fragment, catalyzing momentum toward a new order—global or regionally fragmented—that will emerge from the inexorable march of Great Power transition.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter considers the historic patterns and implications of Great Power military alignments, international economic norms, and broader global institutions and organizations that evolved during past eras of Great Power competition. It observes that Great Powers historically pursue multilateral arrangements to enhance their security posture, in part through military alignments, their economic stature, and their dominance in the institutions and organizations that manage global interactions and transactions. Great Power selection and management of strategic partnerships and military alignments often determine the prospects for success in GPC, deterrence of direct Great Power armed clashes, and the propensity for Great Power victory should war occur. Military alignments among the

Great Powers of any era are normally temporal, shifting, and based more on shared immediate threat perceptions of another Great Power than on any long-lasting common purpose.

Thus, the mid-decade Sino-Russian Great Power alignment remains best understood as challenging to American power and interests for as long as it goes; however, it inevitably will dissipate as the threat perceptions of the United States in Moscow and Beijing begin to diverge. Great Power military alignments with lesser states are most durable and reliable for enhancing Great Power deterrence and defense against threatening Great Power rivals when they are based on conditions including a common threat perception, some ideological affinity, and a closely interwoven politico-military command structure than those based on coercion. This historical lesson indicates that America's long-standing alliance structures in NATO and with close partners in the Indo-Pacific region are historically unique and thus valuable to ultimate American success in its GPC with its two main rivals. It remains to be seen if the value of these American military alignments can be sustained from Washington during the remainder of the 2020s.

The chapter also evaluates strategic economic competition during past eras of GPC. Throughout history, Great Powers experienced uneven forms of growth. Once beneficial economic interdependence driven by the logic of unfettered market forces becomes threatening as Great Power rivalry grows and the vulnerabilities of economic interdependence with rivals (and rival partners) convey risks to state control and security. Invariably, Great Powers growing in wealth and power assert special privilege to alter standing rules and norms. Established Great Powers declining in relative wealth and power cling to past procedures and institutions beneficial to their stature. Intensifying Great Power economic competition in an era of multiple rivals inevitably increases the strategic risks that states perceive from economic interdependence. This generates an imperative for states to seek greater control over markets to arrest the vulnerabilities they perceive from economic interdependence and the potential for corrosive influence such interdependence allows. The historical trend toward fragmentation of globalized economics through the mechanism of increasing economic barriers to trade and free-flowing finance is resonant at mid-decade of the 2020s and an inevitable by-product of the Sino-Russo-American strategic rivalry. This began before the American Presidential election of 2016 and has been accelerating since. Economic fragmentation, therefore, must be expected to continue and may ultimately—perhaps even before the mid-2030s—create the factors for regionally or functionally separated economic blocs that reject most globalized trade and financial flows.

Finally, the chapter analyzed historical Great Power strategic competition over global rules, norms, organizations, and institutions involving interstate transactions like communications, education, health, transportation, legal standards, and sociocultural exchange, among others. Under pressure from intensifying rivalry, Great Powers experience growing disagreements about the proper framework for and enforcement of standards for the conduct of international engagements. The historically dominant pattern is that intensifying Great Power rivalries fragment once collaborative interactions. At mid-decade, this pattern is evident.

Today's Great Powers increasingly struggle over the role and relevance of American-established international organizations and institutions. China and Russia are putting serious pressure on these standing organizations and institutions to change in line with

their preferences while at the same time championing new, alternative international norms, rules, institutions, and organizations more suited to their preferences and interests. Wary of standing organizational limitations on its sovereignty and simultaneously unwilling to negotiate changes to them, the United States paused its financial support for the WTO in March 2025 and is withdrawing from the World Health Organization. It is uncertain that the 80-year dominance of America's post-World War II globalized network of rules, norms, and institutions will survive through 2030, but if it does, that survival will continue under extreme duress. As with the global economic system, this intensifying duress will ultimately drive fragmentation of much of the world into blocs of opposing norms, rules, and institutions arranged around emerging Great Power spheres of influence. This pattern has been evident for more than a decade before 2025; thus, the second Trump administration might accelerate long-standing trends toward global fragmentation, but that trajectory did not originate with it. At the end of the day, whether they coalesce rapidly or slowly, fragmenting Great Power spheres of influence will become increasingly isolated and impervious to outside actors and preferences.

## Transitions

Informed by these historical patterns of rivalrous Great Power interactions in the formation of military alignments, global economic norms and procedures, and international institutions and organizations, it is now time to take a deeper look into how these dynamics and others are playing out among Washington, Beijing, and Russia at mid-decade. The next two chapters, 3a and 3b, formally chronicle and then evaluate the strategic objectives, policy choices, and variables of national power possessed by the United States, China, and Russia. The chapters update and evaluate the most important geostrategic characteristics for understanding the evolution of GPC at mid-decade.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This chapter features historical examples of Great Power multilateral alignment patterns mainly from Europe and the Near East. While there are no specific examples cited from the histories of China or other Far East empires, the author proceeds from the premise that their historical patterns align reasonably well with Western theories of Great Power politics, competition, and alignments established as the baseline for this chapter's analyses and insights. For the perspective of scholars who contend that there is a unique Chinese history and therefore approach to international relations—including theories like Yan Xuetong's moral realism, Zhao Tingyang's conception of the Tianxia system, the Shanghai School's symbiosis theory, and Qin Yaqing's relational theory of world politics—see Yih-Jye Hwang, "International Studies in China," *International Studies* (November 22, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.719>. For an overview of those who, like this chapter author, believe that Chinese history is not inconsistent with the major theses of Western-origin thinking on interstate power relations, especially those of realism and hegemonic stability theory, see Magnus Fiskesjö, "The Legacy of the Chinese Empires Beyond 'The West and the Rest,'" *Education About Asia* 22, no. 1

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<sup>2</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 12–5; John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November/December 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war>.

<sup>3</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Great Power Rivalries: The Case for Realism," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2023, <https://mondediplo.com/2023/08/02great-powers>.

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- <sup>5</sup> Walt, "Alliances in Theory and Practice," 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948).
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