
Great Power Competition and the Rise of the Rest: Toward a Multipolar Asia

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ABSTRACT

The traditional understanding of great power contestation and geopolitical rivalry is that it harms weaker countries that are put under tremendous pressure to conform to the competing claims and demands of the big players. This essay relies on the concept of unintended consequences and argues that middle powers in Asia could counterintuitively gain from the “new Cold War” between China and the United States by means of favorable treatment from the two great powers to woo them to remain either on one side or the other, or to stay balanced between Beijing and Washington. Among the candidates in the region who are uniquely positioned to benefit from the “new Cold War,” India is shown to stand the best chance to harness China-United States antagonism to climb its way up from its present status as a rising power to become the world’s third great power. Japan, Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam are also projected to gain from the “new Cold War” over the coming decades and increase their respective power, influence, and impact in shaping a genuine multipolar order in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This essay makes a prognosis of a multipolar Asia and, by extension, a multipolar world over the coming

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fifty years due to the structural opportunity presented by the China-United States tussle and the willful agency exercised by rising and middle powers to capitalize on this window of opportunity.

“. . . what is evident is that establishing a multipolar Asia as a foundation of a multipolar world is now more urgent than before. Obviously, much of this will happen in the backdrop of intensified great power competition, and understanding how that could unfold is, therefore, vital.”¹

—Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India

“[We] should disclose the backstage manipulator who aims at serving its own geopolitical needs that has been attempting to stir up troubles undermining the peace . . . We should abandon the Cold War mentality and oppose zero-sum games, keeping the region away from geopolitical calculations, and not become pawns in the great power competition.”²

—Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of China

In 2024, The Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, released a ranking of twenty-seven countries in Asia in terms of their comprehensive power measured by eight criteria: economic capability, military capability, resilience, future resources, economic relationships, defense networks, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence. The report classified the United States and China at the apex as “superpowers,” followed by “middle powers” such as India, Japan, Australia, Russia, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Ranked at the bottom were “minor powers” including Cambodia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Laos, Mongolia, and Nepal.³

Asia Power Index 2024

CATEGORY	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE
Superpowers	1	United States	81.7
	2	China	72.7
Middle Powers	3	India	39.1
	4	Japan	38.9
	5	Australia	31.9
	6	Russia	31.1
	7	South Korea	31.0
	8	Singapore	26.4
	9	Indonesia	22.3
	10	Thailand	19.8
	11	Malaysia	19.6
	12	Vietnam	18.7
	13	New Zealand	16.3
	14	Taiwan	16.0
	15	Philippines	14.7
	16	Pakistan	14.6
	17	North Korea	11.3
	18	Brunei	10.2
Minor Powers	19	Cambodia	9.5
	20	Bangladesh	9.4
	21	Sri Lanka	7.7
	22	Laos	7.0
	23	Myanmar	6.7
	24	Mongolia	5.2
	25	Nepal	4.8
	26	Timor-Leste	4.3
	27	Papua New Guinea	4.2

While the ranking included subjective estimates drawn from intangible yardsticks such as each country's influence and the depth of its alliances and partnerships—and one might debate whether any particular nation's power has been underestimated or overestimated—a striking pattern is unmissable. The gap between the top two superpowers is narrow, yet they remain far ahead of the middle powers ranked third through sixth. On the other hand, the gap between the lowest-ranked middle powers and the minor powers just below them is minimal.

In other words, the table suggests that Asia in 2024 was essentially bipolar, with two great power centers jostling for preeminent status while maintaining a seemingly unassailable lead over other countries. Meanwhile, a crowded field of dynamic middle and small powers experienced relatively small gaps among themselves, with their rankings subject to change depending on their performance across various indicators.

The competition, it seems, is not unfolding along multipolar lines among the top five or six Asian powers, but instead follows a classic bipolar

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..... pattern. At one level, the United States and China are locked in direct rivalry, while at another, a less salient race apparently takes place among the middle and minor powers to outmaneuver one another. To transpose a hierarchy of issue areas onto the power configuration in Asia—where “high politics” encompasses defense, national security, and military issues, while “low politics” includes economic, political, and social affairs⁴—the ranking suggests that high political struggles take place between race leaders and the low-relevance, low politics conflicts occur among the also-rans.

This essay discards such myopic lenses and instead argues for processes involving middle powers that have systemic salience. It argues that although China will not concede multipolarity and the United States may be ambivalent about the merits of multipolarity, their intensifying mutual rivalry and competition, dubbed the “new Cold War,”⁵ is opening up avenues for wider diffusion of capabilities and greater agency for middle powers that could contribute to the advent of a multipolar Asia and, by extension, a genuinely multipolar international order.

The top-down tendency to highlight great power behavior as the driving force of global affairs while eyeing the conduct of middle and small powers as sideshows is ingrained in the field of International Relations, especially among Western thinkers and adherents of the realist school. But the ground realities of regional relations in Asia are complex because the high politics of great power competition are not siloed, but rather are intrinsically and inextricably linked to the aspirations of the middle and small powers to rise up and fulfill their strategic objectives. The interplay between these two dynamics—the rivalry between China and the United States on one hand and the ascent of other Asian states on the other—will

ultimately shape the fate of Asia and form the foundations of the emerging world order. Focusing nearly exclusively on high politics and great power competition is a fundamental error because of the symbiotic ties between high politics and low politics in a deeply integrated yet fragmented world.

Whether former U.S. President Joe Biden's claim that "we've pulled ahead in our competition with China"⁶ proves accurate, or Chinese President Xi Jinping's assertion that "the East is rising, and the West is declining"⁷ comes to fruition is undeniably important. However, the terrain on which this battle of national wills unfolds is geopolitical in nature, and the intended and unintended effects of great power competition carry repercussions for the other states. The question of who will prevail as the dominant power on earth is going to be decided not just in Beijing or Washington, but also through the combined effect of policies, strategies, and decisions taken in New Delhi, Tokyo, Canberra, Seoul, Jakarta, Bangkok, Hanoi, and so on.

Contrary to the original Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union—which Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere critiqued on behalf of the Global South as an unjust and unfair tussle where, "when the elephants fight it is the grass which gets crushed"⁸—the new Cold War can enable some middle-ranking countries to ascend the power hierarchy and transform the jungle into a space where multiple fiefdoms or spheres coexist. The analogy of the jungle suggests a Hobbesian world characterized by anarchy, brute force, and aggression. And history does suggest that power transitions can be violent if they involve dissatisfaction over economic gains and territorial disputes.⁹ To be sure, there are clear risks of arms races, military clashes, and infringements of national sovereignty during this period. However, once the transition is complete, the result could be a more balanced Asia—one shaped by a multipolar power structure, which may ultimately be more desirable than the bipolar architecture of the present.

COMPETITION WITH BENEFITS

A striking feature of great power competition today is the variety of strategic opportunities it presents for growth and advancement of ambitious powers that are dissatisfied with the status quo. In a bid to outdo the other side geopolitically and assert the superiority of its political model, each of the two great powers of our time—the United States and China—has extended a range of incentives to secure the allegiance of middle and small powers, or at least counterbalance the influence of the opposing side.

The incentives deployed in this elaborate game of buying and retaining loyalty include foreign investment, financial assistance, trade concessions, technology transfer, integration into value chains, diplomatic support, exceptional backing in multilateral institutions, advanced military aid, and regional interventions to ensure a favorable security situation for the concerned beneficiary country.¹⁰

One reason for the panoply of inducements in the new Cold War is that the nature of great power competition today differs from that of the classic Cold War period. The current contest lacks the ideological animus held by the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States between 1947 and 1991. Without question, in a matchup between regime types, China is the world's most powerful authoritarian state and the United States is its liberal democratic converse. But in an economic sense, the fact that China has been practicing state-guided capitalism or "capitalism with Chinese characteristics"¹¹ has allowed it to partner with the United States itself since the 1980s and also to engage with middle and small powers using the logic of market-driven economic growth rather than brute force and military pressure.¹² The massive economic interdependence between China and the United States, wherein the former has been the latter's third largest trading partner and the former parks approximately half of its enormous foreign exchange reserves in the American dollar, indicates that the two great powers represent two branches or "varieties of capitalism"¹³ and are not fighting to impose their respective ideologies over the rest of Asia and the world.

This is not to claim that China and the United States are akin to Tweedledum and Tweedledee. There is merit in the observation that "the real battle is within capitalism, between two models that jostle against each other," namely "the liberal meritocratic capitalism that has developed incrementally in the West over the past two hundred years . . . and the state-led political, or authoritarian, capitalism that is exemplified by China."¹⁴ There would indeed be no new Cold War had both China and the United States been facsimiles. Yet, the approach to foreign policy by the two contemporary great powers, which represent two types of capitalism, will naturally carry some similarities. Large and wealthy capitalist countries can exercise power over smaller and poorer countries by means of economic statecraft rather than crude regime change operations, outright military invasions, or territorial conquest. The race between China and the United States does have a conventional coercive military dimension and some neocolonial features, but it is best understood as a milder multidimensional competition in which each power competes to attract and retain weaker nations as strategic partners rather than allowing them to align with its rival.

The second reason for the new Cold War engendering benefits for middle and small powers is the United States' penchant to partially adopt elements of the strategy of "offshore balancing" to prevent an adversary from becoming hegemonic in crucial regions of the world. Under offshore balancing, Washington would "encourage other countries to take the lead" in checking an anti-American would-be hegemon like China, "turn[ing] to regional forces as the first line of defense," "rely[ing] on local powers," and "throw[ing] its considerable weight behind them."¹⁵ That the United States need not directly confront China but can instead stand behind strategic partners in Asia as they stand up to Chinese aggression contains within it the prospect of the emergence of additional great powers on the continent. By its very conception, as laid out by Christopher Layne in 1997, offshore balancing "is a strategy for the multipolar world that is already emerging," and is based on the assumption that "in a multipolar world other states will balance against potential hegemons, and it is to America's advantage to shift this responsibility to others."¹⁶ Unlike the original Cold War, when the United States adopted the policy of active containment to overtly or covertly intervene to topple or protect regimes owing to fear of dominoes falling to Soviet Communism, the logic of offshore balancing is to avoid direct interventions and let regional power politics play out.

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Expectations that the United States can pass the buck to new great powers that will arise in Asia have not yet been upheld, and there are bitter critics of offshore balancing who insist that the United States alone has the economic and military wherewithal to do the heavy lifting to prevent a Chinese takeover of Asia.¹⁷ Still, exhaustion from strategic overcommitment, wariness about getting overly involved in multiple theaters of conflict, and isolationist currents represented by President Donald Trump have kept offshore balancing on the table. Trump's Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that the world is going "back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet," and that it is foolhardy for the United States to become a "global government" that is "trying to solve every problem."¹⁸ Whether Washington will indeed

withdraw from key regions of the world or willingly finance and aid the rise of new great powers in different continents under a tightfisted Trump

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..... presidency is unclear. But it stands to reason that if multipolarity is inevitable, the United States would be better off ushering it in on its own preferred terms, by allowing and catalyzing new great powers to come up that will be friendly to it and opposed to China. Since maintaining primacy is looking increasingly impossible for the United States, it faces a strategic choice: accept a bipolar order in which Washington concedes a vast sphere of influence to Beijing in Asia, or promote a multipolar system by nurturing multiple power centers capable of collectively counterbalancing Beijing's rise in Asia.

Even as this debate over American grand strategy has no clear winner, in praxis, the United States has moved toward strengthening its allies and strategic partners in Asia. Whether Washington's intensified support for allies and partners is intended to cultivate new great powers to match China or simply to sustain American preeminence by preventing the balance of power from tilting in Beijing's favor, the effect of these American policies is that the new Cold War is spurring remarkable economic growth and power accumulation for well-placed countries with an inclination toward the United States, which now sees them as essential counterweights to an assertive China.

THE KEY WOULD-BE GREAT POWER

Among the Asian countries best positioned to take advantage of the new Cold War is India, which was ranked a distant third after the United States and China in the Lowy Institute's 2024 Asia Power Index. By virtue of its vast and youthful population, large geographic size, rapid economic growth, geopolitical location, nationalism, and its own sense of manifest destiny as a "leading power" in the world, India has all the makings of a future great power.¹⁹ Elsewhere, I made the case that India is no longer a middle power and that it is better understood as a rising power, which will unwaveringly counterbalance China and aim to catch up with its giant northern neighbor in economic, military, and geopolitical heft.²⁰ The

United States spotted India's potential as early as 2005, when it announced a "decisively broader strategic relationship" with the explicit goal "to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century."²¹ In the following two decades, the strategic partnership between the United States and India went from strength to strength in the wake of their mounting mutually shared threat perceptions about a menacing China.

The list of benefits that accrued to India from the United States' "strategic generosity"²² amid the latter's escalating great power competition with China is long and instructive. The 2008 civil nuclear agreement, wherein Washington helped New Delhi bypass international non-proliferation regulations; the 2016 designation of India as a "major defense partner" of the United States to access advanced American weaponry and increase joint military coordination; Washington's backing for New Delhi to gain entry into three of four multilateral export control regimes between 2016 and 2018; the granting of Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 (STA-1) status by Washington in 2018 to New Delhi for the latter to access military and dual-use technologies; the signing of all four foundational defense agreements by 2020 through which the United States can share with India's armed forces greater logistical and intelligence resources; and the 2020 launch of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) under which the two partners engage in joint research and co-development in cutting edge fields like quantum computing, defense-industrial production, semiconductors, telecommunications, and outer space—all are milestones with clear strategic intent to boost India's military and economic capabilities to compete with China.

It is noteworthy that even as the United States kept deepening high-tech cooperation with India and encouraging American allies to enter into similar engagements, it also began imposing technology denial and export ban restrictions on China. With technology widely viewed as the currency of power and a core determinant of a country's comprehensive national strength, there is a bipartisan consensus in the United States that it must not fall into "the wrong hands" of authoritarian China and instead be directed only to allies and partners that are "aligned with U.S. interests."²³

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India has grasped this duality and leveraged its benefits by advocating that “trusted supply chains will really become key to strategic partnerships.”²⁴

Declarations from Washington that the two countries are “collaborating on nearly every human endeavor”²⁵ are not rhetorical and New Delhi is conscious that their strategic embrace is occurring in the broader context of great power competition. India’s External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, has stated that India remains alert to opportunities presented by schisms in the prevailing contentious international climate. His call for strategic clarity, focusing on “identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions,” and his use of the historical analogy of China’s rise, which showed “greater ambition and less consistency” during the final years of the Cold War by turning against the Soviet Union, befriending the United States, and reaping the tremendous economic and geopolitical dividends of Western support, are instructive.²⁶

With China bent on obstructing India’s rise—to prevent it from equaling its own economic might and geopolitical influence—and threatening India’s national security through military provocations and geoeconomic manoeuvring, there is a clear rationale for the latter to opt for an “external balancing” strategy of entering into coalitions with like-minded countries in order to thwart the pressures of a more powerful adversary. Apart from the United States, India has also hedged its bets by advancing strategic partnerships with U.S. allies that have stakes in the Indo-Pacific such as Australia, France, Japan, and South Korea, as well as with other notable regional players like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam.²⁷ India’s old Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership with Russia has also persevered, even as it has irked the United States. The dexterity with which India managed to deepen Western partnerships while extracting value from the fundamentally anti-Western Russia and promoting itself as a leader of the Global South has earned it plaudits for being “in the best geopolitical position among almost any major country in the world.”²⁸

India’s “multi-alignment” doctrine is an insurance policy, given that relying on the United States alone could compromise its strategic autonomy or leave it in the lurch if Washington drops what President Joe Biden had called “extreme competition” with Beijing and the two instead strike a grand bargain.²⁹ What is certain is that India cannot afford to back away from counterbalancing China due to the zero-sum game mentality in Beijing that will not permit another Asian great power to emerge. As long as the United States chooses either full offshore balancing or opts for traditional Cold War-style containment of China, India knows that it presents golden opportunities and New Delhi will keep shedding old hesitations

to grab them. China, on the other hand, is aware that the new Cold War offers India a helping hand to close the power gap, and hence its admonitions to India to avoid being used as a “pawn in the [United States’] global hegemony network.”³⁰ With a projected USD 55 trillion GDP by 2047,³¹ India’s rise to great power status has an air of plausibility supported by the window of opportunity opened by the new Cold War.

THE ALLIES WHO ARE BEEFING UP

As long-standing formal allies of the United States, Australia and Japan are classic middle powers whose primary strategy has been to fortify and double down on cooperation with Washington to manage threats posed by regional adversaries in the Indo-Pacific. In the wake of China’s massive military buildup and maritime expansionism, these two American allies have sought to not just sustain the strategic reassurance and protective umbrella provided by the United States but also to update it to forge a trilateral “collective deterrence” network.³² Unlike India, a rising power that prizes its autonomy, aims for great power status, and avoids outright alliances, Australia and Japan are more status quo-oriented by nature and know that the probability of either of them becoming a global great power in the same league as China and the United States is slim. In terms of demography, economic vitality, and military power projection, Japan and Australia are not would-be great powers. Yet, they can move up and become more consequential players in the Indo-Pacific by harnessing the new Cold War.

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Within Australia, there have been calls to abandon the tag of a middle power and place the country in the category of “pivotal powers” i.e., “countries that by virtue of their strategic location, size of population, economic potential, policy preferences and political weighting are destined to shape the contours of geopolitics in key regions of the world.”³³ The term “rising middle power” has also been applied to Australia to invoke “a more substantial strategic, foreign policy, and defence role” in the Indo-Pacific in the wake of “intensifying major-power competition between its most essential strategic ally the United States, and its vital trading partner China.”³⁴

Whatever the label, driven by strategic anxiety to be more proactive in the wake of China's military and economic expansionism, Australia has devised what Peter Layton terms as two mutually reinforcing approaches i.e., a "balance of power grand strategy" of ramping up its own military and economic might and entering into collective defense alliances such as AUKUS (with the United States and the United Kingdom), and an "engagement grand strategy" of deepening strategic partnerships with rising, middle, and small powers in the Indo-Pacific, such as India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and the Pacific Islands, to ensure that the region is not reshaped and remade as per China's hegemonic blueprint.³⁵

Canberra's plans for its largest naval buildup since World War II worth USD 35 billion are informed by concerns about "entering a period of risk in the Indo-Pacific and that's generated by China's increased aggression in both the South China Sea and Northeast Asia."³⁶ Should Australia complete its proposed military ramp-up in the next two decades with considerable support from the United States, it will automatically make it a greater balancer of power in Asia and upgrade its status in the regional and international orders. Without the pressures of the new Cold War, Australia would not be going places in the power configuration.

Likewise with Japan, one can foresee a combination of "internal balancing" (strengthening one's own military and economic resources) and external balancing (forming alliances and partnerships to counter a stronger power) guiding its strategy in the coming decades. Japan's reawakening under the nationalist leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who thundered that "Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country,"³⁷ is causally linked to strategic angst about China's lengthening shadow in the Indo-Pacific. Japanese leaders' laments that they are facing the "most severe" security environment since 1945, and their vows to respond via a dual path of strengthening the Japan-United States alliance "as a foundation" as well as expanding "the circle of friendly and like-minded countries, using diplomacy and defense to realize the peace of Japan and the region," sound similar to Australia's pathway.³⁸

Japan's projected five-year-long record military buildup of USD 320 billion that began in 2023 has the potential to turn its Self-Defense Forces into "a real, world-class effective force."³⁹ The reversion of Japan to being a "normal" power without the shackles of the post-World War II pacifism is intrinsically connected to the new Cold War. Alive to the China challenge, Japan is leaving no stone unturned and is finding a willing senior ally in the United States, which is welcoming and enabling Japan's internal and external balancing strategies. It remains to be seen if, in the long run, Japan

and Australia become more autonomous from the United States as they seek to become rising middle powers or “tier-one” countries. Presumably, with the steady accretion of indigenous military might in the coming decades, the need for Australia and Japan, and even South Korea, to keep hosting tens of thousands of American troops in bases will decline and they will feel confident enough to take greater ownership of security and face down China without looking up to the United States. Compared to India, the fact that Australia and Japan remain ensconced in the alliance system of the United States limits how far they can go in the regional and global power configurations. Yet, there is an undeniable rise of

these two countries, which transcends the constraints of their alliances with the United States, rendering the scenario of a multipolar Asia credible.

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THE HEDGERS WHO CAN BALANCE

In discussions on grand strategy, the question arises as to which Asian powers have the intent and commensurate means to be proper balancers of China. A study by an American military official in 2016 judged that “Japan instead of India could be more effective in the role of balancer in Asia, considering patterns of behavior, potential military capability, and economic capacity.”⁴⁰ A declassified American government document a few years later noted India’s dominance in South Asia, leadership in the Indian Ocean, increasing engagement in Southeast Asia and with allies of the United States, and concluded that “a strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to China.”⁴¹ But apart from these two Asian heavyweights, there are a few other capable middle powers who deserve mention here.

Among the ten nations of Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Vietnam have the strongest militaries with a ranking of thirteen and twenty-three respectively out of 145 countries.⁴² These two have fairly large populations and are also independently minded regional powers that did not join any

formal alliance system in the new Cold War so as to retain their strategic autonomy. Both have active territorial disputes with China in the maritime domain and have shown historical and contemporary inclinations to push back Chinese expansionism. As core members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), they have also attempted to unify smaller neighboring countries into a bloc that can effectively bargain with and limit China's gunboat diplomacy.

Given the huge asymmetry of power between them and China as well as the internal divisions within ASEAN, Indonesia and Vietnam have also signed bilateral strategic partnerships with the United States and with other actors in the Indo-Pacific. The elevation of both their respective friendships with the United States to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, even as they maintain similar-sounding preexisting partnerships with China, was an indicator of how they were trying to adjust to the new Cold War. Both nations reject alliances and alignment with either China or the United States and prefer not to make an either-or choice so as to enjoy beneficial linkages with the two great powers.

Indonesia has been labelled as a "dove state" that is "playing a safe game" by avoiding overt conflict with its premier economic partner, China, on geopolitically sensitive matters while also trying to defend its territorial sovereignty from Chinese threats to the Natuna Islands through overtures toward balancing states.⁴³ Vietnam has publicly resisted China's illegal

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maritime claims in the South China Sea and enhanced military cooperation with the United States, its Asian allies, and partners such as India. But in a carefully calibrated act of hedging, Vietnam has sought to minimize maritime skirmishes and clashes with China and has adopted a softer tone and tenor in contrast to the noisier and harder balancing strategy of the Philippines, a treaty ally of the United States.⁴⁴

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States, namely Australia, India, and Japan, are. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Indonesia and Vietnam are utilizing the window of the new Cold War to grow economically and militarily stronger. The willingness of both Washington and Beijing to offer trade and investment incentives and also to provide assistance in defense and military fields gives Jakarta and Hanoi options and access to advanced resources and technology. As classic “connector economies” courted by both great powers, they have “been able to leverage the friendshoring and nearshoring approaches of the United States and China to attract more greenfield investment from both.”⁴⁵ Without the overarching great power rivalry, neither Indonesia nor Vietnam would be wooed in this fashion.

Predictions that, by 2050, Indonesia will become the fourth-largest economy in the world and that Vietnam could jump into the top twenty might very well materialize, and one can envision the militaries of both countries operating in increasingly expeditionary capacities.⁴⁶ Individually, neither would match up to China, India, or the United States, but they could sit beside Japan and Australia in the second rung as the main middle powers that will command more influence and develop the political will to disallow China or the United States from imposing hegemony. For the past several decades, Indonesia and Vietnam have been branded as “regional great powers” i.e., a “category of states between great powers with system wide interests and the all and sundry small states.”⁴⁷ By continuing to leverage the new Cold War, they have the opportunity to rise above that bracket.

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TRIPOLAR WORLD AND MULTIPOLAR ASIA

What will the power configuration in Asia and the world look like fifty years from now? A forecast by the American financial giant Goldman Sachs shows China, India, the United States, Indonesia, and Nigeria as the likely top five economies of the world in descending order by the year 2075. But it predicts that the top three will have GDPs in the range of USD 50 trillion to USD 60 trillion each, while those that follow are far behind with

Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan between USD 12 trillion and USD 15 trillion followed by Brazil, Egypt, Germany, and the United Kingdom, which fall into the single digits.⁴⁸

Using the basic assumptions of international relations that “military power is rooted in a state’s economy,” and that “while economic development may not be the only determinant of military effectiveness, it seems to be the primary determinant,” one can surmise that China, India, and the United States will overshadow every other power on earth in military might and, by extension, in comprehensive national power by 2075.⁴⁹ Also, some countries that are in the top ten of this list made it primarily by virtue of their demographic profiles and continued population growth. In light of their past and present histories, it is a long shot for them to become great powers over the next half century. Which leaves us with the conclusion that what we will end up seeing is a tripolar world with China, India, and the United States having significant global influence and competing among themselves in various regions and subregions.

As to Asia alone, should we also envisage a tripolar configuration or a wider form of multipolarity? The terms “multipolar Asia” and “multipolar world” have often been tagged together as causally linked, implying there cannot be one without the other. In light of the possibilities I have highlighted about the rise of Australia, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam, there is a fair possibility of Asia being multipolar by 2075 in a specific sense, i.e., China, India, and the United States being the main actors but having to share influence and power with four or five other empowered regional great powers that cannot be trampled upon or are forced to “bandwagon” to any one of the big three.

If one believes that geopolitics and counterbalancing are eternal features of international affairs, then great power competition in Asia will continue beyond 2075. Yet, the scenario of an evolved multipolar Asia where no single hegemon can attain absolute mastery beyond a particular sphere of core influence is a comforting one, especially for the small states that are presently cowering under the fear of a neo-imperial China or the negative fallouts of the proverbial elephant fight between China and the United States. One cannot, of course, rule out tensions and wars in a multipolar Asia. A study suggesting that multipolarity has “higher risk of small wars and lower risk of great-power conflict” offers a nuanced picture of what might be in store.⁵⁰ Armed conflicts can also very much erupt during the tortuous journey leading up to multipolarity and play spoilsport to the continuous ascent of rising and middle powers. Writing in this journal in 2017, I had floated a forum for “Asian Alternative Security” that keeps

the great powers out and “promotes intra-Asian conflict mitigation solutions.”⁵¹ Such institutional innovations might be able to keep a lid on “small wars,” if not prevent them entirely.

Crystal gazing at the future landscape of power in Asia is an intellectual exercise with numerous *ceteris paribus* conditionalities that include a mix of domestic and foreign policy variables. The great, middle, and small powers that are expected to compete and rise relative to each other as the new Cold War rages, cannot sit back and wait passively for the projected outcomes to materialize. As the economist John Maynard Keynes warned, the “long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead.”⁵² Rising and middle powers of Asia, in particular, face a *carpe diem* situation today. If they fail to seize the historic opportunities presented by the ongoing China-United States great power competition, get embroiled in resource-sapping small wars, lose economic, military, and diplomatic momentum, or fall prey to domestic sociopolitical upheavals, then the entire premise of an emerging multipolar Asia would fall by the wayside.

Such provisos also apply to the two current great powers, which have to avoid domestic pitfalls and abjure wars while partaking in relentless competition. The fact that great powers such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and Russia ceased to be great powers during the course of the twentieth century tells a cautionary tale that neither China nor the United States can ignore. Whether or not they retain their positions in the international order is, to some extent, up to their own sagacity and foresight. Yet, it bears repeating to readers that it is a reductionist fallacy to concentrate only on what China and the United States do and to neglect the rise of the rest in Asia as a mere footnote. Sustaining great power status and engaging in great power competition are the prerogatives of elite states, but the twenty-first century variants of these pursuits have a symbiotic and transformative quality that can deliberately or unwittingly produce a more balanced Asia.

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