

Editor's Introduction

Security in the Age of Multipolarity

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Every generation of security scholars inherits a word it did not choose and cannot quite agree on. For the Cold War, it was bipolarity. For the three decades after, it was the unipolar moment. This year, the word on offer is multipolarity — and as the essays in this issue make clear, the word is doing more work than it can comfortably bear.

Michael O'Hanlon opens the debate by refusing its premise. Surveying seventy years of forecasted American decline, he argues that today's order remains closer to bipolar, or at most tripolar, than to any genuine dispersal of power: the United States and its allies still account for the preponderance of global military spending, and no rising bloc yet possesses the cohesion to govern in its place. It is a useful corrective, and this issue does not resolve the disagreement so much as let it stand — because the pieces that follow are, in their own ways, arguments about what a world only partly multipolar actually feels like from the inside.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the essays on alliance architecture. In our interview, Vice-Minister Taro Yamato describes a Japan accelerating its defense buildup two years ahead of schedule, not because the Japan-U.S. alliance has weakened, but because the threats arrayed against it — a more assertive China, a nuclear North Korea, a deepening Moscow-Pyongyang axis — have multiplied faster than any single alliance can absorb. Emmanuelle Maitre finds much the same logic at work in Europe's nuclear posture: as confidence in the durability of American extended deterrence erodes, France's "European dimension" and the Northwood Declaration are not evidence of an alliance rejected, but of partners hedging against an order they can no longer take for granted. Multipolarity, on this reading, is not a finished condition. It is a stress test that alliances are still, for now, passing.

Other contributors locate the contest somewhere the security literature has historically paid less attention: inside the target state itself. Norito Kunisue traces how Russia has cultivated Europe's populist right not as an ally to be armed, but as a "Trojan horse" to be positioned — a strategy that succeeds or fails at the ballot box in Paris as much as on any battlefield. Joey Hood's essay, drawn from a career of trying to counter exactly this kind of influence, reaches a candid conclusion: that the traditional diplomatic toolkit of warnings and sanctions has performed poorly against China and Russia alike, and that competing effectively will require the United States to out-finance and out-inform rivals rather than simply out-threaten them. Read together, these two pieces make the same argument from opposite ends of the same transaction — one on how influence is sold, the other on how it might be outcompeted.

Enrico Fardella's essay carries the contest into a register too often left out of security journals entirely: the ledger. He argues that the currency and trade tensions building between Washington and Beijing are not a side issue to great-power competition but one of its central arenas, and that a Europe without a unified external-economic strategy risks becoming the residual market absorbing whatever imbalance the United States and China decline to resolve between themselves. It is a reminder that the structure of global demand is, in its own quiet way, as strategic a terrain as any strait or border.

And in our second interview, Dr. Sulmeyer takes up the domain that may least resemble the security order any of us were trained to think about: cyberspace, and the artificial intelligence now accelerating it. He is candid that the discipline's deterrence frameworks, built for a bipolar nuclear age, translate only imperfectly to a world of dual-use technology and contested attribution — and that the coming years will be defined less by the tools states already have than by how much autonomy they are willing to delegate to the tools now arriving.

Taken together, these seven pieces do not agree on how many poles the world now has, or where they sit. What they agree on is that the contest is no longer confined to the domains security studies traditionally reserved for it. It runs through alliance commitments and populist movements, through trade balances and cyber doctrine, through a Tokyo ministry and a Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris. If the age is multipolar, it is multipolar in more than the count of its great powers - it is multipolar in the sheer number of fronts on which that power is now being contested.

We are grateful, as ever, to our contributors for the care and candor of their arguments, and to our readers for engaging with them in the spirit of open inquiry that has defined this journal since its founding.

The Editors
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